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Good afternoon everybody,

It is good to be here today to speak about the different impacts the COVID-19 pandemic has had on the work and family responsibilities of women and men.

But first, allow me to provide some context.

Around 200 years ago, during the industrial revolution, more families started moving to cities.

When they moved, they brought an old concept with them – the concept of separate spaces.

It is easy enough to understand. Imagine society was divided into two spaces.

The first space was public. The second was private.

The changing work environments due to industrialisation led to a growing distinction between these two spaces.

Men spent most of their time in the public space, taking part in work and business, engaging in politics.

Women spent most of their time in the private space – they completed domestic tasks provided care for children and elderly, and were generally excluded from everything else.

You maybe ask yourself - why is she talking about history? – I bring up this concept of spaces as it can be boiled down to the matter at hand – work and family responsibilities of women and men and broadly speaking work-life balance.

When we talk about work-life balance, what we are fundamentally talking about is how much time we spend in either of these spaces.

One space is not inherently better than the other – both spaces can give women and men fulfilment, joy and growth.

But both spaces require an investment in time.

200 years later, it would be untrue to say that the choice of how women and men invest their time into these spaces lies completely in their own hands.

Let me put this into context.

Let us say I am working at a company. I live with my spouse and two small children. My spouse's company did not offer him generous paternity leave, and my company did not offer me flexibility in my working schedule. Due to these circumstances, I take two long spells of maternity leave with each birth.

This stalled my career progression. My husband now earns significantly more than me. My elderly father's health has begun to deteriorate, and there is not adequate support for him to continue living independently. These circumstances push me to make a further choice – is it feasible for me to continue working? I realise that the growing care burdens and inflexibility of my employer leave me no choice but to leave my job.

Well, it wasn't just me who made this choice. It was 7.7 million women across the EU. The equivalent of the entire populations of Denmark and Latvia. While their individual circumstances may differ, the lack of adequate support pushes many of these women out of work.

And this was before the pandemic even began.

During the pandemic, the gap between the spaces collapsed – home and work merged into one. Buzzwords: home-office and teleworking.

Care responsibilities exploded.

Men doubled the amount of time they spent doing this share of work, although women still shouldered the bulk.

EIGE found that on average, women across the EU have carried out 36 hours of unpaid work a week. This is 2,000 hours a year. 2,000 hours a year is more or less what you would spend on full time employment.

This unpaid work creates a vicious cycle. It props up so many of the inequalities we cannot seem to shift. How much time women are able to give to their jobs, how often they are promoted, how much they earn and whether they are able to work at all, all of it is linked to what happens in the home.

Let's go back to my hypothetical family. Although we faced many challenges during the pandemic, like many others around the world, we stepped up to the challenge. We adapted.

My hypothetical husband worked from home during the pandemic – and this gave him for the first time in years the choice to invest more of his time in the home, with our children. With hours cut out from commuting and greater working flexibility, he can now choose to take them and collect them from school, cook their meals, and spend more time with them.

But restrictions are lifting. And his employer wants him back in the office. What do we do now? Do I stop working?

Who wins in this situation?

Not me. I wanted to keep my job in the first place. Not my husband. He wanted to spend more time at home. Not my children. They see me fail to break the vicious cycle, fail to overcome these gender stereotypes. What sort of example does this set for them?

In 2021, for the first time in 17 years, the number of “economically inactive” women increased. There are women who are not seeking paid work by choice. Before Covid, this figure had been steadily dropping year after year.

Our companies don't win. They are losing these capable workers.

Does society win? I think you know my answer.

It is in women's interest, men's interest, children's interest, our economic interest, and our social interest that we ensure these structural barriers do not block more people from choosing how they invest their time.

Let me be clear. We have come a long way in the past 200 years, and in particular since 1957 when the goal of equality between women and men was written into the Union's founding treaties. But we are still hitting roadblocks. And crises, such as the pandemic mean that progress in areas of woman's rights is not just stalled, but even reversed.

Yet, the pandemic also showed us ways to change our life for the better.

It has given us a once-in-a-life time chance to reverse negative trends, to reimagine the way we live and work. A chance to move three steps forward for work-life balance.

Here is how we can do this:

First step forward. We need to give all parents the opportunity to spend time caring for their children. To do this, governments need to earmark generous amounts of parental leave for all fathers. We can already look to some member states for good practices, such as "Use it or lose it" parental leave. In Sweden, the government offers an extra 90 days of leave to all fathers. If they do not use it, they lose it, along with the financial benefits connected to it.

This has boosted the amount of men looking after children, and in turn has normalised the idea of men as caretakers. It is crucial to slowly but surely chip away at these stereotypes.

The state has another role to play. We need affordable, professional care services. These need to exist for children, elderly, and those with disabilities. Our care infrastructures across Europe are crumbling, and Covid only worsened the problem. They need an urgent boost to make them future proof and to alleviate the burden of unpaid care placed upon women.

Second step forward. Caring responsibilities should never cause women to leave their jobs against their will. This is why governments must make flexible and part-time jobs flexible for those who provide care. If both partners in a family unit can work reduced hours, the state could top up their salaries and pension contribution,

ensuring that both parents can choose how and where they invest their time working, studying, raising children or providing care.

Third step forward. We need to carefully manage telework. While it allows many parents to combine the time they spend at work and in the home, telework must not end up dominated by mothers trying to care for their children at the same time as doing their job, while fathers remain undisturbed in offices. Employers must create conditions where all staff take advantage of flexible working arrangements in a way that allows for work life balance.

What is EIGE doing to make these changes a reality?

The pandemic has given EIGE the opportunity to examine in-depth the socio-economic consequences of the pandemic for women and men.

Much of the new evidence will come from EIGE's first EU-wide survey, which asked women and men how much their paid and unpaid hours changed during the pandemic.

This will provide policymakers with the information they need to direct recovery funds and help us move forward. The results of this survey will be released during the launch of the Gender Equality Index in Autumn 2022.

This month we will also launch our Three Steps Forward campaign. Through this campaign we want to encourage governments, businesses and individuals to identify and take three steps forward - towards an economy that works for all.

EIGE's Gender Equality Index indicates that at the current pace gender equality will be reached in more than 60 years – today, I would like to invite all of you to consider three concrete steps you could take to help us move forward more quickly and make gender equality a reality for all. Together, let's make it happen.

Thank you.

