



Addressing social challenges of parenting

Fighting labour market obstacles, social risks and high level of poverty

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Activity Report

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On October 16, 2015 in Riga an international forum “*Addressing social challenges of parenting. Fighting labor market obstacles, social risks and high level of poorness*” was hosted by Freedom and Solidarity Foundation (BSF). Participants discussed ways and possibilities how to reduce social and economic risks for young parents. The event was organized by BSF with the Foundation for European Progressive Studies (FEPS) and the NGO "Babyroom".

The conference was divided into three panel discussions, covering issues on both, causes of problems and their solutions, as well as future prospects.

The first panel discussion addressed parents of infants and children at a small age as a social group facing particular challenges and needs. Answers were offered to such questions: What defines this group? What are their needs and risks? Why is it important to cover those risks and to soften challenges? This panel also paid a special attention to the issue of family and children friendly environment.

The first speaker of this panel was **Maksims Ivanovs**, Ministry of Welfare, Family Policy department. He presented the current State policy on families and children, as well as outlined the planned future support mechanisms. M. Ivanovs noted that Latvia in comparison with other developed countries, gives less funding to social support of young families. This also explains why so many Latvian families with children are at risk of poverty. Especially bad is the situation with respect to single parents.

Līga Laizāne – Zelmene, Family Psychology Centre “Līna”, board member of association „PEP mammas” (first emotional support for mothers with children under age of three), explained the changes faced by young parents when a child comes into a family. L. Laizāne-Zelmene stressed that non-governmental organizations contribute a lot to the emotional support of young parents and that a greater State support is really needed.

Board member of NGO “Babyroom” **Linda Pavļuta**, emphasized the importance of public support and overall positive attitude towards parents with children. She stressed that it is vital that family and child-friendly environment is built both by public and private sector. Often, a new family faces a situation when environment is so unfriendly that it is difficult or impossible to get into a postal office, State Revenue Service branch and even a store or to attend a cultural event. Inaccessible environment can isolate a family from social processes and lead to a feeling of inferiority, so it is very important to build accessible and inclusive environment. In addition, development of an accessible urban environment is important for many social groups, not only for families with children.

Judit Tanczos, FEPS Policy Advisor included in her speech the developments at EU level. The EU has brought innovative solutions to child care that has contributed to gender equality in the Member States. One of such innovations was the EU maternity directive that was approved in 1992. But it is outdated and no longer corresponds to current events.

Recently, after the withdrawal of the draft Maternity Leave Directive, the European Commission put forward a roadmap concerning the issue of reconciliation, which includes a variety of recommendations for the Member States as well as certain conditions. For example, Member States are invited to share examples of good practice in this area. One of the positive points in these guidelines is that they speak not only of the availability of services, but also of their quality.

Guidelines also outline tax issues, because at the moment young families in many Member States are facing excessive tax burden. The document also includes a new family or parenting model that characterizes our time - possibilities to have flexible working hours, work from distance and use of a variety of IT solutions in children upbringing and for more successful return to the labor market.

During the second panel discussion participants of the conference discussed questions related to reconciliation and work-life balance: How to deal with challenges of bringing up kids and advancing in carrier/employment? What are the specific challenges of parents of children with long-term care needs and single mothers?

Līga Brūvere, representative of web page Mammamunteti.lv raised questions about what makes a family and people in Latvian happy, and what – unhappy, pointing out that although 59% of people in Latvia declare themselves to be happy, analyzing from the European context, we are one of the most unhappy societies.

As one of the reasons why a person is not happy, respondents of SKDS (Marketing and Public Opinion Research Centre) survey mention insufficient time to spend with family. It is very important for families with children to be able to plan a joint vacation, to find time during working days to take a child to a doctor and so on. Employees in Latvian see it is a problem because it is difficult to agree with an employer.

In this respect, a new essential idea has been introduced in Latvian starting this year: parents with children are entitled to one additional holiday, which can be used as needed.

However, to address this problem more broadly, many more solutions appropriate to current time on how to combine parenting with work should be introduced and popularized. Nowadays increasingly wide range of professions offers opportunities to work from a distance, have flexible working hours and to use other IT solutions. There is a need for a more rapid entry of these solutions into the Latvian society.

Viola Kropa, lecturer of Rīga Stradiņš University also pointed out different aspects that hinder a successful merge of parenting with work and career. Experience of other countries shows that being outside of labor market for a long period of time cause a sense of social exclusion to a woman. Children as well in such cases find it problematic to integrate into society. To decrease this problem, a greater support from the employers is needed. The lecturer also stated the previously mentioned opinion that nowadays there are much more opportunities to offer a work from a distance, create flexible working hours or to offer a part-time employment. A wider use of such solutions would allow for many women to keep their professional qualifications and have a better integration into the labor market.

She also pointed out that the State usually chooses to provide parents with traditional support mechanisms, such as allowances. But alongside them other forms of various supports should be introduced, such as childcare and care services, promotion of flexible working hours in society.

Ilze Viņķele, MP stressed the importance of this discussion as finally questions of demography are discussed more widely than before, including into conversation issues like child care, development and education.

Politician emphasized the fact that so far there has been a great pressure on the financial support mechanisms for families with children in Latvia, but too little thought has been paid to question on how to help parents return to the labor market. I.Viņķele pointed to the need for trade unions to become more involved in this situation, for example, by strengthening collective agreements' support mechanisms for employees who are raising children.

In the third panel discussion participants talked about the role of the State and municipalities: What are the most effective instruments to support families of infants and children? How does this effect family members individually? What are the specific social groups at risk?

Researcher **Ilmārs Mežs** pointed out that the current birth rate improvement is a direct result of the "demographic ultimatums" implemented in previous years. However, the next year's budget is a step back for two reasons - firstly, the planned tax changes are not friendly to families with children, and secondly, other direct forms of support for families with children are being reduced. For example, starting with next year, co-financing for looking after children in situations when municipality kindergartens are not available will no longer be provided. I.Mežs invited to learn from Estonia's experience on how to support families with children successfully. Unlike many other Eastern European countries, Estonia has achieved a positive birth rate.

Ieva Ādamsona, representative from association "PROGRESĪVIE" encouraged to speak louder about questions concerning the accessibility of environment and education to children with special needs. Financial support, technical barriers and the negative attitude from administrative authorities put parents with such children and children themselves in a humiliating situation. Today in Latvia, there are approximately 8,000 children with special needs who could become taxpayers in the future - but for this to happen the State and municipalities have to come towards families with such children. First of all, assistant services need to be provided, secondly, availability of educational institutions has to be ensured.

Inga Bite, MP raised awareness on an urgent problem - currently we have provided a relatively good support for families for the period until the child reaches the age of one and a half, and then the amount of the support rapidly drops. It is necessary to look for solutions so that families would receive support also after this period. Also I.Bite spoke of the different support mechanisms and municipal services for young families stressing that municipal offers and possibilities in this area are very different in every municipality.

The last speaker on the panel was **Susanne Andersson**, Secretary General of S-kvinnor, Social Democratic Women. She emphasized gender equality issues, pointing out that without gender equality in the family, gender equality in the labor market cannot be achieved. Sweden has a variety of mechanisms to ensure this, such as division of parental leave into two equal parts and one parent has no rights to take other parents parental leave.

Also Sweden has specific support mechanisms for parents under age of 19. They as well can have the opportunity to take parental leave, including from school and then return to learn. Also, single parents have a special support system that allows them to bring up their children and integrate into the labor market more successfully.



Families in Sweden receive not only financial support, but also a variety of services - such as childcare and babysitting services. These services are available not only for those parents who work during a day, but also for those who work at night shifts (and/or weekends).