



## Discussion Highlights

# THE UNFINISHED REVOLUTION: WHAT ARE THE SYSTEMIC BARRIERS TO RECONCILING PARENTHOOD AND CAREER?

18 May 2026

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## About the EUROPEUM Institute for European Policy

The EUROPEUM Institute for European Policy is a nonprofit, nonpartisan, and independent think tank focused on European integration and cohesion. It contributes to strengthening democracy, security, stability, freedom, and solidarity throughout Europe, while also supporting the Czech Republic's active engagement within the European Union.

EUROPEUM conducts original research, organizes public events and educational activities, and develops new ideas and policy recommendations with the aim of improving national and European decision-making processes.

The entire evening was organized on the initiative and **under the leadership of Aneta Martinek, author of the book *Holky to chtěj taky*, and Linda Tejchman, founder of the Bruselský cedník project**, who also handled the organization and moderation of the event.

The event took place under the auspices of the **EUROPEUM Institute for European Policy and the Permanent Representation of the Czech Republic to the European Union**.



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*A discussion on women's position in the labor market, balancing parenthood and career, and the systemic barriers that women in the Czech Republic continue to face took place on **May 18, 2026, in Brussels** at the EUROPEUM Institute for European Policy. The event addressed a topic that has been gaining increasing prominence in recent years, not only in the Czech Republic but also in the broader European debate on **gender equality, the functioning of the labor market, and the future of social policies**. The discussion was held under the auspices of the EUROPEUM Institute for European Policy and the Permanent Representation of the Czech Republic to the European Union.*

*The event was moderated by **Aneta Martinek, author of the book Holky to chtějí taky, and Linda Tejchman, founder of the Bruselský cedník project**. Women active in top-level politics, diplomacy, European institutions, and the private sector accepted the invitation to participate in the discussion - **Lucie Šestáková**, Head of the Cabinet of European Commissioner Jozef Síkela (DG INTPA); **Irena Moozová**, Deputy Director-General for International Aspects of Justice, Rule of Law, and Equality (Directorate-General for Justice and Consumers – DG JUST), **Jaroslava Rezlerová**, CEO of ManpowerGroup and Vice President of the Czech Chamber of Commerce, **Magdaléna Frouzová** from CzechInvest, and diplomat **Pavla Papirnikova**, who focuses on strategy for Czechs in EU institutions.*

*The discussion took a comprehensive look at issues of gender equality, **women's position in the labor market, balancing motherhood and career, women's economic independence, the functioning of social systems, and the need for deeper social and political changes**. The participants shared their personal experiences while also analyzing broader structural issues affecting women in the Czech Republic and across Europe. The debate linked personal stories with an analysis of systemic barriers, stereotypes, and the functioning of public policies.*

## Key points of the discussion

- **The discussion focused on women's position in the labor market**, balancing parenthood and career, women's economic independence, and persistent gender stereotypes.
- **The speakers pointed out that Czech women are highly educated**, but their potential remains underutilized due to structural barriers, long career breaks for child-rearing, and a lack of flexibility in the labor market.
- **According to the panelists, the Czech Republic lags behind in terms of gender equality**, the gender pay gap, and the representation of women in leadership positions, even though Europe is among the regions with the highest levels of gender parity.
- **Much of the discussion was based on the personal experiences of the participants**, who spoke about women's economic insecurity, the risk of poverty following a career break, and the need for women's financial independence.
- **Particular attention was paid to women in the public sphere and female politicians**, who face more frequent personal attacks, sexual innuendo, and criticism focused on their appearance or family life.
- **One of the most important topics was flexible work arrangements and home office**. The speakers emphasized that flexible work models help parents balance work and family life and should become a standard feature of the modern labor market.
- **The discussion also touched on the low representation of women in politics and in leadership positions**. Suggested solutions included mentoring, support for women's leadership, and quotas.

□ **In conclusion, the need for systemic changes was emphasized—including better childcare infrastructure, support for flexible work arrangements, greater involvement of men in parenting, and the elimination of stereotypes that complicate women’s professional and personal lives. It amounts to 100% of the average income, but is capped at 2.5 times the average monthly wage in Slovenia.**

## **The Swedish model of parental leave policy as an example of a functional system**

One of the opening topics was parental leave and the different models of social support for families in European countries. The panelists cited Sweden as an example of a well-functioning system that successfully combines economic support with gender equality. <sup>1</sup>**The Swedish model provides parents with a total of 480 days of parental leave, with most days covered at approximately 80% of their salary.** The system also includes a non-transferable portion of parental leave allocated specifically to each parent. The aim of this arrangement is to encourage men to actively participate in childcare while preventing all responsibility from automatically falling on women.

Estonia and Slovenia were cited as further positive examples, where approximately 64% of men take parental leave. <sup>2</sup>In Slovenia, parental leave lasts 130 days for each parent, for a total of 260 days; it follows immediately after maternity leave, and the mother may take not only her own portion but also the portion transferred from the father, with wage compensation amounting to 100%

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<sup>1</sup> Øresunddirekt, “Parental Leave in Sweden,” updated on 6 June 2025. Øresunddirekt. <https://www.oresunddirekt.dk/en/working-in-sweden/family-parenting/parental-leave-in-sweden/>

<sup>2</sup> Government of Slovenia, “Family Rights and Benefits,” GOV.SI, last edited on 12 February 2026. <https://www.gov.si/en/policies/family-children-and-marriage/>

of average income, up to a maximum of 2.5 times the average monthly wage in Slovenia.

According to the participants, these models demonstrate that gender equality is not merely a cultural issue, but also the result of specific legislative and social measures. The debate therefore shifted to the broader question of what kind of society European countries want to build—whether a society based on traditional gender roles, or a model that promotes a more equal distribution of care and economic responsibility between men and women.

## The Czech Republic and the Untapped Potential of Educated Women

A significant portion of the discussion also focused on the demographic situation in the Czech Republic and broader demographic trends in the European Union. The speakers highlighted the paradox that while Czech women are highly educated and skilled, neither the state nor the labor market is able to effectively utilize their potential. According to the participants, the underutilization of the female workforce is not merely a matter of gender equality, but also a significant economic and demographic problem.

The discussion also touched on international gender equality rankings. **<sup>3</sup>According to the Gender Gap Index, the Czech Republic ranks among the lowest-scoring countries in the European Union and is ranked around 104th in the world.**<sup>4</sup>The panelists pointed out the paradox that while

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<sup>3</sup> World Economic Forum, Global Gender Gap Report 2023, published in June 2023. World Economic Forum PDF [https://www3.weforum.org/docs/WEF\\_GGGR\\_2023.pdf](https://www3.weforum.org/docs/WEF_GGGR_2023.pdf)

<sup>4</sup> Padesát procent, “Genderová rovnost v Česku: Stojíme na místě,” Padesát procent, published on 7 March 2024. Padesát procent <https://padesatprocent.cz/cz/genderova-rovnost-v-cesku-stojime-na-miste>

Europe as a region achieves one of the highest levels of gender equality in the world, and many European countries—such as Norway and Finland—have long been among the global leaders, the Czech Republic lags significantly behind. In international comparisons, it is even outperformed by countries such as Ethiopia and Bangladesh on certain indicators.

According to the panelists, this situation demonstrates that a country's economic development does not automatically guarantee a higher level of gender equality. The main causes identified were persistent stereotypes, low representation of women in leadership and political positions, significant wage gaps between men and women, and inadequate support for balancing work and family life.

It was noted that the Czech system is still structured in a way that assumes a woman will stay home for several years after giving birth. Such a model leads to a career interruption during a period when women naturally grow professionally and build their expertise. The result is lower representation of women in leadership roles, politics, diplomacy, and management. The panelists emphasized that this is not a matter of a lack of ability, but rather a consequence of systemic structures that make it difficult for women to return to the workforce.

The speakers also compared the Czech system to Belgium, where the infrastructure is significantly better adapted to the needs of working parents. After-school programs and childcare services were cited as specific examples. While after-school programs in the Czech Republic often end around 5:00 p.m., in Belgium they operate until the evening hours, which allows parents—especially women—to work more fully. According to the panelists, it is precisely such practical measures that fundamentally influence women's ability to maintain their careers.

## Personal experiences: motherhood, career, and financial independence

Much of the discussion was based on the participants' personal experiences. Stories were shared about growing up in a divorced family during the socialist era, and it was pointed out that, despite official rhetoric about eradicating poverty, even before 1989 there were groups of people living in extremely difficult material conditions who were rarely mentioned in public discourse. <sup>5</sup>Among the most vulnerable were single mothers, who often struggled to provide for their families' basic needs - from housing and heating to quality food for their children. **The discussion also highlighted that women's economic dependence on a partner can lead to social insecurity and poverty in the event of divorce or a life crisis, which subsequently affects not only the women themselves but also their children.** In this context, it was noted that women's economic independence is one of the fundamental prerequisites for freedom, stability, and a dignified life.

The discussion also drew on experiences from abroad, including life in Germany and contact with the Iranian community. It was emphasized that stereotypical expectations of women are not a problem limited to a single culture or region, but exist across societies. Criticism was also directed at the fact that support for women in balancing career and family is often provided by other women—particularly migrant women—who perform low-paid care work. The discussion highlighted that this leads to the reproduction of inequalities among women themselves.

It was also noted that financial independence and freedom of choice are key aspects of women's status. One participant described her experience of returning

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<sup>5</sup> Lucie Václavíková, "Samoživitelky za socialismu: neviditelná chudoba ve světě, který rovnost jen předstíral," Heroine, published on 18 September 2023. Heroine <https://www.heroine.cz/zena-a-svet/4285-samozivitelky-za-socialismu-neviditelna-chudoba-ve-svete-ktery-rovnost-jen-predstiral>

to work just three months after giving birth in an effort to continue her career. Nevertheless, this was met with strong social criticism and comments questioning her motherhood. At the same time, it was emphasized that parental support in caring for the child played a significant role—support that many women lack.

The discussion also addressed experiences from a traditional family environment, where a mother fell into poverty after years away from the labor market. This experience led to a drive to build her own career and achieve economic independence. **At the same time, reflections on working in diplomacy were shared, along with a note on a major legislative change from 2015 that allowed women in the foreign service to continue working abroad even after becoming pregnant.** Before this law was passed, women often had to automatically leave their posts abroad and return to headquarters, which significantly hindered their career advancement.

## Gender Stereotypes and Discrimination in the Workplace

The panelists repeatedly highlighted the deeply entrenched stereotypes that affect women in the labor market. It was noted that women are often asked questions about planned pregnancies or motherhood during job interviews, as companies still view parenthood as a risk and an economic burden.

According to numerous studies, working mothers are often judged more harshly by society than men or women without children. Research suggests that women who return to work after having a child are sometimes perceived as less devoted to their families and more focused on personal success or career ambitions. These negative attitudes are particularly pronounced in cases where a woman's return to the workforce is seen as a matter of personal fulfillment rather than economic necessity. Conversely, women who work for financial reasons tend to be judged

more leniently by society. <sup>6</sup>The panelists also pointed out that society still clings to the notion of “ideal motherhood,” according to which a mother should focus primarily on caring for her children and family, while a career or professional ambitions are often viewed as secondary. The traditional model of the stay-at-home mother is thus still considered a socially desirable ideal, which creates pressure on women who decide to continue their working lives. Such stereotypes subsequently contribute to prejudices against working mothers and simultaneously influence their position in the labor market and in the public sphere.

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Special attention was also given to female politicians and women in the public sphere. The panelists pointed out that women in politics are often judged based on their appearance, communication style, or personal lives to a much greater extent than their male colleagues. If a woman steps outside the traditional framework of expected behavior, she is often subjected to more intense criticism and attacks.

**Although politics is naturally a confrontational arena and sharp criticism is directed at men as well, attacks against women often take on a different character.** Instead of criticism of their political views or professional decisions, women are more often the target of personal attacks focused on their appearance, family life, or the very fact that they are active in the public sphere.

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<sup>6</sup> Torres AJC, Barbosa-Silva L, Oliveira-Silva LC, Miziara OPP, Guahy UCR, Fisher AN, Ryan MK. The Impact of Motherhood on Women's Career Progression: A Scoping Review of Evidence-Based Interventions. *Behav Sci (Basel)*. 2024 Mar 26;14(4):275. doi: 10.3390/bs14040275. PMID: 38667071; PMCID: PMC11047346.

Such attacks often include sexual innuendo, ridicule, threats, or verbal abuse directed at them and their families.

<sup>7</sup>In recent years, the United Nations has repeatedly drawn attention to the growing problem of violence against female politicians and women active in public life. In 2018, an expert group operating under the auspices of the United Nations designated this type of attack as a form of human rights violation. At the same time, it noted that many women active in politics or public life are often unable to accurately describe their experiences or speak about them publicly, as such incidents have long been downplayed in society or considered a “normal” part of the political environment.

## **Work flexibility, women’s position in the labor market, and personal life**

One of the most discussed topics was work flexibility and the overall structure of the labor market as it relates to women and parents. It was noted that the Czech public sector had long been unfamiliar with the concept of working from home, and managers often distrusted employees who worked remotely. However, the pandemic has shown that flexible work models are effective and can significantly help parents balance work and family life.

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<sup>7</sup> Marie Šťastná, „K násilí na ženách v politice dochází i v Česku. Jeho cílem je politicky zastrašit a vytlačit,“ Deník Alarm, publikováno 22. června 2021. Deník Alarm <https://denikalarm.cz/2021/06/k-nasili-na-zenach-v-politice-dochazi-i-v-cesku-jeho-cilem-je-politicky-zastrasit-a-vytlacit/>

The discussion also featured examples of companies that offer women flexible work arrangements and tailor working hours to their needs. It was noted that mothers are among the most effective employees because they are forced to work in a highly organized manner and manage their time efficiently. It was also emphasized that companies that are able to accommodate parents benefit from this in the long term.

The panelists also pointed out that, despite women's high level of education, the position of Czech women in the labor market has long been below average among OECD countries. The Czech Republic lags significantly behind, particularly in terms of women's pay and the availability of flexible work arrangements.

**<sup>8</sup>According to current data, women in the Czech Republic earn on average about 17% less than men in the same positions, and the pace at which this gap is narrowing remains very slow.**

Although female unemployment in the Czech Republic is not a major problem, most women work full-time, and opportunities for part-time or flexible work remain limited. According to the panelists, compared to Western European countries, the Czech labor market still fails to adequately address the needs of parents, which makes it significantly more difficult for women to balance work and

**According to the panelists, compared to Western European countries, the Czech labor market still fails to adequately address the needs of parents, which makes it significantly more difficult for women to balance work and family life. In their view, therefore, work flexibility should not be seen as an exceptional benefit, but as a natural part of the modern labor market.**

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<sup>8</sup> Eliška Straková, „Ženy si v Česku vydělají o šestinu méně než muži, novela zákona má zajistit rovné odměny,“ iROZHLAS, publikováno 17. března 2026. iROZHLAS [https://www.irozhlas.cz/zpravy-domov/zeny-si-v-cesku-vydelaaji-o-sestinu-mene-nez-muzi-novela-zakona-ma-zajistit-rovne\\_2603172228\\_elev](https://www.irozhlas.cz/zpravy-domov/zeny-si-v-cesku-vydelaaji-o-sestinu-mene-nez-muzi-novela-zakona-ma-zajistit-rovne_2603172228_elev)

family life. According to them, therefore, flexible working arrangements should not be viewed as a special perk, but as a natural part of the modern labor market.

## The low representation of women in politics and the issue of quotas

The discussion also addressed the low representation of women in politics and in leadership positions. <sup>9</sup>It was noted that women account for only about 17.2% of those in high-level political positions, and without systemic measures, this situation is changing only very slowly.

The panelists argued that quotas can serve as a tool to open up opportunities for women while also compelling society to address issues that affect them. According to them, greater representation of women would automatically lead to a stronger focus on issues such as childcare, work-life balance, and gender equality.

It was also noted that quotas do not mean giving preference to less qualified female candidates, but rather compensating for existing biases and inequalities. According to the panelists, the public sphere is still dominated by men, and without active measures, the situation will not change.

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<sup>9</sup> Edu Effective, „Pouze 17,2 % žen je v Česku na vedoucích pozicích. Jak překonat tuto nerovnost a dosáhnout změny?“ Edu Effective. Edu Effective <https://www.edueffective.online/cs/pouze-172-zen-je-v-cesku-na-vedoucich-pozicich-jak-prekonat-tuto-nerovnost-a-dosahnout-zmeny/>

## The Need for Systemic Change and Generational Optimism

At the conclusion of the discussion, the need for deeper social and systemic change was highlighted. The participants emphasized that it is not enough to appeal to women's individual responsibility; rather, it is necessary to change the functioning of the state, the labor market, and social expectations. Among the key priorities they identified were building high-quality childcare infrastructure, supporting flexible work arrangements, greater male involvement in parenting, and economic incentives for employers.

Despite criticism of the current state of affairs, a certain optimism was also expressed. Some participants believe that the younger generation of men and women is more open to a partnership-based family model and a more equal division of parental responsibilities. At the same time, however, they pointed out that without political support, public discussion, and long-term campaigns, deeply rooted stereotypes will not change.

## Recommendations

Based on the discussion, several key recommendations can be formulated:

**First, the Czech Republic should significantly strengthen policies that support the work-life balance for parents.** This includes expanding access to affordable child care, improving the functioning of after-school programs, and creating services that meet the real needs of working parents.

**Second, flexible forms of work should become a standard feature of the labor market, not an exception.** Greater use of part-time work, flexible hours, or home office can help parents—especially mothers—remain economically active and continue their professional development.

**Third, the parental leave system should do more to encourage fathers to take an active role in caring for their children.** Inspiration can be drawn, for example, from Scandinavian models, which include a non-transferable portion of parental leave allocated specifically to each parent and promote a more equitable division of caregiving responsibilities between men and women.

**Fourth, employers and public institutions should actively work to eliminate stereotypes against working mothers.** Recruitment, career advancement, and employee evaluations should be based primarily on qualifications and work performance, not on assumptions related to motherhood or family responsibilities.

**Fifth, women's economic independence should be viewed as one of the key social and economic priorities.** This requires narrowing the gender pay gap, supporting women's career advancement, and reducing long career breaks, which later lead to lower pensions and a higher risk of poverty.

Last but not least, the need to increase women's representation in politics and decision-making positions was highlighted. Mentoring programs, support for

women's leadership, and systemic measures to ensure that issues affecting women and families are better reflected in public policy can all contribute to achieving this goal.