

(English version)

**Question for written answer E-003315/26
to the Commission
Giuseppe Antoci (The Left)
(24 August 2026)**

Subject: Shortage of early childhood services and the employment of women in Sicily

The EU gender equality strategy and European care strategy recognise access to early childhood services as key to increasing women's participation in the labour market and promoting social inclusion.

According to the Italian National Institute of Statistics' data on the provision of early childhood education services and the Italian National Social Security Institute's gender report, Sicily continues to have one of the lowest female employment rates in Italy and childcare coverage significantly below the EU's targets. This makes it harder for women to strike a balance between work and family life, and increases their risk of unemployment and economic exclusion.

Despite the resources made available through the European Social Fund Plus (ESF +) and cohesion policy, significant differences between regions in access to early childhood education services persist.

In view of the above:

1. Would the Commission say that the EU funds allocated to Sicily have been effectively used to expand early childhood services?
2. Will it further promote initiatives to support the regions that are lagging furthest behind on the EU's targets for female employment and educational services?
3. What tools will it use to monitor the effectiveness of EU funding in reducing the gender gap in the labour market and improving people's work-life balance?

Submitted: 24.8.2026

**Answer given by Executive Vice-President Minzatu on behalf of the European Commission
(13 October 2026)**

1. The use of the European Social Fund Plus (ESF+) in Sicily to expand early childhood education and care (ECEC) services and female employment is subject to shared management⁽¹⁾ rules. Within the ESF+ regional programme 2021-2027⁽²⁾, EUR 58.1 million support women's labour market integration via 'Occupazione Donna', while EUR 264.2 million directly finance work-life balance and nursery fee reductions, in synergy with the national programme 'Youth, Women and Jobs' and other EU funds⁽³⁾, which allocated EUR 3.24 billion for 150 480 additional places for ECEC for children aged 0-6, including projects in Sicily⁽⁴⁾. Sicily's programme evaluations document the implementation and outcomes of ESF+ measures.

2. Moreover, the Commission provides strategic direction within the framework of the Gender Equality Strategy⁽⁵⁾ which has a dedicated section on work-life balance and gender equality in care⁽⁶⁾. Through the European Semester, the Commission promotes a targeted use of resources, and regional authorities may request reprogramming of funds towards care services if necessary. In this regard, the 2026 Country Report for Italy⁽⁷⁾ called for increased labour-market participation, particularly among women, by further expanding childcare and long-term-care services, especially in the south.

3. Impact monitoring relies on the performance framework, result indicators, monitoring committees and impact evaluations-including a dedicated evaluation mandated by Sicily's evaluation plan for 2028, focusing on care services and female labour market participation. The disbursement of EU resources is subject to compliance with enabling conditions, including the horizontal condition on gender equality, which Italy currently fulfills.

⁽¹⁾ Under Article 8 of Regulation (EU) 2021/1060 and Article 3 of Regulation (EU) 2021/1057, the ESF+ is implemented under shared management: Member States and regional authorities are responsible for programming, selecting projects and managing daily operations on the ground, while the Commission is tasked with setting the strategic framework, approving programmes, continuously monitoring implementation and auditing expenditure regularity.

⁽²⁾ <https://www.sicilia-fse.it/pr-21-27/programma-regionale>.

⁽³⁾ E.g. the Recovery and Resilience Facility (RRF).

⁽⁴⁾ RRF payments depend on the satisfactory fulfilment of the relevant milestones and targets. While implementation data show the resources deployed and places created, the longer-term impact on female employment will need to be established through evaluation.

⁽⁵⁾ https://commission.europa.eu/strategy-and-policy/policies/justice-and-fundamental-rights/gender-equality/gender-equality-strategy_en.

⁽⁶⁾ https://employment-social-affairs.ec.europa.eu/news/european-care-strategy-caregivers-and-care-receivers-2022-09-07_en?prefLang=it.

⁽⁷⁾ https://economy-finance.ec.europa.eu/economic-surveillance-eu-member-states/country-pages-including-country-reports/country-report-italy_en.