

STATEMENT ON THE EUROPEAN CARE STRATEGY

EPSU & EUROCARERS

2 September 2022, Brussels

The eagerly awaited European Care Strategy will be published on 7th September. Ahead of its publication, EPSU and Eurocarers highlight the need to address member states' overreliance on informal carers (family members, friends and neighbours), the majority of whom are women, by investing more in public services which are the foundation of universal access to high-quality care.

Europe's population is ageing rapidly, increasing the need for care services, and particularly in recent years, for non-residential care. But in most EU countries, under-funded and under-staffed care services are struggling keep up with the growing demand. As a result, many people are left without options for accessible and affordable care, which increases the risk of old age poverty. With no other care solution, many family members, friends and neighbours, in most cases women, step out of the labour market and take on these responsibilities as informal carers. Others try to combine care and work responsibilities, putting in jeopardy their own physical and mental health, in context of a blatant lack of support.

In fact, informal carers are currently the largest giver in care in Europe, which is neither a suitable nor a sustainable solution. The only way to ensure universal access to high-quality care, as well as to implement Principle 18 of the European Pillar of Social Rights, is to invest in public care services, which are for equity and efficiency reasons best placed to deliver. This means more funding, adequate, needs-based staffing levels, as well as good pay and working conditions for care workers, including access to trade unions and protection from Occupational Safety and Health risks. We need a fundamental revaluing of care and recognition that it is a core public good.

Only adequately funded public care services can ensure all people in need of care have autonomy and choice about care provision, whether residential or non-residential care, and that relatives and friends have a choice concerning the care responsibilities they are willing to endorse. For people with bigger care needs, informal care may be necessary to supplement non-residential care services. In such cases, informal carers willing to provide complementary care should be supported financially and offered recognition, tailored made guidance, respite and training, including relevant ICT-based information and training resources. However, whilst it is important to recognise and support the supplementary care provided by family members, friends and neighbours, this cannot be an excuse to simply pay informal carers to take on this role, rather than financing public services. The former should supplement the latter, not the other way round. It is important that municipal and regional authorities and non-profit organisations are able to provide both quality, accessible and affordable residential and non-residential care services centered around the person, and have adequate resources to do so.

The care sector is chronically undervalued. Traditional attitudes about care being a woman's responsibility are damaging for both professional and informal care, as well as for our societies and the economy as a whole. The care sector is going through a labour shortage crisis, which was exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic. Poor working conditions and low pay add to the negative public perception of care professions, which makes it extremely hard to recruit and retain workers. It is therefore necessary to challenge stereotypical and outdated views about care provision, and revalue the sector by ensuring higher wages and better conditions. In terms of informal care, the gender pay gap and gender discriminatory societal perception mean that mainly women are expected leave the labour market to look after relatives and friends. Before COVID-19, women in the EU spent an average of 13 hours more than men on unpaid care and housework every week, and this gap got significantly worse during the pandemic. The extent to which women take on unpaid care responsibilities further exacerbates the gender pay gap and the pension gap. Member States therefore need to address the gender dimension of care in related policies.

EPSU and Eurocarers look forward to the publication of the European Care Strategy, and to working together with the European institutions to address the above issues.

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