



Report



EU-PACIFIC TALKS: FOSTERING WORK-LIFE BALANCE IN DIVERSE SOCIETIES

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April 2024

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**Co-funded by
the European Union**



Demographic Shifts, Social and Gender Dynamics

The debate began by highlighting key demographic trends over the last decade. Europe and Southeast Asia are experiencing some of the lowest birth rates, with a significant decline since the Great Recession of 2010, further exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic. Countries like South Korea and many high-income European nations have extremely low birth rates and delayed parenthood. Factors contributing to these trends include stagnant incomes, high housing costs, and rising inflation due to geopolitical events. Young people today are delaying parenthood to continue their education or build a career. **Tomáš Sobotka**, Deputy Director of the Vienna Institute of Demography, emphasized that increased longevity and the aging baby boom generation are adding pressure to social systems. Migration, typically involving younger individuals, also affects demographic dynamics, particularly in countries experiencing population outflows like Hungary and the Balkan states.

The discussion moved to the impact of migration on demographic structures. Declining fertility rates and migration patterns significantly affect social support systems. In countries like France and the UK, population decline and migration necessitate welfare reforms. Asian countries like China, which are now experiencing population decline, face similar pressures. Migration from poorer countries increases the strain on social systems. Mr. Sobotka emphasized that productivity, linked to education, is more critical than demographics. Ensuring quality education for the younger generation is essential to secure decent jobs and contribute effectively to the system. Early retirement in countries like Spain and Italy reduces the economic productivity of the working-age population. While low birth rates pose challenges, they also offer an opportunity to improve education systems and labor markets, potentially alleviating demographic pressures through better policies.

Eva Mošpanová, a journalist for Deník N, clarified the friction points in Czech and Slovak societies regarding gender roles and career preferences. Despite significant progress in education, women face obstacles in the workplace, especially when starting a family. Workplaces often do not accommodate the balance between career and family life. Limited availability of kindergarten places and insufficient earnings during maternity leave exacerbate these issues. Extended maternity leave in the Czech Republic supports the traditional family model but hinders women's return to the workforce. Mothers often experience physical and psychological isolation after giving birth, making it difficult to return to work or participate in social activities. Ms. Mošpanová suggested flexible working hours as a solution to help women balance childcare and professional obligations more effectively.

Policy Solutions and Work-Life Balance

The second part of the debate focused on policies at the national and international levels aimed at addressing the needs of women and other vulnerable groups. **Tsukiko Tsukahara**, founder and president of Kaleidist and co-representative of G20 EMPOWER Japan, emphasized the importance of full participation of women and vulnerable groups in decision-making processes. She stressed the need to set and monitor numerical targets, such as the representation of women on boards of directors and closing the gender pay gap. Japan's revision of its corporate governance code, requiring large companies to disclose such data, was highlighted as a positive example. The discussion also covered government support for retraining and upskilling programs, investment in innovation from the perspective of women, ensuring fully paid care leaves for both men and women, and leveraging digital technologies to enable flexible work models. The critical issue of equal pay and the shorter working hours of women with children were also highlighted.

The COVID-19 pandemic has reshaped work practices, promoting online work, which has benefited many women. However, companies are now pushing back, preferring employees to return to the office. Mr. Sobotka noted that while remote work is beneficial, personal cooperation and in-person meetings are often irreplaceable. It is essential to maintain work-life boundaries, as being "online and available all the time" erodes these boundaries.

The availability and quality of childcare are crucial for achieving work-life balance. **Renge Jibu**, an associate professor in Tokyo, pointed out that in Japan, there can be tension between parents and non-parents regarding fair treatment at work. Companies need to clearly define job roles and responsibilities rather than focusing solely on hours worked. Quality, affordable childcare, especially for children under the age of three, is essential for balancing work and personal life. A strong labor market that provides part-time work and treats parents and non-parents equally is also necessary.

Ms. Jibu and Ms. Tsukahara shared their personal experiences, noting that Japan has excellent subsidized childcare that is both high-quality and affordable. This allows for effectively balancing a career while raising children. Despite this, many women of their generation still choose to stay at home.

The discussion also covered involving individuals other than mothers in childcare. Publicly provided childcare is crucial, and the increasing retirement age affects the availability of grandparents to help with childcare. All panelists agreed that more men should be included in this conversation, who can offer valuable perspectives. This requires structural and cultural shifts to address stereotypes and the pressure many men feel as primary breadwinners.

Final Remarks

The debate concluded by emphasizing the need to include non-parents in discussions about work-life balance. Government-backed paternity leave and

greater flexibility for fathers to share childcare responsibilities would be beneficial. Work-life balance policies should benefit all individuals, not just mothers. The speakers agreed on the necessity of inclusive, equitable policies and sustained dialogue to improve work-life balance for everyone.