

LEAVING NOBODY BEHIND: MAKING SOCIAL RIGHTS AVAILABLE TO ALL FAMILIES

European expert meeting
Key reflections and findings

December 2023



Background

A 2020 OECD working paper *Treating all children equally? Why policies should adapt to evolving family living arrangements* refers to modern family life and the profound changes to children's family living arrangements. An increasing number of children live with unmarried parents whose informal cohabitation implies unequal rights in terms of access to welfare benefit and social protection programmes compared to those in married life.

In addition, children experiencing family dissolution are increasingly likely to share their time between the two homes of the separated parents, and/or to live in a stepfamily. The partnerships of rainbow families are still not recognised in many countries. While single parent families and parents of children with disabilities are often overlooked by family policy/support systems.

Family living arrangements are very diverse and not fully identified by official statistics and addressed by national family policies, with consequences on families' living standards and their capacity to take risks and be resilient.

The context is one of fast-paced changes in labour markets and income security to which families have to act as key responsive entities, cushioning potentially negative impacts and enabling/disabling risk-taking and change. As well as being under care and work pressure, families are time-starved with negative impacts on their mental health and well-being.

Policy and support systems need more than ever to be inclusive, flexible, connected and complementary to ensure that families can be resilient to internal and external shocks. However, are these policies and services truly accessible to all types of families and are they designed with family diversity in mind? Families whose composition is less traditional are especially vulnerable and can be affected much more by social and economic hardships.

The European Union is taking different policy and legal initiatives to support this process under the European Pillar of Social Rights (e.g. EU Work-life balance directive, European Care Strategy, EU Child Guarantee, EU Gender Equality Strategy), but more could be done to ensure that new social rights are fully accessible to all without discrimination.

The family policy mix generally consists of measures to address typical care and poverty challenges for families, such as work-life reconciliation, child-rearing support, long-term care, and financial and nonfinancial assistance for families in vulnerable situations. These measures are often designed and funded in different policy fields (education, employment, social, migration, housing).

COFACE co-hosted a European expert meeting on family diversity with [UNAF Spain](#) on 17th October 2023 in Madrid with 80+ participants from 23 countries.

This meeting aimed to:

- Provide an overview of the social rights of families at national and EU level;
- Study policies to support families in Spain;
- Take a specific look at early childhood services and policies and their availability for different types of families;
- Facilitate cross-country exchanges of good practices in family diversity policies;
- Identify gaps in eligibility or family policy designs;
- Consider what adaptations of social protection systems and EU policies are needed.

The keynote presentations are available at www.coface-eu.org

Programme

9.30-10.00 Welcome and round of introductions

Annemie Drieskens, President of COFACE Families Europe
Amaia Echevarría Director, Unión de asociaciones familiares

10.00-11.30 Spotlight on policies and services to support families in Spain

Family diversity protection policies in Spain: key developments

Patricia Bezunarte Barrio, Director General, Family Diversity and Social Services, Secretary of State for Social Rights, Ministry for social rights & the 2030 Agenda, Spain

Debate with Spanish family organisations

Carmen Flores, President, Federación de Asociaciones de Madres Solteras
María García, President, FFM Isadora Duncan
José Luis Aedo, President, FIAPAS
Elvira Méndez, General Director, Associació Salut i Família
Natalia Blanco Graña, Director, Federación Española Autismo

Co-moderators:

Amaia Echevarría, Director, Unión de asociaciones familiares
Elizabeth Gosme, Director, COFACE Families Europe

11.30-12.00 Stretching and coffee break

12.00-13.30 European context: an overview of rights for families of today

EU social policy through a family diversity lens
Attila Böhm, Policy and Advocacy Officer, COFACE Families Europe

State of play on family policies in Europe: spotlight on 5 countries

Martino Serapioni, Research Programme Coordinator, COFACE Families Europe

13.30-15.00 Lunch break

15.00-16.30 Family diversity workshop

Facilitator: **Beybin Elvin Tunç**, COFACE Education Programme Coordinator

In the afternoon we brainstormed together about different family realities and how families can access different elements of family policy: access to resources, services and time arrangements. All participants were invited to share their thoughts on family diversity and access to rights, bring different country perspectives, and we also ensured that everyone is encouraged to exchange their personal and professional experiences during the workshop in smaller groups.

15.30-15.45 Stretching break

17.00-18.00 Final plenary – collecting reflections

All groups were invited to share some key points made during the reflections to create inclusive, pluralistic and gender-responsive family policies.

Welcome

Annemie Drieskens opened the expert meeting stating that the family policy that COFACE advocates for is framed in gender equality, non-discrimination, social inclusion and gives an answer to the wide diversity of needs of families today. She quoted the first priority of the COFACE New deal for Families of Today (2019): **A Europe recognising all family forms without discrimination.**



Families with babies, teenagers, adolescents face different challenges and have different needs than parents with children with disabilities or caring for older people. Family models are also evolving all over Europe, with families becoming less traditional and more diverse. **Today millennials are redesigning the family:** the dual earning model has become dominant as women have entered the labour market in great numbers. Partnering trends have also changed.

Although the majority of children live with two parents, more children grow up in unmarried couples, single parent families, rainbow families, recomposed families or transnational families. Some are speaking about 'Framily' as friends are increasingly taking up the role of family. The diversity of family living arrangements often implies unequal rights for both children and parents (in terms of access welfare and social protection) and this growing inequality demand our particular attention.

Annemie gave an overview of the conference programme and highlighted that the afternoon workshops were designed using **a specific methodology to harvest the collective knowledge** of all 80+ participants in the room. She invited all to actively participate in the debate and share their opinions and ideas during the workshops in order to have a real cross-country exchange and learn from each other. She hoped to engage with all and join forces to ensure that family policies are modernised and reinforced, bringing everybody forward.

Amaia Echevarría opened on behalf of the Spanish Union of Family Associations (UNAF), which is a non-profit, state-wide organisation (with 20+ member organisations) that has been promoting the rights and welfare of families from a diversity perspective for 35 years.



She started by stating that families, as a living and dynamic system in constant evolution, have undergone a **profound social transformation** in Spain in recent decades, which has given rise to a plurality and diversity of family models and forms of cohabitation. This profound social transformation has disrupted the nuclear model and has led to the emergence of new family forms that aspire to the same degree of recognition and social protection, which require a new legal and social framework on which to base their functioning. However, what has not changed is that families, whatever their structure, are a fundamental pillar of individual and collective development, of a country's economic and social progress.

It is necessary to respond to this new social reality by means of a legislative framework that recognises and gives equal rights to all families. However, for this protection to become a reality, it requires investments. Spain is and has historically been one of the countries that invests least in the family. This is reflected in the high rates of child poverty and also in the low birth rates. It is therefore necessary for the public authorities to take urgent measures to protect children, especially the most vulnerable. **There are not poor children, there are poor families. And to protect children it is necessary to invest in families.**

This is a challenge not only in Spain but also in other European countries which is why UNAF is keen to work with the COFACE under the Spanish Presidency of the EU, to help promote new legislative frameworks that advance rights and improve the living conditions of families.

Spotlight on Spain

The first session started with a presentation from [Patricia Bezunarte Barrio](#), Director General, Family Diversity and Social Services, Secretary of State for Social Rights, Ministry for social rights & the 2030 Agenda, Spain.

Family diversity protection policies in Spain: key developments

Patricia explained that in recent years, Spain has been clearly committed to the improvement and modernisation of family policies and to an approach to social intervention with families that is aligned with the principles of positive parenting and evidence-based good practices.

Spanish citizens systematically give the family the highest value on the scale of importance in the different spheres of life, just after health, but today **the family is an institution that cannot be conjugated only in the singular, but rather it must be referred to in the plural** with an inclusive approach to the different forms of family coexistence that Spanish citizens adopts.



She referred to increasingly complex societies, which have become increasingly diverse due to the combination of demographic, cultural, social and economic changes that have taken place in Spain and in neighbouring European countries and even on a global scale. Additionally, factors such as migratory movements, climate change or the impact of the development of Information and Communication Technologies and digitalisation are also shaping increasingly diverse societies.

On the other hand, elements linked to the social and economic situation cannot be ignored, such as the great inequalities that persist among families, which places a significant percentage of them in a situations of vulnerability or at risk of poverty and social exclusion, with particularly pernicious effects on the development and equal opportunities of children and adolescents.

All the aforementioned challenges require **public policies to support families** and social alignments that are able to respond to them. Attention to diversity, demographic challenges, the need for support in raising children, the promotion of equal opportunities and co-responsibility between women and men, the fight against poverty and exclusion that threatens the quality of life of many families, especially when it affects children and adolescents (resulting in child poverty), are challenges that oblige public policy-makers to review and promote modern family support policies adapted to these new realities.

The Spanish government is fully involved in this task and has been promoting far-reaching initiatives to tackle different challenges, such as the implementation of a Minimum Income Scheme as a Social Security benefit guaranteeing a minimum income for households according to their composition. There are also initiatives such as labour reform to combat job insecurity that particularly affects young people, making it difficult for them to develop their life and family projects; and housing policy, which also seeks to increase the availability of accommodation for young people and families.

Patricia explained that they have also worked intensively on the drafting of a [Family Law](#), which in the end could not be approved by Parliament due to the calling of general elections in July 2023. The aim of this law was to create a cross-cutting framework regulation for family support policies in Spain which would legally recognise the different family structures and situations, aiming to improve the social and economic protection of families, especially those in situations of special need. In short the proposed law aims to contribute to creating an environment, a legal and social ecosystem that is more favourable to families, so that citizens can develop their family life project with greater freedom and access the support they require according to their unique needs.

Patricia explained the process which led to this law. The European Commission had repeatedly urged Spain to improve support for families in its [European Semester Country Recommendations](#) in past years. On that basis a project to support structural reforms funded by the European Commission was developed from September 2020 to February 2022 to promote a new national framework of support and protection for families in Spain, with the technical assistance of the OECD.

The [final report](#) includes a review of family protection in Spain, a series of good practices from other EU and OECD countries and, finally, a set of recommendations to guide the reform, which, to a large extent, contributed to the foundation and support of the approach and content of the draft Family Law promoted by the Government in the last legislature. The review highlighted some weak points in Spanish family policies such as: unequal levels of protection between the different family forms (the focus is currently mainly on large families), and conflicts between work and family life; clear insufficiency in the level of social and economic protection for families, especially those with dependent children; and finally the fact that it is not just a question of investment, it is also a question of policy design with diversity in mind.

Patricia highlighted a wide range of measures taken in relation to financial benefits, social services and parenting support, leaves and work-life reconciliation. She also gave some insights into the draft Family Law and what it aims to achieve:

- Articulate a general and coherent framework for the social and economic protection of families, trying to overcome the current fragmentation and lack of equity of the set of state regulations in this area, also providing for better governance and coordination of policies, both within the state administration itself and with the different territorial administrations, and facilitating social participation and the monitoring and evaluation of these policies.
- Legal recognition of the diversity of family models that coexist in Spanish society, including the establishment of homogeneous definitions of the different family realities to ensure coherence in the different sectoral regulations that affect them.
- The recognition of the right to provide and receive care, as well as the right to intra-family and social co-responsibility, which should

constitute essential pillars of the functioning of institutions and entities, both public and private.

- Updating and improving the social and economic protection of families, with special attention to situations of vulnerability and the phenomenon of child poverty, as well as promoting the positive exercise of parental responsibilities to support the well-being and development of children and adolescents.

In this regard, some measures have been proposed or are already underway. For instance, in the area of family diversity, targeted measures are being taken in order to drive change:

- The recognition of unmarried couples in access to social benefits and benefits and the creation of a state register for this purpose;
- The creation of a single-parent family certificate, similar to the one that already exists for large families, with state validity, to facilitate access to benefits in various areas (social, employment, education, transport, housing, etc.);
- Improving protection for large families, for example by reducing the number of children to four to qualify for the special category;
- Greater guarantees of access to the necessary means and support for families with people with disabilities;
- The promotion of equal treatment and opportunities and the prevention of discrimination against rainbow families;
- Specific protection for recomposed families;
- The equalisation of labour and social rights for adoptive and foster families with biological families;
- Improvements in the regulation of immigrant families, especially in relation to minors.

Debate with Spanish family organisations

The keynote speech of Patricia Bezunarte Barrio was then followed by reactions and a panel debate with a selection of five family organisations in Spain.



The panel included five speakers.

Carmen Flores, President of the Federación de Asociaciones de Madres Solteras (FAMS), which is the Federation of Associations of Single Mothers. It is a COFACE member and an independent non-profit entity constituted in 1994 by several associations with similar objectives in the recognition, support and promotion of single-parent families.

María García, President of Fundación de Familias Monoparentales Isadora Duncan, an organisation which has been helping women facing single parenthood for 40 years across Spain. It is a COFACE member and was founded in 1984, in the city of León (Spain), by a group of single mothers with the primary objective of claiming and asserting the rights granted to them as women and families by Spanish law, fighting against the evident or hidden discrimination that they suffer because of their family situation.

José Luis Aedo, President of FIAPAS which is the Spanish Confederation of Families of Deaf People (FIAPAS), the largest platform representing families of deaf people in Spain. It is a COFACE member, and over the years it has evolved and today it is an organisation representing families where one (or several) members have a deafness, not only parents and children.

Elvira Méndez, General Director of Associació Salut i Família (ASF), which is a private, independent and non-profit organisation. The families supported by ASF are all those primary structures of support for life that crystallise in plural forms of coexistence and, consequently, include 1. diversity of origin, ethnicity and nationality: native Spanish families, immigrant families, ethnic minority families and transnational families; 2. diversity of sexual and generational composition: heterosexual families, single-parent families, recomposed families, homosexual families and regrouped families.

Natalia Blanco Graña, Director of the Federación Española Autismo (FESPAU) which is a statewide organisation that puts its efforts in strengthening entities and professionals who work with people with autism and their families so that they can develop their life project, with special emphasis on those people who require greater support needs or more significant support. For FESPAU, families are understood not only as a means of support for the development of the person with autism, but as a subject in itself with specific and different needs.

The panel was organised in three rounds:

- Overview of key Spanish trends and data on different types of families represented in the panel;
- Key barriers for families to access their social rights;
- Key recommendations to ensure that families better access support.

Trends and data on different types of families represented in the panel

In Spain there are 1,230,000 people with different types and degrees of hearing impairment, to which must be added the 3,400 children between 2 and 5 years of age. Of these, more than 98% use oral language to communicate. According to the National Statistics Institute, 27,300 persons (2%) use sign language. Five out of every thousand newborns have a different degree of deafness, which in Spain means that with the current birth rate there are around 1,890 new families with a deaf child every year. 50% of adolescents and young people aged 12-35 years in most developed countries are at risk of hearing loss due to overexposure to noise in recreational settings. Presbycusis, age-related hearing loss, affects approximately 30% of the population between the ages of 65-70, reaching 80% of the population

over the age of 75. Due to noise pollution and lifestyles, these age-related hearing problems are increasing at an earlier age, around the age of 50.

Concerning single-parent families, this family model is eminently feminine. According to Spanish INE data, more than 81% of these families are headed by women, who are responsible for all aspects of the family. This is why these families are gendered. According to the Continuous Household Survey (2021) in Spain, there are a total of 8,152,900 households with dependent children, of which 1,944,800 are single-parent families. This survey only counts those single-parent families that do not share their home with other people, thus excluding single-parent families that live in: residences, shared flats, shared rooms, family homes. Single-parent families are the only family model that is currently growing. Unemployment, poverty, lack of recognition and legislative protection and discriminatory responses are the main reasons that make single parents vulnerable and place 49.2% of single parents below the poverty line. The severe material deprivation of single-parent households in relation to four of the nine items of the AROPE rate is 15.3% compared to 6.6% for two-parent households.

There are families in Spain living with an Autism Spectrum Condition (ASC) - this is a condition of neurobiological origin and involves a different development of the nervous system and brain functioning. It accompanies the person throughout their life and affects, fundamentally, two areas of personal functioning: socio-communication; and activities, interests, behaviours and sensory profile. According to European studies, the prevalence of autism is 1 in 100 people, that is, 1% of the population. Taking this figure into account, this would mean about +450,000 people with ASC in Spain and +4.5 million people with ASC in Europe. For each of these people, at least three others in the household - parents and a sibling - are directly linked to autism. About 35% of people with ASC have significant support needs (high severity of ASC, associated intellectual disability and no spoken language/minimal spoken language). Between 31 and 33% of families of people with ASC have clinically significant depression and anxiety. In the general population this percentage drops to 4%. Rates of stress in the parenting role are markedly higher than in families with children who have a typical childhood development. In addition, raising a child with ASC results in high economic costs for families and the community, which prevents equal access to services.

What are the key barriers which prevent families from accessing their social protection rights?

Maria from FFM Isadora Duncan explained that they started a campaign years ago to promote a comprehensive law on single-parent families in Spain, and in doing so they detected a first problem: **how to define a single-parent family, as the range of families is wide and varied, and of different legal origins.** Faced with this situation, the "legislators" are opting to create legal instruments, which seem to extend the social rights of single parent families, but which in practice restrict them or make them useless, as they are prioritising the number of children (in an attempt to homologate with large families), **ignoring the fact that the majority of single parent families only have one child.** To this must be added that being a single parent family is considered a "temporary situation" i.e. it can be a more or less long period, but not necessarily a constant in the development of a family. But this vision is, in practice, a clear restriction of rights, since any vital decision, affective or otherwise, can be influenced by the immediate socio-economic consequences it would lead to.

José Luis from FIAPAS noted that the **presence of deafness in the family exposes the family to a higher risk of vulnerability.** Hearing loss implies a higher financial cost for the family and a greater need for emotional and other support. Around 95% of deaf children are born into hearing families who lack sufficient information about their children's deafness, making it difficult for them to make decisions and exercise their parental roles. **People with deafness do not have equal access to orthopedic benefits.** This is an issue that not only conditions the future of the deaf person, but also the family situation, in need of the services, resources and support to be mobilised in this area. Currently, hearing aids are the only external prosthesis included in the National Health System whose provision is only contemplated in the case of people under 26 years of age and who are bilaterally deaf. Additionally, there are cases of children with early hearing loss detected at an early age who are currently **entering the first cycle of early childhood education without hearing support resources**, which deprives them of hearing accessibility and access to oral communication during their stay in the early childhood education centre. We must not lose sight of the fact that we

must take advantage of early childhood, when the critical period of development takes place, in which the greatest brain plasticity makes possible certain learning processes (irrecoverable at other ages) and allows for the prevention of future alterations and the aggravation of disabilities already present.

Carmen from FAMS highlighted a number of obstacles. **Single-parent families have no state-level recognition**, which leaves them at the mercy of the goodwill of the policies of the different Autonomous Communities, Provinces and even City Councils. Single-parent families are supported by a single wage, that of the head of the household, 81% of whom are women. The wage gap between women and men is still present today in Spain: women's average wage is 81.28% of men's in 2020. Reconciling work and childcare is even more complicated in the case of single-parent families due to several factors: on the one hand, the existence of a single person responsible for childcare makes it even more difficult to reconcile work and family time; on the other hand, the dependence of the family unit on a single salary often **makes it impossible to outsource childcare to third parties especially in situations where the childcare is not affordable.**

Elvira Mendez from ASF referred especially to the concept of families in vulnerable situations, pointing out that due to their vulnerability they face barriers in society and the labour market, through different forms of discrimination. She also highlighted **the isolation that can be suffered when in situations of vulnerability**, making the risk of social exclusion even higher with the multiple consequences this can create. The difficulties they may have in accessing key services and policies due to their isolation can also lead to a distrust of different stakeholders.

Natalia from FESPAU highlighted different obstacles to policies and services for families with autism. The average age of diagnosis of autism in Europe is 4.5 years. In Spain, the average age of diagnosis is 5.5 years. If we take into account that early intervention covers 0 to 6 years of age (even less, depending on the Autonomous Community in Spain), **they find that a late or incorrect diagnosis can prevent the appropriate supports from being received, hindering the potential development of the child.** Some people on the autism spectrum reach adulthood without being diagnosed. Girls and women with autism, unlike men, receive numerous misdiagnoses prior to ASD. Families with a member diagnosed with ASD are faced with a disorder whose causes are unclear and whose

optimal treatment can be contested. **They are in a complex and changing situation knowing that delays in accessing services can worsen treatment outcomes.** Additionally, 50% of mothers and fathers over 50 years old still live with their children with ASD. In addition, they have little social and community participation. **There are not enough resources for people with ASC once they finish compulsory education and start adult life.** This reality generates situations of double dependency and lack of protection, especially when the family members who provide support are getting older and are also affected by situations of dependency. **Most interventions for ASC are evaluated only in terms of child outcomes and ignore their impact on the family.** Interventions with children are not harmless; they have an effect on families, which may increase distress depending on the type of intervention being considered. Different studies have found that when children with ASC receive interventions that are especially directive and demanding, they generate even greater stress in their families. **Being a single mother is associated with decreased levels of support, which is especially worrisome given the high divorce rate in families of children with ASC.** One aspect that accentuates their social exclusion is their progressive impoverishment. Households with people with disabilities generally receive less income and have less capacity to generate income as they assume extraordinary expenses derived from the disability (not always eligible for social assistance or economic benefits).

Key recommendations to ensure that families better access support in Spain

Families with autism

- Early diagnosis is important so that men and women can access specialised supports and services as soon as possible. In general, the earlier it is identified and intervened, the better the prognosis and quality of life for individuals with autism.
- To meet these needs, some people with ASD benefit from specialised day care services that seek to promote the development of their skills and interests, as well as their social and community participation. In all cases, the objectives of these services should be aimed at maximising personal autonomy and guaranteeing continued learning throughout

life, minimising the effects that the advances of age may have on the health and quality of life of their beneficiaries. For this reason, it is necessary to promote the development of these specialised services, since their offer is currently limited and territorially dispersed.

- It is necessary to promote research on the impact of interventions on families, as well as to promote quality interventions with scientific evidence that imply an intervention as naturalised as possible and with measurement of its impact on the family.
- Likewise, it is necessary to promote specific interventions with families as a subject of intervention to work on their emotional wellbeing, with special emphasis on factors such as anxiety, depression and stress, which are significantly higher in this population.
- Weave an important network of support in all areas that promote the inclusion of people with ASD and their families, in which we consider it essential to include family entities.

Single parent families

- Focusing social assistance on the situation of the weakest part of any family, which are the children in it, i.e. the objective risk of poverty that they present.
- It is necessary to carry out a series of measures to eliminate the inequalities that remain latent between one type of family and another, measures that are reflected in a Single-Parent Families Act that defines, includes and protects single parent families and that articulates a series of measures that serve to alleviate and correct the situation of discrimination that exists in the face of the invisibility of a family model that is constantly growing and that yet is not taken into account when it comes to legislating, since only the traditional family model is taken as the basis for legislation.

Develop a law on single parent families, with a rights-based approach. With a children's and gender perspective, addressing specific characteristics:

- Inclusive definition of single-parent families, homogeneous among Spanish autonomous

communities and guaranteeing the inclusion of those families in which all parental responsibilities fall on a single person, usually women.

- A protective and preventive framework from the first child, which means immediate resources for these families in order to close the poverty or exclusion risk gap compared to two-parent families. A protective framework with benefits on a par with those enjoyed by large families: access to social vouchers, etc.
- Reconciliation and co-responsibility: Specific measures in this area both in employment (including self-employment) and unemployment. Guaranteed access to employment rights enjoyed by two-parent families where both partners work.
- Duplicity of leave for care and work-life balance derived from the European Work-Life Balance Directive. Support and public services for care and work-life balance e.g. universal child benefits extended for single parents.
- Specific policies in other areas mainstreaming the reality of single parents: employment, education, housing, health and self-care, access to culture, leisure and free time.

Families with deafness

- Families need emotional support and support of all kinds, including mutual inter-family support (peer projects), which is key in the presence of a disability, in this case a hearing disability. For this reason, it is considered essential to include the organisations of families of people with disabilities in the support networks and referral itineraries established by the public administrations.
- End unjustified discrimination on the basis of age and location of hearing loss in access to hearing aid benefits.
- Ensure the provision of products and resources to support hearing accessibility, information and oral communication from the moment a child with deafness starts school, including the 0-3 years stage.

- Extend the duration of leave that facilitates work-life balance in the case of families with a member with a disability or an impairment that could lead to a disability (think of newborns who do not yet have administrative certification), as these are currently insufficient and have a clear gender bias, as it is mainly mothers who attend medical, audiological, speech therapy, educational appointments, etc., with a serious detriment to their employment situation.

couples, and considerations for non-married couples. However, the full application of these rights remains a work in progress.



European context: an overview of rights for families of today

The second session of the conference focused on the European context, specifically addressing the rights of families in Europe today. This session started with an exploration of EU family and social rights from a diversity perspective (with [Attila Böhm](#)) and a dive into family policies supporting parents of young children in 5 countries (with [Martino Serapioni](#)) giving a preview of the first study of the European Observatory on Family Policy that COFACE founded together with the Centre for Family Studies of Odisee in Belgium.

The EU Child Guarantee was also highlighted as a critical measure to ensure that children at risk of poverty or social exclusion have access to fundamental rights, such as healthcare and education. It focuses on children with special needs, those in precarious family situations, and children with disabilities. Moreover, Attila touched on the EU Care Strategy, launched on September 7, 2022, which envisions a fair and sustainable care system for individuals from birth to old age. This strategy includes a life cycle approach that encompasses both care receivers and caregivers, and emphasises high-quality early childhood education and care (ECEC) for all children, particularly those from disadvantaged or migrant backgrounds or with special needs. The first presentation concluded with a look at the future, discussing the December 2022 European Commission proposal for a regulation on parenthood recognition within the EU. This proposal aims for the harmonisation of rules relating to parenthood across the EU to facilitate the recognition of parenthood established in one Member State throughout the others, with the best interest of the child as the paramount concern.

EU social policy through a family diversity lens

Attila Bohm, COFACE Policy and Advocacy Officer, provided a comprehensive overview of the EU's approach to family policy through the prism of family diversity. Attila elucidated how, despite family policy remaining under national jurisdiction, the EU influences this domain through legal and policy frameworks. These frameworks hinge on the European Pillar of Social Rights, which serves as the foundation for setting the agenda as well as for monitoring and evaluating progress. A notable development is the EU Work-Life Balance Directive, adopted on January 24, 2019, aimed at facilitating the reconciliation of work and family life for working parents and carers. This directive sets minimum standards for family leaves, ensures adequate payment for certain leaves, and establishes flexible working arrangements. It represents a significant step forward, particularly with its inclusive approach that recognises paternity leave, parental leave rights for same-sex

The overarching message of the session was clear: although the EU does not have the competency to legislate family policies and law, there is a tangible shift towards making family policies more inclusive of all types of families. COFACE-Families Europe continues to champion this cause, advocating for a broader, more inclusive understanding and support of family diversity in EU policymaking.

Conclusion

- EU does not have competency to legislate in family policies and law.
- MS have their own rules on family diversity taking it into account to different degrees.
- There is a shift in Europe towards making family policies inclusive of all types of families (with disabilities, single, blended, same-sex, transnational) but the EU is still careful to legislate in this field.
- COFACE continues to ensure this pluralistic family perspective is taken into account in EU social and employment policy and will keep monitoring their implementation closely.

During the question and answer segment of the session, the dialogue opened with an inquiry about how the EU's Work-Life Balance Directive pertains to single parents. It was explained that while the directive's concept of "equivalent second parents" does offer benefits to single parents, the language used is more suggestive than prescriptive, found in the recitals rather than the operative provisions. This means that the transposition of these benefits into national law varies across Member States, leading to inconsistent interpretations and applications.

Attention then shifted to the EU Child Guarantee, highlighting its focus on single parents. Although this measure constitutes 'soft law' and not a directive, thus carrying a different weight in terms of compliance, the intention to support single parents is evidently present. The EU's cautious approach to legislating on family policy was underscored, illustrating its preference to set broad objectives without imposing overly specific mandates on Member States.

A question was raised about the priorities COFACE would like to see on the 2024 EU elections agenda. The response was assertive: COFACE advocates for the full implementation of EU policies related to families and ensuring that these remain high on the EU institutions' agenda. Specifically, COFACE intends to emphasise the importance of care services, ranging from early childhood education and care (ECEC) to long-term care. This focus stems from the significant challenges such as staff shortages that plague care services, a concern frequently voiced by COFACE and COFACE Disability members.

The conversation took a turn towards the contentious topic of surrogacy in Europe. It was mentioned that the European Parliament had labeled surrogacy as similar to human trafficking, which sparked a response clarifying that COFACE does not engage with the debates on surrogacy at present since this is not an EU competence. The

organisation focuses on EU social policy and would need to consult with its members before taking a stance on such issues. A participant commented on the surrogacy debate, suggesting that the comparison to human trafficking may reflect conservative or catholic viewpoints, as evidenced by the positions of certain Members of Parliament in the Czech Republic.

Finally, another contribution came from a legal perspective, discussing the influence of the EU's recommendations or 'soft law' on third countries of the EU, like Serbia. Therefore, EU hard and soft law frameworks can be significant for candidate countries for EU membership, which are required to align with EU standards. Additionally, it was noted that even for non-candidate countries, EU measures serve as valuable benchmarks or models for national policy development.

State of play on family policies in Europe: spotlight on integration in 5 EU countries

In the second presentation of session two, Martino Serapioni from COFACE-Families Europe delved into the current landscape of family policies across Europe, with a particular focus on five Member States. Martino's discourse revolved around the intricate challenge of achieving coordination and coherence in family services, emphasising the importance of a crosscutting approach to meet the diverse needs of families, especially during a child's early years.

He pointed out that family policies often span beyond the scope of traditional public administrations, indicating a substantial lack of institutionalisation. Martino argued that integrated family policies might be the key to addressing these challenges. In support of this argument, he referenced the 2023 European Observatory on Family Policy report, which was set to launch mid-November, monitoring the state of play of family policies and highlighting the dynamics of integration within family policy across five countries: Belgium, Finland, Germany, Italy, and Poland.

Martino underscored the multiple dimensions of integrating family policy, from encouraging cooperation between various services to overcoming fragmentation, aligning jurisdictions, and building networks for cross-sectoral

responses. He outlined a continuum of five cross-sectoral dynamics that have shown improved integration, ranging from fragmentation to complete integration, where families begin to view separate institutions as one unified service.

A particularly poignant part of the presentation was Martino's identification of three key crosscutting needs for families with young children: balancing care and work after childbirth, overcoming splits in early childhood education and care (ECEC), and receiving adequate support during the perinatal phase. He highlighted the financial and emotional strain due to partial wage compensation during leave, the childcare gap, and the need for better coordination between employment leave and ECEC services. For instance, he noted that while countries like Finland and Germany have adopted an integrated 0-6 cycle in ECEC, others like Belgium and Poland are still grappling with split systems.



Martino concluded his presentation by stating that although the journey towards family policy integration is underway and varying paths to integration are being explored, barriers still exist. He stressed that breaking down silos could foster greater cooperation, leading to a more equitable family policy space. The talk underscored the need for a unified approach to support families comprehensively, from prenatal care to educational services, and how such an integrated system could fundamentally improve family well-being across Europe.

During this session's questions and answers segment, a significant issue was raised regarding the lack of professional care workers in early childhood education and care (ECEC) in Croatia, where the responsibility falls heavily on local governments. This decentralisation leads to a disparity in childcare costs for parents, depending on a city's financial capabilities. In search of solutions, a participant inquired whether other EU countries have a centralised ministry or institution

to regulate these disparities, alluding to the financial burden of childcare on Croatian parents.

Another comment pointed out the controversial nature of mandating national standards for ECEC. The concern is that overly stringent standards might discourage local governments from implementation, thereby presenting a delicate balance between the desired quality of services and their widespread availability.

Questions were also directed towards the distribution of responsibilities between social care and education within government systems. There was a particular interest in how integrated systems navigate the division of roles between different ministries, such as the Ministry of Social Affairs and the Ministry of Education. It was noted that integration not only brings an educational focus to the 0-3 age group but also introduces a care dimension to the 3-6 age range, acknowledging that care is still a critical component alongside education.

A participant from Finland contributed that regardless of the system's structure, an ECEC programme must encompass all dimensions—social, care, education, etc.—to be effective. The complexities that arise from integrating different levels of governance were acknowledged, alongside the suggestion of building upon existing educational structures by adding related services such as health and social care, with education remaining the central pillar.

Finally, the discussion turned towards the value of professional and family care work, emphasising the necessity to recognise and respect both. The point was made that such recognition should extend to social security and pension systems, ensuring that individuals engaged in family care are not at a disadvantage. The dialogue clearly reflected the varied challenges faced across different European systems in integrating ECEC services, highlighting both the complexities and potential strategies for creating more cohesive and equitable frameworks for family care.

Family diversity workshop

This third session was chaired by **Beybin Elvin Tung**, COFACE education programme coordinator, together with a team of facilitators. **This transformative workshop on family diversity was planned as a response to a deep recognition of evolving societal changes.**



As family structures, values, and expectations continually evolve, it becomes increasingly evident that the approach to family policies must adapt and grow. This workshop served as a response to the call for policies that reflect the full spectrum of family diversity. The mission of the workshop was to allow participants to explore, acknowledge, and rectify biases and barriers within current policies.

The workshop was designed to be a complement to the conference sessions in the morning. Throughout the day, family diversity and its alignment with policy development was explored on three distinct levels: Macro, Meso, and Micro.

In the Macro Level, EU-level policies were examined, with a focus on diversity, inclusivity, and accessibility in policy implementation, challenging the adequacy of equality in promoting social rights for diverse families. Transitioning to the Meso Level, attention turned to the implementation of family policies in various countries and sectors, unveiling diverse national approaches and the need to address one-size-fits-all policies. Following the conference, the workshop aimed to cover the micro approaches to family diversity, encourage active participant engagement, offering an intimate examination of the challenges faced by different family constructions, **allowing professionals and individuals to explore rainbow, blended, and transnational families particularly.** Through cross-

country exchange and networking, this workshop facilitated knowledge sharing, gap identification, and adaptation development, all aiming to foster inclusive, pluralistic, and gender-responsive family policies, ultimately contributing to a more equitable society for all families.

The commitment to crafting more equitable, inclusive, and diverse family policies necessitated an innovative approach. Rather than emphasising predefined solutions, the workshop aimed to create an environment conducive to open-minded discussions, drawing from the rich tapestry of perspectives woven by the diverse community in attendance. The primary goals revolved around identifying biases, generating inclusive policy ideas, and collectively evaluating potential solutions through shared brainstorming.

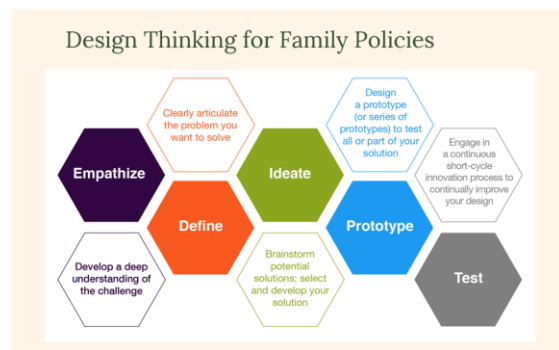
The methodology

This workshop was structured around three main policy fields, all taken from COFACE’s position paper of 2017 “Families on the Edge: Building a comprehensive EU work-life balance reality” (see table below). By collectively working towards inclusive, pluralistic, and gender-responsive family policies, the workshop aimed empower participants to contribute to the creation of a more equitable society for all families.

Reconciliation Pillar	Measure	
RESOURCES ensuring decent living standards	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Labour related income: access to decent wages and tackling the gender pay gap Fairer and more equitable tax systems Removing implicit bias also from indirect taxation (e.g. VAT) Income Support: benefits and allowances 	
	SERVICES adequate provision of care services	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Affordable, accessible and quality childcare services for children below 3 years, and between 3 and mandatory school age Affordable, accessible and quality community-based long-term care services based on person-centered support packages
		TIME support for organising working time

Simplifying Complex Problems through Design Thinking

Design thinking is an innovative problem-solving approach that centres around understanding the needs, experiences, and perspectives of people affected by a particular challenge. Imagine taking a complex puzzle and breaking it into smaller, more manageable pieces. Design thinking does just that. It simplifies complex problems by transforming them into challenges that can be understood, tackled, and conquered.



The mindset of the workshop

A Human-Centred Approach:

It was rooted in understanding the people we are working for. It is about starting from the perspective of the families. By putting ourselves in the shoes of different families, we gain insights that drive innovation to improve the existing policies.

Non-formal Education:

Using a non-formal approach that emphasises open communication, creativity, and collaboration. We wanted to create a safe and supportive environment for everyone to share their experiences and ideas.

Collective Brainstorming:

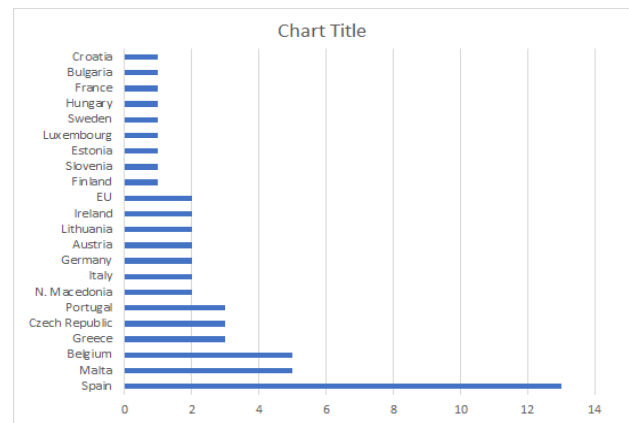
It harnessed the diverse perspectives, knowledge, and creativity of a group, emphasising collaboration and open dialogue. By pooling together, the collective wisdom of participants, it often leads to innovative and comprehensive insights.

Harnessing Collective Intelligence:

In this process, each participant contributes to a broader collective intelligence. Our diverse individual experiences, perspectives, and ideas coalesce into a collective wisdom that shapes our solutions. Collaboration takes centre stage, recognising that every participant, with their distinct background and viewpoint, enriches our collective understanding.

Workshop participants

The team of facilitators was made up of 13 people from the COFACE secretariat as well as representatives of Share The Care Poland and UNAF Spain. The total number of the participants in the workshop was 55 persons, all from 22 different countries. 16 of the participants were working for the ministries or other state services, while the rest were representatives of COFACE member organisations or other NGOs.



Empathy phase

In this session, participants engaged in an empathetic exploration of the family depicted in the case study, which served as a foundational exercise to inform subsequent problem-solving discussions. This exercise comprised six distinct parts: 'hearing,' 'seeing,' 'saying,' 'doing,' 'thinking – feeling,' and 'pains – gains,' providing a comprehensive view of the family's experiences and challenges.



The case study referred to the Sharma-Garcia Family consists of Rahul (37) and Miguel (40), an unmarried couple who relocated to a new country in search of better opportunities. They have two children, Sofia (5) and Lucas (7). Sofia is Rahul's daughter from his previous marriage, and Lucas is their adopted child. Miguel's elderly mother, Catherina (75), also lives with them. Upon moving to the new country, Rahul, a skilled teacher, faced challenges in finding a stable job due to language barriers and differences in educational systems. Miguel, a freelance graphic designer, takes on various projects to support the family financially, but their income is not always sufficient and stable. In his free time, Rahul is trying to learn the language of the new country. Sofia has autism, requiring specialized care and support. She loves painting and can spend all day engaged in art. Lucas is very talented in sports, especially dancing, and he wants to attend dancing classes. As parents, Rahul and Miguel are dedicated to providing the best care for Sofia's needs while ensuring Lucas receives the love and attention he deserves. The family faces financial challenges, making it tough to balance their caregiving roles and work aspirations. Finding affordable and inclusive care services for both children, especially tailored to Sofia's requirements, has been a struggle. Rahul's parents live close by, but they have not been in contact for years, as some family members do not accept Rahul and Miguel's relationship due to their sexual orientation. Catherina tries to help, but due to her age, she cannot be physically too active. Additionally, Sofia's mother, Martina, who lives in another country, is a part of their lives. Rahul needs to communicate and collaborate with Martina to ensure Sofia's well-being and maintain a strong connection with her, even though they are physically separated. Despite facing obstacles, the Sharma-Garcia Family remains optimistic, resourceful, and resilient. They actively seek

support and assistance to navigate their new life in the new country. *(Note: For privacy and cultural sensitivity, fictional names and details have been used in the description. The photo was taken from Stock Image)*

Under the 'hearing' segment, two dominant responses emerged. Participants noted that individuals surrounding the family often exhibited a willingness to assist them in overcoming their difficulties. However, concurrently, the family is frequently exposed to stereotypes and discrimination. Such characterisations as 'not normal,' 'different,' 'strange,' and 'crazy' were frequently attributed to them. Criticism was also directed at the family, with assertions that the parents were responsible for their challenges due to perceived irresponsibility. Doubts were expressed about men's ability to care for children. Yet, there were also supportive sentiments, with many acknowledging the family's bravery and admirable qualities.

Moving on to the 'seeing' portion, observations were made regarding how children perceived their parents' stress, while children's interactions with peers appeared unburdened by complexities, signifying their 'innocence' and absence of stereotypes. Participants, again, predominantly focused on the parents' viewpoint, emphasising the family's struggles. Simultaneously, they observed 'more traditional' or wealthier families facing fewer problems. A recurring theme was the isolation of the parents without support or assistance from social services, compounded by challenges in administrative processes and job searches, alongside numerous daily life barriers.

The 'saying' section revealed the nature of daily interactions within the family. Participants primarily chose to focus on the family's mutual support and encouragement. Positive descriptions were prevalent, highlighting the parents' ordinary nature and their optimistic outlook on the future, even some difficulties such as job searching.

Shifting to the 'doing' part, participants detailed various family activities, including cooking, playing with their child, and engaging in outdoor pursuits. Simultaneously, they emphasised the family's daily struggles, encompassing the search for care services, job searching, language acquisition, and socialisation with neighbours and new social networks.

In the 'thinking – feeling' segment, the focus centred on the strong feelings of love among family members. The family members were perceived as supportive and optimistic, expressing their mutual pride and the belief that they could achieve their goals. In contrast, there were feelings of loneliness, isolation, distraction, and exclusion from the protection system.

The final part of the session involved reflections on 'pains and gains.' Participants delved into their fears, frustrations, and worries, including concerns about financial stability, the ability to provide for their children, physical and mental exhaustion, and the absence of early childhood education and care services.

Bullying and prejudice emerged as additional challenges, with the overarching sentiment being the family's sense of non-acceptance. Despite these pains, the family held dreams of a better future – one characterised by happiness, stability, economic security, suitable employment, and adequate childcare systems. Their aspirations included integration and a sense of belonging within their community.



Within the domain of **social services**, participants raised vital considerations such as state intervention, family benefits, childcare provisions, administrative support, services tailored to children with disabilities, psychological assistance, and financial support. **Financial resources** garnered considerable attention, encompassing income sources, child allowances, family cards, vouchers, scholarship opportunities, and access to banking services. In the context of **time arrangements**, the discussions revolved around the feasibility of flexible working hours, part-time employment options, remote work possibilities, overnight early childhood education and care (ECEC) services, paternity leave, and affordable schooling solutions.

Reflection boat exercise

In the subsequent phase of the 'Design Thinking - Define Phase,' participants engaged in a thought-provoking exercise known as the "Reflection Boat." During this exercise, participants were tasked with envisioning the hypothetical relocation of the case-study family to the country where they are currently working and considering the implications for the three key policy areas.

Define- Understanding Access and Barriers to Social Rights and Services

Reflection Boat:
Imagine Sharma-Garcia family moved to the country that you are working at. Based on the empathy mapping and brainstorming (R/S/T):
what would work for them?
what would not work for them?
To access to their social rights?

Participants reflected on what aspects would align favourably with the family's needs. Positive feedback emerged from some participants, particularly those from countries like Malta, Belgium, and Spain, where there is a recognition of LGBTQ+ rights, including same-sex marriages and child adoption by same-sex couples. Additionally, certain countries, such as Greece and Spain, offer free education, financial support to parents with children, services for individuals with disabilities, and competitive wages. These facets were seen as supportive of the family's well-being.

Conversely, a recurring theme in the "holding back" category pertained to challenges and limitations. Participants expressed concerns over the absence of services for individuals with disabilities, hidden expenses related to supposedly free education (notably in Belgium), and the lack of free access to

Define phase

Brainstorming

In the subsequent session, participants transitioned into the 'Design Thinking - Define Phase,' where, through a cross-cultural exchange, they embarked on a comprehensive exploration of access to social rights and services, as well as the barriers that impede such access. At the outset, a brainstorming activity was conducted to identify key points within three distinct policy areas that they had selected during the registration: social services, financial resources, and time arrangements.

Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC). Discrimination, language barriers, the absence of same-sex marriage recognition, and bureaucratic complexities emerged as significant barriers in this context.

Ideate phase

In the final phases of the workshop, in the ideation and prototyping sessions where participants successfully identified challenges and reframed them as opportunities, the focus shifted to testing the proposed solutions. Participants, working initially in smaller groups and later in larger ones, delved into addressing the question, "How might we?" in the context of family challenges. The objective of this session was to consolidate the insights obtained from group conversations and have each policy group present their responses to their respective "How Might We?" questions. This collaborative effort sought to bring together diverse perspectives, encourage discussions about insights from other policy areas, and promote cooperation and mutual learning among participants.

Regarding **financial resources**, the group arrived at a consensus on several fronts. They identified bureaucratic complexities, stigma, restrictive eligibility criteria, and the fragmentation of authorities as problematic situations that need to be discontinued. In contrast, they recognised the importance of continuing trans-institutional discussions and EU-national dialogues. Additionally, participants highlighted the significance of adopting practices like minimum European standards for income support, wages, and taxation, as well as promoting empathy among civil servants to better serve families.

In the domain of **social services**, the group concurred on the need to halt information gaps, exclusion, discrimination, and a reactive service culture. They stressed the importance of sustaining efforts to promote equality, diversity, bottom-up awareness, and advocacy with decision-makers. Simultaneously, the group advocated for the implementation of more targeted and tailored case management, proactive services, integration initiatives, EU efforts to align policies, and a strong focus on the participation and empowerment of families.



Finally, the **time arrangements** group highlighted the necessity to discontinue discrimination and stigmatisation, a sentiment echoed by the other policy groups. They emphasised the importance of perpetuating practices like remote working and supportive systems for mental health, as well as recognising multi/single parenting and treating fathers as equal parents. Additionally, the group called for equal rights for same-sex couples, the establishment of care leaves and universal recognition for persons with disabilities, and the provision of inclusive education for every child. Defining parenthood and recognising non-biological parents in unmarried couples were also identified as crucial steps.

In summary, it is evident that although the three groups focused on different policy areas, they arrived at similar or closely related conclusions during this session. Discrimination and prejudice emerged as significant challenges that underpin various other problems. It's essential to consider the diverse backgrounds of the participants, their countries of origin, and the status of social rights development in their respective regions. This intersectional perspective will deepen understanding of family diversity and can shape the development of more inclusive and equitable family policies.

Conclusion

The family diversity workshop encompassed various phases aimed at exploring and enhancing family policies with a holistic approach. It commenced with a focus on macro-level, delving into EU-level policies and the importance of diversity in policy implementation. The meso-level session dived into the implementation of family policies in different countries and sectors. The diversity in national approaches highlighted the challenges and opportunities that arise in the practical application of policies. This stage provided a broad understanding of the policy framework within a conference format.

The micro-level workshop brought an in-depth perspective by immersing participants in the experiences of diverse family types. Rainbow families, blended families, and transnational families took the centre stage besides many different aspects that can be revealed in the case that was used. Through cross-country exchange and networking, participants shared practices, identified gaps, and envisioned adaptations catering to the unique needs of families.

Each phase contributed to a comprehensive understanding of family policies and their real-world implications. The journey progressed from broad policy frameworks down to specific family compositions, generating a rich collection of insights and experiences. Throughout the workshop, interactivity was at its core. Cross-country exchange provided the platform for participants to share diverse viewpoints and practices, breaking down geographical boundaries. The exchange of knowledge and experiences has illuminated the intersectional nature of family diversity, prompting a more holistic and inclusive approach to policy development. Participatory decision-making was another vital aspect. The workshop's collaborative nature encouraged open dialogue, ensuring every participant's unique perspective was valued. The harvesting of ideas and insights was a dynamic process. It wasn't about finding predetermined solutions but rather understanding the implications and considering innovative approaches. It's evident that the workshop was not just a theoretical exercise but a collective effort to improve the lives of diverse families.

In conclusion, the family diversity workshop was a journey that transcended policy discussions and ventured into the realm of real-world experiences. It brought participants from different countries and backgrounds together, fostering cross-country exchange and participatory decision-making. Together, they sowed the seeds for more inclusive, pluralistic, and gender-responsive family policies, to contribute to a fairer and more equitable society for all families.



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