

Second Work & Welfare Meeting

5th December 2020

Second meeting on Work, Welfare & Earnings

Chair

Okay hello, everybody and now we are in the feedback session where we're going to hear from one rapporteur from each of our 11 feedback groups on their discussions today. Each rapporteur is asked to give us between three and five key findings on their group's discussion on the very important topic of gender equality in the workplace. We're recording this feedback session so that it will be available on the website and first of all I'd like to thank those of you who volunteered to be the rapporteur for taking on this extra duty. We really appreciate it. I'm going to call the rapporteurs now one after the other and I'm going to start with the rapporteur from group 1. Can we hear from your group, please?

Breakout Group 1

Yeah, so point one was bureaucracy is not user friendly or family friendly and not easily accessible and needs to be a one-stop shop. Public information systems need to be accessible to all. There is also a want for setting social protection payments, including the Cares Allowance, at a level that brings people above the poverty line and supports the minimum standard of living. We also requested that job seekers get meaningful support and supporting access to child care especially and a process for applying for the social protection needs to be respectful and non-judgmental.

Point two was the individualization of the welfare system so that nobody is unseen in the system and everyone is accounted for and treated equally. And point three we had was that several strongly agreed that paternity leave should be mandatory and must be taken, although not everyone agreed with that point, there needs to be a more scrutinized way of how the government spends our taxes. There needs to be further accountability and transparency and taxes should benefit all of society. So there is a need for a fair tax system, ring fencing the taxes to link the collection of the taxes with the expenditure also, for instance, road tax would need to go towards road infrastructure. And then five was just the standardization of pension or the standardization of pensions. Everyone should get the same pension of equal value once they turn 65. And that's it from group one.

Chair

Thank you very much BG1. You obviously had a very busy time today coming up with all those ideas. Let's see how many of them resonated with the other groups. Now we're going to come next to Breakout Group 2 please.

Breakout Group 2

The recommendations for group two. The first one: allow people receiving Cares Allowance to work for more than 15 hours per week outside the home. The second was: adopt fully individualized taxation and social protection system to promote a more equal division of paid work and care. The third was: improve access and affordability of child care and after school care including spaces for parents who work non-standard hours or days due to caring responsibilities. The fourth was: simplify and streamline supports using technology where appropriate in order to notify people of their entitlements and ensure the process of applying for social protection supports is respectful and non-judgmental. And the fifth one is: introduce legislation on the right to request flexible working. That's it.

Chair

Thank you very much BG2. That's succinct. Thanks a lot. Then for group three please.

Breakout Group 3

The first one, we have three points here: overhaul of the social welfare tax system which will include single parents, guardians, divorced, separated and blended families and you simplify the tax for the people mentioned above and a UPB which is a universal pension benefit to start when you start earning with auto enrolment and allowances for carers and child minders, a pension for oil and disturbance attacks needs to be assessed on the individual's circumstances. Introduce a tax benefit for family and to reform tax systems and bonds.

Chair

Thank you very much BG3. And then BG4, You're going to tell us about the discussion in group four, please.

Breakout Group 4

So we have five points in group four. The first was implement a participation income payment which provides a form of financial recognition and allows for collection of stamps for pensions, especially in cases of unpaid care work or voluntary work. Adopt a fully individualized social protection system with payments that lift people above the poverty line and supports a minimum standard of living. Two: improve paid parental leave schemes by increasing time allowed to be taken and pay possibility for mandatory parental leave to ensure both parents available and this would need to be done with no loss of wages.

Three: make flexible working hours the norm for both men and women including full-time or part-time remote working which allows for the sharing of care responsibilities. Number four: the impact of the marriage bar on women's pensions should be addressed by the relevant

minister including a discussion on being able to count the years after they were forced out of the workforce and the possibility of back pay. Number five: childcare should be a state-funded public service available to all to ensure accessible and affordable child care, especially for those parents who work non-standard hours and for those families living below the poverty line, allowing them to get back into the workforce.

Chair

That's great. Thank you very much BG4. And moving next we come to the report from group five.

Breakout Group 5

Firstly we agree with the idea of a universal basic income or living wage into pension years. This would be a minimum standard of income and it would provide top-ups to income of lower paid work. It means the people can afford to live in society. Those who earn above that level can do so and as a first step to this, those who are affected by the marriage bar can immediately be provided with this as touched on by Mary Walsh in her video. Secondly, by default we think that tax credits and social protection should be individualized. If a couple wish to change this they may be transferable and caring in the home should not be treated with any less value than other work. Thirdly, we think that auto enrolment into pensions should occur.

Our next point was that child care is recognized as a barrier to equality and lack of child care services delay a return to employment. It should be a non-for-profit. It should be treated as a necessity and costs should be tailored based on parent's income. A four-day working week, where practical, would also assist parents in wider caring duties and child care maintenance should also be proceeded with more vigour. Our final point was regarding parental leave. We think bonus parental leave should be awarded if both parents avail of maternity and paternity leave.

Chair

Okay thank you very much. Again, another very interesting discussion. Now, from group six.

Breakout Group 6

I'll go through these points reasonably quickly. The first one was individualization. There was broad agreement and support for that principle across tax pension and social welfare and I suppose just one point to consider is just that doesn't disadvantage households where there may be only one earner in the household. In particular where that, for caring reasons, where you know where one person you know might be decided for that person not to work for caring reasons. Then the next was around the broad category of flexible working where there was a kind of, again, a broad agreement for the promotion and the right to request flexible working which would and the benefits thereof.

The next point was under the caring umbrella and, again, sort of a general promotion acknowledgement of the benefit that carers provide in society. Like one of the earlier contributors and there was a kind of agreement that this maximum number of hours of cysteine should be increased before the curse lands it you know falls away. And then we also touched on kind of a broadening potential carers payment should be considered this kind of participation income concept and that we'd like to be considered. The next one was and this was maybe created a little bit of kind of debating amongst the group, was around patterns you leave and certainly one member felt that you know it should be up to the family to choose kind of how that is applied. You know albeit it was recognized and very much a financial driven decision if there's one parent earning more than the other and albeit recognizing that that might have adverse implications either for the employer or actually for the promotion of gender equality.

And the next point was around pensions and the concept of auto enrolment and I think we're generally very strongly in support of that obvious with potential opt-out and you know depending on age or life circumstance at the time, but it should also include flexible and part-time workers, almost finished, then there was kind of under a bucket of kind of education and promotion in this segment and kind of almost like life skills training in the context of you know greater awareness of taxation pension and some of the implications and of certain decision making that people make through their life from a tax and a pension perspective and then also you know greater role modelling of the things like I suppose parental care or carers should be advertised and again just leading to a more caring society and final point was again one raised by one of the early contributors around a kind of a general review of the marriage bar pension implications for women and I think the people, certainly some people in the group, thought that is something that should be reviewed by the relevant minister so thank you.

Chair

Thanks very much BG6. I mean I think what's interesting to hear coming out from the different groups is where there are points of agreement across groups, but also that inside groups not everything is 100 agreed on. That shows that a real diversity of views is being engaged and I think that's exactly the purpose. So BG7 if we can hear from you, please?

Breakout Group 7

I suppose in the order of importance we noted in relation to caring work we recommended that any and all forms of caring work of any duration should be treated as paid employment and pension terms and we note that the current setup does not appear to allow carers to better themselves through education or through meaningful additional employment. So it needs greater flexibility hours for education should not be limited in that sense and also we felt home carers should be equipped to access the same training as professional carers at no additional cost and facilitated to do so and we also strongly felt that previous care work should be retrospectively recognized in terms of pensions.

Our second point was child care. So to boil it down, we thought that universally available programs should be accessible regardless of income status. Pandemic has taught us that the country will be on its knees with child care if the child care sector fell through so we feel that

this should be highly prioritized. Our third point was around pensions. So, again, a universal scheme which entitles people to a rate linked to the living wage in 2020/2021. There is no excuse for any person of pensionable age to be in or close to poverty and the feedback was also that information on all supports when reaching pensionable age should be easily accessible and simple to understand.

And to add to that more broadly, we feel that all forms of social protection payments should be linked to the living wage and we stopped at that, but to add more of a side note than an additional point we were all struck by the feedback from Cathy that in order to receive her one parent family payment she needs to physically turn up at the post office and, rain, hail or shine, to collect that. Where is the dignity in that situation? So we request that all persons availing of social protection payments have a choice of how to receive their payment in order to impart and allow as much dignity as possible and, similarly, any socially provided service should aim to be provided with the utmost dignity.

Chair

Thank you very much BG7. That's extremely interesting to hear. Also the side note. Now, next we come to group eight. Over to you.

Breakout Group 8

The first one was to resolve historic mistakes. Quote unquote the invisible women example. Tax credits for women who cared in the past. And next we have women's fashion. So everybody basically paid for caring work we leave you to contribute towards their own pension and they should be recognized for your tax credits for unpaid time. Participation income is the best way to describe that point I suppose. We agreed the third point was child care for parents should be accessible, affordable and a flexible approach taken a shared care policy. Promotion for parents, both parents could basically work less than full-time and achieve a better work-life balance.

The next point was individual payments of people in their own right. I know differentiation between men and women tax regardless of gender or marital status etc. And finally we have address specific needs of lone parents or parents with children of disability slash adults that grow up into adults, obviously, and in regards to supports to enable them to return to work or education and then look at as a side point on to that is how does the absence of these impact on the future welfare and the welfare of the children in the state by not doing now by not doing it I kind of look into the future was while they're thinking on that.

Chair

Thank you very much BG8. And now we're coming to group nine.

Breakout Group 9

Similar trend certainly coming came out of our feedback. So on our first point of recommendation we suggested this would be the introduction of a right to reasonable access to flexible and agile working. It was discussed that the just a right may also allow the employer or right to refuse, but that the reasonable access to agile working or flexible working should be promoted and introduced. And secondly, we discussed and recommend separating out the marital status and individualization of the taxation, social welfare and the pension systems. And we concluded as a group that there was a radical upgrade required to modernize these processes, these systems in our society to recognize the modern world, the modern country we live in.

Thirdly, we discussed and recommend the parental leave that we look at an equalization of mandatory, as it were, parental leave and that in order to promote male caring as well. The fourth point, actually Eleanor had mentioned as her side note and we had sought clarification on that whether that actually was, in fact, the case that lone parents would have to heal up for the post office for this payment and if, in fact, that is the case, which we have no reason to disbelieve, that any stigma inducing elements of the process should be removed as a point of order and we saw this as a very, arguably, a very quick win that just should just be facilitated for people. It shouldn't be difficult in this day and age and we believe that most social welfare payments are in fact accessible via banking so why there would be a difference. Just we found that incomprehensive.

And then the fifth point that we discussed and would like to recommend is that the introduction of a universal basic income for the carer whether that's directly in the home or. That role is recognized officially. And that it would also allow the continuation of pension contributions in terms of a non-contributory pension and therefore promote equality within the pension system down the line. So that was our group's recommendations.

Chair

Thank you very much BG9. As you say it is fascinating where the views converge and also that there's slightly different nuances coming from one group and another. Group 10 please.

Breakout Group 10

So our first point is we're proposing that there's that we introduce an education piece on tax literacy in Ireland and we suggest it should cover the collection, the use and also caring parenting and welfare entitlements. Just to improve the tax literacy of the general public from what we agreed was a very low base. And then just similar or related to that, then we would like to see a more user-friendly tax system introduced. Our second point was to introduce a universal basic income and auto enrolment into a pension scheme. Our third point then was to adopt an individualized taxation system to promote more equal division of paid work and care. That came from one of the submissions. And then our final point then is to introduce a four day week with the aim to redefine what work is and give more flexible working conditions.

Chair

Thank you very much BG10. I think that's, again, interesting where views overlap and where there are differences. And so group 11 please.

Breakout Group 11

Just let you know that our group was mainly in agreement in everything. Our first recommendation is affordable child care and accessible childcare for all. For larger companies to be incentivised to offer child care on site and smaller crèches being brought under state ownership if they're not viable. We also discussed maybe an insurance policy similar to the ones in the schools where parents pay eight euro a year in insurance for our children. This would go some way to stop bogus insurance claims against crèches and things like that. Parents are paid somewhat through their own pockets. We also discussed in under that parent leave and that should benefit both parents equally, however that has to be taken mixed parental leave, and joint parent leave all comes under the one part. That can be decided between the parents on a financial basis and we also need to recognize the best parenting skills as gender neutral skills.

Two was the participation income and joint individually assessed people. Recognise care work to be care for all and family members with additional care needs. Be it parents, brothers, sisters across the board. People would need to take time off for different reasons and that should be recognized. Part-time work needs to be recognised as a valid option for job seekers and should have the same benefits as full-time workers with regards to sick pay, holidays etc. etc. People that work remotely should have the same promotion opportunities as those working, say, in an office five days as somebody who works three days from home and two days in work, however that would be provided.

Number three: what definitely needs to be addressed now is the marriage bar and the hundred thousand women needs to be made more visible and no person should be undocumented in the state and the overall tax systems and pensions to be included to all workers and carers so that you can all benefit from it.

Number four was streamline the existing services that are there in social welfare and tax like simpler paperwork for different things because the system makes it so complicated for some people. So just simplify everything down. I mean all different sections of each department can work together to simplify things instead of sending people around and about looking for different things.

Number five was increased state-run child care and social welfare to be index links and loan parents should be supported financially, but also educationally. And bring child care in under state ownership and there should be a difference that, I know we're discussing care in January, between caregivers and carers which would be people that take care of people with additional needs. And just as a side note we're always talking about what's going to cost and going to cost the state. We'd like to just put it down that from one of the speakers that if we reduce poverty it'll save 4.5 billion per year to the state and also from carers, family carers Ireland it's known that carers save the state over 10 billion a year and we just want that recognized as a cost saving as opposed to always about what it's going to cost. And that's us for today.

Chair

Well thank you all very much. I think there's a lot of food for thought there and several of you have made the same point, but in almost every report there are new angles on it. So we will now go through all of this again and distill it out into the emerging compendium of recommendations that are coming from the different discussions. So thank you very much for volunteering, even under some pressure, to be the rapporteurs. We think it's important that as many people as possible, you know, take on this role through the different sessions. So we will, you know, record this and put it up on the website so that everybody who was in the assembly today can see what was discussed in the groups that they were not in and also the many observer's people outside of the assembly who are interested in seeing how it's developing, what kind of ideas are emerging. They'll also be able to tap into this rich harvest that's come out from the breakout groups. So thank you very much indeed and I hope we'll see some of you at our meetings on either the 10th or the 14th and if not I hope we'll see you all back fighting fit and ready for the next round on the 16th of January. So, again, very happy Christmas to you and your families and see you in the New Year. Take care.