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**High-level Conference on
Work-life balance as a leverage for women's empowerment
and promoting gender equality
Palazzo Farnesina, Rome, 12 April 2022**

Conference Conclusions

Under the aegis of the Italian Presidency of the Council of Europe Committee of Ministers, and co-organised by the Minister for Equal Opportunities and Family of Italy and the Council of Europe, and with the support of the Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation, the conference brought together high-level representatives of governments, international organisations, research and industry. It provided rich insights into work-life balance, the pursuit of a fair equilibrium between professional activities and family responsibilities.

Work-life balance is a critical element of women's empowerment, as it shapes the opportunities women can seize in terms of career growth, salary increase, and leadership positions. A gender-equal balance between work and family, and an equal distribution among parents of responsibilities relating to care for children, for dependents who are ill or have a disability, or for the household, means women should not be obliged to pursue part-time, low-paid, or low-responsibility jobs, nor should they have to choose between career and family.

Participants agreed that, in order to achieve work-life balance for all -

Governments and State institutions need to:

- ✓ develop strategies for gender equality, focusing on the empowerment of women and the promotion of an equal distribution of care and assistance responsibilities between men and women.
- ✓ Ensure that paid and accessible maternity, paternity, and parental leave, including suitable time allocation and protection, are provided for by law and in practice.
- ✓ Ensure that flexible work possibilities are provided for by law and in practice.
- ✓ Invest in care infrastructure, ensuring good geographical coverage, affordability and opening hours adapted to workers with responsibilities for children or dependents who are ill or who have a disability.
- ✓ Invest in education programmes which address gender stereotypes and promote both the sharing of care responsibilities by all, and career choices free from gender bias.
- ✓ Regularly monitor and assess the implementation of relevant legislation and policies, and, in particular, report regularly on gender pay gaps and on care leave and its impact on wages/incomes.
- ✓ Guarantee gender-disaggregated data collection and gender-sensitive social and economic analysis and impact assessments of the relevant legislation and policies.

Employers and employer organisations need to:

- ✓ put in place structures and facilities enabling all workers – women and men – to fulfil care responsibilities.
- ✓ Offer flexible working conditions, supporting care leave for women and men alike.
- ✓ Take steps to achieve a more gender-balanced labour force, both horizontally and vertically, placing particular emphasis on women’s leadership.
- ✓ Promote different types of work-life balance incentives for women and men, whether or not they bear care responsibilities.
- ✓ Recognise and value the time-management and ‘soft’ skills which parents acquire and develop as relevant for the work environment, and career advancement.
- ✓ Implement programmes to de-stigmatise remote working or part-time work and promote a work culture that values the quality of outcomes over the quantity of hours spent at work.
- ✓ Promote remote work as a *possible* facilitation of – as opposed to a burden on – work-life balance, especially for women and men with care responsibilities.
- ✓ Support the advancement of government regulations in this area, and develop public/private partnerships promoting a gender-balanced labour force, both vertically and horizontally.
- ✓ Implement existing tools for gender equality (including work-life balance) business certification and ensure their long-term sustainability, e.g. through regular reporting.

Finally, all actors, be they public or private, should join forces with civil society – including women’s organisations and social partners – as well as academia, to:

- ✓ promote women’s economic independence as a form of empowerment and a prerequisite for gender equality and for societies that are equitable and economically sustainable.
- ✓ Promote the role and responsibility of men and boys as actors of change for gender equality in the public and private spheres.
- ✓ Stress the importance of maternity, paternity and parental leaves and the significant roles of both parents in the upbringing of their children.
- ✓ Ensure that work-life balance measures break the cycle of gender-based stereotypes that harm societies by limiting the potential and the pursuits of women and men; and in so doing, address perceptions and norms, raise awareness, and promote examples that have significantly contributed towards positive change.
- ✓ Make efforts to consolidate the democratic fabric of societies as they adapt to new challenges, ensuring that recovery measures in response to large-scale crises – such as pandemics and war – are gender-equality sensitive.