The use of new technologies for the promotion of work-life balance and for the advancement of family policies aimed at the social inclusion of women and men

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In this brief paper we address a key theme which is going to become increasingly important in labour organization as well as gender equality policies namely that of work-life conciliation through new technologies. We will first focus on the concept of smart work by making reference to specific legislation in this area and relevant data and we will then provide some examples of good practices in this area. Finally, we will address some recommendations on the role of governments.

1. WORK-LIFE CONCILIATION and SMART WORK

The importance of work-life conciliation is acknowledged by different international organizations as in the **OECD Better Life Index** which includes work-life balance within the 11 indicators of well-being.
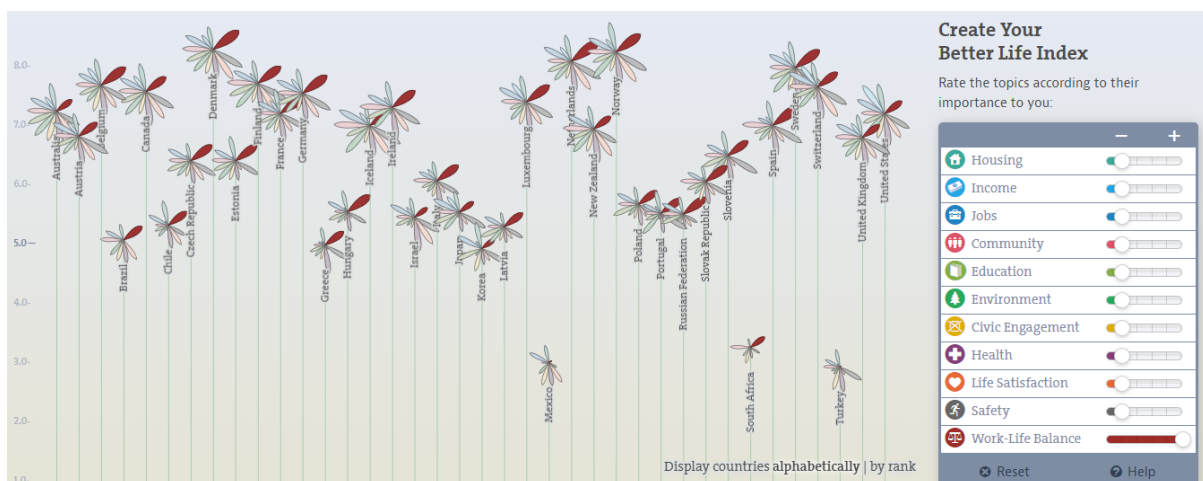

Figure 1 OECD Better Life Index

Work-life conciliation has traditionally been based on the provision of parental leave measures, early childhood education and care services, as well as flexible working arrangements. To those measures which obviously remain key in family-life conciliation, we must include today the use of new technologies in work which can result in an important positive effect on life-work balance. We refer here to the concept of smart work (other terms that are often used are: Flexible Working, Telework, Work 4.0, Agile Working, Activity Based Working, Mobile Working e New Ways of Working). Smart work has been defined in a UK regulation

as "an approach to organising work through a combination of flexibility, autonomy and collaboration, which does not necessarily require the workers to be present in the workplace or in any pre-defined place and enables them to manage their own working hours". (UK)

As OECD emphasizes, finding a suitable balance between work and daily living is a challenge that all workers face and which affects especially families. Most importantly governments can help to address the issue by encouraging supportive and flexible working practices, making it easier for parents to strike a better balance between work and home life. These policies also aims to promote gender equality. Indeed the digital transformation can be seen as a help to improve women's labour market prospects lowering those barriers that women are facing in the workforce, given that women's participation to the labour market remains significantly lower than men's one. At European level the overall employment rate of women is still 11.5 pp lower than that of men, while caring responsibilities are reasons for inactivity for almost 31% of inactive women, (while this is only the case for 4.5% of men).

The promotion of gender equality will not happen automatically, however, and the promotion of flexible ways of working through new technologies will benefit especially if it is promoted not only by employers but also by governments by granting a right to request flexible working arrangements to all workers for example. Also, digital technologies and the flexible ways of working they enable could help foster more gender balance career paths and thus reducing earning inequalities. Moreover, by giving men the opportunity to work from home, it would also reduce gender discrimination raising women from the role of only responsible for the house and the children. It is also significant to note that countries with the highest shares of women working from home also have the highest maternal employment rates while no such relationship emerges for men. (OECD)

More generally the use of new technologies in working arrangements is recognised to have a positive effect at society level not only in relation to better balance between private and working life, but also in relation to reduction or elimination of commuting times and thus reduction of pollution, better individual performances, less costs for companies, creation of working places for disadvantaged segments of the population. The relevance of work-life balance and of flexible work arrangements is acknowledged also in the **Eurobarometer survey** published in 2018. For instance, in the opinion of interviewed people, flexible working times would have a positive impact on the decision by men to take parental leaves. Indeed while the first factor having an incidence is financial compensation (41%), the second is the possibility of part-time work or taking such leaves in a flexible way such as in blocks (35%).

2. RELEVANT LEGISLATION

At EU level the **European Framework Agreement on Telework** was concluded in 2002. It states that telework must have a voluntary character, that workers who choose telework must be granted the same rights as regards employment conditions than other workers and it provides for a number of protection measures. More recently, the subject is addressed in the proposal for a Directive on work-life balance for parents and carers which aims at modernising the existing EU legal framework in this area. The proposal sets out the extension of the existing right to request flexible working arrangements (reduced working hours, flexible working hours and flexibility in place of work) to all working parents of children up to at least 8 years old, and all carers. It also encourages a **gender-balanced use** of family-related leaves and flexible working arrangements Other key points relate to:

- Introduction of **paternity leave.** Fathers/equivalent second parents will be able to take at least **10 working days** of paternity leave around the time of birth of the child, **compensated** at least at the level of sick pay.
- Strengthening of the existing right to 4 months of **parental leave,** by **making 2 out of the 4 months non-transferable** from a parent to another, **and compensated** at a level to be set by Member States. Parents will also have the right to request to take the leave in a flexible way (e.g. part-time or in a piecemeal way).
- Introduction of **carers' leave** for workers providing personal care or support to a relative or person living in the same household. Working carers will be able to take **5 days per year**.

Moreover, within Europe, a number of countries, have legislated on the matter either with specific laws on the smart work or tele-work or with specific provisions within general laws on labour. The first law has been enacted by the **UK** in 2014 on *Flexible Working Regulation* stating that all subordinated employees with at least 26 weeks of work have the right to request forms of work flexibility. In **Italy** the law of 22 May 2017, no. 81 regulates smart work defined as: "a way of carrying out a subordinate employment relationship characterized by the absence of time or space constraints […] and where workers are guaranteed equal economic and regulatory treatment compared to their colleagues who perform the service in the workplace." Other laws or regulatory documents have been recently approved in **France** (Loi du Travail of 31/08/2017), **Germany** (Arbeiten 4.0), **Belgium**. In the **Netherlands**, the Working Conditions Act was revised in 2012. **Hungary** was first country to adopt by law the European Framework Agreement on Telework in 2004. In other continents legislation on flexible working arrangements is even older. For instance in Since **2000**, **US** federal law has required that every US government employee work from home to the maximum extent possible, while in 2010 the Telework Enhancement Act (TEA) passed in order to regulate telework.

3. **DATA ON THE USE OF WORKING FLEXIBLE ARRANGEMENTS**

Data on the use of working flexible arrangements vary significantly from country to country and also on the basis of how they are collected, namely how is flexible work defined. What is most important, however is that in most countries there has been a general trend towards the increase of the use of flexible work in the last years. For instance Eurostat data show an increase in the use of smart work from the year 2010 to 2017 both for workers aged 15-39 and 15-64.
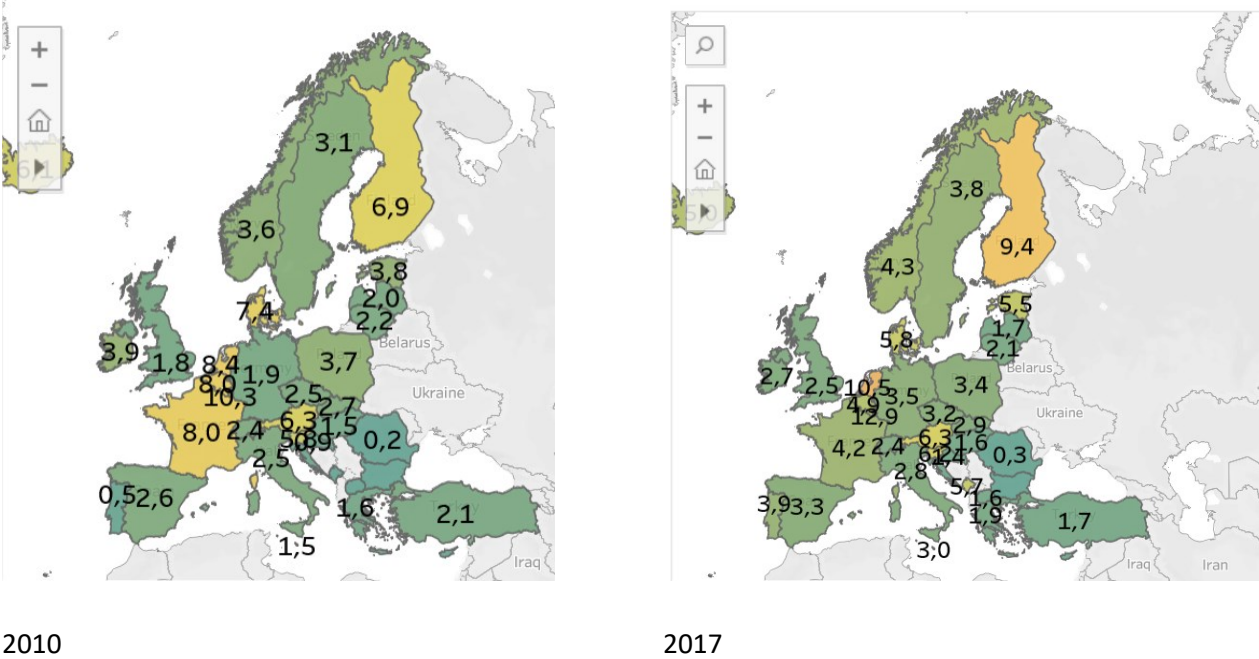

2010   2017

Figure 2. Smart working's employees in Europe, EUROSTAT Data, Age 15- 39 years old, 2010/2017

2010   2017
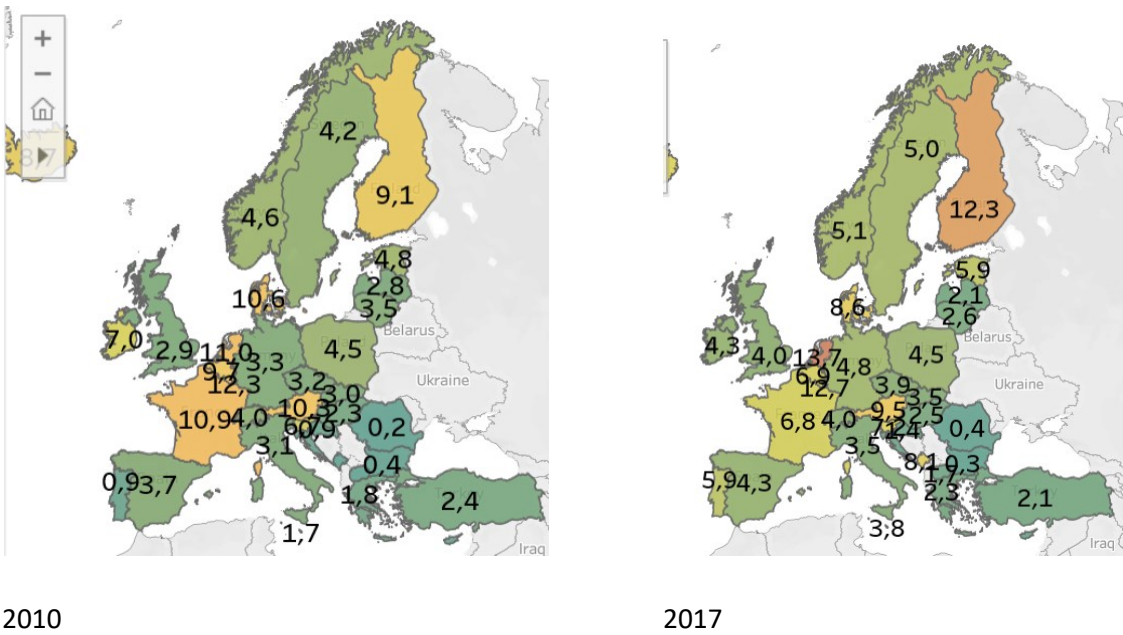
Figure 3. Smart working's employees in Europe, EUROSTAT Data, Age 15- 64 years old, 2010/2017

Eurostat data (figure 4) also shows that in 2015 the EU average of employees using smart work was 18%. However, only 3% used regular home-based telework, while 10% used occasional T/ICTM (telework/new information and communication technologies-mobile work) and 5% used high mobile T/ICTM.
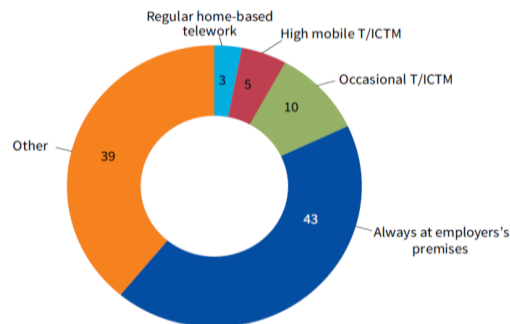
Note: These data are based on the proxy categorisation of T/ICTM.

Figure 4. Proportion of employees engaged in T/ICTM in the EU28 (%)

Data from various national statistical sources in different years clearly show different percentages of employees engaged in varying levels of T/ICTM work ranging from 1% in Hungary (2014) to 32% in Sweden (2012).

Country	Group	%	Year	Source
Argentina	T/ICTM (N/A) All workers	2	2011	National Survey on Information and Communication Technologies (ENTIC)
Belgium	Home-based telework (at least sometimes)** All workers	20	2011	Belgium Labour Force Survey
	Home-based telework (at least 1 day per week) Employees (Flemish region only)	23	2004	TOR-VUB
Finland	T/ICTM (during the last 12 months) Employees	28	2013	Finnish Working Life Barometer
France	T/ICTM proxy	7	2004	DARES
	All workers	12	2012	Greenworking
Germany	Home-based telework (at least 1 day per week) All workers	12	2014	Mikrozensus
Hungary	Home-based telework (last four weeks) All workers	1	2014	Hungarian Labour Force Survey (Hungarian Central Statistical Office)
India	T/ICTM (at least 1 day per week) Employees	19**	2015	Own
Italy	T/ICTM (Scope N/A) All workers	5	2013	Smart Working Observatory of the Polytechnic University of Milan
Japan	T/ICTM (at least 8 hours per week) Employees	16	2014	Teleworking Population Research (TPR)
Netherlands	T/ICTM (At least 1 half day per week) Employees	15	2014	Statistics Netherlands and TNO
Spain	T/ICTM (proxy) Employees	7	2011	National Working Conditions Survey (INSHT). Own elaboration based on data extracted from http://encuestasnacionales.oect.es/
Sweden	Home-based telework employees* (total)	32	2012	Statistics Sweden
	Employees (at least 1 day per week)	8		
UK	Home-based telework (reference week) Employees	4	2015	Labour Force Survey – Office for National Statistics
US	T/ICTM (at least 1 day per week) Employees	20	2012	General Social Survey (GSS)

Note: This table shows the percentage of workers (total employment or employees only) engaged in varying levels of T/ICTM. Where available, data for at least one day a week have been selected. The percentages have been rounded. *Refers to working from home with or without ICT. **The figure for India is for employees in the non-agricultural 'organised sector' (formal economy) only. There are no data available for Brazil.
Source: National studies.

Figure 5 Rates of T/ICTM by country (national sources, different years)

In Italy between 2013 and 2017 the Observatory on Smart Working (Politecnico, Milano) estimates that the number of smart workers has raised of 60% while 1 out of 2 companies has introduced or will shortly introduce measures to make work more flexible.

4. SOME EXAMPLES OF GOOD PRACTICES

Finally we are going to present some good practices in this area. At national level, we have already identified a number of laws in this area. Furthermore, some policies can be listed.

In **Italy**, as already introduced by the Minister for Family and Disabilities, the Department for Family Policies has launched a procedure of expression of interest aimed at setting up an institutional table for discussion and dialogue with the business world for the promotion of the reconciliation between work and family care time and the support of the birth rate and motherhood in the business environment. The aim of the initiative is to support companies in the promotion of better corporate welfare practices in relation to family issues. At the level of companies and associations, a number of best practices have been enacted which promote flexible working arrangements or the valorization of volunteering as in the project CROSS (citizen reinforcing open smart synergies) which will be presented later on.

In **Finland**, teleworking has been on the national agenda and in several government programmes since the 2000s. In 2007, an 'employer guide for teleworking' was published by the Finnish Ministry of Employment, while in 2009, the same ministry published a report on teleworking, providing practical recommendations and measures to facilitate the introduction of teleworking in companies and organisations. From 2011, a national teleworking day was established by the Finnish Environment Institute, in collaboration with Microsoft and, from 2014 onwards, the Finnish Institute of Occupational Health. The campaign is organised by a network of 22 executing organisations, representing a wide range of public and private stakeholders, as well as the social partners (EECN, 2011; Heinonen and Saarimaa, 2009), including an award for the teleworking manager of the year.

In **Argentina**, the Ministry for Work, Employment and Security (Ministerio de Trabajo, Empleo y Securidad Social, MTESS) has been actively promoting telework for several years. They created the teleworking network (la red de teletrabajo); developed a manual of best practices in telework; and launched a tripartite observatory to follow the development of telework programmes in companies and promote best practices. The MTESS' telework coordinator shows on its website a number of programmes related to certification of telework skills, promotion of telework in private enterprises and the public sector, and telework for several specific groups of workers (such as young people, older workers and people with disabilities).

In **Japan**, Guidelines for appropriate adoption and execution of telecommuting with ICT equipment have been approved. Moreover the Ministry of Internal Affairs and Communications (MIC) has been undertaking the Nationwide Development Project for Teleworking (Telewaku Zenkoku Tenkai Purojekuto) since 2012, and organising seminars for the promotion of telecommuting, presenting the benefits of adopting this work arrangement. The Ministry of Health, Labour and Welfare (MHLW) has established the

Telework Consultation Centre (Telewaku Sodan Senta) in Tokyo and has been providing subsidies to small and medium-sized enterprises that introduce a 'whole-day own-home teleworking' system or a satellite office system.

5. RISKS AND RECOMMENDATIONS OF SMART WORK

Finally, it is also important to reflect on the fact that the use of new technologies in the work environment can also generate some potential risks which we will brief outline together with the indication of relevant policies which can mitigate those risks. The **ILO and Eurofound report "Working anytime, anywhere: the effects on the world of work"** identified a number of risks including:

- The difficulty of separating working life from private life. The so-called **'blurring of boundaries'** phenomenon – "there is some risk of overlap between work and personal or family life –work–home interference (and also home–work interference) – because of longer working hours and the mix of duties at the same time, which may result in blurring work–life boundaries and increased work–family conflict."

This could compromise the exact aim of a better conciliation work-family life. Literature refers to a **right to disconnection** as a new frontier in the right to privacy in the XXI century (as indicated for instance in the French Labour Code, the right of the subordinate employee to go off-line outside arranged working times)

In France and Germany different agreements – both at sectoral or company level – have tried to grant a sort of 'right to be disconnected' by limiting the functioning of email servers after normal working hours, as well as during those periods that should be considered as rest times for workers (such as weekends and holiday periods).]

- **Occupational work and well-being**: e.g. isolation from colleagues, lack of appropriate working environment "ICT use can have negative implications for stress levels, and that they are probably related to the space and time discretion and work occupying non-working spaces and times (blurring boundaries)".

- **Job security and social protection systems**.

Governments' role is thus very relevant in order to mitigate those risks and best promote the use of new technologies in order to foster work-life conciliation. We highlight some recommendations in this area drawn from the OECD (2017) report *Going Digital the Future of Work for Women*:

- ✓ i) granting all employees a right to request flexible working time arrangements; ii) encouraging social partners to cover flexible workplace practices in collective bargaining agreements; and iii) helping companies change their work organisation through the exchange of best practice and information campaigns promoting a change in the workplace culture (OECD, 2016e).

- ✓ ensure more flexible ways of working do not lower job quality. This includes guaranteeing that working time regulations (including minimum rest periods) are respected.

- ✓ Ensure more flexible ways of working do not lower job quality. This includes guaranteeing that working time regulations (including minimum rest periods) are respected. [For example, across the European Union, an estimated 46% of self-employed women aged 15-49 are not entitled to maternity benefits (EC, 2015).]

- ✓ Ensure gender equality in support for displaced workers.

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