

Ensuring Support for Caregivers and Families

By Lisa Paus

The United Nations Economic Commission for Europe (UNECE) held its Ministerial Conference in Rome, Italy, in June 2022 to discuss the progress made in the 20 years since the Madrid International Plan of Action on Ageing (MIPAA) and the Regional Implementation Strategy (RIS) were adopted. The discussions made it clear that much has been done in the past 20 years to improve the lives and life situations of older persons, but also that much remains to be done. This is why the Ministerial Declaration of the Conference contains goals for the 56 UNECE member states for the next five-year implementation phase of MIPAA/RIS.¹

The conference and the Ministerial Declaration also put a spotlight on a topic that is pivotal for Germany as well as for many countries in the UNECE region and worldwide: How can we ensure high-quality, accessible long-term care, and how can we improve support for family members who provide informal care and who constitute a central pillar of caregiving support for those in need?

The COVID-19 pandemic caused fear and suffering for older people worldwide. At the onset of the pandemic, the German government put special legal regulations in place to address acute needs. Against the backdrop of an unknown future development of the virus, especially from autumn onward, we extended these regulations until April 30, 2023. For older persons, this means that family members providing informal care continue to benefit from flexible leave arrangements for family caregivers. This includes the right to remain absent from work for up to 20 workdays in an emergency care situation caused by COVID-19. During this time, the care support allowance (*Pflegeunterstützungsgeld*) is granted to compensate for lost income.

Many countries, including Germany, face a lack of professional caregivers. The majority of people who need long-term care in Germany receive home care, which is provided mostly by relatives and informal caregivers. Most Germans

would like to be cared for at home for as long as possible. Caregiving relatives are therefore a pillar of society. They not only make an important contribution to the family but also take on a task for society as a whole, which is essential for cross-generational cohesion, social interaction, and aging with dignity.

However, we should not take such “informal care” work for granted. It is a burden for the caregivers, who often have to combine work, family life, and care. It is a permanent stress situation: day by day — but also night after night. They do this with passion and love. They support persons in need of long-term care, regardless of what special task is given to them — be it dementia, a disability, physical problems, or palliative care. And most of these caregivers are women. They reduce their paid work or even stop gainful employment completely to be able to care for family members. This means the gender pay gap may become a gender pension gap. Consequently, issues related to the informal care sector are intertwined with issues of gender equality. This is why the federal government has agreed on several measures to support informal caregivers.

The COVID-19 pandemic has demonstrated that family caregivers fulfill an important role in families but also in society. In most cases, these are women who take care of children at the same time. But in Germany, approximately 500,000 children and young people also take care of chronically ill relatives or those in need of long-term care. This group of young caregivers tends to be forgotten. However, in the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, we have committed ourselves to leaving no one behind. This commitment also includes older persons, informal caregivers, and young caregivers.

Let me elaborate on the project *Pausentaste* (pause button) in Germany, which aims at providing counseling and information to young caregivers. Many of the caregivers do not see themselves as such. They consider it their normal task to take care of family members

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in need. This willingness to support family members and consider it to be a normal task of life is common. However, caregivers are often overburdened, which can have negative mental, social, and educational impacts. *Pausentaste* helps young caregivers to take a break, reflect, accept support, and talk about their situation — anonymously. Even though the project primarily targets young caregivers, it is also available to teachers; home care providers; and people who work in schools and universities, hospitals, and youth organizations as well as the general public. Since 2021, *Pausentaste* has had a special focus on caregiving for university students and young adults undergoing vocational training.

In conclusion, we can say that long-term care requires time, energy, and money. Thus, in November 2021, the new German government agreed to further develop regulations on caregiver leave and family caregiver leave. The Federal Ministry for Family Affairs, Senior Citizens, Women and Youth is currently preparing the reform of family caregiver leave stipulated in the coalition agreement. On the one hand, this involves optimal solutions for employees who provide care for loved ones at home; it addresses issues such as making time more flexible, reducing the loss of income for family caregivers, and preventing their possible withdrawal from the labor force. On the other hand, the operational

and organizational challenges for employers who grant employees full or partial leave to care for a family member have to be considered. The current preparatory work is aimed at creating a new legal basis for attractive family caregiver leave, which will make a significant contribution to preventing the care crisis from worsening.

I hope that all governments in the UNECE region will strive to further improve the lives of older persons and achieve a society for all ages. ●

¹https://unece.org/sites/default/files/2022-06/Rome_Ministerial_Declaration.pdf



Lisa Paus
Federal Minister for Family Affairs,
Senior Citizens, Women, and Youth
Germany