

Supporting mothers' empowerment, professional development, long-term reintegration into the labour market.

POLICY RECOMMENDATION AND ACTION PLAN

Concrete Economic, Labour and Other Recommendations, Solutions, Conclusions of Best Practices



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1. EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Challenge

The “motherhood penalty” is one of the most persistent drivers of gender inequality in Europe. Only 29% of first-time mothers return to full-time work within three years after maternity leave, compared to 96% of fathers who remain employed. This leads to wasted skills, reduced productivity, and widening inequality, at a time when Europe faces both demographic decline and labour shortages. Enabling mothers’ reintegration into the labour market is therefore not merely a social policy choice, but an economic and demographic imperative for the EU.

The MothersCan Response

The Erasmus+-funded MothersCan Project piloted solutions in Spain, Germany, Greece, Romania, and Cyprus. Its three-pronged model:

- **Empowered Mothers** – recognising caregiving-acquired skills and offering upskilling opportunities.
- **Engaged Employers** – countering bias and promoting return-to-work practices.
- **Supportive Ecosystems** – building partnerships across governments, employers, and civil society.

Evidence shows this approach improves employability, shifts employer attitudes, and strengthens support systems.

Key Policy Recommendations

- **Legal & Regulatory:** Enforce flexible work rights, strengthen anti-discrimination protections, and expand phased-return legislation.
- **Funding & Financial:** Co-finance employer-led returnships, expand early childcare, and reduce childcare costs for low-income families.
- **Strategic Interoperability:** Mainstream MothersCan practices into EU strategies, strengthen monitoring, and incentivise “mother-friendly workplaces.”

Expected Impact

- Boost economic growth by unlocking women’s full potential.
- Advance gender equality and meet EU child and labour targets.
- Mitigate demographic risks by raising female labour market participation.

Call to Action

We urge the European Commission, Member States, employers, and social partners to adopt these measures and make reintegration after maternity leave both fair and feasible.

2.0 INTRODUCTION, BACKGROUND, AND OBJECTIVES

2.1 Introduction

The MothersCan project was conceived as a direct response to the persistent challenges facing mothers returning to work after maternity leave. Eurostat data confirms a significant gender gap: only about 29% of first-time mothers return to full-time work within three years after maternity leave, compared to 96% of fathers who remain employed. This is not merely an equity issue but a substantial economic loss, wasting valuable talent and human capital.

A central, cross-cutting barrier is the inadequacy of formal childcare provision. As of 2022, only 35.7% of children under the age of three across the European Union were enrolled in formal Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC), with wide variation between countries. According to the *Employment and Social Developments in Europe 2024* report, ten EU Member States had already reached the revised Barcelona target of at least 45% enrolment for children aged 0–2 years. Among the MothersCan participating countries, only Belgium and Spain are likely to be among these ten.

With only 35.4% of children under three are enrolled in formal childcare EU-wide mothers are often forced to choose between care and career. The MothersCan initiative addresses this by empowering mothers and making the labour market more responsive to their needs.

2.2 The MothersCan Project: Context and Approach

The MothersCan Project is an EU-funded Erasmus+ transnational initiative that addresses the persistent barriers women face in re-entering the labour market after maternity leave. Across Europe, motherhood is frequently associated with career interruptions, wage penalties, and reduced professional opportunities. The project responds to these challenges by developing and piloting innovative strategies that promote women's empowerment, strengthen their employability, and foster more inclusive labour markets.

The project, delivered by a multidisciplinary consortium comprising AKMI SA (Greece – adult education and training provider), Fainareti (Greece – women's empowerment and social inclusion NGO), Institute of Entrepreneurship Development – iED (Cyprus – entrepreneurship and innovation capacity builder), CLNR – Centrul pentru Legislație Non-Profit (Romania – nonprofit legal advocacy centre), Asociación con Valores (Spain – social enterprise supporting people at risk), Plan B / BK-consult (Germany – project management and adult training specialist), and Make Mothers Matter (Belgium – European network advocating for mothers and families in policy debates), have piloted innovative strategies that promote women's empowerment, strengthen their employability, and foster more inclusive labour markets. This diverse expertise ensures that solutions are locally grounded yet scalable across Europe

At its core, MothersCan focuses on the transferable skills mothers gain through caregiving such as time management, multitasking, conflict resolution, and resilience that are important tools to in the professional environment. The categories of vulnerable groups of mothers include women with disabilities, migrant and minority women, single mothers, and those in precarious socio-economic situations.

MothersCan adopts a multi-level and multi-stakeholder approach, combining capacity-building for women with strategic engagement of employers and policymakers. Its key components include:

1. Empowerment and Capacity-Building for Mothers: This involves providing tailored training in entrepreneurial, digital, and soft skills to enhance employability and promote self-employment.
2. Skills Development: Supporting mothers in cultivating competences that are directly transferable to their professional environment, reinforcing confidence and labour market readiness.
3. Employer Sensitisation and Engagement: Offering practical guidance to employers and hiring managers to counteract recruitment bias, recognise caregiving competences, and implement gender-sensitive workplace policies.
4. Ecosystem Building: Promoting collaboration between employers, policymakers, training institutions, and civil society actors to create sustainable structures for maternal labour market reintegration.

MothersCan has piloted these scalable solutions national levels. The pilot interventions, and cross-country exchanges provided some evidence and lessons, that have a bearing for the EU's priorities on gender equality, work–life balance, social inclusion, and sustainable economic growth.

2.3 Objective of the Policy Recommendation Report

The objective is to translate the lessons, evidence, and best practices emerging from the MothersCan project into an actionable plan for EU policymakers, national governments, and labour market actors. Specifically, the report seeks to:

- Highlight structural barriers that hinder mothers' full reintegration into the workforce.
- Demonstrate scalable solutions piloted through MothersCan that can be mainstreamed across member states.
- Provide concrete policy measures to improve childcare provision, strengthen work–life balance, and promote inclusive labour market practices.
- Ensure that the skills, experiences, and contributions of mothers are fully recognised as part of Europe's social and economic development.

The objectives align with existing EU frameworks on gender equality, childcare, and inclusive labour markets. They focus to improve on the implementation of the EU Gender Equality Strategy 2020–2025, the European Pillar of Social Rights (Principles 2, 3, 9, and 11), the Barcelona Targets on early childhood education and care, and the Work–Life Balance Directive. The Lessons aim to strengthen these policies by advancing childcare provision, equitable access to education and training, and the reintegration of women and vulnerable groups—including women with disabilities and migrant mothers—into the labour market.

3 CROSS-COUNTRY FINDINGS, LESSONS, AND BEST PRACTICES

The pilot phase revealed both context-specific and cross-country issues. The text box below synthesises the core findings that inform the subsequent policy recommendations

Spain- key Insights

Barriers:

Childcare access**:** Although coverage (55% under 3) exceeds the EU's Barcelona target, supply varies by region and waiting lists remain in urban areas.

Affordability gaps**:** Despite national tax benefits, regional variations in subsidies mean not all families enjoy equal access.

Workplace culture: Persistent bias against mothers re-entering the workforce, especially regarding career progression after leave.

Lessons Learned from Piloting:

- WP3 (Workplace Reintegration): Hiring managers supported structured return-to-work measures, especially predictable scheduling and workload planning during the first 6 months.
- Employers emphasized the need for manager training modules covering legal rights, flexible scheduling, and fair performance evaluation.
- Mothers valued peer-to-peer mentoring groups as a confidence-building tool for reintegration.

Best Practices Identified:

- Equal parental leave (16 weeks each, fully paid) supports shared caregiving from the outset and reduces stigma for mothers.
- Tax benefits and regional subsidies directly lower financial barriers to childcare participation.
- Short, practical employer trainings were found to be a low-cost way to improve reintegration outcomes and are scalable across sectors.

Germany-Key Insights

Barriers:

Childcare Access: Severe shortage of early childhood educators (approximately 125,000 vacancies) limits access for under-3s despite strong demand.

Affordability gaps: Uneven childcare coverage across Länder creates regional disparities. Administrative fragmentation between federal and state levels complicates childcare access and subsidy navigation for parents.

Workplace culture: Cultural persistence of the "modified breadwinner model" — mothers more often take part-time jobs — reinforces the part-time penalty in earnings and career progression.

Lessons Learned from Piloting:

- WP2 (Empowerment): Mothers benefited from framing caregiving-acquired skills (time management, multitasking, resilience) as professional competences. This boosted confidence and employability, especially when preparing CVs.
- WP3 (Workplace Reintegration): Skills-first recruitment helped reduce bias linked to CV gaps. Employers welcomed job-sharing, phased re-entry, and output-based performance evaluations but highlighted the need for clear HR templates and standardised returnship models to scale adoption.
- WP4 (Entrepreneurship): Entrepreneurial training attracted mothers seeking flexible income sources. However, access to finance and balancing business with family duties remain key barriers to sustainability.

Best Practices Identified:

- Shared parental leave under **ElterngeldPlus** and the **Partnership Bonus** supports gender-equal caregiving and earlier return-to-work options.
- Job-sharing emerged as a practical retention tool, keeping skilled mothers engaged in the workforce while balancing childcare needs.
- Output-based performance evaluation (focusing on results delivered rather than hours worked) reduced bias against flexible or part-time working mothers.
- Team-based planning for childcare disruptions (e.g., Kita closures) strengthened resilience and supported smoother reintegration.

Greece-Key Insights

Barriers:

Childcare Access: Limited childcare provision for under-3s, with heavy reliance on grandparents and informal family care networks.

Affordability gaps: Public childcare centres are concentrated in urban areas, leaving rural and semi-urban regions underserved.

Fragmented funding and lack of coordination between municipalities and central government lead to uneven service quality.

Long parental leave schemes are underused due to low replacement rates, which financially discourage early return to work.

Workplace Culture: Persistent cultural expectations that mothers assume primary caregiving reinforce labour market dropouts or delayed re-entry.

Lessons Learned from Piloting:

- WP2 (Empowerment): Mothers valued tailored coaching that helped reframe family-acquired competences (organisation, problem-solving, adaptability) into employable skills, building confidence for job search and interviews.
- WP3 (Workplace Reintegration): Employers expressed interest in structured returnship programmes and mentoring schemes but highlighted the absence of practical HR tools to implement them consistently.
- WP4 (Entrepreneurship): Self-employment was seen as an attractive path for mothers needing flexibility, but pilots revealed barriers including limited access to microfinance and insufficient business development services for women.

Best Practices Identified:

- Municipal crèche expansion projects co-financed by the EU Social Fund show that targeted funding can significantly increase childcare coverage in job-dense areas.
- Mentoring circles for returning mothers provided low-cost, high-impact peer support and reduced isolation during reintegration.
- Partnerships between local employers and municipalities to reserve childcare slots proved effective in linking labour market needs with family services.
- Simplified “leave and childcare rights” guides for both mothers and HR managers improved awareness and uptake of entitlements.

Romania-Key Insights

Barriers:

Childcare Access: Formal childcare coverage for under-3s is among the lowest in the EU, with stark urban–rural disparities.

Affordability gaps: Public crèches are oversubscribed, while private childcare is prohibitively expensive relative to average wages.

Workplace Culture: Heavy reliance on extended family care persists due to lack of accessible, affordable services.

Long parental leave (up to 2 years, or 3 years for children with disabilities) discourages early return to the labour market and reinforces career breaks.

Limited employer engagement in providing or co-financing childcare solutions.

Lessons Learned from Piloting:

- WP2 (Empowerment): Mothers gained confidence when supported to translate caregiving skills (organisation, conflict resolution, resilience) into professional competences, but many still struggled with the stigma of long employment gaps.
- WP3 (Workplace Reintegration**):** Skills-recognition tools tested by HR managers helped counter hiring bias. Employers also expressed interest in reserving or co-financing company-linked crèche places as part of retention strategies.
- WP4 (Entrepreneurship): Entrepreneurial training generated interest among mothers seeking flexible options, but difficulties accessing microfinance and limited networks restricted feasibility.

Best Practices Identified:

- NRRP-funded crèche expansion shows potential to close access gaps if targeted to job-dense areas.
- Company-linked childcare models were welcomed as a promising tool for retaining female talent.
- Recognition of caregiving-acquired skills during recruitment improved mothers' chances of re-entry and was positively received by employers.
- Tailored HR guidance on parental leave rights and reintegration pathways proved useful in reducing confusion and ensuring smoother returns.

Cyprus-Key Insights

Barriers:

Childcare Access: Provision for under-3s is limited and uneven, particularly outside urban centres, forcing many parents to rely on private providers or extended family networks.

Affordability gaps: Public subsidies are modest, while private childcare costs are high compared to average wages.

Uptake of EU-funded childcare expansion projects remains low due to limited awareness and accessibility.

Parental leave is less generous and less commonly used; fathers' entitlements are short, reinforcing unequal caregiving roles.

Workplace Culture: Lack of employer-linked childcare provision makes balancing work and care especially difficult for mothers.

Lessons Learned from Piloting:

- WP2 (Empowerment): Mothers highlighted the value of peer mentoring and skills-recognition exercises, which helped rebuild confidence after career breaks.
- WP3 (Workplace Reintegration): Employers expressed demand for clear, practical guides on leave entitlements and reintegration pathways, noting confusion among staff as a barrier. Some piloted mentoring schemes linking returning mothers with experienced colleagues.
- WP4 (Entrepreneurship): Interest in entrepreneurship was strong among mothers seeking flexibility, but barriers included limited access to micro-grants, lack of business advisory services, and difficulties balancing start-up work with childcare.

Best Practices Identified:

- Practical HR guides on leave and entitlements emerged as a low-cost, high-impact tool to support smoother reintegration.
- Mentoring schemes pairing returning mothers with experienced staff boosted confidence, retention, and workplace inclusion.
- EU-funded childcare expansion demonstrates potential when better publicised and linked with employer co-financing models.
- Employer-supported flexibility in early return periods (e.g., phased hours, remote options) was strongly valued by both mothers and managers.

4.0 Policy Recommendations & Action Plan

This section presents concrete economic, labour, and social policy recommendations at both the country-specific and European Union levels. The action plans are informed by the lessons learned and best practices identified across the MothersCan partner countries.

The recommendations are organised under three complementary pillars:

- **Legal and regulatory measures** to create enabling rights and protections;
- **Financial and funding mechanisms** to expand childcare and support mothers' re-entry into the labour market;
- **Strategic interoperability actions** to ensure coordination across governments, employers, and social partners.

Together, these measures provide a scalable and harmonised framework for supporting the reintegration of mothers with children under three years old, helping to reduce inequalities while strengthening Europe's economic resilience and inclusive growth.

Table 1 Concrete recommendations and action plans to support mothers' reintegration into the labour market in pilot countries.

Country	Policy Issue	4.1 Legal & Regulatory Actions	4.2 Funding & Financial Actions	4.3 Strategic / Interoperability Actions	Responsible Actors	Indicators of Success
Spain	High childcare enrolment and equal parental leave, but unpredictable work schedules persist. Pilots showed managers need training to support parents.	Strengthen legal framework for flexible scheduling and parental leave.	Expand childcare places for under-3s. Offer tax breaks to firms that provide workplace crèches.	Create recognition of caregiving skills. Establish hubs linking mothers to training and employers.	Ministry of Equality; Regional Gov'ts; Employers	• Higher under-3 enrolment • Number of workplace childcare partnerships
Germany	Acute shortage of approximately 125,000 childcare staff. Cultural expectation for mothers to work part-time limits careers. Pilots tested job-sharing and performance-based evaluation.	Standardise job-sharing and phased return models. Make ElterngeldPlus more flexible for gradual re-entry.	Co-finance educator training between federal and state gov'ts. Provide subsidies for rural/underserved areas.	Promote output-based evaluation of work. Encourage team-based childcare provision.	Family Affairs Ministry; State Gov'ts; PES; Employers	• More trained educators • More firms adopting job-sharing/output-based models
Greece	Childcare gaps in rural areas. Cultural norms still place caregiving mainly on mothers. Pilots showed mentoring and flexible return schemes help.	Introduce a legal right to phased return-to-work. Strengthen paternity leave to balance roles.	Expand rural childcare services using EU funds. Subsidise employer-linked childcare.	Institutionalise mentoring schemes. Integrate skills recognition in public employment services.	Labour Ministry; Local Gov'ts; Employers	• Increased paternity leave uptake • New rural childcare centres
Romania	Very low childcare coverage. Long parental leave delays	Reform leave law for gradual/early return. Legally	Invest in crèches through the Recovery	Build skills-recognition into employment services. Expand	Labour Ministry; Municipal	• More crèches built • More mothers

	mothers' return to work. Pilots highlighted importance of recognising caregiving skills.	enable company childcare schemes.	Plan. Subsidise private childcare providers.	public–private childcare partnerships.	Gov'ts; Employers; PES	returning before child turns 2
Cyprus	Childcare limited outside cities; private childcare is too costly. Pilots showed value of employer guidance and mentoring.	Standardise parental leave across sectors. Introduce legal right to flexible work.	Subsidise under-3 childcare with EU funds. Co-finance employer childcare.	Institutionalise employer guidance programmes. Create structured mentoring schemes for mothers returning to work. Integrate skills recognition into public employment services.	Labour Ministry; Municipal Gov'ts; Employers; Public Employment Services	• More under-3 childcare places • Increased return-to-work rates for mothers • Number of employer–mentoring partnerships established

Table 2. Recommendations & Action Plan for EU level actors on Supporting Mothers' Reintegration into the Labour Market

Policy Issue	4.1 EU-Level Legal & Regulatory Recommendations	4.2 EU-Level Funding & Financial Recommendations	4.3 EU-Level Strategic / Interoperability Recommendations	Responsible Actors	Indicators of Success
Childcare access & operating hours	Require countries to achieve and go beyond the targets set in the Council Recommendation, 2022 while safeguarding high-quality standards in early childhood education and care ECEC especially for under-3s, and ensure centres have opening hours that match different work patterns (including evenings and weekends).	Create a Childcare Expansion Facility using European Social Fund Plus and European Regional Development Fund to finance new pilots in rural areas and shift-work contexts.	Track progress via the European Semester and Child Guarantee monitoring, and publish an EU childcare dashboard to make progress visible.	European Commission – Directorate-General for Employment, Social Affairs and Inclusion Directorate-General for Regional and Urban Policy; and the Member States of the European Union.	• More childcare places for under-3s • More centres open during shift/irregular hours • Narrowed rural–urban access gap

Affordability & transparency	Require Member States to publish clear childcare fee structures and set acceptable cost thresholds.	Fund childcare vouchers for low-income families via ESF+. Provide bridging subsidies where public places are lacking.	Publish an EU "Transparency Toolkit" with model contracts and fee tables; roll out childcare navigators.	European Commission; National Ministries of the Member States; and Local Authorities (regional and municipal governments).	• More families paying below affordability threshold • More regions publishing childcare fee tables
Educator shortages	Harmonise qualification frameworks for childcare staff. Enable mutual recognition of skills across EU.	Use ESF+ to train new staff, offer mobility grants and retention bonuses.	Create an EU Observatory to track vacancies, share best practice, and forecast demand.	European Commission – Directorate-General for Education, Youth, Sport and Culture (DG EAC), Directorate-General for Employment, Social Affairs and Inclusion	• More staff trained • Decline in vacancy rates • Better retention after 24 months
Return-to-work barriers	Propose an EU "Right to Flexible Return-to-Work" directive, covering phased return, job-sharing, and employer accountability.	Use ESF+ to co-finance returnship programmes, wage top-ups and re-skilling vouchers.	Embed MothersCan models into Public Employment Services and create an Employer Champions Network to spread best practices.	European Commission; Labour Ministries; Employers; Public Employment Services	• More returnship programmes • High retention of mothers returning • Reduced part-time penalty
Workplace infrastructure	Issue EU guidance on minimum standards: lactation rooms, predictable scheduling, employer crèches.	Provide EU grants/tax incentives for employer-led childcare and facilities.	Link family-friendly workplace standards to EU Corporate Social Responsibility/ Environmental, Social, and Governance reporting.	European Commission; Labour Inspectorates; Employers	• More employers meeting standards • More employer-supported childcare
Equity for vulnerable groups	Strengthen EU anti-discrimination rules on caregiving. Extend benefit	Target ESF+ subsidies to single parents, migrants, disabled mothers.	Require Member States to link reintegration measures with Child	European Commission;	• Higher employment rates among target

	coverage to self-employed parents.		Guarantee plans; report on equity outcomes.	Equality Bodies; NGOs	groups • More subsidies accessed • Lower child poverty in single-parent households
Data & monitoring	Require harmonised childcare data reporting (fees, hours, waitlists, workforce).	Fund interoperable national childcare dashboards feeding into an EU platform.	Launch an EU Reintegration Scoreboard (Eurostat) with comparable annual data.	European Commission; Eurostat; National Statistics Offices	• More Member States reporting harmonised data • Annual EU childcare reports published • Greater comparability across countries

4.1 Conclusion: A Call to Action

- **The Evidence is Clear:**

  The MothersCan project shows that the "motherhood penalty" is not inevitable. With the right policies, mothers' reintegration into the labour market is both achievable and transformative.

- **The Stakes are High:**

  Europe is facing declining birth rates and growing skills shortages. Leaving the talents, skills, and aspirations of mothers untapped is a social and economic risk the EU cannot afford**.**

- **The Pathway is Practical:**

  The recommendations outlined in this report provide a realistic, evidence-based plan - combining legal, financial, and strategic reforms to remove barriers and create genuine opportunities for mothers with young children**.**

- **The Time to Act is Now:**

  We urge the European Commission, Member States, and employers to adopt and implement these measures. This will not only advance fairness and gender equality, but also strengthen Europe's competitiveness and build a resilient, future-ready labour market**.**

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