World Organization of Workers
Organisation Mondiale des Travailleurs
Weltorganisation der ArbeitnehmerInnen
Organización Mundial de Trabajadores

A WOW Policy Paper: People at the Centre
The Path Towards Real Equality in Europe 2026

Legislation alone is not enough

In 2026, Europe stands at a vital turning point. We have moved from a phase characterized by political visions and new EU directives to a phase where these laws must stand the test of reality. The turning point marks the transition from words to action: It is now that we must prove we can move equality from legal paragraphs into the individual workplace and into European homes.

Although the EU has introduced groundbreaking measures – such as the pay transparency directive and gender balance in leadership – experience shows that progress stalls if we do not simultaneously address the underlying cultural and structural patterns. For WOW, equality is not an ideological struggle or a front against men. It is a matter of fundamental justice and human dignity. We wish to create a future where equality is seen as a partnership that unlocks the potential of both men and women.

Key Challenges

Through dialogue with our members, WOW has identified four critical barriers requiring action:

- **The Unexplained Pay Gap:** Even as the pay gap narrows, a "residual difference" remains that cannot be explained by objective factors such as experience or industry choice. This requires greater transparency and awareness of wage structures.

- **The Mental Load:** Real equality is not just about hours spent at work, but about who holds the overall responsibility for family logistics. This invisible burden still rests primarily on women and directly affects their opportunities for career and personal development.

- **Lifetime Economic Consequences:** We must address the long-term impact of unequal care distribution. When women reduce working hours due to insufficient care infrastructure, it leads to a "pension gap" and increases the risk of female poverty in old age. Equality is a lifelong economic necessity.

- **The Need for Robust Rights:** Equality must never become a luxury item prioritized only in good times. It must be an integral part of our social model, regardless of economic cycles. These rights must be resilient against crises and practically applicable—meaning they must be backed by financial security and protection against discrimination so that individual workers can actually use them.

WOW's Values: Dialogue and Cooperation

WOW is built on the principles of solidarity, subsidiarity, and respect for the individual. We believe that lasting change is created through dialogue rather than conflict. For WOW, equality is about creating a united front for justice, where men and women work together as equal partners in both professional and family life.

Recommendations for Action

1. From Strategy to Reality: Practical Gender Mainstreaming

The EU has long held "Gender Mainstreaming" as an official strategy. WOW supports this line, but we urge that the strategy now be elevated from a statement of intent to practical reality.

- **Our Proposal:** Gender impact assessments must not be a formal afterthought but must be a mandatory part of concrete impact assessments for all new initiatives – whether regarding digitalization, transport, or taxation. This ensures we catch unintended imbalances before they become reality for citizens.

- **Strengthening Care Infrastructure:** Real equality remains theoretical without access to affordable, reliable, and high-quality childcare and care services. We call for public investment in care infrastructure as a prerequisite for labour market participation.

2. Collective Agreements as an Engine for Balance

As a labour organization, WOW believes that collective agreements are the most practical and effective tools to turn equality into lived reality.

- **Systematic Pay Equity Reviews:** We propose that collective bargaining be used actively to ensure full transparency, directly supporting the implementation of the EU Pay Transparency Directive. This entails a regular review of gender-disaggregated pay data to identify and address unexplained gaps. By integrating these equity reviews into collective agreements, we ensure that the principle of 'equal pay for work of equal value' becomes a practical reality.

  This requires concrete action plans if discrepancies are found that cannot be justified by objective factors such as experience, skills, or responsibility.

- **Concrete Support for Care:** We must secure rights in collective agreements for full pay compensation during parental leave for both parents and the right to flexible working hours. By removing economic barriers for fathers, we make it possible for families to share care work more naturally.

3. Men as Active Partners: Measurable Goals

To ensure real progress, WOW proposes working with the following guiding ambitions and benchmarks for progress:

1. **Full Utilization of Paternal Leave:** We work toward 90% of all fathers fully utilizing their earmarked leave through an active support culture at the workplace.

2. **Equal Distribution of Care Days:** We aim for a 50/50 distribution of a child's sick days through dialogue and adaptation of work culture.

3. **Male Leaders as Role Models:** We encourage male leaders to lead by example by utilizing family-friendly arrangements themselves, making it culturally acceptable for all employees.

4. **Identifying Barriers:** We propose ongoing studies into what may prevent men from using their rights to flexibility and leave, so we can target our efforts effectively.

4. Conclusion

The turning point in 2026 requires the courage to look behind legal paragraphs and into daily routines. By using the collective agreement as a tool and involving men as partners, we can create a Europe where human dignity and justice are the foundation of our shared future, in which all people benefit equally.'

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