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Is the EU Parliament

▲ The absence of a comprehensive parental leave policy, alongside long working hours, travel between Strasbourg and Brussels, and weekend work, prompted some MEPs to end their careers earlier or not run in 2024, according to Elena Frech, a researcher from the University of Navarra. (Photo: Eurpress)

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down female MEPs with children?

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BY SALOMÉ BONNEYRAT, BRUSSELS, 11 FEBRUARY 2025, 12:23:26

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Balancing an EU career with family life is especially challenging for MEPs with young children, impacting their career choices and, in turn, the diversity and representation in the European Parliament, according to **Elena Frech**, a University of Namur researcher.

"Parents see the world differently, and if there are fewer parents in parliament, especially mothers and young parents, it will ultimately affect politics and policy," she told EUobserver in an interview.

The absence of a comprehensive parental leave policy, alongside long working hours, travelling between Strasbourg, Brussels and the constituency, and weekend work, has led some

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When researching work-life balance in the European Parliament, she said female MEPs often mentioned the physical distance from their families as an “urgent problem” — especially when it comes to not being able to be there for unexpected situations.

While some MEPs choose to move their families to Brussels before starting their term, others decide to leave their families in their home country and travel back and forth. The distance from the home country of the MEP is a major factor.

But Frech also pointed out that long working hours are a major challenge.

MEPs and other EU officials often miss out on putting their kids to bed or even seeing them in the evenings because they’re working so late, which is a common issue in political life, she said.

Frech also mentioned that male MEPs with more traditional family values usually perceive balancing family and mandate as less problematic, as these male MEPs tend to have wives who stay at home and look after the children.

“The percentage of caretaking for many fathers is lower. Therefore, it is perceived easier to handle both family and the mandate,” Frech said.

No absentee voting

The European Parliament’s rules do not recognise

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“The members of the parliament organise the exercise of their free mandate themselves, so there is no ‘leave authorisation’ necessary,” a spokeswoman from the EU parliament told EUobserver.

French Left MEP Leila Chaibi **said** in an interview in 2023 that being absent at the parliament means “that a vote that fails by just one vote will be your fault. Just because you’re not there.”

“It’s like having to choose between a voter and a newborn,” she complained.

In 2023, Spanish Left MEP Adriana Maldonado **collected** signatures among the 705 MEPs asking for the parliament to finally recognise officially maternity and paternity leave and allow remote voting for MEPs during parental leave.

“Europe is capable of adapting to the new digital era, and we need to get it up and running again,” she **said**.

Despite being signed by parliament’s president, Roberta Metsola, the proposal was rejected on the grounds of privacy, safety concerns, and the fact that MEPs have individual, non-transferable mandates.

“It would be normal to keep it for some specific cases, such as when an MEP becomes a mother or father, and also in other circumstances, such as

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A legislative proposal **was introduced** by MEPs in 2022 to allow for the temporary replacement of a member for a 16-week renewable period in the event of parental leave or serious illness. But this is still pending approval in the EU Council, a EU parliament spokeswoman told EUobserver.

Danish example

Meanwhile, the Folketing, the Danish parliament, already authorises replacement during parental leave.

Parliamentarians are excused for up to 12 months in case of pregnancy or adoption; during that time the member is replaced by a substitute. Substitutes are elected in the same way as official members during the time of the parliamentary election.

Similarly in Paris, during important sessions in the French parliament, parliamentarians can choose substitutes to vote for them.

However, although pregnant MEPs are excused from coming to the plenary sessions of the parliament for three months before, and six months after, giving birth, the absence of remote voting puts pressure on the MEPs to come back sooner.

“Their faction or their party loses one vote because they can’t replace parents on leave for purpose of the voting. Hence, the pressure for parents is really very high to go anyway,” Frech said.

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leave is not yet officially recognised, and no rule exists for father MEPs or the ones who make the choice to adopt.

“So, if attendance in plenary is measured at the end of the term, you have a ‘bad score’ because it is just not recognised that you were on parental leave,” Frech warned.

In contrast, the Covid-19 pandemic “was perceived as a very family-friendly time” for work-balance by parent MEPs, according to the researcher.

Even though family members and children were forbidden to enter the parliamentary chamber, parents could decide to vote remotely from home, which most of them did for almost a year.

Yet more recently, the right to participate remotely in a meeting was recently **denied** to the Italian Green MEP Cristina Guarda, after she asked to take part in the commissioner hearings remotely — after a doctor’s order to remain at home for the last few weeks of her pregnancy.

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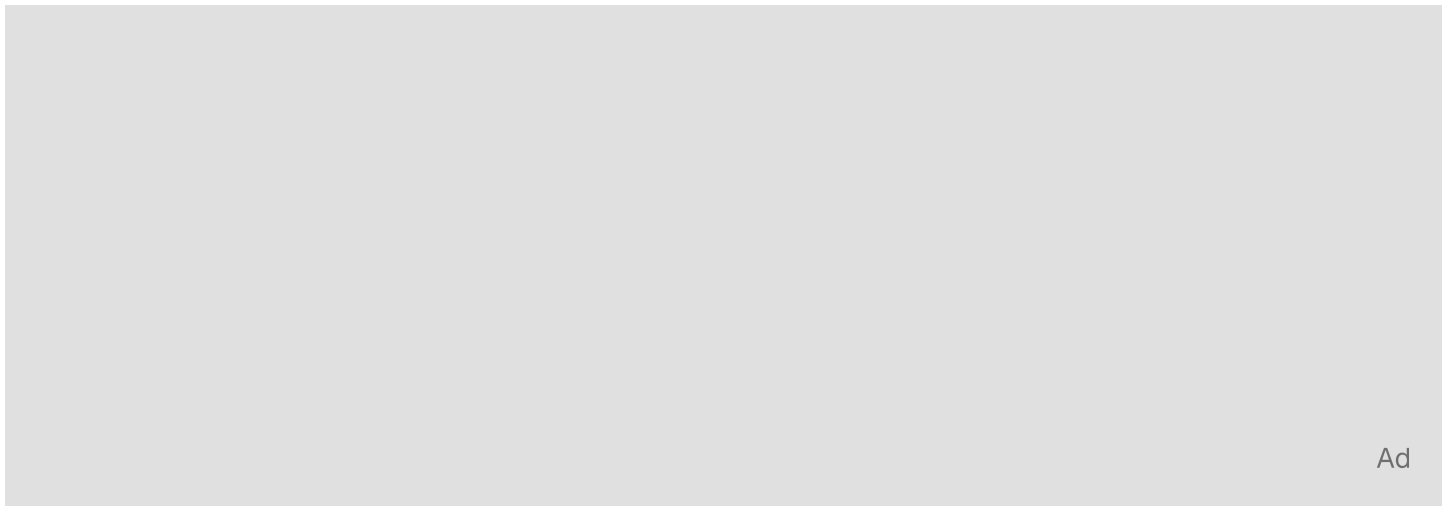
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