

**PROJECT - Men and Fathers in Families and Careers -
A Practical, Political and Social Challenge**

**Draft Report
Expert Panel (incl. Project Steering Committee)
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Partners of the Project Group:

**AZK – Germany
AFB – South Tyrol (Italy)
BASE-F.U.T. – Portugal
CSDR – Romania
EUROMF – Belgium
Fondazione Luigi Clerici – Italy**

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1 Participants

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2 Context of the project meeting

The “reconciliation of family and career“ is one of the central issues in the current socio-political discussion. Until now, most of the attention has been focused on the difficulties for women to strike a balance between the two while the fact that fathers, too, want to make a contribution to their families, but have far fewer opportunities to participate in family life because of the demands posed on them by their careers has been largely neglected. Recognizing this, EZA initiated a project in October 2005 together with partner organisations in different European countries which was designed to analyse all relevant aspects, perspectives and conditions of the reconciliation issue and to focus on the role of men in achieving true reconciliation and truly equal opportunities in both families and careers. By creating an awareness for the issue among men and decision-makers as well as among the public at large, the reconciliation of families and careers is understood as a task for both genders rather than – as it was seen by many in the past – as a problem which only concerns wives and mothers. The project “Men and Fathers in Families and Careers“ intends to identify the role of men in their careers and families, to analyse the situation in individual European countries and to create a public awareness for the issue through a series of seminars. Partner organisations from six European countries (Belgium, Germany, Italy, Portugal, Romania and Hungary) provided surveys and observations from their various domestic settings, describing the difficulties men and fathers from all over Europe are having in reconciling families and careers.

3 Surveys and observations from the individual countries

Academic researchers in *Portugal* have so far focused on professional success and career opportunities rather than on the problems that fathers have in reconciling families and careers. In 1979, an Equal Opportunities Act was passed but subsequently failed to level the substantial differences between the salaries of men and women. Child rearing in Portugal is considered a family matter and by and large privately organised. Childcare is mainly provided by women, although more recently indications for a stronger commitment shown by men have also been observed.

Younger couples in particular seem more interested in giving both partners an opportunity to play a role in the children's education, and the number of domestic labour-sharing agreements seems to be on the rise. The increasing willingness of men to assume child care responsibilities and to re-define for themselves some of the aspects of their roles as fathers indicates that a stronger commitment of fathers to the lives of their families may indeed be desired, but not to the extent that these fathers would shoulder an even share of the family's child care burden.

In *Italy*, virtually no empirical surveys have analysed the reconciliation of families and careers from the perspective of men and fathers. The academic literature has mainly focused on equal career opportunities for men and women or on the role of mothers in families and the professional world. Statistics show that 78 percent of all household work is provided by women. Men continue to see themselves as providers rather than carers. The development of their careers consequently enjoys priority. The Italian society continues to hold the view that mothers are chiefly responsible for all family matters including education and childcare.

Only 9 % of all top jobs in Italy are held by women. Women on the other hand are disproportionately represented in the public sector and childcare facilities (schools, nursery schools etc.) – so Italian children learn from an early age that childcare is women's work. Feminists, too, have contributed to the development of this rigid compartmentalization.

A change in mentality and a loosening of this rigid pattern of distributing gender roles would be welcome, since scientists have shown how important early close contacts with their fathers are for the children in their later stages of development.

Studies have shown that men are suffering from role conflicts and problems in reconciling their families and careers and that they are searching to compensate for any deficits felt by pursuing professional success. Recent studies also show that the desire to bring up children is a key element in the lives of most couples. Italy, on the other hand, has currently the lowest birth rate in Europe. The Italian laws subject the role of the mother to the express and deliberate protection of the state while there is a conspicuous lack of corresponding clauses about fatherhood.

In *Belgium*, many studies have been published about marital breakdown and divorces, but only a few about the conflicting demands made on fathers by their families and their careers. Comprehensive studies, on the other hand, have been dedicated to issues such as: What constitutes a family? and the respective roles of fathers, mothers and children.

The continuous increase of the unemployment figures has, however, aggravated the organisational problems in many families. In the wake of the significant rise in the number of divorces, for instance, custody arrangements have become somewhat unsteady, and fathers, forced to sacrifice more of their working time to childcare and education, have assumed a new role.

For this year's general elections in Belgium, all parties have been legally obliged to allocate 50 % of all places on their lists of candidates to women.

The situation in *Romania* is – in comparison with other European countries – characterised by a relatively high proportion of fathers who are making use of their entitlement to longer periods of parental leave (app. 12 percent). In 2000, Law no. 19 granted each family – mother or father – the right to a parental leave period of two years. This law had the objective of giving more fathers the opportunity of playing an

active role in the lives of their children and families. The government pays the parents on leave up to 85 % of their salaries through transfer payments and child benefits, a highly attractive offer for men given the currently low level of income in Romania. It can be said, however, that it has largely been this promise of attractive benefits, rather than any change in the mentality and awareness of Romanian men, which has been the driving force behind the high acceptance rate of the paid parental leave. Neither is there much evidence for a changing mentality as far as equal gender opportunities are concerned.

Another problem in Romania is the apparent lack of enthusiasm of most men on parental leave for childcare and domestic labour. Statistics show that most men are using their leaves to work in the garden and to renovate or extend their homes. Childcare seems to remain, despite the best efforts of the government, a rather marginal occupation for male Romanians.

Continuous changes on the labour market have resulted in a high pace of law-making in Romania, a development which is frequently causing irritations among the population.

Trade union federations are often unsure as to what legislation actually exists and applies.

According to an analysis in *Italy / South Tyrol* about the reconciliation of family and career, women feel much more strongly drawn to the subject than men, and women are generally the ones who identify the concrete problems which occur in the family. Men, on the other hand, hardly request any information about this aspect of equal opportunity legislation. Another survey has shown that men – with an employment ratio which barely differs from the women's – only rarely make use of their parental leave entitlement. Under certain circumstances, however, a slight tendency to an increased willingness of fathers to shoulder more family responsibilities can be observed. Men are assuming larger roles as fathers and members of their families the more active their wives are pursuing their own careers. Activities in family and household as well as child care have so far been the domain of women. One problem of South Tyrolean working women is the absence of any right to go part-time after the birth of a child. 83 % of the 3,000 workers (nearly all of them women) who put in a corresponding request were eventually forced to resign because no such part-time offer was forthcoming.

The role of the father in the family is much less highly rated by the society than the role of the mother. Fathers are afraid of losing their status in the workplace and of being discriminated against by other men. Many men have inhibitions making clear and openly pursuing their wish to go on a longer parental leave.

Increasing numbers of men want to show a strong commitment to their roles as fathers. Many studies and surveys from *Germany* show that both young women and young men are awarding a high priority to the reconciliation of family and career in the planning of their lives. Men, on the other hand, are often experiencing conflicts between the demands of their roles as providers and fathers. – Only a few enterprises in Germany show themselves to be family-friendly and flexible when it comes to assessing the requests of men for long parental leaves. Instead, they demand a high degree of flexibility from the families, expecting them to be "corporation-friendly" and mobile. Many fathers refrain from claiming a long parental leave because they are afraid of losing face – and, ultimately, their jobs as well.

It was established that – as something which *applied to all countries* – the diagnosis of altered mentalities or profound changes in our general understanding involved different interests as much as values. This was also made clear by the development of the political parties.

It was also observed that men and fathers in general – regrettably – did not seem to attach tremendous social importance to the reconciliation of family and career.

4 Key issues

As a conclusion, it was observed that – while legislation enabling young fathers to go on extended periods of parental leave existed in all of the European countries of the project – only a small fraction of these fathers actually showed any willingness to make use of this entitlement. The role of the mother generally enjoys the protection of the law which has the practical effect of pushing mothers into the direction of domestic work and child care while the role of the father is much less strongly defined and emphasized through legislation.

Men find themselves in the centre of a role conflict between the demands of families and careers. The fear of losing career opportunities and of being discriminated against by others is keeping many fathers from filing and pursuing applications for parental leave.

A key aspect is the existing gap between the salaries of men and women. Since this pay gap can reach up to 37 % in some European countries, this can be considered one of the main reasons for fathers not to take up their parental leave entitlement. Apart from the (eventual) costs in terms of missed career opportunities, there is the more immediate concern of having to cover the enormous shortfall in the family budget created by the loss of the man's / father's salary – the woman's / mother's salary can only in rare cases manage to compensate for this loss. This exerts a huge financial pressure on the family's situation.

Enterprises are only rarely willing to react flexibly when their male employees express the wish to spend more time with their families. Small and medium-sized enterprises in particular are particularly bad in this respect: only very few have developed family-friendly policies targeted to benefit men who want to assume larger roles in the lives of their families.

The European partner countries have by and large failed to develop adequate levels of awareness for the roles fathers are expected to assume in their families and the society at large. Many fathers are uncertain as to what type of role they can play in their families. Often, this role is restricted to that of a provider, and only a relatively few men assume substantial responsibilities for child care and household work.

To compound the problem, a conflict between men with children and other men affects many enterprises. Men without children fear that they will be made to pay in so many ways for the privileges granted to the fathers in the workforce.

5 Strategies for seminars

Studies from the individual countries which are participating in the project should continue to be observed, systematically collected and analysed in order to draw further data and conclusions from their results with the eventual objective of gaining more insights into the problems of men who are trying to reconcile family and career. An improved awareness for the issue must be generated among men and fathers as well as decision-makers in corporations, politics, the public and the society at large. The key individual problems of defining and developing the father's role must be identified, discussed and addressed.

For this purpose, an international awareness creation campaign will be designed and realized on the basis of the results from the forthcoming seminars.

Men will be provided with information about opportunities to participate more immediately in the lives of their families – improving the family's quality of life and enabling themselves to develop more rounded and complete personalities which are not exclusively focused on successful careers. Men should be encouraged to take more and better care of their children and to support their partners in their domestic tasks. This part of the campaign will be dedicated to providing information, taking into account national laws, cultures and conditions.

An increased involvement of fathers in domestic work also requires a change in awareness on the decision-making level of their enterprises. Enterprises will be an important target for attempts to create an awareness for the importance of fathers' contributions to family lives. Investments into family-friendly policies from flexible working hours to the provision of child care facilities can produce handsome dividends, for multi-national corporations as much as for small and medium-sized enterprises. Flexible working hours are a key condition for any successful reconciliation of family and career.

The legislation of the individual countries will be analysed, identifying the opportunities fathers have to make their working hours more flexible and to actually claim their right on parental leaves. The country-specific legal frameworks should be strengthened and extended.

Seminars in three partner countries will be hosted by the respective partner organisations in order to ensure that the widest possible range of people will be provided with information about ways to resolve the conflicts of men between family and career. These seminars will approach the subject exemplarily, i.e. address the actual context of the individual country. If possible, the seminars should use different methodological and didactic approaches (workshops, futuristic projections, work in small groups, contributions from participants etc.).

People who are immediately concerned by the issue in families and the society, representatives from enterprises and politicians from all levels of the legislative – in particular local councils – should be asked to participate and to provide speeches or presentations. – The following target groups have been identified: young people, trade unions, (local) politicians, representatives from social associations, works councillors, opinion leaders and “multipliers” from churches and NGOs, representatives from professional associations (such as teachers, sociologists, and psychologists), press representatives and people immediately concerned by the issue (young fathers).