

EPSU Written contribution to the EESC Opinion on “Teleworking and Gender Equality”

The European Federation of Public Service Unions (EPSU) represents 8 million public service workers across Europe. It is the European region of the global public services federation PSI and is also a member of the European Trade Union Confederation (ETUC).

EPSU represents a number of sectors in which women compose the majority of the workforce (e.g. health and care services, social services, public administration..). Gender equality is at the heart of EPSU’s work and mainstreams gender equality across all of its actions.

Below a number of policy points that EPSU would urge to take into account in the upcoming EESC opinion. Moreover, the current pandemic has exponentially increased the use of telework and, therefore, exposed some of the shortcomings of a practice that, if not properly analysed and developed using a gender lens, could hit hard on women’s employment, health and well-being. Without a proper gender analysis, even those policies that would seem gender neutral may be, in reality, gender blind and affect negatively women. Therefore, EPSU strongly welcomes this opinion that would help shed a light into the gendered impact of telework/smartwork policies.

The points below are to be considered as general key areas to be taken into account in the EESC opinion, beyond the context of the current pandemic. However, because of the spike in the use of telework during the last year, and the wider use of this practice that may be done in the future, some effects and consequences that occurred in the past months, as reported by our affiliates across Europe, have been included:

- **Telework increases number of hours of unpaid care for women**

Women disproportionally perform unpaid care activities for children and other family members compared to men. The pandemic also exposed even further the inequalities and the persistent stereotypical division of unpaid care and domestic work between women and men.

During the recent lockdowns/confinement measures and increased use of telework, women who are into stable employment were able to keep their job and continue working from home but saw a disproportionate increase of unpaid care activities compared to men who started teleworking.

- **Women’s telework is not a replacement of care services**

A worrying phenomenon that has been reported across Europe is that with the recent closure of schools, childcare, care services for older people or persons with disabilities due to the pandemic, women have been accumulating care duties with paid work much more than men. While being fully aware that those closures were temporary and due to a global emergency, EPSU would stress that ECEC and care /support services are not a simple placement that becomes unnecessary if a parent/carer is physically at home. These services have specific educational, medical, care/support value for the beneficiary but also, indirectly, for the beneficiary’s family and for the society as a whole. Moreover, having to take care of a child or adult in need of care/support at home would have a direct impact on women’s ability to perform paid employment. Therefore, in view of a potential increased use of telework after the pandemic, EPSU strongly stresses that telework cannot be an excuse to defund or decrease investment into social and care services, from ECEC to older age.

- **Psycho social risks/mental health and well-being**

Long term or continuous telework can have an impact on mental health and well-being. From a feeling of isolation from colleagues to longer working hours, working in anti-social hours because of the combination with unpaid caring activities, blurring of work and private life, it can all impact on women’s well-being and psycho social risks. Housing conditions and place of residence (in areas with lower connectivity for example) may play a role on the capacity to perform telework in a healthy way.

- **Domestic violence and access to women's health services**

The pandemic has also led to a spike of violence against women. Stress, the disruption of social and protective networks, loss of income and decreased access to services can exacerbate the risk of violence for women. In many countries, where confinements and lockdown are introduced, the risk of intimate partner violence is likely to increase. In a longer term perspective, continuous and long term telework would potentially drastically reduce women's access to dedicated services. Daily access to colleagues and Unions' delegates in the workplace can also work as safety net for victims of domestic violence.

- **Online violence and third party violence**

Public service workers performing their duties online may be victims of online harassment and violence from the public, venting frustrations as they cannot access services in person as they were used to or have to bear with longer processes as workers are not able to perform all their tasks from home (lack of software, hardware...).

- **Class, housing conditions and digital divide**

Class and economic means are clear factors that can divide those being able to get the best out of telework and those who will not, especially in times of emergency. Having enough personal equipment (e.g. children needed computer for e-learning, enough space for all to work/study...). This was clear in pandemic when telework had to be organized in a rush. However, EPSU urges to consider these matters carefully, especially in view of longer term telework policies and if workers will be asked (=imposed) to telework in a regular manner to save office space. This will have a greater impact on the growing number of single parent households, that often means single mothers, but in general all low income families.

- **Gender pay gap, pay transparency and career progression**

In this context it should not be forgotten that women earn, on average, less than men and that are more dependent on job earnings for their living, and less on property or other financial assets than men. Increased telework should not impact on women's career progression, access to training, ability to access their Trade Union delegates and access documents on pay transparency in their company.

- **Role of collective bargaining and sectoral Social Dialogue at local, national and EU level**

Finally, sectoral Social Partners are fundamental for the development and implementation of telework policies and to ensure that women are not disproportionately hit by gender blind telework policies. Sectoral social dialogue, at all levels, from workplace to EU level is key to negotiate appropriate agreements, that would include, among others, health & safety measures, equipment provision, right to disconnect and any other measure that would be considered appropriate.

EPSU remains at disposal of the EESC for further discussion of any of the above mentioned points in view of the upcoming Opinion.

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