

## **Early childhood education and care:**

A tool for child education,  
reconciliation of work and family life, and  
a caring and inclusive economy

**POLICY BRIEF** .....

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# I. Introduction

It is the ambition of COFACE Families Europe to support reconciliation of work and family life by developing policies and workplace measures around three pillars: access to **Resources, Services and Time**. ECEC is an essential part of the Services pillar. This COFACE Families Europe policy brief complements and updates existing COFACE positions on ECEC, taking into account recent developments and legislation.<sup>1</sup> Our position on ECEC is clarified in the 2018 EU Deal for Childcare, and more recently set in a wider context in the 2030 Child Compass shaping a health society, environment and economy fit for children.

COFACE has been advocating for inclusive, accessible, affordable, and quality ECEC, as a two- and multi-generation tool benefitting children and adults. We highlight the multiple socio-economics benefits of ECEC, not only for children but as well for families and society as a whole: improving the inclusiveness, quality, accessibility, and effectiveness of ECEC systems across Europe is therefore key.<sup>2</sup>

The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC), the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD) and the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDG) visions and frameworks drive our work. All children, including those in early childhood, are holders of all the rights enshrined in the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child. The UN Committee on the Rights of the Child recognises the pivotal role parents play in the early education and care of their children, as well as the State's key role *"in providing a legislative framework for the provision of quality, adequately resourced services, and for ensuring that standards are tailored to the circumstances of particular groups and individuals and to the developmental priorities of particular age groups, from infancy through to transition into school."*<sup>3</sup>

First of all, this policy brief examines ECEC at the intersection of childhood, work-life balance and economics, acknowledging the impact of COVID-19 on families, underlining why it is key to invest in **inclusive, affordable, accessible and quality** ECEC (the four elements must be there) and describes the socio-economic benefits of ECEC, namely:

- combat poverty, promote children's well-being and their social integration, and support children to break the intergenerational cycle of disadvantages, as children from disadvantaged backgrounds are the one who benefits the most of ECEC;
- make a reconciliation between family and professional work possible for women and men, and helping to close the gender care, employment and pension gaps;
- giving parents (mothers and fathers) equal employment opportunities, with positive side effects for the economy.

ECEC is therefore examined as tool to tackle inequality and poverty (**child poverty** is unfortunately a reality in Europe, and child poverty means family poverty), to promote work-life balance and equal opportunities for women and men to both care and work (different reports underline that the **gender care gap** is still high and the essential nature of care work for the proper functioning of both society and the economy), and to build an economy which cares (the **lack of investments in ECEC** are affecting the quality, the care profession and the employment opportunities of working parents). These challenges are not irreversible and ECEC can play an important role, with leadership from the European Union to ensure coordinated efforts and actions.

The second section of this brief highlights the important role of the European Union to boost ECEC and which should be the key elements of an ambitious ECEC strategy by 2030. There has been a shift of paradigm regarding ECEC within the European Commission. With the launch of the “**Barcelona objectives**” twenty years ago, ECEC was then primarily seen as an economic argument to boost employment, especially the women’s participation in the labour market. However, in the last years, the European Commission has broadened its scope of ECEC, bringing to the fore a holistic view of the ECEC benefits for children, families and society.

The proclamation in November 2017 of the **European Pillar of Social Rights**, which includes principles of Gender Equality and Work-life Balance, as well as ECEC services, was the first legislation in that sense. The Commission continued in this direction with the **adoption of the ECEC Quality Framework** around five key aspects (accessibility, decent training and working conditions for ECEC staff, a pedagogical approach, monitoring and evaluation, and finally governance and funding), **the European Pillar of Social Rights Action Plan** and **the European Child Guarantee** in 2021.

## II. ECEC at the intersection of childhood, equal opportunities and economics

*We know that in the EU, close to 1 in 4 children are at risk of poverty or social exclusion. But these figures pre-date the COVID-19 crisis. Parents, particularly single parents, carers in poorly paid work, or without a job, are sometimes unable to meet their children’s most basic needs. This is not a fact of life we should accept. We have to invest in our children, to break the cycle of poverty, to ensure equality opportunities, and to support their well-being.*

Nicolas Schmit, European Commissioner for Jobs and Social Rights<sup>4</sup>

### a- Child poverty means family poverty

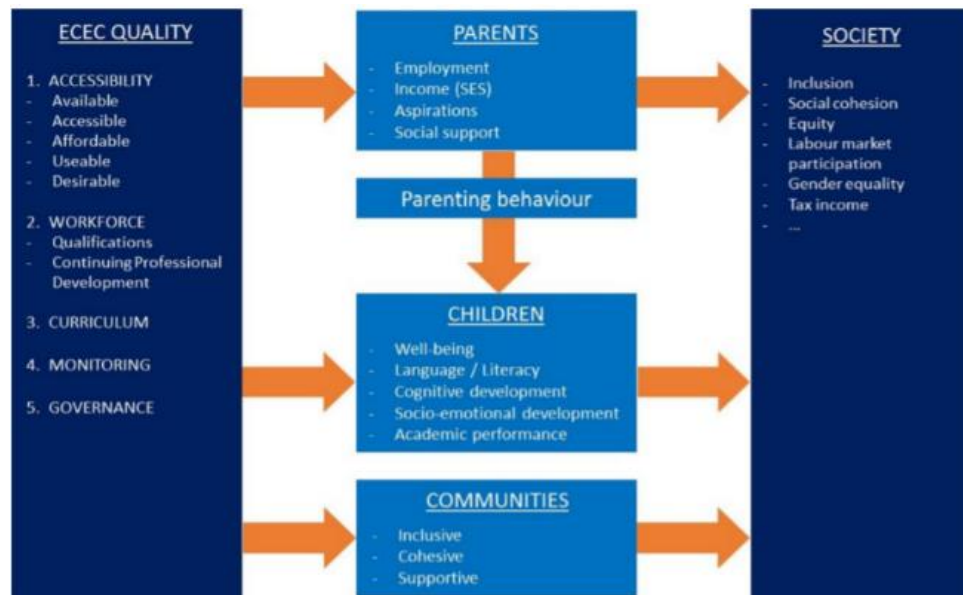
The vicious cycle of inequalities and exclusion is not irreversible. Investing in ECEC programmes can be an effective tool to tackle poverty and social exclusion and promoting equal opportunities, especially for children living in more excluded communities.<sup>5</sup>

Evidence shows the multiple benefits that quality ECEC programmes bring to children which can be seen beyond childhood, and more especially for children in a disadvantaged position<sup>6</sup>, although there is less consensus on the benefits for children below 12 months of age.<sup>7</sup> But while parents (and grandparents) are often the key providers of care for children in the very early years thanks to maternity, paternity, parental and carers leaves (with varying degrees of duration and pay), such family care must be complemented with professional childcare to ensure quality education and care from the earliest age for children, also to ensure that parents are not in a vulnerable position on the labour market due to their care duties. Coordination between the end of family leaves and ECEC is therefore essential.<sup>8</sup>

The EU institutions have not only enshrined ECEC as one of the **backbones of its European Pillar of Social Rights**<sup>9</sup>, but have also underlined the **multidimensional aspects** of ECEC programmes. Indeed, recent reports<sup>10</sup> have underlined its positive impact on **education** (child development and health) but also its **socio-economic** benefits (tackling economic inequalities, breaking the cycle of poverty, enabling carers – often women- to have greater opportunities to participate in the labour market). (figure 1) On the anti-child poverty effect, inclusive, accessible, affordable and quality ECEC programmes can be effective if combined with other supports such as cash transfers, leaves and flexible working arrangements.

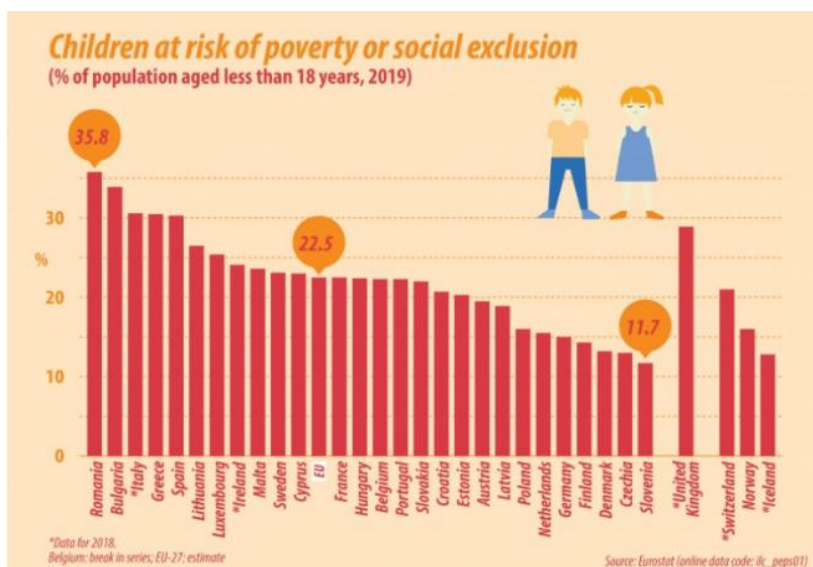
Child poverty is unfortunately a reality in Europe. In 2019, just before the Covid-19 pandemic, one out of four children (around 18 million children) in the EU were at risk of poverty or social exclusion (AROPE)<sup>11</sup>, the highest age group<sup>12</sup> (figure 2). The highest rates are found in Eastern and Mediterranean Member States, with huge regional differences.<sup>13</sup> The impact of COVID-19 on child poverty is still not fully known, but some reports advance that it could have potentially worsened for households in already vulnerable situations.<sup>14</sup> Moreover, children living at risk of poverty or social exclusion face more obstacles to access ECEC, decent housing, healthcare and an adequate nutrition.<sup>15</sup>

**Figure 1:** The holistic view of high-quality, accessible ECEC programmes and their benefits



Source: European Commission, Study on the economic implementing framework of a possible EU Child Guarantee scheme including its financial foundation. 2021

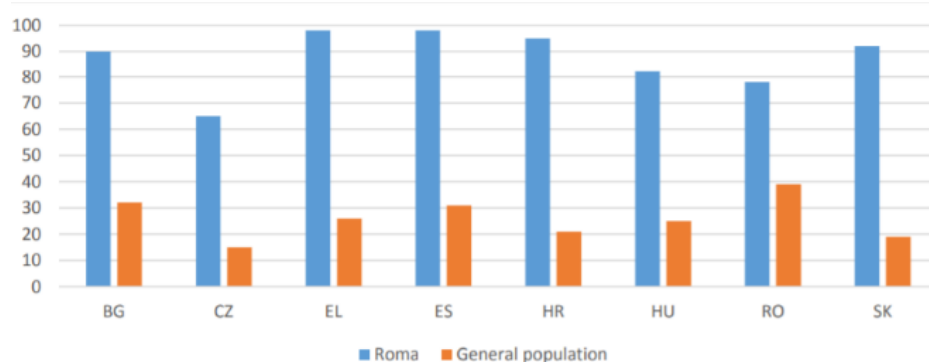
**Figure 2** Children at risk of poverty or social exclusion



Source: Children at risk of poverty or social exclusion, Eurostat, 2020

The picture is even darker, as underlined in different reports<sup>16</sup>, for children in precarious family situations<sup>17</sup>, children in institutions, children from ethnic minorities or backgrounds (especially Roma children), migrants and refugees, and children with disabilities. For instance, three out of five Roma children live in severe material deprivation and four out of five are at risk of poverty or social exclusion<sup>18</sup> (figure 3). The picture could be even bleaker due to the current Covid-19 pandemic and improvements are not expected even in the medium term.<sup>19</sup>

**Figure 3** : Income poverty rate of Roma children; selected EU Member States, 2014, %



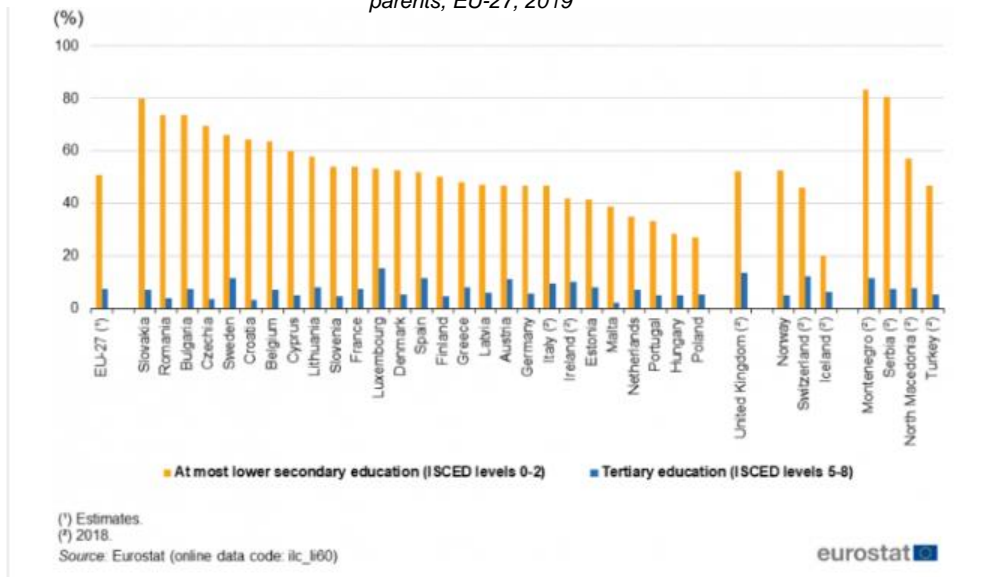
Source: Commission Staff Working Document accompanying the document Proposal for a Council Recommendation establishing a European Child Guarantee, 2021

According to Eurostat, key factors that have a strong influence on the risk of poverty or social exclusion in the EU include, among others, **the type of household, the level of education or having a migrant background.**<sup>20</sup>

Regarding the types of families, single parent families and large families are especially at risk. The risk of poverty rates are higher for single-parent households than they are for the overall population: two out of five people living in single-parent households in the EU face risk of poverty, twice as much as the whole

population<sup>21</sup>. Other types of households with dependent children are also more at risk of severe material and social deprivation: namely families composed of two adults with three or more dependent children, and those composed of three or more adults with dependent children. Then, half of children whose parents' level of education did not attain secondary education were at risk of poverty in 2019, in comparison with only one out of ten of children whose parents reached tertiary education<sup>22</sup> (figure 4). The migrant background is also a factor of falling into poverty risk and social exclusion: three out of ten EU children with at least one foreign-born parent were at risk of poverty and social exclusion, in comparison with one out of ten for children whose parents had both been born in the reporting Member State.<sup>23</sup>

**Figure 4.** Share of children aged less than 18 years at risk of poverty, analysed by the highest level of education attained by their parents, EU-27, 2019



Source: Children at risk of poverty or social exclusion, Eurostat, 2020

Tackling child poverty is indeed urgent. Child poverty means family poverty. Poverty, marginalisation and inequalities are inherited and will be cumulated over time, if not tackled drastically.<sup>24</sup> Without big investments, today’s children at risk of poverty have great chances to become “*tomorrow’s forgotten*”, joining a vicious circle which will make it difficult for them to overcome the burden of inequalities and social exclusion.<sup>25</sup> (figure 5)

Breaking the inter-generational cycle of poverty and social exclusion is therefore necessary<sup>26</sup>, as underlined by the Principle 11 of the European Pillar of Social Rights: “*Children have the right to protection from poverty. Children from disadvantaged backgrounds have the right to specific measures to enhance equal opportunities*”. In the words of European Commissioner Schmit during the presentation of the European Commission’s proposal for a Child Guarantee: “*A child’s background should not dictate the course of the rest of their lives.*”<sup>27</sup>

**Figure 5.** The vicious cycle of poverty and social exclusion



Source: European Commission, Factsheet: European Child Guarantee, 2021

Furthermore, and after the outburst of the current COVID-19 pandemic, the vulnerabilities of families have been considerably amplified, and have magnified all the different existing inequalities such as lack of access to digital tools and infrastructure: a recent working paper highlights that children growing up in single parent families and large families have been identified as particularly at risk to suffer digital deprivation.<sup>28</sup> This, as well as other vulnerabilities mentioned above, have placed huge stress on family relationships, potentially affecting child well-being development and learning.<sup>29</sup>

The report of the UN Special Rapporteur on extreme poverty and human rights underlines that *“the current approach to poverty eradication in the European Union is too narrow to be deemed appropriate for the scale of the problem.”*<sup>30</sup>

## **b- Work-life balance for all, and equal opportunities for women and men**

*If we want a more gender-equal society, we need a twofold approach that tackles the uneven sharing of care work. First, we need changes at household level, so that equal sharing of care tasks between women and men becomes the norm, and, second, we need accessible and affordable professional care services that can help tackle the rising care needs expected in the EU as the population ages.*

Carlien Scheele, Director European Institute for Gender Equality (EIGE)<sup>31</sup>

COFACE Families Europe has been supporting the notion of work-life balance for all types of families. Regarding heterosexual families, this also means tackling the stereotypical vision of “traditional” distributions of roles, where women are caregivers and men are the breadwinners.

This seems to be in line with the recent report of the European Social Policy Network (ESPN) report on social policy responses to the pandemic: *“the COVID-19 pandemic has also highlighted long-standing weaknesses in social protection systems and social inclusion policies. It has shown the importance, and the challenge, of ensuring accessible and adequate income and support to all in particular to those whose vulnerability and disadvantaged situations have been intensified by the pandemic”.*<sup>32</sup>

COFACE expects the European Union to effectively coordinate the fight against poverty and social exclusion through different measures which set up Europe-wide universal automatic social rights and access to care services like ECEC for families of all types without discrimination, combined with specific targeted measures for families in vulnerable situations.

These elements work as disincentives for men’s involvement in family and care responsibilities, with men missing out on family life and bonds, and women missing out employment and a decent pension. As the EU Gender Equality Strategy 2020-2025 highlights, *“both parents need to feel responsible and entitled when it comes to family care”*<sup>33</sup>, ensuring that the State offers equal opportunities to both women and men to both care and work. Unfortunately, the reality is different, as care is still perceived as a women’s responsibility in the family, and this stereotype still prevails even when women join the labour market and when men are more involved in family care.<sup>34</sup>

Women in the EU spend on average about 13 hours more per week caring for children than men do (36 hours and 23 hours respectively). This uneven share of care tasks rises in households with children under 17 years old -where women spend 42 hours on caring tasks, 20 hours more than men

do<sup>35</sup>-, single parent families (85% of EU single parents are women<sup>36</sup>) and remote rural areas where services and infrastructures are often scarce.<sup>37</sup> Then, nine out of ten women living with a partner with children do at least an hour of childcare work per day in comparison with seven out of ten men.<sup>38</sup>

Involvement in family life is more than caring for children and other family members. Regarding housework tasks and cooking activities, while eight out of ten women do them at least one hour per day, only three out of ten men do the same.<sup>39</sup> This situation has not changed for more than a decade.<sup>40</sup> The gap is even bigger for households with children: nine out of ten women prepare food and do housework tasks at least an hour per day in comparison with three out of ten men.<sup>41</sup>

Moreover, only one out of three families in the EU share the unpaid care equally.<sup>42</sup>

As EIGE's report underlines<sup>43</sup>, job characteristics and the values regarding gender equality are important factors too within the share of care and the predefined gender stereotypes within the families. First of all, unemployed or in precarious job situations, women spend twice as much time on unpaid care every day than women with permanent jobs. Couples who defend an egalitarian gender role within the family are the ones who share the care tasks more equally.

Different reports<sup>44</sup> underline that during the COVID-19 pandemic the gender care gap is still high (although the picture is nuanced and even unclear in some countries), as well as making clear how key care work is so vital for the proper functioning of both the society and the economy. Research shows that women continued to take up a greater share of unpaid care work (additional household and caring tasks), despite the fact that many men have been teleworking and participated in unpaid work tasks. Moreover, with many schools closed across Europe during the lockdowns, a new form of unpaid care

emerged: the move to online schooling created yet another unpaid job, especially for women who were more involved in helping their children in the virtual classroom. According to EIGE and Eurofound, during the COVID-19 lockdowns, women spent six hours more on cooking and housework than men (18 hours and 12 hours respectively), while before the pandemic the gap was 9 hours (16 hours for women and 7 for men).<sup>45</sup>

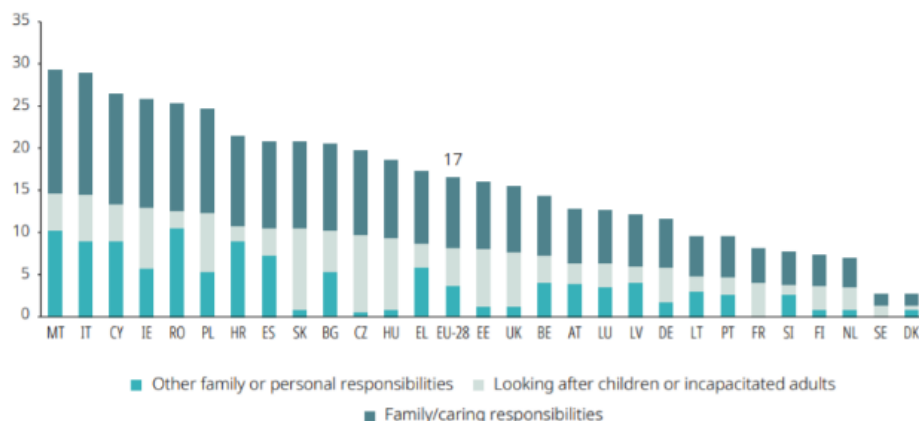
Telework has been used to balance work and family life, especially by women.<sup>46</sup> However, teleworking and flexible working arrangements could be seen as well as the opportunity for fathers to get more involved in household and care tasks, rebalance the disparity and trigger a positive change<sup>47</sup>, if they do not blur the boundaries between work and family life<sup>48</sup>, and "*if they are accompanied by gender equality measures and family-friendly policies and organisational practices*".<sup>49</sup>

These gender inequalities in care have great effects on women, families and the economy. As the 2020 German Presidency Council Conclusions on tackling the gender pay gap recall, the gender pay gap and the gender care gap have to be analysed together. They are both largely mutually dependent and mutually reinforcing phenomena.<sup>50</sup> Care keeps almost 8 million women out of the labour market, in comparison with half a million men<sup>51</sup> (figure 6). Furthermore, three out of five employed women declare having experienced some shifts in employment due to childcare responsibilities, in comparison with one out of five men.<sup>52</sup> These situations faced by many employed women (and increasingly men) due to unpaid care responsibilities play a key role in maintaining (and widening) the gender care gap: the time spent on unpaid care work cannot be pursued in paid work.<sup>53</sup>



**Figure 6.** Women who are inactive due to care responsibilities as a percentage of total population (%), 15–64, EU-28, 2019

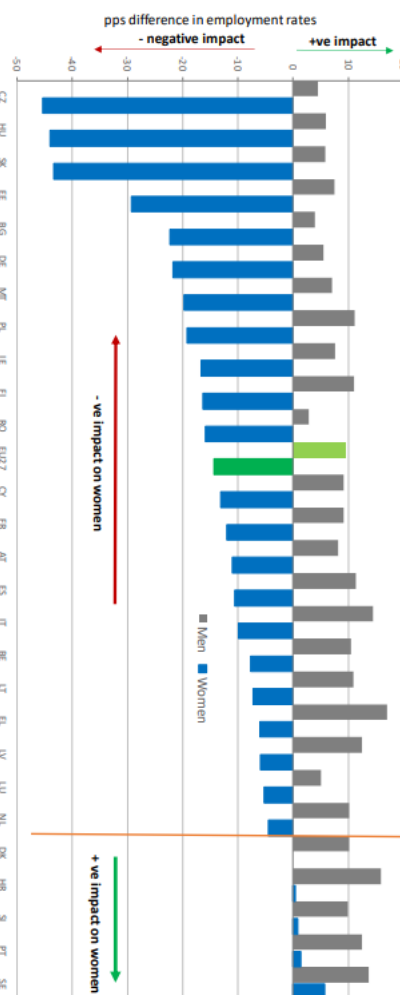
Source: EIGE, Gender inequalities in care and consequences for the labour market, 2021



**Figure 7** Employment impact of parenthood for men and women (age 25-49) in 2019

The current EU gender pay gap is at 16%, and it has only decreased by 1% in the last decade.<sup>54</sup> As things stand in today’s labour market, it is cheaper for a family to renounce a woman’s income instead of the man’s. This inequality has a €360 billion yearly cost for the EU and jeopardises women’s professional careers.<sup>55</sup> This is linked to the gender care gap, but also to the fact that women more often work in lower paid jobs for instance, including professional care work which is not valued or recognised enough.

Furthermore, the **impact of “motherhood” on employment** must be underlined. In 2019, the employment rate increased for men in all Member States (by almost 10 percentage points) whereas it fell in almost all the Member States for women<sup>56</sup> (by 14 percentage points) for parents (25-49 years) with at least a child younger than 6 years-old<sup>57</sup>. In some Member States, the negative impact is extremely high, reaching 40 percentage points (Czech Republic, Hungary and Slovakia).<sup>58</sup> (figure 7)



Note: the employment impact of parenthood is the pps difference in the employment rate for mothers and fathers with at least one child under the age of six.  
Source: Eurostat [fst\_hheredch].

Source: European Commission, Joint Employment Report, 2021

Last, but not least, persisting gender roles have an impact on the workforce. This is very clear in the gender distribution in the care sectors. The great majority of employed people in these sectors are women. Indeed, three out of four employed people in care sectors in the EU are women. This figure rises to 9 out of 10 for child care workers and educational assistants.<sup>59</sup> These sectors have been extremely hit by the COVID-19 pandemic: physical distancing is generally not possible but these activities are essential for the well-being of children and the good functioning of our societies and economies - yet workers in ECEC are often not well paid.<sup>60</sup>

Furthermore, the 2019 European Council Recommendation on High-Quality Early Childhood Education and Care Systems underlined that “*work of early childhood education and care professionals has a long lasting impact on children's lives. However, in many countries the profession has a rather low profile and status [...]. Professionalisation of staff is key because higher levels of preparation positively correlate with a better quality service, higher quality staff-child interactions and therefore better developmental outcomes for children*”.<sup>61</sup> However, only a third of European education systems demand at least a bachelor degree to be able to work with young children (usually children below 3 years old). Moreover, the majority of education systems assistants can be hired without a minimum qualification in ECEC.<sup>62</sup>

There is now a unique opportunity to improve ECEC systems within broader gender-responsive family policies (covering a mix of measures including services, leaves, cash transfers, flexible working), namely in the context of discussions around the transposition of the EU Work-life balance directive.

As the first legislative proposal to follow the proclamation of the European Pillar of Social Rights in November 2017, this Directive is an important stepping stone in the consolidation of existing social rights and the establishment of new ones for millions of citizens. It must now be followed up with enforcement and monitoring, and be transposed without delay into national legislation, as an opportunity to overcome the challenges highlighted above (child and family poverty, gender inequalities in the family and the labour market).<sup>63</sup>

The Directive includes beneficial measures: minimum European standards for paternity, parental and carers' leaves, flexible working arrangements and employment rights.<sup>64</sup> It should be noted that work-life balance policies leading to more balanced gender roles, are widely supported: 84% of Europeans (men: 81%) approve of “*A man taking parental leave to take care of his children*” [source: Eurobarometer Special 2017]. Therefore, an ambitious and wide transposition of the Directive is crucial to convert these attitudes into long-lasting behaviours.

However, this Directive only sets up minimum requirements for Europe's families. COFACE has been advocating for higher minimum standards.<sup>65</sup> Families need adequately paid leaves but they also rely on professional care services every day. The transposition of the Directive must be an opportunity to further develop inclusive, affordable and high-quality care services for all ages, including early childhood education and care, as a tool to boost work-life balance and gender equality.

### **c- Towards an economy which cares**

Tackling inequalities and poverty and reconciliation policies are core to the work of COFACE, but so is the economics of care.<sup>66</sup>

The COVID-19 pandemic has deeply hit the health and wellbeing of citizens, as well as the economic indicators. The real GDP is forecast to reach pre-pandemic levels by mid-2022 only.<sup>67</sup> GDP is now expected to rise by 4.8% in 2021 and 4.5% in 2022 in both the EU and the euro area, after a decline by 6.5% and 6% in 2020 in the euro area and the EU respectively.<sup>68</sup> Another negative consequence of the pandemic was the rise of unemployment.

The unemployment rate increased in 2020 reaching 7.8% and 8.7% in the EU and the euro area respectively during summer 2020<sup>69</sup>. In the last quarter of 2020, it slowly decreased.<sup>70</sup> During the first four months of 2021, the unemployment rate continued falling steadily, reaching 7.3% and 8% in the EU and the euro area respectively in April 2021.<sup>71</sup>

Labour market participation and total hours worked fell sharply during the pandemic, despite the measures taken to contain the economic losses.<sup>72</sup> The pandemic has hit almost all the economic sectors<sup>73</sup>, but with differences across the sectors, with a fall in employment between Q3-2019 and Q3-2020. And yet, COVID-19 economic efforts have benefited more businesses than households.<sup>74</sup>

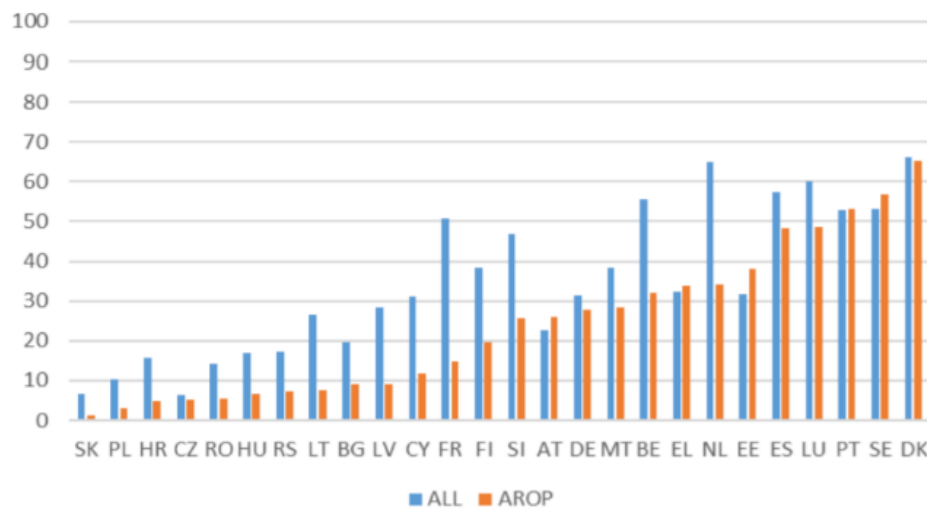
Young people are the ones who have most suffered from the COVID-19 economic crisis. Half of the 18-29-year-old people (51%) who replied to the OECD “Risks That Matter 2020” survey underline that either they or a household member suffered at least a professional disruption since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic (job loss, use of a job retention scheme, reduction in working hours, pay cut).<sup>75</sup> This figure is five percentage points higher than the 30-49 year-olds and fourteen higher than the 50-64 years old.<sup>76</sup> On top of that, a third of young people highlighted financial strains.<sup>77</sup>

Children were also hugely affected. In order to control the spread of the COVID-19 virus, most EU countries implemented partial or full lockdowns and restrictions on movement. These measures often also included the closure of ECEC centres, schools and establishment social-medical and service provision for children with disabilities who are excluded from the mainstream education system.<sup>78</sup> With the closure of schools, millions of children had to go on distance learning education, putting the most vulnerable ones at a clear disadvantage (such as children with special needs or children living in digitally deprived families).<sup>79</sup>

The COVID-19 measures also meant restrictions on other childcare options: for example, grandparents no longer available to care for their grandchildren. The non-economic effects of these measures included a significant impact on the mental health, increased family tensions and domestic violence, separated families, isolation and loneliness – all situations which must be addressed to avoid long-term impacts on the health and well-being of children and their families.<sup>80</sup> From an economic perspective, this combination of closures of services and restrictions left working parents of younger children in a predicament in terms of balancing family and work life. This situation put the spotlight on existing and worsening inequalities, as well as the importance of early childhood education and care to support a fully functioning economy and society.

A public provision of ECEC is one of the measures that UNICEF underlines as being effective to tackle inequalities.<sup>81</sup> There are some 30 million children under 6 years old in the EU. ECEC programmes usually target this age group, which accounts for one out of twenty persons in the EU.<sup>82</sup> However, not all of them have access to these services. Only three out of ten children below 3 years of age (roughly 5 million) attend ECEC programmes<sup>83</sup>, and children from disadvantaged backgrounds tend to be underrepresented in formal ECEC programmes.<sup>84</sup> (figure 8)

**Figure 8.** ECEC participation rates of children at risk of poverty (AROP), compared to all children. Age group 0-2 years, 2019, %

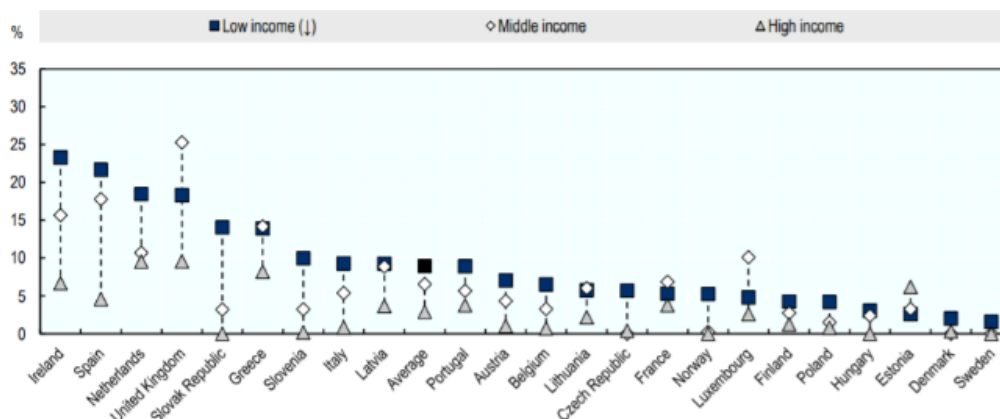


Source: Commission Staff Working Document accompanying the document Proposal for a Council Recommendation establishing a European Child Guarantee, 2021

In European OECD countries, children below three years old born in low-income households have a one-third less chances to participate on ECEC programmes than their peers born in high-income households.<sup>85</sup> For many households, childcare is still very expensive, despite the several types of supports (rebates, cash benefits, tax reliefs, etc.).<sup>86</sup>

For instance, in European OECD countries, one out of four low-income households with at least a child between 0-5 years consider that they need more childcare but cannot afford it.<sup>87</sup> (figure 9)

**Figure 9.** Share of households reporting that they would like to use (more) formal childcare but cannot afford it, households with at least one child aged 0-5, by income level, 2016



Source: OECD, Is Childcare affordable? 2020

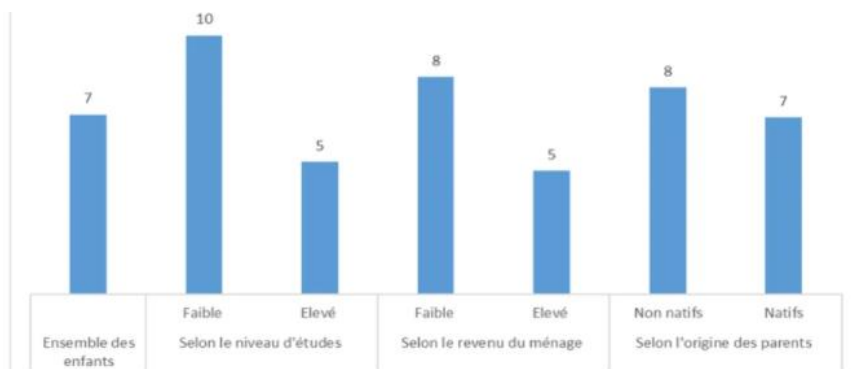
Affordability is indeed important to improve access to services but NOT sufficient. There are also other barriers that still prevail such as the availability of places, inclusivity of the setting, the cultural norms, household prospects in the labour market, the quality of the services, and more.<sup>88</sup>

Because high quality ECEC programmes are positive, providing children with the best start in life. The early years are crucial and the most formative in a person’s life, laying foundations that will influence all aspects of a child’s life. Investment in this period therefore generates long-lasting cumulative benefits with ECEC also being key for a “successful lifelong learning.”<sup>89</sup> Furthermore, children who have attended high quality ECEC programmes show greater amounts of cognitive and socio-economic skills.<sup>90</sup> Then, being in contact with other children in formal ECEC programmes boost social behaviour and learning capabilities.<sup>91</sup>

These effects have a thorough impact throughout adolescence and adulthood, declining the school dropout rate, raising the chances of attending higher education and, thus, better employment prospects, as well as improved health and greater social mobility.<sup>92</sup> These effects are especially relevant for children from disadvantaged backgrounds who benefit from ECEC more than children from middle and high-income families.<sup>93</sup> For instance, children from disadvantaged backgrounds are three times more likely to finish secondary school if they have attended quality ECEC programmes.<sup>94</sup>

A recent study carried out in France suggests that children who attend kindergarten with ECEC professional staff who can provide them activities suited to their age, as well as the fact of being in contact with other peers, will see positive impacts on language acquisition.<sup>95</sup> These beneficial outcomes are particularly relevant among children from disadvantaged backgrounds. Children attending ECEC could on average say 80 words, 6 more than the average and 12 more than children who stayed at home with their parents.<sup>96</sup> (figure 10)

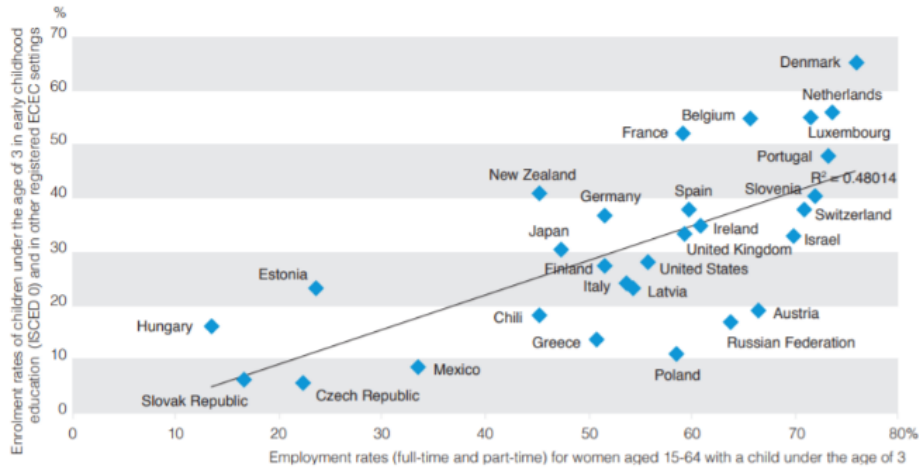
**Figure 10** Number of additional words known to children attending kindergarten



Source: INED, Crèche : un effet positif sur le développement du langage, particulièrement pour les enfants défavorisés, 2021

Moreover, the availability and accessibility of ECEC programmes is key too for families, especially for women. Indeed, there is a strong correlation between availability of quality, affordable, accessible and inclusive ECEC programmes and the rise of the female employment rate.<sup>97</sup> (figure 11)

**Figure 11.** Relationship between mother's employability and enrolment rates in early childhood education and care (2014) For mothers aged 15-64 whose youngest child is under the age of 3



Source: OECD, How does access to early childhood services affect the participation of women in the labour market?, 2018

The OECD report shows that the more number of hours a child is enrolled in ECEC programmes, the more mothers (and fathers) can find a full-time employment<sup>98</sup>, securing their economic independence, more positions of female leadership, and a more diverse workforce. On average, in OECD countries, women had three times more chances to be in part-time jobs than their male peers in 2015.<sup>99</sup> Then, one out of ten women in the European Union work part-time or are inactive due to care duties, in comparison with only one out of two-hundred men.<sup>100</sup>

While high quality ECEC has impacts on child education and on working parents, the economic and labour market impact is also evident in some countries like France, Luxembourg, Slovenia, Portugal, Sweden, Denmark, which have both high levels of children participation in ECEC and high levels of mothers work full-time.<sup>101</sup>

**Figure 12.** Percentage of women and men who report unmet household need for formal childcare services, 2016

Even before the COVID-19 pandemic, the situation of families had been described as “a global childcare crisis”. One out of seven families in the EU had unmet needs for childcare services<sup>102</sup> (figure 12). These figures rise to one out of five single mothers with children.<sup>103</sup> For half of families affordability hampers their access to childcare services.<sup>104</sup>



Source: EIGE Gender Equality Index, 2019

The economy is not solely comprised of activities which involve a monetary exchange. The so-called “informal” economy often serves as the backbone of “formal” economic activities, ensuring that solidarity, mutual assistance, social and emotional ties remain strong, preventing social unrest and upheaval when “formal” structures fail to address human misery and distress.

Families are at the heart of the informal economy, maintaining the essential relations and bonds between all generations. In order to cement their role, policy-makers should properly enact policies for reconciling work and family life as well as invest in the care economy and high quality ECEC.

### III. The important role of the European Union to boost ECEC

*I will want to develop a European pillar of social rights, which takes account of the changing realities of Europe's societies and the world of work. And which can serve as a compass for the renewed convergence within the euro area. This European pillar of social rights should complement what we have already jointly achieved when it comes to the protection of workers in the EU. I will expect social partners to play a central role in this process. I believe we do well to start with this initiative within the euro area, while allowing other EU Member States to join in if they want to do so.*

President Juncker, State of the Union, 2015<sup>105</sup>

What role does the European Union play in fostering ECEC services? And how to achieve accessible, affordable and quality ECEC programmes? Regarding social policies, the EU has a number of legislative competences that allows it to “*support and complement the activities of the Member States*”.<sup>106</sup> However the EU has limited competences in relation to social protection services, with this being the primary competence of Member States.<sup>107</sup> This means that social services are essentially provided by national and regional governments rather than by European Institutions.<sup>108</sup>

Social and social-related policies are developed essentially at (sub)national level, with national governments investing around 30% of their GDP on social protection and health.<sup>109</sup> However, the EU budget is too tight to face these kind of investments. Then, there are different cultural inheritances of welfare states.<sup>110</sup>

European social policy underpinned by the European Commission has met different stages in the latest 15 years.<sup>111</sup> First of all, a phase of questioning social policy during the two terms of President Barroso, where during the financial crisis of 2008 there was a missing social dimension<sup>112</sup> and a “market first approach”.<sup>113</sup> Then, a “*new start*” initiated by President Juncker’s mandate in 2014, and continued by his successor at the 13<sup>th</sup> floor of the Brussels-based Berlaymont building, European Commission President von der Leyen.<sup>114</sup>

During his speech to the European Parliament in October 2014, President Juncker expressed his ambitions for a more social Europe and higher social standards, and spoke about his ambition of seeing the EU as “*a triple-A on social issues*”.<sup>115</sup>

The cornerstone of European social policy under the leadership of President Juncker was the proclamation in November 2017 of the European Pillar of Social Rights, which includes principles of Gender Equality and Work-life Balance, as well as ECEC services.<sup>116</sup> The Commission continued in this direction with the adoption of the European Pillar of Social Rights Action Plan and the European Child Guarantee in 2021. These plans seem to prove that there is willingness to fight against child and family poverty, and tackle gender inequalities of all sorts.

In fact, social policy matters for EU citizens: as a recent Eurobarometer shows, nine out of ten citizens consider that a social Europe is important to them personally.<sup>117</sup> Then, three out five citizens think that there will be a more social Europe in 2030, while four out of five Europeans who had heard about the European Pillar of Social Rights considered that the Pillar will reinforce both employment and social inclusion in the EU as a whole<sup>118</sup>.

Regarding ECEC, it is important to recall the important role of the European Union to boost ECEC and which should be the key elements of an ambitious ECEC by 2030.

### a- Time for renewed EU targets on early childhood education and care?

A major step forward in the area of ECEC has been the Conclusions of the European Council in Barcelona in March 2002. As part of the Employment Strategy, Member States agreed to “remove disincentives for female labour force participation and strive, in line with national patterns of provision, to provide childcare by 2010 to **at least 90% of children between 3 years old and the mandatory school age and at least 33% of children under 3 years of age**”.<sup>119</sup>

The achievement of these targets that became known as “**Barcelona objectives**”, were not legally binding but important political recommendations. Setting up common targets allow for better monitoring and therefore improvement.<sup>120</sup> ECEC was then primarily seen as an economic argument to boost employment, especially the women’s participation in the labour market.

Recent reports<sup>121</sup> have assessed the achievement of the Barcelona objectives and found that, a decade after the expected deadline, the targets have still been only partially fulfilled.

**Regarding the target of 33% of children under 3 years of age:** the EU-27 has reached the Barcelona targets, as on average 35.5% of children under 3 years old attend an ECEC centre-based in 2019.<sup>122</sup> However, only **15 out of the 27 Member States reached the target in 2019**, and there are great differences in the participation rates between countries, from 68% in Denmark to 1.4% in Slovakia.<sup>123</sup> The Netherlands, Spain, Malta and Lithuania experienced great records of improvement, while the Social Scoreboard highlighted “critical” for five Member States (Romania, Hungary, Poland, Czech Republic, Croatia).<sup>124</sup> (figure 13)

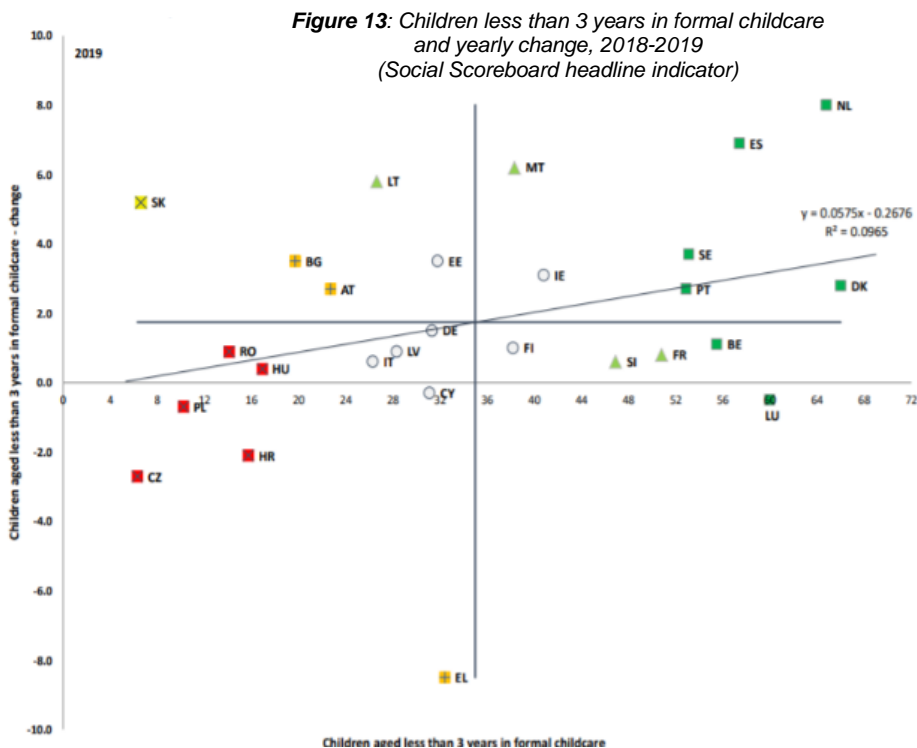


Figure 13: Children less than 3 years in formal childcare and yearly change, 2018-2019 (Social Scoreboard headline indicator)

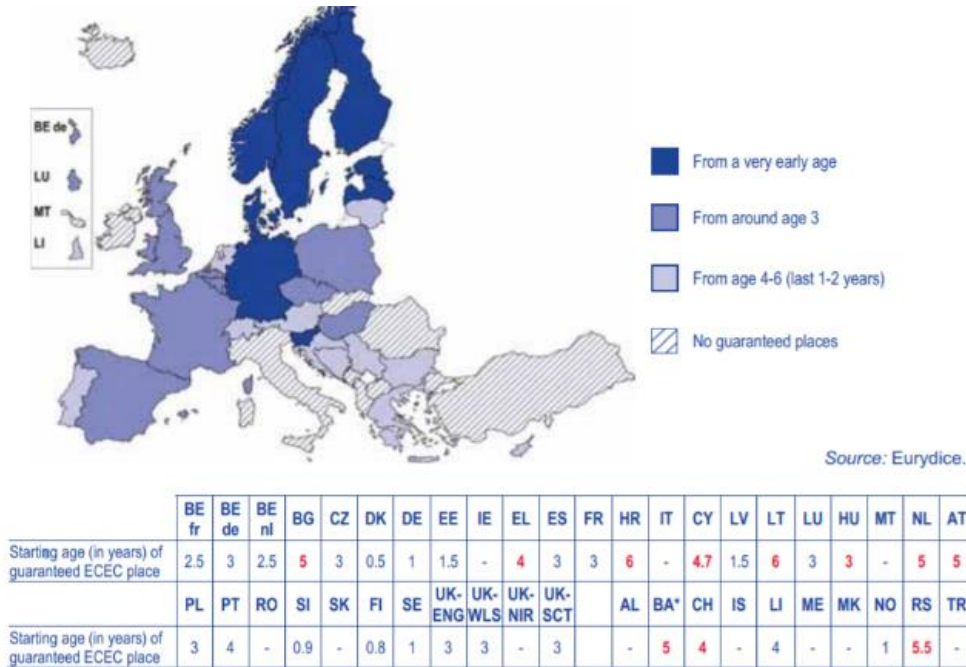
Source: European Commission, Joint Employment Report, 2021



One of the reasons for these gaps is the age that Member States guarantee a place in ECEC, as only **a fourth of them guarantee a place in an ECEC programme** immediately after the childbirth, normally after the end of the childcare (maternity, paternity, parental) leave.<sup>125</sup> (figure 14)

What's more, the target established for the Education and Training (ET 2020) was fulfilled.<sup>127</sup> The ET 2020 strategic framework established that **by 2020 at least 95% of children between 4 years old and compulsory school age should participate in ECEC programmes.**

**Figure 14:** Age from which a place in ECEC is guaranteed 2018-2019

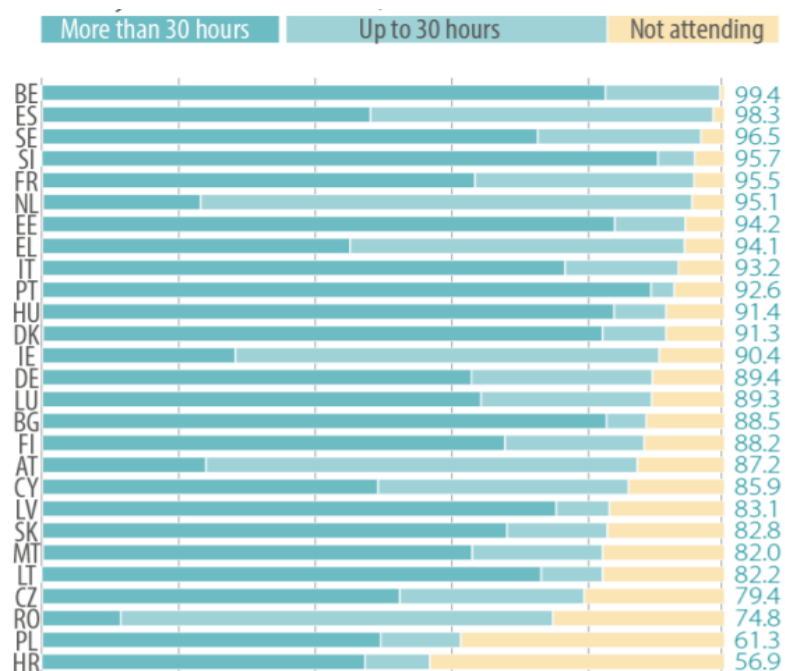


Source: Eurydice, Key Data on Early Childhood Education and Care in Europe: 2019

**For the target of 90% of children between 3 years old and compulsory school age:** The EU-27 participation rate of **children aged three years old and over on ECEC programmes was 92.8% and 95.1% for the children aged four years and over.**<sup>126</sup> Half of the Member States fulfilled in 2019 the participation rate of children aged three years old and over in ECEC programmes, and six more were very close to the target (between 85 and 90% of participation rate). (figure 14)

Another step forward was made in February 2021 when the Council set up the ET 2030 target that **“at least 96% of children between 3 years old and the starting age for compulsory primary education should participate in early childhood education and care, by 2030”.**<sup>128</sup> So far, only 3 Member States have fulfilled this target but five more are close to reach it (between 94-96% participation rate). (figure 15)

**Figure 15:** Percentage of children aged three and over attending early childhood education and care facilities, 2019



Source: European Parliament Research, Participation in early education and care, 2021

In its new Gender Equality Strategy 2020-2025<sup>129</sup>, the European Commission calls on Member States to “ensure adequate investments in early childhood education, care services and long-term care services including from available EU funding”. Moreover, given that many countries are still lagging behind on the provision of ECEC, the Commission will propose to revise the Barcelona targets to ensure further upwards convergence among Member States of early childhood education and care.

This revision was also announced in the European Pillar of Social Rights Action Plan (March 2021), together with other complementary measures, and will be connected to the upcoming European Care Strategy announced by President von der Leyen during her State of the Union speech in September 2021, planned for the third quarter of 2022.

## **b-The European Pillar of Social Rights Action Plan - multiple tools to boost ECEC**

*Your task over the next five years is to strengthen Europe's social dimension and ensure those in work are supported to earn a living and those out of work are supported to find a job and gain the skills they need. At the heart of this, is the need for dignity, fairness and prosperity for Europeans. Our best instrument to deliver on this is the European Pillar of Social Rights and its 20 principles. I want you to develop an action plan to implement the Pillar, working closely with the Member States and fully respecting the subsidiarity principle.*

President von der Leyen, Mission Letter to  
Nicolas Schmit - Commissioner-designate for  
Jobs, 2019<sup>130</sup>

At the Social Summit for Fair Jobs and Growth on 17 November 2017, the three EU Institutions proclaimed the European Pillar of Social Rights, a list of 20 principles divided into three chapters. Each of these chapters covers a number of policy issues. The Pillar is the first set of social rights adopted by the EU Institutions since the Charter of Fundamental Rights<sup>131</sup> and the backbone of the social dimension of President Juncker's 2014-2019 term.<sup>132</sup>

The Pillar's central aim is to serve as a guiding tool towards improvement in the employment and social fields.<sup>133</sup> The Pillar is to be applicable only in the Euro area<sup>134</sup> because it wants to strengthen the Economic and Monetary Union<sup>135</sup>, but it is open for other Member States, which can join whenever they decide so. As for EU legislation adopted in the framework of the Pillar, this is applicable to **all** Member States (e.g. the EU Work-Life Balance Directive).

The Pillar underlines some rights already enshrined in the Union acquis and adds principles to tackle the challenges arising from different perspectives (social, technological and economic ones).<sup>136</sup> It does not prevent Member States to go further and settle up more ambitious standards.

National, regional and local governments need to deliver most of the competences and tools required to deliver on the Pillar. The EU institutions have a supportive role, where they have a shared competence, establishing a level-playing field across EU countries<sup>137</sup>, and helping Member States with the implementation of the Pillar through various tools such as soft and hard law, monitoring and evaluation through the Social Scoreboard<sup>138</sup>, country-specific recommendations within the EU Semester Process to steer national reforms.<sup>139</sup>

Among the 20 principles, there are two that are particularly relevant to ECEC.

First of all, the **Principle 11**: "Childcare and support to children". COFACE Families Europe was glad to see that the Pillar underlined that providing affordable and good-quality early childhood care for all children and introducing specific measures to enhance equal opportunities and be protected from poverty were key.<sup>140</sup> Then, the **Principle 9**, "Work-Life Balance". The Pillar highlights the right of parents and people with caring responsibilities to suitable leave, flexible working arrangements and access to care services. It is also beneficial that the Pillar underlines the equal access of men and women to these measures in order to share better their caring responsibilities.<sup>141</sup>

There is at least one question that remained open after the adoption of the Pillar, and that COFACE Families Europe previously underlined<sup>142</sup>: how to ensure that the implementation of the European Pillar of Social Rights if it is not a legally binding instrument in primary or secondary law<sup>143</sup>, transforming the 20 principles into deliverables and life-changing actions for Europe's families? Since this COFACE assessment, the European Union has successfully adopted key legal and policy frameworks to advance implementation of the Pillar principles, and recently also published a **European Pillar of Social Rights Action Plan** in March 2021<sup>144</sup> to keep up momentum and trigger further joint EU actions, especially to address the

consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic, following further requests made to the European Commission.<sup>145</sup>

The Action Plan put forward three headline targets for the EU to reach by 2030, on issues such as employment, skills, and social protection.<sup>146</sup>

- At least 78% of people aged 20 to 64 should be in employment, which includes 3 sub-goals, one of them being increasing the availability of childcare services (from children between 0-5 years old);
- At least 60% of all adults should participate in training every year;
- The number of people at risk of poverty or social exclusion should be reduced by at least 15 million. Out of these 15 million people, at least 5 million should be children.

In this Action Plan, the Commission calls on Member States to set up national targets accordingly, and to mobilise all the policy tools such as the European Semester, the available European funding programmes, as well as hard and soft European Law.<sup>147</sup> The three targets will be also supported by a **revised Social Scoreboard**. New indicators will be added to the Social Scoreboard on **adult learning, child poverty, disability employment gap, and housing cost overburden**.<sup>148</sup> The Action Plan is due to be reviewed in 2025.<sup>149</sup> The Commission wants to mobilise different EU funds to implement its action plan, including changes in its social funds like the European Social Fund and the Fund for European Aid to the Most Deprived. The European Council adopted on 8<sup>th</sup> May the **Porto Declaration**.<sup>150</sup> which welcomes the Commission's action plan. Finally, on 25<sup>th</sup> June 2021, the European Council officially endorsed the Action Plan.

COFACE Families Europe welcomed the Action Plan, but also expressed its doubts on certain points namely regarding the perception of family care as focused mainly on children and not on adults (which does not reflect the current demographic trends of ageing and the increasing care for older family members).<sup>151</sup> Nonetheless, the Action Plan highlights the need to boost ECEC from different perspectives:

- **ECEC as an employment and gender equality measure:** ECEC is seen as a Work-Life Balance measure for families, helping more women to join the labour market, thus decreasing the **gender care, pay, and pension gaps**. These arguments to invest in quality, accessible and affordable ECEC have been traditionally underlined by the EU Institutions (eg: Barcelona Targets, Gender Equality Strategy 2020-2025<sup>152</sup>, Council Conclusions on Tackling the Gender Pay Gap<sup>153</sup>, Gender Equality Report 2021<sup>154</sup>, etc.). What's more, the Action Plan mentions that the expected revision of the Barcelona Targets "*will aim at fostering upward convergence across Member States, and hence **improve female labour market participation***", that is, the same arguments underlined by the Barcelona Targets in 2002.
- **ECEC as educational and anti-poverty measure:** ECEC is seen as providing the "*foundations on which to build the basic and transversal skills needed in fast-changing societies; they also form the basis for any further learning and skills development*". ECEC is seen as both as educational – where the early years are of paramount importance to develop social-cognitive skills- and as a tool to tackle poverty transmission. Targeted measures on ECEC are also planned by the European Child Guarantee (see below) to support children in vulnerable situations, hence with a big focus on the inclusiveness of the ECEC provision.

From the COFACE perspective, the need to boost ECEC also stems from its already known positive effects on families:

- **ECEC is a powerful means to protect the paid income of parents**, therefore shielding them and their children from unemployment-induced poverty: it is therefore as much a tool to tackle poverty as well as poverty transmission.
- **ECEC should also be seen as a means to help parents to reach their personal ideal number of children**: alongside with comprehensive work-life balance policies to support families, ECEC is seen as a means to help all parents or would-be parents to maintain a steady income from paid work throughout parenthood. ECEC is a key contribution to lifting the financial constraints preventing parents to reach their fertility goals.

### **c- EU guidelines for high quality and inclusive ECEC systems**

Following the adoption of the European Pillar of Social Rights, the EPSCO Council adopted on May 2019 a Council Recommendation on High-Quality Early Childhood Education and Care Systems<sup>155</sup>. The aim of the Recommendation is to set up a set of common objectives and definitions of what a quality, affordable and accessible ECEC means.<sup>156</sup>

A EU Recommendation is not legally binding<sup>157</sup> but it *“is expected to oblige the suggestions made [...] by its political significance”*<sup>158</sup>.

The 2019 Recommendation backs up Member States in their efforts to improve the accessibility, affordability and quality of their early childhood education and care systems, underlying that *“a lack of availability, accessibility, and affordability has been shown to be one of the main barriers to the use of [ECEC] services”*<sup>159</sup>, while acknowledging the primary responsibility of Member States in this area.

Furthermore, the Recommendation sets ECEC as one of the key social pillars of the EU<sup>160</sup>, as it is aimed to drive implementation of a series of actions under the Principle 11 of the Pillar of Social Rights, and as well the Sustainable Development Goal 4.2, which establishes that all children should have access to quality ECEC, including pre-primary education, by 2030.

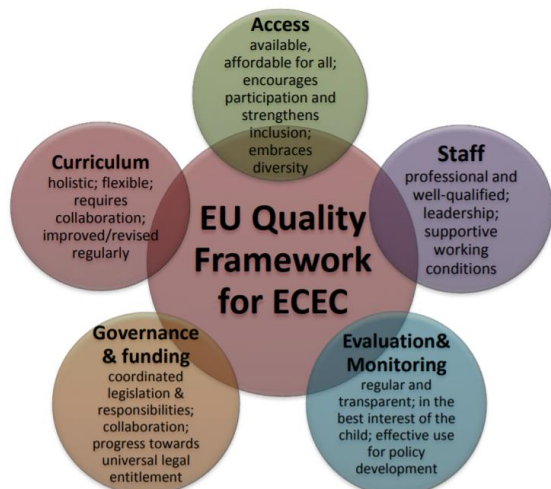
Some see a radical change of policy orientation on ECEC, in the last decades.<sup>161</sup> Childcare was seen in the “Barcelona targets” of 2002 as a way of boosting up women’s employment.<sup>162</sup> ECEC would be purely seen as a *“service for working parents, which they would pay for in order to be able to go out and work”*<sup>163</sup>, where the *“education sector seem like a commodity where private companies are free to make profit”*.<sup>164</sup>

By declaring in its 2019 Recommendation 2.f that *“inclusive early childhood education and care services for all children, including children with diverse backgrounds and special educational needs, including disabilities, avoiding segregation and incentivising their participation, regardless of the labour market status of their parents or carers”* should be provided, the Council of the EU highlights the multiple benefits of ECEC<sup>165</sup> and that *“the official position of the EU is that high quality early childhood education is a good investment for countries, and that this requires well-qualified teachers, better salaries and good working conditions in the sector”*.<sup>166</sup>

Indeed, the Recommendation reinforces the concept of **“quality ECEC”**, with the inclusion of a **Quality Framework** (in the annex of the Recommendation), around **five key aspects** (Recital 16) and **ten statements**, that were firstly included in the **2014 Proposal for key principles of a Quality Framework for Early Childhood Education and Care**.<sup>167</sup>

The five dimensions of quality ECEC are accessibility; decent training and working conditions for ECEC staff; a pedagogical approach; monitoring and evaluation; and finally governance and funding.

Figure 16: EU Quality Framework for ECEC



Source: Annex of the Council Recommendation on High-Quality Early Childhood Education and Care Systems, 2019

The Recommendation highlights that “*only high-quality early childhood education and care services deliver benefits; low quality services have significant negative impact on children and on society as a whole*” (Recital 9) and reinforces that national “*policy measures and reforms need to give priority to quality considerations*” (Recital 9).

The Recommendation includes, among others, the following actions under each of the five dimensions:

- **Accessibility:**
  - ✓ **Analysing the supply and demand from families** in order to better adapt the offer of early childhood education and care services to their needs, respecting parental choice (Recommendation 2.b);
  - ✓ **Analysing and addressing the barriers that families might encounter** when accessing and using early childhood education and care services, such as costs, poverty-

related barriers, geographical location, inflexible opening hours, barriers related to inadequate provisions for children with special needs, cultural and linguistic barriers, discrimination as well as a lack of information (Recommendation 2.c);

- ✓ **Establishing contact and cooperation with families and especially those in a vulnerable or disadvantaged situation**, in order to inform them about the possibilities and benefits of early childhood education and care participation and, where relevant, about available support, and build trust in the services and encourage participation from an early age (Recommendation 2.d);
- ✓ **Strengthening preventive actions, early identification of difficulties and adequate provisions for children with special needs and their families**, involving all relevant actors, e.g. educational, social or health services as well as parents (Recommendation 2.h)

- **Training and working conditions of ECEC staff and strengthening the development of early year’s curricula:**
  - ✓ **Support the professionalisation of early childhood education and care staff**, including leaders by raising the status of the early childhood education and care profession by creating **high professional standards, offering attractive professional status and career prospects to early childhood education and care educators**, striving to reach a better gender balance and creating professionalisation pathways for staff with low or no qualification as well as specific pathways to qualify assistants (Recommendation 3.a);
  - ✓ **Enhance the development of early years’ curricula** in order to follow children’s interests, nurture their wellbeing and meet the unique needs

and potential of each individual child, including those with special needs or in a vulnerable or disadvantaged situation. Approaches supporting holistic learning and children's development could include (Recommendation 4);

- **Governance and funding:**
  - ✓ Scaling up investment in early childhood education and care with a focus on availability, quality and affordability, including making use, where appropriate, of the **funding opportunities offered by the European structural and investment funds** (Recommendation 6.a);
  - ✓ Creating and maintaining tailored national or regional Quality Frameworks (Recommendation 6.b).

COFACE Families Europe welcomed this Recommendation<sup>168</sup>, which puts ECEC as a high priority issue for EU institutions<sup>169</sup>. This Recommendation fulfils a wide range of recommendations that COFACE Families Europe has been advocating for years<sup>170</sup>:

- Aligning the Recommendation to the European Pillar of Social Rights, and the Sustainable Development Goals, as a compass for future actions;
- Acknowledging that investing in early childhood education and care is a good investment only if the services are of high quality, accessible, affordable and inclusive. **High quality includes a decent adult-to-child ratio**, crucial for quality care and for keeping children safe. Evidence shows that only high-quality early childhood education and care services deliver benefits; low quality services have significant negative impact on children and on society as a whole.

- Different benefits of ECEC, both **educational** (measure to support child wellbeing, education and cognitive development) but also **economic and social** (inclusion measure that prevents and reduces poverty and social exclusion, and a crucial employment support measure for parents);
- Investments in ECEC through EU funds and national budgets under the new Multiannual Financial Framework.

In order to support the implementation of this Council recommendation, the European Commission set up a working group develop a few key tools. It was composed of national Ministries responsible for ECEC systems in 35 countries, eight European organisations, and European Agencies and international organisations,<sup>171</sup> and had as mission to **offer policy recommendations based on some of the five dimensions of the ECEC European Quality Framework.**<sup>172</sup>

This resulted in a number resources to support national policy-makers responsible for ECEC in relation to making ECEC inclusive<sup>173</sup>, providing guidelines on boosting the ECEC workforce<sup>174</sup>, and recruitment and training of well-qualified ECEC staff<sup>175</sup>; as well as a final report summarising the conclusions of the inclusion toolkit and the guidelines.<sup>176</sup> The next mandate of the group (2021-2023) will focus on **evaluation and monitoring.**

#### d- European Child Guarantee national action plans

*I will create the European Child Guarantee to help ensure that every child in Europe at risk of poverty or social exclusion has access to the most basic of rights like healthcare and education.*

President von der Leyen, Political Guidelines of the new Commission, 2019<sup>177</sup>

The European Child Guarantee has become a policy priority<sup>178</sup> for the current von der Leyen's Commission, following several years of advocacy from child rights and family organisations. The study on the feasibility of a child guarantee for vulnerable children highlights that the impetus for a Child Guarantee started in 2015 with a European Parliament report<sup>179</sup> on Reducing inequalities with a special focus on child poverty.<sup>180</sup> This report requested that the EU "*introduce a child guarantee so that every child in poverty can have access to free healthcare, free education, free childcare, decent housing and adequate nutrition, as part of a European integrated plan to combat child poverty including both the Child Guarantee and programmes offering support and opportunities for the parents to come out of social exclusion situations and to integrate the labour market*".<sup>181</sup>

The Parliament's call was due to the weak and unfulfilled implementation of the Commission's Recommendation Investing in children: breaking the cycle of disadvantage<sup>182</sup> of 2013, strong high levels of child poverty and social exclusion, and the difficulties of Member States to both tackle the vicious cycle of poverty and use more efficiently the EU Funds for implementation of the Recommendation.<sup>183</sup>

In 2017, the same year as the adoption of the Pillar, the Commission launched a Study on the feasibility of a child guarantee for vulnerable children<sup>184</sup>, which was published in June 2020. This study focuses on four target groups: children residing in

institutions, children with disabilities, children with a migrant background (including refugee children), and children living in a precarious family situation.<sup>185</sup>

This study underlines that action is needed to improve support for children in vulnerable situations in five principle policy areas: healthcare, housing, education, **childcare**, and nutrition.<sup>186</sup> It states that children in a more disadvantaged situation need more and targeted support, and ideally a twin-track approach is needed to improve both the access and inclusivity.<sup>187</sup> Furthermore, the study concludes that EU action such as policy coordination, guidance and funding to support Member State actions (where the essential responsibility lies) is feasible.<sup>188</sup> On top of that, EU funds have great potential to play a more effective and strategic role in supporting access to the five policy areas.<sup>189</sup>

On 24th March 2021, the European Commission published the European Child Guarantee<sup>190</sup>, framed in the new EU Child Rights Strategy. The objective of the European Child Guarantee is to prevent and tackle poverty and social exclusion by guaranteeing access of children in need to a set of five key services: ECEC, education (including school-based activities), healthcare, nutrition, and housing.<sup>191</sup> The Parliament adopted the Child Guarantee last 29<sup>th</sup> April and the Council did the same last 14<sup>th</sup> June, with a Council Recommendation establishing a European Child Guarantee.<sup>192</sup>

ECEC plays a key role in the Child Guarantee, not only by the number of times "*early childhood care and education*" is quoted in the legislation<sup>193</sup>, but also through the holistic two-generation approach adopted in the Child Guarantee viewing ECEC programmes as benefitting both children and their families (and not only as an economic tool to boost women's employment).



First of all, ECEC is seen as a way to **tackle inequalities, helping children at risk or social exclusion** (Recital 12). ECEC is seen as a measure which will help to achieve the targets of reducing by 15 million the number of people at risk of poverty or social exclusion, which at least 5 million should be children of the European Pillar of Social Rights Action Plan.

Therefore, **the access to high quality ECEC programmes** for children at risk or social exclusion is essential (Recitals 17, 18 and 27, Recommendation 4), as a way to “*remove transmission of social exclusion and securing equal opportunities for children in a disadvantaged situation*” (Recital 20). Poverty of the children is seen as family poverty, that is, children at risk or social exclusion face barriers to access to ECEC programmes **because** their families do. Therefore, The CG encourages Member States to “*identify and address financial and non-financial barriers to participation in early childhood education and care, education, and school-based activities*” (Recommendations 7a and 7d).

That is why the CG highlights that Member States with a level of child poverty above the EU average must provide at least **5% of their ESF+ allocated funds**<sup>194</sup> to tackle this problem. Other funds such as the ERDF and InvestEU “*will also support investment in enabling infrastructure, such as social housing and early childhood education and care facilities, as well as equipment and access to quality and mainstream services*” (Recital 28). The target groups (“children in need”) of the national action plans on the CG is to be defined by Member States, but with key guidance in the Recommendation on including children with disabilities, children in institutional care, homeless children and their families.<sup>195</sup>

Moreover, the CG reinforces another aspect of quality ECEC programmes, which are **healthy meals**, as an essential aspect of the well-being of children (Recommendation 9b). On top of that, healthy meals should be provided to “*support access to healthy meals*

*also outside of school days, including through in-kind or financial support, in particular in exceptional circumstances such as school closures*” (Recommendation 9a).

Regarding the **monitoring**, Member States must submit to the Commission, within nine months of the adoption of the Recommendation (that is at latest in March 2022), an **action plan with a 2030 timeline**. Moreover, a “*national Child Guarantee Coordinator, equipped with adequate resources and mandate enabling the effective coordination and monitoring of the implementation of the Child Guarantee recommendation*”.<sup>196</sup> Then, Member States must send a report to the Commission on the progress in implementing this recommendation every two years. The Commission, on its side, needs to review the progress made and report to the Council five years after the adoption of the recommendation.<sup>197</sup>

COFACE will continue to monitor the Child Guarantee process closely, facilitating links between family policy-makers across countries and encouraging the use of all EU instruments available to boost national actions, including the recently launched Technical Support Instrument flagship initiative on the Child Guarantee.<sup>198</sup>

Furthermore, COFACE will advocate for a smooth articulation of Child guarantee policies with the transposition of EU Work-life Balance directive. In particular, the emphasis on ECEC should not be used to hamper every parent’s right to adequately paid maternity, paternity or parental leaves.

## IV. Conclusion: *quality* as key precondition for positive ECEC impacts

As we have seen in this brief, research underlines the several benefits that ECEC brings not only to children, but also to families and to society, especially to families in disadvantaged situations. These benefits depend on ECEC services which are inclusive, accessible, affordable and of quality. **If one of these items is missing, it can have detrimental effects on child development (especially from disadvantaged backgrounds) as well as on the work-life balance of families and the society as a whole.**

COFACE Families Europe believes that, regarding ECEC, a whole-society approach should be taken, with ECEC at the intersection of key EU frameworks:

- Combat poverty, promote children's well-being and their social integration, and support children to overcome educational and socio-economic disadvantages, as children from disadvantaged backgrounds are the one who benefits the most of ECEC: this has to be done through the **swift implementation of the Child Guarantee and the European Pillar of Social Rights Action Plan** and the honest collaboration between the European Commission and Member States;

- **Transposition of the EU work-life balance directive**, ensuring continuity between family childcare (leaves) and professional care (ECEC), helping to close the gender care, employment and pension gaps through the **Gender Equality Strategy 2020-2025** and the launch of the **upcoming European Care Strategy** (which must take an intergenerational approach look at care from early childhood to old age)
- Building back better after this pandemic-driven crisis, moving towards a caring and inclusive economy which invests in ECEC, including through the **EU structural and investment funds, the Recovery and Resilience Facility and the whole battery of the NextGenerationEU Plan.**

Members of COFACE Families Europe will continue monitoring and advocating for these measures, raising awareness, **with special attention to the *quality* of ECEC as an essential precondition to achieve these multiple positive impacts.** They expect the EU Institutions and national governments to implement these important and very needed social rights for families of today.

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<sup>120</sup> European Parliament Research (2021), Participation in early education and care, [https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/BRIE/2021/696210/EPRS\\_BRI\(2021\)696210\\_EN.pdf](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/BRIE/2021/696210/EPRS_BRI(2021)696210_EN.pdf)

<sup>121</sup> Eurydice (2019), Key Data on Early Childhood Education and Care in Europe: 2019 Edition, *Op.Cit.*,

European Parliament Research (2021), Participation in early education and care, *Op.Cit.*, European Commission (2021), The European Pillar of Social Rights Action Plan, *Op.Cit.*

<sup>122</sup> European Commission (2021), The European Pillar of Social Rights Action Plan, *Op.Cit.*

<sup>123</sup> European Commission (2021), Joint Employment Report 2021, *Op.Cit.*

<sup>124</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>125</sup> The 7 Member States are the following: Denmark, Germany, Estonia, Latvia, Slovenia, Finland, and Sweden. Eurydice (2019), Key Data on Early Childhood Education and Care in Europe: 2019 Edition, *Op.Cit.*

<sup>126</sup> European Parliament Research (2021), Participation in early education and care, *Op.Cit.*

<sup>127</sup> Council Council conclusions of 12 May 2009 on a strategic framework for European cooperation in education and training ('ET 2020'), [https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=CELEX:52009XG0528\(01\)&from=EN](https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=CELEX:52009XG0528(01)&from=EN)

<sup>128</sup> Council of the European Union (2021), Council Resolution on a strategic framework for European cooperation in education and training towards the European Education Area and beyond (2021-2030), <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/media/48584/st06289-re01-en21.pdf>

<sup>129</sup> European Commission (2020), A Union of Equality: Gender Equality Strategy 2020-2025, *Op.cit.*

<sup>130</sup>

[https://ec.europa.eu/info/sites/default/files/mission-letter-nicolas-schmit\\_en.pdf](https://ec.europa.eu/info/sites/default/files/mission-letter-nicolas-schmit_en.pdf)

<sup>131</sup> European Commission, Factsheet on the European Pillar of Social Rights, <https://ec.europa.eu/info/sites/default/files/european-pillar-of-social-rights.pdf>

<sup>132</sup> Laurie Buonanno and Neill Nugent (2021), Policies and policy processes..., *Op.cit.*

<sup>133</sup> European Commission (2017), European Pillar of Social Rights booklet, [https://ec.europa.eu/info/sites/default/files/social-summit-european-pillar-social-rights-booklet\\_en.pdf](https://ec.europa.eu/info/sites/default/files/social-summit-european-pillar-social-rights-booklet_en.pdf)

<sup>134</sup> The Euro area has 19 member countries

<sup>135</sup> European Commission (2017), European Pillar of Social Rights booklet, *Op.cit.*

<sup>136</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>137</sup> European Commission (2017), The European Pillar of Social Rights - Questions and Answers, [https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/MEMO\\_17\\_1004](https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/MEMO_17_1004)

<sup>138</sup> Find here the Social Scoreboard of indicators of the Pillar of Social Rights:

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<https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/web/european-pillar-of-social-rights/indicators/social-scoreboard-indicators>

<sup>139</sup> COFACE Families Europe (2018), An EU Deal for Childcare, *Op.cit.*

<sup>140</sup> COFACE Families Europe (2017), Preliminary assessment of the European Pillar of Social Rights – An important step towards a more social Europe,

<sup>141</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>142</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>143</sup> Social Europe (2016), The European Pillar of Social Rights – no ‘social triple A’ for Europe, <https://socialeurope.eu/european-pillar-social-rights-no-social-triple-europe>

<sup>144</sup> European Commission (2021), The European Pillar of Social Rights Action Plan, [https://ec.europa.eu/info/strategy/priorities-2019-2024/economy-works-people/jobs-growth-and-investment/european-pillar-social-rights/european-pillar-social-rights-action-plan\\_en](https://ec.europa.eu/info/strategy/priorities-2019-2024/economy-works-people/jobs-growth-and-investment/european-pillar-social-rights/european-pillar-social-rights-action-plan_en)

<sup>145</sup> See for instance the Council new Strategic Agenda for the EU (2019-2024) adopted on 20<sup>th</sup> June 2019, <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/eu-strategic-agenda-2019-2024/>; the European Parliament report on a strong social Europe for Just Transitions transition -action plan on the European Pillar of Social Rights, <https://www.europarl.europa.eu/legislative-train/theme-an-economy-that-works-for-people/file-strong-social-europe> adopted on 24<sup>th</sup> November 2020, [https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/A-9-2020-0233\\_EN.pdf](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/A-9-2020-0233_EN.pdf)

<sup>146</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>147</sup> European Parliament (2021), Communication on a strong social Europe for just transition -action plan on the European Pillar of Social Rights, *Op.cit.*

<sup>148</sup> European Commission (2021), The European Pillar of Social Rights Action Plan, *Op.cit.*

<sup>149</sup> Portuguese Presidency of the Council of the EU (2021) , <https://www.2021portugal.eu/en/porto-social-summit/action-plan/>

<sup>150</sup> European Council (2021), The Porto declaration, <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press/press-releases/2021/05/08/the-porto-declaration/>

<sup>151</sup> COFACE Families Europe (2021), European Pillar of Social Rights action plan: turning principles into action, <https://coface-eu.org/key-ingredients-for-the-european-pillar-of-social-rights-to-help-families-and-the-economy-bounce-back/>

<sup>152</sup> The ECEC is mostly highlighted in the Gender Equality Strategy 2020-2025 under the chapter of “Closing the gender care gap”. European Commission (2020), A Union of Equality: Gender Equality Strategy 2020-2025, *Op.cit.*

<sup>153</sup> The Recital 36.a states as follows: “Further develop or establish a framework, including collective

agreements where relevant, for the sharing of paid work and unpaid care work between women and men on an equal basis, including the following elements: a. Well-developed, affordable and accessible quality early childhood education and childcare and short and long-term adult care facilities and infrastructure in both urban and rural areas.”

<sup>154</sup> “Alongside worklife balance measures, the availability of affordable and high quality early childhood education and care (ECEC) services for children and long-term care for the elderly and for people with a chronic illness or disability are fundamental for women’s participation in the labour market”, European Commission (2021), 2021 report on gender equality in the EU, *Op.Cit.*

<sup>155</sup> Council Recommendation of 22 May 2019 on High-Quality Early Childhood Education and Care Systems, [https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=CELEX:32019H0605\(01\)&from=EN](https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=CELEX:32019H0605(01)&from=EN)

<sup>156</sup> Eurydice (2019), Key Data on Early Childhood Education and Care in Europe, *Op.cit.*

<sup>157</sup> Art.288 of the TFEU

<sup>158</sup> EU Monitor, [https://www.eumonitor.eu/9353000/1/j9vvik7m1c3g\\_yp/vh7bhbj5azzb](https://www.eumonitor.eu/9353000/1/j9vvik7m1c3g_yp/vh7bhbj5azzb)

<sup>159</sup> Council Recommendation of 22 May 2019 on High-Quality Early Childhood Education and Care Systems, *Op.cit.*

<sup>160</sup> Eurydice (2019), Key Data on Early Childhood Education and Care in Europe, *Op.cit.*

<sup>161</sup> Interview with Stig Lund, ETUCE’s representative in the European Commission’s Working Group on “Early Childhood Education and Care”, 5 December 2019, <https://www.csee-etuce.org/en/news/etuce/3367-early-childhood-education-and-care-is-really-on-the-political-agenda-right-now>;

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<sup>162</sup> Nafsika Alexiadou and Ulrike Stadler Altmann (2020) Early childhood education research in Europe..., *Op.cit.*

<sup>163</sup> Interview with Stig Lund, ETUCE’s representative in the European Commission’s Working Group, *Op.cit.*

<sup>164</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>165</sup> Nafsika Alexiadou and Ulrike Stadler Altmann (2020) Early childhood education research in Europe..., *Op.cit.*



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<sup>166</sup> Interview with Stig Lund, ETUCE’s representative in the European Commission’s Working Group, *Op.cit.*

<sup>167</sup> Report done to the European Commission by European experts from 25 countries on ECEC, [https://ec.europa.eu/assets/eac/education/policy/strategic-framework/archive/documents/ecec-quality-framework\\_en.pdf](https://ec.europa.eu/assets/eac/education/policy/strategic-framework/archive/documents/ecec-quality-framework_en.pdf)

<sup>168</sup> COFACE Families Europe (2019), Ministers of Education adopt Council Recommendation on High Quality ECEC

<sup>169</sup> COFACE Families Europe (2019), How can your country improve child and family policies? Check out the 2019 Country-specific recommendations

<sup>170</sup> COFACE Families Europe (2018), An EU Deal for Childcare, *Op.cit.*

<sup>171</sup> European Commission (2021), Delivering on the European Education Area: Inclusive, high-quality early childhood education and care, [https://ec.europa.eu/education/news/inclusive-high-quality-early-childhood-education-and-care\\_en](https://ec.europa.eu/education/news/inclusive-high-quality-early-childhood-education-and-care_en)

<sup>172</sup> Just to underline that the previous Working Group (2012-2014) developed the European Quality Framework

<sup>173</sup> <https://op.europa.eu/en/publication-detail/-/publication/4c526047-6f3c-11eb-aeb5-01aa75ed71a1/language-en/format-PDF/source-search>

<sup>174</sup> European Commission (2020), ET2020 Working group Early Childhood Education and Care- Final Report, <https://op.europa.eu/en/publication-detail/-/publication/308643fa-678c-11eb-aeb5-01aa75ed71a1>

<sup>175</sup> <https://op.europa.eu/fr/publication-detail/-/publication/47ba3c3a-6789-11eb-aeb5-01aa75ed71a1/language-en/format-PDF/source-191896611>

<sup>176</sup> European Commission (2020), ET2020 Working Group Early Childhood Education and Care- Final Report, *Op.cit.*

<sup>177</sup> [https://ec.europa.eu/info/sites/default/files/political-guidelines-next-commission\\_en\\_0.pdf](https://ec.europa.eu/info/sites/default/files/political-guidelines-next-commission_en_0.pdf)

<sup>178</sup> FEPS (2020), Towards a Child Union!, *Op.cit.*

<sup>179</sup> Intervention of Prof. Hugh Frazer during the webinar “The Child Guarantee: A tool to tackle family poverty?”, *Op.cit.*

<sup>180</sup> European Parliament (2015), Report on reducing inequalities with a special focus on child poverty,

[https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/A-8-2015-0310\\_EN.pdf](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/A-8-2015-0310_EN.pdf)

<sup>181</sup> European Parliament (2015), Report on reducing inequalities with a special focus on child poverty, *Op.cit.*

<sup>182</sup> European Commission (2013), Recommendation Investing in children: breaking the cycle of disadvantage of 2013, <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=CELEX:32013H0112&from=EN>

<sup>183</sup> Intervention of Prof. Hugh Frazer during the webinar “The Child Guarantee...”, *Op.cit.*

<sup>184</sup> European Commission (2020), Feasibility study for a child guarantee, <https://op.europa.eu/en/publication-detail/-/publication/c312c468-c7e0-11ea-adf7-01aa75ed71a1/language-en>

<sup>185</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>186</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>187</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>188</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>189</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>190</sup> European Commission (2021), European Child Guarantee <https://ec.europa.eu/social/main.jsp?catId=1428&langId=en>

<sup>191</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>192</sup> Employment, Social Policy, Health and Consumer Affairs Council, 14-15 June 2021, <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/meetings/epsco/2021/06/14-15/>

<sup>193</sup> 16 times

<sup>194</sup> On 28<sup>th</sup> January 2021, the Council and the European Parliament reached an agreement on the European Social Fund Plus (ESF+) which includes, for the first time, specific objectives and targets to tackle child poverty. For more information, see EU Alliance for investing in children (2021), EU Alliance for Investing in Children statement on the ESF+ political agreement,

<https://www.eurochild.org/uploads/2021/02/EU-Alliance-for-Investing-in-Children--Statement-on-political-agreement-on-ESF.pdf>

<sup>195</sup> European Commission (2021), European Child Guarantee, *Op.cit.*

<sup>196</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>197</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>198</sup> [https://ec.europa.eu/info/technical-support-instrument-2022-flagships-support-projects\\_en](https://ec.europa.eu/info/technical-support-instrument-2022-flagships-support-projects_en)