



WORK PACKAGE 11

**THE MEANING OF WORK AND THE
IMPORTANCE OF ENSURING EQUALITY:
BRIDGING CONTEMPORARY VIEWS WITH
FUTURE VISION**



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EVENT DESCRIPTION			
Event number:	11		
Event name:	The meaning of Work and the importance of ensuring Equality: Bridging Contemporary Views with Future Vision		
Type:	Hybrid conference		
In situ/online:	in-situ/online		
Location:	Malta		
Date(s):	13. 11. 2025		
Website(s) (if any):	https://transform-euproject.eu/homepage/		
Participants			
Total number of participants:	164	From total number of countries:	13
Description			
<i>Provide a short description of the event and its activities.</i>			
<p>On Wednesday, 13 November 2024, the National Commission for the Promotion of Equality (NCPE, Malta) hosted the panel discussion “The Meaning of Work and the Importance of Ensuring Equality: Bridging Contemporary Views with Future Vision”. The event was organised within the framework of Work Package 11 (WP11) of the CERV TRANSFORM: The future of workforce project and brought together both in-person and online participants.</p> <p>The session took place on site at the Aldo Moro Street, Marsa, Malta, from 09:00 to 12:30. In addition to residents and stakeholders who attended in person, the event gathered a wide international audience through online participation.</p> <p>In total, 164 unique eligible participants took part, representing 13 countries. In-person attendance included participants from Malta and France, while online participants joined from Slovenia, Portugal, Belgium, Italy, Greece, Germany, Hungary, North Macedonia, Lithuania and Poland. Attendees included project partners from UCLL (Belgium), FOŠ – Faculty of Organisation Studies (Slovenia), Iscte (Portugal), IRES-RVG (Italy), Innovation Hive (Greece), CRN (Germany), WellbeingLab (Sweden), and FFI (Poland), alongside other EU citizens and Maltese residents.</p> <p>The event opened with a welcome by the NCPE Commissioner, Ms Renee Laiviera. She opened the conference by acknowledging the growing presence and participation of men in NCPE events, noting this as an encouraging development in the pursuit of gender equality. She emphasized that an equality perspective must be mainstreamed in order to analyse and adequately address the challenges associated with the rapidly changing world of work, including occupational gender segregation, unequal working conditions—particularly pay gaps—inadequate work–life balance, and the rise of harassment and online violence. Ms Laiviera noted that while digitalisation, automation, and technological advancements aim to enhance productivity and competitiveness, they also place additional pressures on employment relations and significantly affect the labour-market prospects and working conditions of both women and men. She concluded her speech by reiterating the pivotal role of the NCPE in safeguarding equality through its investigative work, the Equality Mark Certification, the Equal Pay Tool and Equal Pay Certification, the Directory of Professional Women, as well as ongoing research and awareness-raising initiatives.</p> <p>After, the Parliamentary Secretary from Malta, Hon. Rebecca Buttigieg, opened her address by emphasising that work is not merely a source of income but a core dimension of personal fulfilment, dignity, and participation in society. From this perspective, ensuring equality in the workplace is essential not only for the protection of fundamental rights but also for the creation of a resilient, inclusive, and productive workforce. She highlighted several policy developments achieved in Malta in recent years,</p>			

including a continued increase in women’s employment rate, reflecting the gradual narrowing of gender gaps in labour market participation. The extension of leave entitlements was also mentioned, including parental leave made accessible to self-employed fathers and the broadening of urgent family leave provisions, reforms intended to support a more equitable work–life balance for women and men. She addressed the need as well to strengthen women’s representation in decision-making roles, noting that leadership diversity is key to organisational fairness and innovation. The ongoing relevance of equal pay for equal work or work of equal value remains a central component of workplace equality. The importance of workforce sustainability, particularly by recognising and retaining the experience and contribution of older workers, must be also tackled.

Hon. Buttigieg also addressed the emerging challenges associated with digitalisation. She underscored that risks resulting from AI systems must not be overlooked, stressing that principles of equality and fairness must be embedded already at the design stage to ensure that technological advances do not reproduce or amplify existing inequalities. She concluded by reaffirming the government’s commitment to building inclusive and supportive workplaces and to harnessing the potential of digital transformation in a manner that promotes a safe, fair, and accessible future of work for all.

Following this, Ms Annalise Frantz, from NCPE and representing the TRANSFORM consortium, delivered an overview of our project and its strategic relevance for understanding the evolving European labour landscape. Her presentation, “The Future of the Human Workforce – Embracing Change, Challenges and Opportunities”, outlined the project’s scope, objectives, and planned initiatives. She highlighted that TRANSFORM runs from September 2024 to August 2026, bringing together partners from Slovenia, Italy, Poland, Germany, Portugal, Belgium, Greece, Sweden, and Malta. This broad collaboration enables a comparative and multidimensional examination of the transformations affecting labour markets across the EU. Ms Frantz explained that the project is designed to:

- Explore the future of the human workforce in a context marked by rapid technological, demographic, and organisational change;
- Assess the impact of automation, artificial intelligence, and robotics on current and emerging job roles, skill requirements, and workforce well-being;
- Identify challenges and opportunities associated with technological transformation, including implications for fairness, equality, and labour market inclusion.

She also noted that further information on the project, including the initiatives planned for 2025 and 2026, is available through the TRANSFORM platform, inviting participants to engage with ongoing activities and outcomes.

Following these keynote speech, Prof. Anna Borg (Centre for Labour Studies, University of Malta) delivered the compelling keynote “*Equality and the Future of the Human Workforce: Navigating Change and Challenges*”. address examining the future of work through an equality-driven and gender-sensitive lens. She opened by emphasising that progress in the future of work must be fair and grounded in the principle that all individuals—regardless of gender, race, ethnicity, or background—deserve equal treatment. Moving from rhetoric to concrete action remains difficult, she noted, particularly in a global climate marked by conflict. Nevertheless, maintaining equality as a central societal value is essential. Prof. Borg highlighted several persistent misconceptions, including the widespread belief that equality has already been achieved. In practice, unfair structural advantages and disadvantages persist and have become normalised, such as the enduring “ideal worker” norm favouring white, middle-aged men with a partner supporting their career.

A key argument in her presentation was the need to rethink the concept of work. While most people associate work with income, work also encompasses unpaid, care-related, and community-based activities that contribute to individual and collective well-being. She offered a gender-sensitive definition:

“Work is a multifaceted concept encompassing all activities that affirm life, create value, and contribute to individual and societal growth, extending beyond paid economic production.”

Drawing on NCPE’s recent research on work-life balance, she showed that while both women and men agree that unpaid work should be shared equally, the actual distribution remains highly unequal. Flexibility is still stigmatized, with fathers particularly penalized for requesting family-friendly arrangements. Challenging gender norms in both paid and unpaid work is therefore essential. Prof. Borg identified seven major challenges shaping the future workforce:

- AI, automation, and robotisation – potential job losses and role redefinition;
- Training and reskilling – ensuring equitable access to lifelong learning;
- Growth sectors and gender imbalance – risks of reproducing inequalities in emerging industries;
- Algorithmic governance in HR – preventing bias in recruitment and decision-making;
- Flexibility, mobility, and hybrid models of work – addressing the “flexibility stigma” and safeguarding the right to disconnect;
- Rise of domestic outsourcing – improving conditions for contracted and outsourced workers;
- Precarious and platform work – tackling insecurity, lack of benefits, and erosion of trust.

She supplemented these reflections with recent labour market statistics from Malta. Employment continues to grow—now exceeding 329,000 workers (a 4.5% increase from the previous year), with an overall employment rate of 80%. The gender employment gap has narrowed significantly: in Q2 2025, male employment reached 85.3% and female employment 73.2%, compared to 80.7% and 64.6% respectively in 2019. These improvements reflect long-term national investments in childcare, family benefits, flexible work, and urgent family leave provisions. Over 20,500 mothers have benefited from free childcare, whose budget expanded from €5 million to €49 million within a decade.

On the other hand, Prof. Borg also stressed that technological transformation brings new risks. AI and digitalisation can enhance innovation and productivity, yet they may exacerbate inequality if fairness is not embedded from the design stage. Malta's national AI strategy, developed in partnership with Microsoft, thus prioritises digital literacy, public sector capacity-building, and lifelong learning to ensure that technological change empowers workers rather than displaces them. Her keynote concluded with a call for “a revolution in work culture—where both women and men share the many forms of work equally.” Equality, innovation, and fairness, she argued, must evolve together if societies are to build a future of work that is not only technologically advanced but also inclusive and humane.

A significant intervention came from a representative of the National Skills Council (NSC), who shifted attention to the cultural foundations of inequality. She stressed that gender roles — reproduced from early childhood — shape expectations long before individuals enter the labour market. These embedded norms influence perceptions of responsibility for unpaid care work and consequently affect who can access training, pursue career progression or attain leadership roles. In response, Prof. Anna Borg argued that dismantling such deeply rooted stereotypes requires nothing less than a “revolution in mindset.” Education systems, media narratives and public discourse must work together to normalise shared responsibilities between women and men. This is not a matter of shifting rights from one group to another, she noted, but of fostering collaborative practices that improve quality of life for everyone. Although NCPE research indicates positive developments in Malta, Borg stressed that meaningful change demands far greater investment and sustained commitment.

When the NSC representative asked how this transformation might unfold in practice, Borg emphasised that progress depends on a dual strategy combining top-down policy direction with bottom-up cultural engagement. Governments must prioritise equality as a national objective, while organisations, communities and individuals internalise and promote these values in everyday life. Without such synchronised efforts, change risks remaining piecemeal and slow.

The interactive segment of the event offered important insights into participants' and citizens perceptions of the changing world of work. Live polls revealed an ambivalent outlook regarding the role of artificial intelligence in the workplace. While a significant number of respondents expressed optimism about new opportunities, others voiced concerns about widening inequalities and job insecurity. When asked about the most essential skills for the future, participants prioritised emotional intelligence, digital literacy, and creative thinking, underscoring the need for a workforce that is both technologically competent and socially resilient.

During the online Q&A, a participant asked how algorithmic governance in HR influences job performance and behaviour. Borg responded that AI systems tend to reproduce existing biases: if organisations already value an “ideal worker” archetype—often white, middle-aged, and male—then algorithmic models built on historical data will replicate these exclusions unless actively de-biased. Ms Laiviera added that NCPE has been engaging in training and policy consultations to address such issues, emphasising that structural supports are indispensable. For example, women's mass entry into the labour market in Malta would not have been possible without foundational measures such as free childcare and evolving parental leave frameworks. However, legislative reforms alone are not sufficient. Borg stressed that work-life balance policies must be adequately compensated; otherwise, workers—especially men—will not make use of them, perpetuating gender disparities in unpaid care. She called on unions, NCPE and government institutions to ensure that this time, reforms lead to meaningful and lasting change.

Later, the Slido polls at the end of the session further illustrated the diverse views among participants:

48% believe that AI will generate more opportunities than risks in the workplace.

Participants identified the top future skills as:

- Emotional intelligence (61%)
- Digital literacy (56%)
- Creative thinking (50%)
- Regarding future inequalities, the most challenging areas identified were:
- Flexible working arrangements (35%)
- Pay and working conditions (35%)
- Workplace culture and inclusion (20%)

Overall, this interactive moment of the event revealed a workforce that is cautiously optimistic yet deeply aware of the systemic transformations required to ensure fairness, inclusion, and resilience in an AI-driven labour market.

After the coffee break, the event continued with a rich and dynamic panel discussion bringing together experts from academia, public administration, labour policy and economic development. The panel—comprising Prof. Alexiei Dingli (University of Malta), Ms Celia Falzon (CEO, JobsPlus), Mr Silvan Mifsud (The Malta Chamber), Ms Ruth Debrincat (National Skills Council) and Ms Renee Laiviera (NCPE Commissioner)—offered a multidisciplinary examination of how Malta can confront the challenges and opportunities associated with the transformation of work.

A central thread running through the discussion was the pressing need to advance a comprehensive transformation of skills that genuinely includes all segments of society. Prof. Alexiei Dingli observed that the accelerating pace of technological innovation makes *learnability*—the ability to learn, unlearn and relearn—an essential condition for employability. As skills become obsolete at an unprecedented rate, adaptability increasingly shapes workers' long-term prospects. Both Dingli and Ms Celia Falzon underscored the psychological dimension of this transition: confidence, self-belief and openness to lifelong learning are as decisive as technical competencies. Falzon further cautioned against an uncritical reliance on AI within educational processes; while digital tools offer benefits, excessive dependence risks weakening critical thinking and learner autonomy. Dingli, conversely, pointed to emerging assessment practices that incorporate AI in a responsible manner, fostering reflective and ethical engagement with technology.

Later in the discussion, Prof. Dingli returned to the question of productivity, clarifying that it should not be equated with longer working hours but with enhancing the value added by each worker. Malta's productivity gap with comparable economies, he argued, is not the result of insufficient effort but of limited opportunities for skills development. From this perspective, AI represents both a challenge and an opportunity. Automation will indeed render certain jobs obsolete, yet it simultaneously creates new professions in areas such as data science, robotics and AI maintenance. Whether Malta can benefit from these emerging fields depends fundamentally on its capacity to provide inclusive upskilling, reskilling and lifelong learning pathways.

This concern was echoed by Ms Ruth Debrincat, who explained that the National Skills Council has identified time and financing as the principal obstacles preventing workers—particularly women—from accessing training. Time scarcity is strongly gendered: unpaid care work continues to fall disproportionately on women, limiting their ability to participate in professional development. She also noted that Malta's economic structure, dominated by SMEs with limited organisational resources, creates additional barriers to systematic training. The Council is currently mapping financial incentives and studying participation among minorities to ensure that training opportunities are genuinely accessible. Importantly, Debrincat underscored that lifelong learning should be understood in a broad sense, encompassing formal, non-formal and informal modes of education.

Questions of equality, flexibility and organisational culture were addressed by NCPE Commissioner Ms Renee Laiviera, who highlighted the slow but ongoing cultural shift regarding domestic responsibilities and work–life balance. She noted that men often do not recognise the personal benefits that shared caregiving responsibilities bring, and that organisations still tend to place the responsibility for upskilling on employees, expecting them to train outside working hours—an expectation that reinforces gender inequalities. Laiviera argued that management must play an active role in enabling fair access to training and in designing flexible work arrangements that do not jeopardise career progression.

The conversation on productivity was further developed by Mr Silvan Mifsud, who contrasted Malta's performance with Sweden's well-established balance between high productivity and extensive work–life flexibility. He argued that such outcomes are not the result of isolated policy interventions but of a long-term, coordinated effort across government, employers and unions. Malta, he suggested, requires a similarly holistic and coordinated strategy. Deep-seated structural challenges—particularly in education—cannot be addressed through superficial reforms, as political resistance and institutional inertia frequently prevent necessary change.

From the perspective of labour activation and employment services, Ms Celia Falzon pointed out that JobsPlus is actively supporting vulnerable jobseekers by providing financial incentives to employers and offering tailored retraining pathways. She stressed the importance of motivation and self-belief as determinants of effective learning, especially in contexts of labour shortages and rapid technological change. Falzon also addressed the role of labour migration in addressing skill gaps, insisting that it must be accompanied by safeguards that protect migrant workers from exploitation.

Across the discussion, several panellists drew attention to the profound relevance of transversal and socio-emotional skills in a digitalised labour market. Technical competences alone are insufficient: empathy, communication, problem-solving and critical thinking are essential to organisational functioning, especially given the rising prevalence of issues such as workplace bullying, which significantly reduces productivity. Panelists referred to recent studies showing the considerable

economic cost of toxic organisational cultures, reinforcing the argument that skills policies must integrate both technical and relational dimensions.

The audience raised pertinent questions about how Malta should prepare for the scale of job displacement expected in coming years, especially in light of high levels of functional illiteracy and limited digital readiness. Participants stressed the urgency of creating pathways for manual and low-skill workers, who risk being excluded from reskilling programmes. One contributor expressed concern that Malta tends to act only when “its back is against the wall,” underscoring the necessity of proactive, rather than reactive, policymaking.

The discussion closed with a call for holistic and simultaneous reforms, rather than incremental or isolated initiatives. Leadership emerged as an important factor: CEOs and senior managers must model lifelong learning and champion flexibility if these are to become embedded organisational practices. Educational reform was also highlighted as indispensable, though politically challenging. Ultimately, the panel converged on a shared understanding: that the future of the human workforce will depend not only on technological adaptation, but equally on cultural transformation, institutional courage and a deep commitment to equality.

Following these discussions, a closing Q&A session brought forth a number of concerns related to the societal implications of digitalisation and the uneven distribution of future opportunities. One participant highlighted the profound risks of technological displacement, drawing attention to groups who may be particularly vulnerable—especially individuals with low literacy levels or workers whose occupations are becoming increasingly automated (e.g., mechanics unfamiliar with modern electronics). While acknowledging that new opportunities will arise, she warned that a portion of the workforce, particularly older employees, may resist digitalisation or struggle to upskill. The pandemic, she noted, had demonstrated the value of investing in employees and provided a rare moment to strengthen skills; however, the transition into the AI era may produce “casualties” if safeguards are not proactively developed. Ms Celia Falzon responded by recalling earlier technological transitions in Malta’s public sector: when computers were first introduced, employees initially felt unprepared, yet they adapted. Adaptability, she argued, is closely tied to self-worth and confidence. Nevertheless, she recognised that some individuals will inevitably be left behind; for these workers, institutions must provide alternative pathways aligned with their strengths and talents—for example, roles requiring creativity or interpersonal engagement rather than advanced digital skills.

Building on the discussion, Prof. Anna Borg returned to several central themes raised during the panel. Addressing Prof. Alexiei Dingli, she asked whether educators are being trained to recognise and challenge gender biases within the education system—a crucial step if long-term cultural change is to occur. Turning to Ms Ruth Debrincat, she emphasised that time itself is gendered: women, who disproportionately shoulder unpaid care responsibilities, cannot always attend training after work. Restructuring school schedules and rethinking the organisation of care could open new opportunities for equal access to upskilling.

Mr Silvan Mifsud reiterated that productivity cannot be viewed in isolation from broader social and cultural factors. A narrow focus risks reinforcing, rather than reducing, inequality. Flexibility, he noted, means different things to different people, and any future-of-work strategy must therefore accommodate diverse needs. He strongly supported a holistic approach, cautioning against policy “cherry-picking” that ignores systemic relationships.

From the public, a participant shifted the discussion towards the topic of social skills, stressing that technological competencies alone are insufficient. Research conducted by his organisation revealed that workplace bullying—primarily originating from management—leads to an estimated loss of 4% of GDP. This demonstrates, he argued, that interpersonal dynamics and organisational culture are inseparable from productivity and well-being. In this sense, Ms Ruth Debrincat and Ms Celia Falzon both underscored the central importance of transversal skills, encompassing emotional intelligence, communication, critical thinking, and collaboration. Prof. Dingli concurred, noting that these competencies are often overlooked in formal education despite being essential for a rapidly changing labour market.

Closing the session, Ms Renee Laiviera observed that while the panellists approached the topic from diverse professional perspectives, they shared a common vision: the need to advance an agenda that promotes equality, protects vulnerable groups, and ensures that technological transformation leads to positive, inclusive change. Sustained commitment from policymakers, educators, businesses, and civil society will be essential to achieving this goal.

The day concluded with a networking session that lasted until 13:00, during which participants expressed their eagerness to continue exploring these important topics further.

HISTORY OF CHANGES		
VERSION	PUBLICATION DATE	CHANGE

1.0	5.12.2025	Completed EDS (FOS)
2.0	11.12.2025	Revision (NCPE)
3.0	12.12.2025	Completed final version EDS (FOS)