PROMOTING LABOUR MARKET PARTICIPATION OF PARENTS WITH YOUNG CHILDREN ACROSS THE EU 2026

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Contents

Preface 5

Introduction to the volume 'Promoting labour market participation of parents with young children across the EU–2026' 7
Éva Lukács Gellérné, Árpád Mészáros

Bulgaria
Tsveta Popova
Promoting labour market participation of parents with young children. Opportunities and Risks of Returning from Maternity Leave in Bulgaria 19

Cyprus
Christiana Cleridou
Promoting labour market participation of parents with young children in Cyprus 37

Czech Republic
Lucie Matějka Řehořová, Kristina Koldinská
Czech Republic and its social protection of parents with young children 55

Germany
Prof. Dr. Hans-Joachim Reinhard
Promoting labour market participation of parents with young children in Germany 67

Finland
Jari Murto, Annika Rosin
How labour market participation of parents with young children is promoted in Finland 87

France
Ignacio Socias, Gabrielle D'Ornellas
Promoting Labour Market Participation of Parents with Young Children in France 109

Greece
Anna Tsetoura
Social protection of working parents with young children in Greece 127

Hungary
Tünde Fűrész
Promoting labour market participation of parents with young children in Hungary 139

Ireland
Louise Crowley
Promoting labour market participation of parents with young children in Ireland 159

Italy
Lucia Boccacin, Maria Letizia Bosoni
Balancing work and family care in Italy: current challenges and perspectives 185

Lithuania
Violeta Vasiliauskienė
Family and work balance in Lithuania 201

Netherlands
Gerrard C. Boot
Promoting labour market participation of parents with young children – situation in the Netherlands 215

Poland
Michał A. Michalski, Agata J. Kałamucka
Supporting synergy between parenthood and labour market activity as a challenge for public policies in Poland 225

Portugal
Ana Teresa Ribeiro, Catarina de Oliveira Carvalho
Promoting labour market participation of parents with young children – the labour market challenges for families with young children, especially for parents who wish to return to work in Portugal 245

Romania
Magdolna Vallasek
Promoting labour market participation of parents with young children. The Romanian case. 265

Slovakia
Lenka Freel, Denisa Homola Nevická
Parenthood and labour Market Equality in Slovakia 285

Slovenia
Sara Bagari, Grega Strban
Balancing Work and Care: Labour and Social Protection for Parents with Young Children in Slovenia 301

Spain
Marc Grau-Grau
Promoting labour market participation of parents with young children – country note for Spain 321

Sweden
Laura Carlson
Promoting labour market participation of parents with young children
National Contribution – Sweden 341

Short Biographies of the Authors 355

Preface

Establishing a balance between work and family life is a pivotal objective for EU Member States, driven by both employment and demographic imperatives. Despite the abundance of political promises, young parents with small children still face demanding challenges in the labour market. Reviewing and addressing these challenges from a comparative law perspective is the aim of an expert network which was established in 2024, bringing together legal experts from different countries across Europe. The first conference, organised by ELTE Faculty of Law (Budapest) and Kopp Mária Institute for Demography and Families in Budapest in November 2024, evolved into a fruitful dialogue and was followed by a second conference one year later, in November 2025. Experts from 19 European countries gathered together to discuss how national and European law tackle the different and often contradictory demands of family and work. The discussions were vivid and stimulating and resulted in this collective volume which investigates the legal and policy dimensions of reconciling work and family in everyday-life.

Labour market participation of young parents with small children across European countries may resemble a patchwork quilt, as it (also) depends on cultural traditions, the countries' broader economic situation and general social policy frameworks. The experts' contributions in this volume put emphasis on instruments of a more direct impact: These are, in particular, labour law provisions, social security systems and family benefits, and the number and availability of childcare facilities in a given country or region. It is in these measures where the focus of the country reports lies – without, of course, ignoring the broader situation in the respective countries. Problems and lacunae as well as good practices and innovative ideas are thoroughly considered, also addressing future challenges and trends.

Our deepest thanks go to all authors. It is their enthusiastic commitment to this project that made this volume possible. We are looking forward to continuing our debate: productively integrating work and family life in Europe is definitely an ongoing mission.

Tünde Fűrész, Éva Lukács Gellérné, Árpád Mészáros and Stamatia Devetzi

Éva Lukács Gellérné, Árpád Mészáros[1]

Introduction to the volume 'Promoting labour market participation of parents with young children across the EU–2026'

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In 2024, an expert network was established with the aim of facilitating focused discussions on the challenges faced by young parents with small children, both at the level of the European Union and within the national context. This initiative resulted in the publication of the volume *"Promoting labour market participation of parents with young children across the EU".*[2] For the volume an extensive introductory chapter was prepared by the authors of this introduction. That contribution set out several key findings, which are briefly revisited here and supplemented by specific issues that emerged during the discussions at the symposium on 28 November 2025.

1. Revisiting core ideas

The 2024 article explored the fundamental aspects of work–life balance, presenting core themes, statistical insights, and prevailing trends, with particular emphasis on labour market dynamics and the employment patterns of young parents. It examined various analytical models designed to identify household earning structures (the post-socialist model,[3] the Southern model[4] or the Nordic model[5]) distinguishing between single-earner and dual-earner arrangements, and it assessed the distribution of unpaid labour, including household responsibilities and childcare.

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[2] Available at: https://www.researchgate.net/publication/385934353_Promoting_Labour_Market_Participation_of_Parents_with_Young_Children_Across_the_EU

[3] Sára Hungler (2024) Introduction to Social Justice, Welfare and EU Law: Measuring Integration in the Visegrád Countries, (manuscript), p. 73.

[4] Lluís Flaquer (2000) Family policy and welfare state in Southern Europe, WP núm. 185, Institut de Ciències Polítiques i Socials, Barcelona, available at: https://www.researchgate.net/publication/36729630_Family_policy_and_welfare_state_in_Southern_Europe

[5] Tine Rostgaard (2014) Family policies in Scandinavia, FES, available at: https://library.fes.de/pdf-files/id/11106.pdf and Nicholas Campisi, Hill Kulu, Júlia Mikolai, Sebastian Klüsener & Mikko Myrskylä (2023): A spatial perspective on the unexpected Nordic fertility decline: the relevance of economic and social contexts. Applied Spatial Analysis and Policy. Vol. 16: 1-31., p. 20. Available at: https://link.springer.com/article/10.1007/s12061-022-09467-x

It was highlighted that following the transition to parenthood, the time and effort demands associated with family life increase significantly. The literature commonly conceptualises this phenomenon as work-family conflict.[6] European statistics show that the majority of household work is still done by women,[7] and the unpaid care work, both child-rearing and domestic labour, adds to inequality.[8] Lower level of productivity and/or income among women paves the way to gender pay gap and later on to pension gap. The gender pay gap widens with age over the course of a career and grows alongside rising family responsibilities, whereas it is relatively small when women first enter the labour market. In 2020 in the EU, the gender pay gap was 12.9 %, while the pension gap exceeded 28%.[9] In 2024 the gender pay gap decreased to 11.1%[10] while the pension gap to 24.5%.[11] A study from 2026, that examines the impact of motherhood and its interactions with other factors on the gender pay gap from a macro-level systemic perspective using panel data from 27 EU countries between 2006 and 2022, calculates that "motherhood penalty is estimated to be about 4–5% of lower earnings".[12] Gender equality is clearly improving, but the pension gap persists, women aged 65 or older faced a higher risk of poverty than men.

At the same time, this cycle which is the result of lower productivity and lower wages is not immutable: empirical findings indicate that an increase in the mother's relative income share not only better their future income prospects but "significantly predicts a more egalitarian housework trajectory".[13] Accordingly, the employment of mothers - and, more broadly, of prospective mothers - was identified as a critical juncture in the context of better economic situation which is the basis of family formation and

[6] Lea-Sophie Borgmann, Lars E. Kroll, Stephan Müters, Petra Rattay, Thomas Lampert (2019) Work-family conflict, self-reported general health and work-family reconciliation policies in Europe: Results from the European Working Conditions Survey 2015, SSM - Population Health, Vol. 9 (2019, 100465. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ssmph.2019.100465

[7] EIGE, Gender Equality Index 2021, available at: https://eige.europa.eu/publications-resources/toolkits-guides/gender-equality-index-2021-report/gender-differences-household-chores?language_content_entity=en

[8] Isailović, Ivana (2026) The Law And Political Economy Of Social Reproduction In The Eu: Between Commodification And Differentiation (October 10, 2025). Available at SSRN: https://ssrn.com/abstract=6211999 or http://dx.doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.6211999

[9] European Parliament (2023) Understanding the gender pay gap: definition and causes, available at: https://www.europarl.europa.eu/topics/en/article/20200109STO69925/understanding-the-gender-pay-gap-definition-and-causes

[10] EUROSTAT (2024) Gender pay gap, available at: https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/databrowser/view/sdg_05_20/default/table?lang=en&category=t_labour.t_earn

[11] https://www.euronews.com/my-europe/2026/03/04/gender-equality-is-improving-in-the-eu-but-the-pension-gap-persists

[12] Zhu, N., Gawel, A. & Toikko, T. (2026) Motherhood and Systemic Gender Pay Gap Faced by Women in European Union Countries. Journal of Family and Economic Issues. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10834-025-10072-6 page 4.

[13] Natalie Nitsche, Daniela Grunow (2016) Housework over the course of relationships: Gender ideology, resources, and the division of housework from a growth curve perspective, Advances in Life Course Research, Vol. 29: Pages 80-94. 88. DOI https://doi.org/10.1016/j.alcr.2016.02.001

childbearing.[14] It constitutes a key intervention point within both labour market and demographic policy frameworks.[15] The employment of young mothers is a decisive factor not only in fostering more balanced intra-family dynamics, but also in strengthening broader social cohesion.[16]

Naturally, the labour market participation of young parents with small children represents a complex, multifaceted challenge. It is shaped by cultural traditions,[17] the broader economic environment, and housing policies,[18] among other structural factors. Nevertheless, certain areas of intervention exhibit a more direct and immediately perceptible impact. These include, in particular, labour law frameworks, social benefit systems, and the availability of childcare facilities.[19]

In the field of labour law, clear and strong European initiatives[20] and measures, like the European Pillar of Social Rights, EU labour law instruments[21] and the work-life balance Directive[22] underscore the need for supportive activities that can offer solutions for balancing work and family life. The majority of women and men consider work–life balance a top priority when choosing a job or workplace.[23] In the 2020-2025 period several major initiatives emerged that directly targeted the challenges related to gender

[14] EUROPEAN COMMISSION, Communication, Demographic change in Europe: a toolbox for action COM(2023) 577 final. Point 4

[15] Misra Joya, Michelle Budig, Irene Boeckmann (2011) Work-Family Policies and the Effects of Children on Women's Employment Hours and Wages. Community, Work & Family, Vol. 14 (2): 139–57.

[16] Gellérné, Lukács Éva - Mészáros, Árpád (2025) In the lead or among the laggards? - CEE countries and work-life balance, LAWYER QUARTERLY 15:2, 129-142. Available at: https://tlq.ilaw.cas.cz/index.php/tlq/article/view/639

[17] Michalski, M.A. (2022) Family policy and social justice – how responsibly and effectively invest in human capital?, Kapocs, 2022/3-4: 132-140.

[18] Griggs, J., & Kemp, P. A. (2012) Housing Allowances as Income Support: Comparing European Welfare Regimes. International Journal of Housing Policy, 12(4), 391–412. https://doi.org/10.1080/14616718.2012.711987

[19] Szelewa, Dorota, Polakowski, P. Michal (2008) Who cares? Changing patterns of childcare in Central and Eastern Europe. Journal of European Social Policy Vol. 18. 115-131.

[20] EUROPEAN COMMISSION, Communication, Demographic change in Europe: a toolbox for action COM(2023) 577 final.

[21] Catalogue of EU labour law directives (European Commission)

[22] Directive (EU) 2019/1158 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 20 June 2019 on work-life balance for parents and carers and repealing Council Directive 2010/18/EU, OJ L 188, 12.7.2019, p. 79–93.

[23] Trude Lappegård, Frances Goldscheider, Eva Bernhardt (2017) Introduction to the Special Collection on Finding Work-Life Balance: History, Determinants, and Consequences of New Bread-Winning Models in the Industrialized World, Demographic Research, Vol. 37. Article 26: 853-866, p 857., available at: https://www.demographic-research.org/volumes/vol37/26/37-26.pdf.

equality and the position of men and women in the labour market,[24] including the Pay Transparency Directive,[25] the implementation deadline of which is 7 June 2026. "This Directive aims to contribute not only to the elimination of pay discrimination but, more fundamentally, to eliminate gender bias within pay structures including the undervaluation of work performed predominantly by women".[26] These initiatives are important additions to the EU's existing gender equality toolbox, however challenges remain, like the concentration of women in low-paid, poor-quality jobs and the double burden of paid and unpaid work.[27]

2. Labour market participation and young generations

In 2023 the EU's employment rate stood at 75.3% which was the highest level that time ever.[28] It could even exceed this historical high, in Q4 2025, the employment rate of people aged 20 to 64 years was 76.3%, as compared to 76.2% in Q3 2025.[29] The rate for men stood at 81.1% and for women at 71.5%. The employment rate of people aged 15-29 stood at 49.1% in 2025 compared to 45.8% in 2020.[30]

In light of this trend, one would expect a decrease in the share of young adults aged 18-34 living with their parents by self-defined current economic status. However, this is not the case, the rate was 37% in 2019 and 36.8% in 2025, which is high and indicating no meaningful change.[31] In contrast, the rate of co-residence among 25- to 34-year-olds in the UK has been 18% in 2023/2024, truth is, however, that is has risen by over a third over the last two decades, by 5 percentage points, from 13% in 2006/2007

[24] Directive (EU) 2024/1500 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 14 May 2024 on standards for equality bodies in the field of equal treatment and equal opportunities between women and men in matters of employment and occupation, and amending Directives 2006/54/EC and 2010/41/EU. Directive (EU) 2024/1385 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 14 May 2024 on combating violence against women and domestic violence.

[25] Directive (EU) 2023/970 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 10 May 2023 to strengthen the application of the principle of equal pay for equal work or work of equal value between men and women through pay transparency and enforcement mechanisms.

[26] Piasna A., Arabadjieva K., Nawrocka S., Parker J. and Zwysen W. (2026) The future of gender equality in the EU, Report 2026.01, ETUI. Available at: https://www.etui.org/publications/future-gender-equality-eu , page 11.

[27] Ibid., page 15.

[28] EUROSTAT (2024) Record high employment rate, regional disparities, available at: https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/en/web/products-eurostat-news/w/ddn-20241029-1

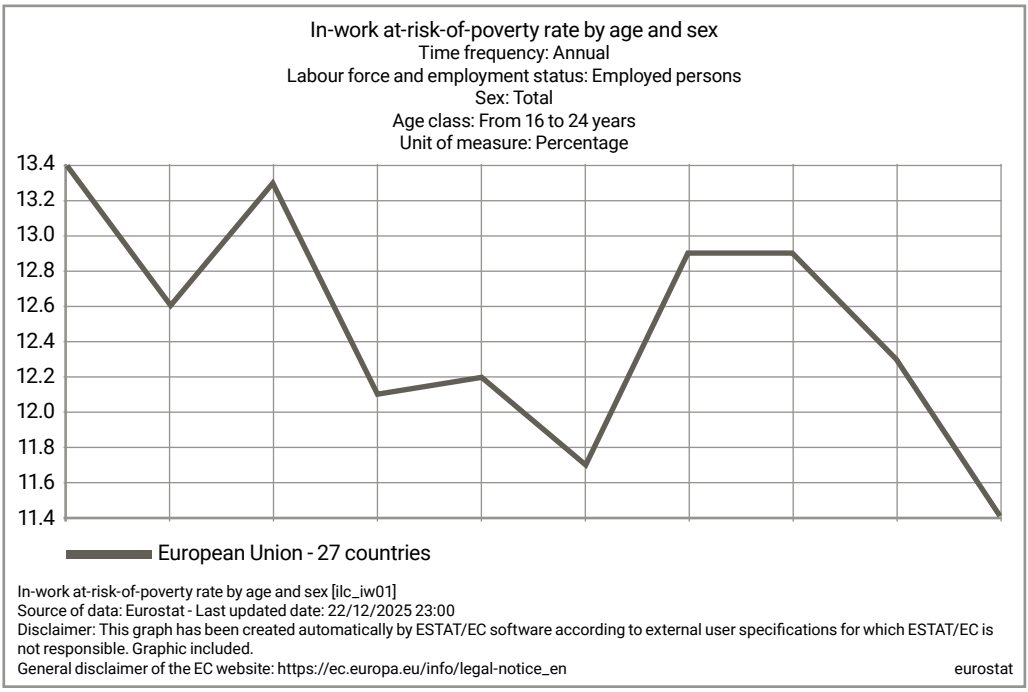
[29] EUROSTAT (2026) EU labour market - quarterly statistics, available at: https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php?title=EU_labour_market_-_quarterly_statistics

[30] EUROSTAT (2026) Employment and activity by sex and age - annual data, available at: https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/databrowser/view/lfsi_emp_a__custom_20995467/default/table

[31] EUROSTAT (2026) Share of young adults aged 18-34 living with their parents by self-defined current economic status, available at: https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/databrowser/view/ILC_LVPS09/default/table?lang=en

to 18% to 2023/2024.[32] This apparent stagnation of young people living with their parents in the EU may be explained by labour market insecurity and other structural factors like rising housing costs, prolonged education, and persistent cultural norms, which jointly offset any expected decline. Regarding labour market insecurity, the main underlying issue lies in the fact that it is not merely employment status that matters, but the stability and adequacy of earnings.

Adequacy of earnings relates to the phenomenon of in-work poverty. In 2017, 10% of employees were poor.[33] Eurostat data show aggregate numbers until 2023 for different age groups. While 11.4% of people aged 16-24 were at risk of poverty in 2023 (see graph), this rate is 8.9% for people aged 16-29 and 8.3% in the 18-64 age cohort. [34]



Data suggest that the school-to-work transition and/or the transition to more stable and better-paid jobs occurs in the mid-to-late twenties in the EU. Regarding school-to-work transition, a recent article gives a concise summary on the scarring effect of a prolonged school-to-work transition on young people's future careers and the

[32] Isabel Atkinson, Bee Boileau, David Sturrock (2025) Hotel of Mum and Dad? Co-residence with parents among those aged 25–34, The Institute for Fiscal Studies, January 2025, available at: https://ifs.org.uk/sites/default/files/2025-01/Hotel-of-Mum-and-Dad-IFS-Report.pdf

[33] Eurofound (2017) In-work poverty in the EU, available at: https://www.eurofound.europa.eu/en/publications/2017/work-poverty-eu

[34] EUROSTAT (2024) In-work-at -risk powerty rate, available at: https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/databrowser/view/ilc_iw01__custom_13692209/default/table?lang=en

influence of family background.[35] Using Italy as a case study it builds upon the premiss that, across the EU-27 countries, "Italy is one of the countries with the longest School-To-Work Transition (STWT), that is the period from the attainment of the highest level of education until the attainment of the first regular job" and that "A prolonged period in unemployment status predisposes people to future disadvantaged conditions in their subsequent working careers."[36] Based on a sample of 16,519 individuals (which group was well-balanced concerning the Italian population in terms of geographical coverage, gender, and level of education), it confirms that the higher the socio-economic situation of the family of origin the shorter the STWT is, meaning that young people find work smoothly and fast, especially if they have tertiary education. The study also examines the impact of the duration of the STWT on subsequent career trajectories and confirmed that, as the duration of STWT increases, the likelihood of maintaining career stability decreases.[37]

A Eurofound study which has been prepared as a background paper for the Hungarian Presidency in 2024 examines the situation of young people in the labour market. It states that "The labour market participation of young people is characterised by a much higher share of people with temporary contracts and is therefore more precarious than that of the general population. In 2023, 34.4% of young workers aged 15 to 29 (11.5 million young people) were temporary employees in the EU27; the figure for the euro zone was 36.7%. This is down from the 36.5% recorded in 2014 and is more than two times higher than the value recorded for the general population (around 14%). The rate is higher among young women (37.6%) than young men (35.5%)".[38] Additionally, a larger share of part-time workers is recorded among them, in 2023, 23% of young workers had a part-time contract compared with 17.8% of the general population.

A new way of 'working' has emerged in the last years, namely that of traineeships that have become an increasingly common pathway for young people entering the labour market.[39] In a Eurofound 2023 survey, "around two-thirds (68%) of trainees said that they had had a written contract, and half (50%) had received some kind of compensation, in most cases a wage or a salary. Young women were less often compensated than young men (45% versus 58%)".[40] It shows that young workers (low-skilled and highly skilled alike), in hope of getting a job later, are willing to work for

[35] Fabrizi, E., Rocca, A. The Scarring Effect of a Prolonged School-to-Work Transition on Young People's Future Careers and the Influence of Family Background. Ital Econ J 12, 581–603 (2026). https://doi.org/10.1007/s40797-024-00302-5

[36] Ibid., 582.

[37] Ibid., 598.

[38] Eurofound (2024), Youth integration in the EU: Navigating digitalisation and labour shortages – Background paper, Eurofound, Dublin. Page 6.

[39] Ibid, page 6.

[40] Eurofound (2023), Living and working in the EU and neighbouring countries e-survey, Round 6. https://www.eurofound.europa.eu/en/surveys-and-data/surveys/living-and-working-in-the-eu-e-survey/e-survey-2023

free, for shorter or longer periods, which can partly be explained by getting valuable work experience, but it is also a loss of income if regarded strictly from an economic point of view. In some sectors, protests have been organised to protect the rights of young people, to prevent exploitation.[41]

In 2023, 12.5% of young women aged 15–29 years in the EU were NEETs (neither in employment nor in education and training), while the corresponding share among young men was 2.4 percentage points lower, at 10.1%.[42] In 2024 the rate for young women stood at 12.1% and 10.0% for young men.

The risk of poverty is higher regarding young NEETs (even higher for young women) and employees in a precarious situation, including part-time workers. As a result of the above-described tendencies, young people tend to delay family formation, with their primary challenge being entry into the labour market in stable jobs, rather than re-entry as young parents. It is highly necessary to address the integration of young people into the labour market and to ensure equitable treatment.

3. Labour market participation of parents

Regarding the employment rate of parents, in 2021, 77% of women aged 25-54 without children were employed in the EU, in contrast, the employment rate for women of this age group with children was lower, at 72%. The presence of children had the opposite effect on men in the same age group: men with children had a higher employment rate (90%) than men without children (81%).[43] Accordingly, the gender employment gap reached 4 pp among people without children and 18 pp among those with children in 2021, these figures convey a clear message: motherhood significantly impacts women's participation in employment.[44] In 2024 Eurostat, using extensive data sets, confirmed that "a high level of education is associated with higher employment rates and a reduced gender gap".[45]

Employment rates decline for women as the number of children increases, with the gender gap widening across all educational levels. Among those with low education, the gap rises from 26.1 pp (1 child) to 35.8 pp (2 children) and 42.1 pp (3+ children).

[41] European Parliament. EU Parliament wants legally-binding ban on unpaid traineeships, available at: https://www.euractiv.com/news/eu-parliament-wants-legally-binding-ban-on-unpaid-traineeships

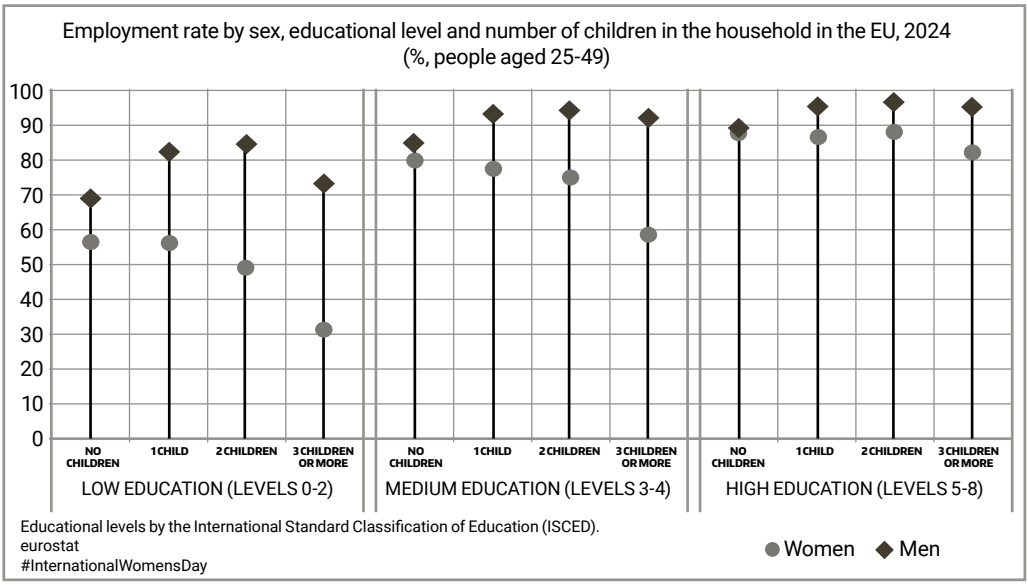
[42] EUROSTAT (2024), Statistics on young people neither in employment nor in education or training, available at: https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php?title=Statistics_on_young_people_neither_in_employment_nor_in_education_or_training

[43] EUROSTAT (2023) Gender employment gap larger for parents in 2021, available at: https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/web/products-eurostat-news/w/edn-20230302-2

[44] COFACE, Families Europe (2024): Motherhood employment gap: shedding light on the vicious cycle, available at: https://coface-eu.org/motherhood-employment-gap/

[45] EUROSTAT (2026) Higher education reduces gender employment gap https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/web/products-eurostat-news/w/edn-20260306-1

At medium education levels, employment remains higher overall, but the gap still peaks at 33.0 pp among those with 3+ children (58.9% for women vs 91.9% for men). Even among highly educated individuals, women's employment lags behind men's: for 2 children, 88.0% vs 96.7% (8.7 pp gap), and for 3+ children, 81.8% vs 95.4% (13.6 pp gap).



Educational attainment is relevant not only to the gender employment gap but also to childbearing, as reflected in the total fertility rate. The findings of Eurostat on the gender employment gap are supported by the authors' own research published in 2025, in which it is argued that: in CEE countries "the proportion of live births by mothers with tertiary education rose in both absolute and relative numbers compared to the overall declining birth rate. The number of children born by mothers with primary or lower secondary education fell everywhere between 2013-2022".[46]

A notable positive trend is that women with tertiary education not only have higher fertility rates but also face a smaller gender employment gap, indicating that investments in educational systems generate measurable returns in the labour market.

4. Single-parent families and childcare services

The percentage of single-parent families has increased significantly over the last decades in most European countries, from 2009 to 2019, the number of single-parent

[46] Gellérné, Lukács Éva ; Mészáros, Árpád (2025) In the lead or among the laggards? - CEE countries and work-life balance, LAWYER QUARTERLY 15:2/129-142., page 141 . Available at: https://tlq.ilaw.cas.cz/index.php/tlq/article/view/639

households increased from 12% to 14%.[47] In 2020 the number of single parent households accounted 4% of total households.[48] Single motherhood is a challenge in every aspect of life for the single parent, especially in terms of job insecurity and precariousness in the labour market,[49] and hence a large majority of these families are headed by women, they face not only the absence of a potential second earner, but also potential difficulties (even discrimination) in the labour market. The question is how welfare states adapt to this challenge to reduce at least the risks associated with the labour market.

The Commission Communication that outlines the Gender Equality Strategy[50] advocates for increased female participation in the labour market, including more balanced representation across sectors and working-time arrangements. It emphasises the importance of accessible, affordable, and high-quality care services, as well as a more equitable distribution of unpaid work between women and men. Furthermore, it calls for targeted policies and measures to support groups facing particular barriers to labour market entry, such as migrant women and single parents.

There are good practices available. The Lone Parent initiative tries to open up new employment options for sinlge parents by developing digital tools to help lone parents find work, because „Single parents often face significant challenges balancing family responsibilities with employment, leading to long periods of unemployment. Extended periods of unemployment can result in a loss of skills, making it even harder to re-enter the job market".[51] In a broader European context the impact of gender equality on lone parent families is examined, and it states that the risk of child deprivation is reduced by labour market equality.[52] Policies that support employment - most notably the widespread provision of childcare services for young children - demonstrate a clear positive effect on mothers' working hours and earnings, while also contributing to improved outcomes in family life and parenthood.[53] This effect is especially pronounced where formal childcare is provided by the state or

[47] Single Mothers Within The European Union (2022), page 4. Available at: https://makemothersmatter.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/12/SINGLE-MOTHERS-POLICY-PAPER.pdf

[48] Ibid., page 5. EUROSTAT (2021) How many single-parent households are there in the EU?".

[49] Karen Jaehrling, Thorsten Kalina, Leila Mesaros, A Paradox of Activation Strategies: Why Increasing Labour Market Participation among Single Mothers Failed to Bring Down Poverty Rates, Social Politics: International Studies in Gender, State & Society, Volume 22, Issue 1, Spring 2015, Pages 86–110, https://doi.org/10.1093/sp/jxu017

[50] Gender Equality Strategy 2026-2030,

[51] Supporting single parents: a digital pathway to employment (November 2024) available at: https://european-social-fund-plus.ec.europa.eu/en/projects/supporting-single-parents-digital-pathway-employment

[52] Moreno Mínguez, A., & Pérez-Corral, A. L. (2022). Job insecurity and child well-being in single-parent families in Europe: A matter of family and gender policy. Journal of Family Research, 34(3), 864–891. https://doi.org/10.20377/jfr-765

[53] Susanne Fahlén (2017) Equality at home – A question of career? Housework, norms, and policies in a European comparative perspective, p 1430-1431.

local authorities, as reliance on for-profit childcare services may give rise to concerns regarding accessibility, affordability, and quality.[54]

Regarding single parents, the European Parliament stressed in 2020 that "Early childhood education and care (ECEC) is the most important policy in promoting gender equality in the labour market and facilitating the employment of single parents, and to prevent the adverse outcomes among children of growing up in poverty[55] According to Zagel and Van Lancker (2022)[56], the risks of poverty for single mothers, and the difference with partnered mothers, is lower in countries with high spending on childcare services.[57]

On the other hand, other studies on the welfare State have shown the positive effect of expansive redistributive policies on the economic situation of single-parent families and their children.[58] There are however further related questions, namely whether increased labour market participation reduces household poverty. A study from 2020 focusing on Germany states that the underlying mechanisms of the strong relationship between lone motherhood and poverty remain unclear.[59]

5. Conclusion

In light of the above, it becomes evident that increasing labour market participation, while essential, does not in itself constitute a sufficient condition for reducing household poverty, particularly in the case of young parents and vulnerable groups such as NEETs. Although employment remains a key pathway to economic security, its poverty-reducing effect is contingent upon a range of qualitative factors, including job stability, working hours, and the adequacy of earnings.

For young people, the transition from education to stable employment represents a decisive phase. The persistence of NEET status and the prevalence of temporary or

[54] Elisabeth Leduc, Ilan Tojerow (2024) Home work: Exploring the labor market effects of subsidizing domestic services, Labour Economics, Volume 90, 102595. Available at: https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S0927537124000903.

[55] Rense NIEUWENHUIS, study requested by the European Parliament (2020) The situation of single parents in the EU, page 9. Available at: https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/STUD/2020/659870/IPOL_STU(2020)659870_EN.pdf

[56] Zagel, H., & Van Lancker, W. (2022). Family policies' long-term effects on poverty: a comparative analysis of single and partnered mothers. Journal of European Social Policy. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1177/09589287211035690

[57] Bellis, G., Léger, J.-F. & Parant, A. (2024) European Union: more single households, fewer families. What geography? What are the explanatory factors?, Les analyses de Population & Avenir, 51(4), pp. 3-38. https://doi.org/10.3917/lap.051.0003

[58] Nieuwenhuis, R., & Maldonado, L. C. (2018). Single-parent families and in-work poverty. In H. Lohmann & I. Marx (Eds.), Handbook of research on in-work poverty (pp. 171–92.). Edward Elgar Publishing.

[59] Sabine Hübgen (2020) Understanding lone mothers' high poverty in Germany: Disentangling composition effects and effects of lone motherhood, Advances in Life Course Research, Volume 44, 100327, https://doi.org/10.1016/j.alcr.2020.100327

low-quality jobs highlight that labour market entry alone does not guarantee economic independence. These early career disadvantages often have long-term scarring effects, delaying family formation and weakening the economic foundations necessary for parenthood.

For young parents, and especially single mothers, these challenges are further compounded. Their labour market participation is shaped not only by structural inequalities and care responsibilities, but also by the broader context of precarious employment conditions affecting younger generations. As a result, even increased participation may not translate into improved living standards, which helps to explain the persistent link between lone parenthood and poverty.

Consequently, policy approaches focusing exclusively on labour market integration risk overlooking the multidimensional nature of poverty among young people and young families. Effective intervention requires a comprehensive framework that addresses both entry into the labour market and the quality of employment, while simultaneously supporting the reconciliation of work and family life. In this respect, targeted measures for NEETs, accessible and high-quality childcare services, and policies addressing in-work poverty are of particular importance.

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Promoting labour market participation of parents with young children. Opportunities and Risks of Returning from Maternity Leave in Bulgaria

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Abstract

Gender equality in terms of participation in the labour market is established in Bulgaria both de facto and in terms of regulatory environment, however, caregiving responsibilities of children traditionally fall on mothers. The article contains information on employment rights in Bulgaria for parents and adoptive parents, as well as on social security rights related to childbirth, adoption and child-rearing. The recent developments in the area of childcare services are also outlined. The article argues that in terms of employment equality between men and women with young children, the comprehensive childcare system has contributed the most in practice to enhance work-life balance, in addition to provisions of additional leave entitlements, high benefit levels and restrictions on dismissals for mothers of young children. Availability of places in state-funded childcare facilities is therefore a key issue in Bulgaria. The article also suggests further consideration of ways to broaden fathers' involvement in child-rearing and to encourage them to take a share of maternity and parental leave. It suggests rethinking protective measures so that they are not concentrated solely on the mother, as this may lead to her being perceived as a less employable worker.

Keywords: employment of parents; work-life balance; labour law protection; social protection; childcare systems, returning from maternity.

1. General context

There are no major differences in economic activity statistics for men and women, and unemployment figures are almost equal for both sexes. At the same time, children in the country, especially young ones, are traditionally raised by women. Until the sharp increase in the retirement age in 2000, the retirement age of 55 for women primarily allowed grandmothers to care for children while the mother returned to work. For almost 25 years now, the care of young children was primarily taken over not by young, retired grandmothers, but mostly by mothers. When mothers work, they rely heavily on assistance from the state. In Bulgaria, there is an established tradition of

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maintaining state-organised forms of childcare (childcare facilities), which allows mothers to return to work.

The non-admission of the child due to the lack of a place in a childcare facility makes it difficult for the mother to return to work full time. A series of organisational, legislative and financial measures have been implemented in recent years to provide more places in kindergartens in big cities; transparency and public control over the process of filling vacant places is introduced; funding is increased to build new kindergartens in big cities, fee for municipal kindergartens is now entirely dropped and costs of private kindergartens are compensated for the families using such. Society is particularly sensitive to these issues because historically the state provided the opportunity for the mother to place the child in childcare and return to full-time work even before the child is one year old. At the same time, employment and social security legislation provide several important rights for working mothers of young children. Additional legislative measures have been introduced to increase the rights and opportunities of parents and adoptive parents, especially fathers, to balance work and family responsibilities. The lack of places in state-funded childcare facilities is a particularly sensitive matter. It is also often used for electoral purposes. For example, in 2022 the government, dominated by a new political party made these kindergartens completely free and introduced a monthly sum of money to compensate parents of children enrolled in private kindergartens. In recent years, there has been a gradual increase in the number of kindergartens - both public and private[2]. Despite the gradual decline in the number of children in Bulgaria, in the last school year more children were admitted to the preschool education system, which allows parents to return to work earlier and full time.

There are several main challenges of raising young children in Bulgaria. First and foremost: in large cities it is greatly difficult (sometimes practically impossible) to place a toddler in a state-funded childcare facility so that the mother can return to work full time without paying high fees for a private childcare facility or a nanny. At the same time, these cities are attractive to young people seeking better employment opportunities, and the number of children in need of kindergarten places continues to grow. Although the state finances the construction of municipal kindergartens in major cities, the need for available places remains.

Secondly, employers' reluctance to hire mothers of young children remains a significant issue, as mothers are traditionally expected to assume primary responsibility for childcare during periods of illness, which often results in work absences. The opportunity for mothers to return to work is closely linked to placing their children in nurseries. This arrangement is beneficial both for mothers and for the child, who interacts with peers of the same age. However, the aggregation of young children in collective childcare settings is associated with an increased incidence of infectious diseases. This creates additional challenges, including the need for a well-functioning

[2] Statistical Yearbook 2024, p. 399-402. Статистически годишник 2024 : с данни за 2023 и 2024 г. - Национален статистически институт - дигитална библиотека

outpatient pediatric healthcare system capable of addressing medical requirements, as well as the availability of a parent to care for the sick child. Although mothers may formally resume full-time employment, they frequently require temporary leave to care for an ill child. Under Bulgarian legislation, a working mother can easily take time off for childcare due to illness, quarantine of the kindergarten, etc. The duration of such leave is not strictly limited and is determined by the child's health status and the attending physician's clinical judgment. During the first 60 days of such leave within a calendar year the mother receives a benefit that is nearly equivalent to the net salary she would earn if working. The leave is compensated by the Social Security Fund in accordance with Articles 40–41 and 45(1) of the Bulgarian Social Insurance Code (SIC). Employers do not have the legal authority to approve or deny this type of leave.
Although every parent has the right to take childcare leave without limitation, statistical data indicate that only 13% of the total days of family-care leave (for caring for a sick child or another family member) were taken by male employees in 2023, 2024, and the first three months of 2025[3], highlighting the continuing gender imbalance in the use of such leave. Because a portion of these leaves is not specified to be taken by fathers it risks further distancing mothers from the labor market and their professional careers. At the same time, the employer of a working mother of a young child must comply with a great number of statutory requirements. These are related to eased working conditions and protection against dismissal, as regulated in the Labour Code. The administrative procedure employers are requested to follow in order to lawfully dismiss a mother of a child up to three years of age is too complex and uncertain, which is the most common reason for not hiring mothers of young children[4]. The fact that maternal employment is quite challenging explains to a certain extent why they often agree to accept lower paid jobs. State statistics do not show a significant share of parents of young children in the labour market in terms of undeclared work and unpaid work. For this reason, it is not relevant to qualify children's upbringing as an obstacle to legal employment in Bulgaria.

2. Labour market situation

From the official Eurostat[5] data, we can trace the main trends on the Bulgarian labour market. The country's population, as well as those between the ages of 15 and 64, is steadily declining. In 2019, it was 4,502,000 (out of a total population of 7 million), and in 2024 was only 4,003,547 (out of a total of 6,445,481) citizens. The proportion of Bulgarians in active employment are slightly above the EU average. In the last five years, the share of Bulgarians in active employment is slightly increasing – from 74.3% employed in 2019 to 76.2% in 2023. An important trend regarding the employment of

[3] https://www.nssi.bg/wp-content/uploads/SPRAVKA_bolnicni_31-03-2025.xlsx

[4] Александров, Андр. Осигурява ли българското законодателство „най-благоприятните условия на труд за жените" в Европа. Български законник, 2021, № 8, 26-30.

[5] [migr_pop8ctb] Population on 1 January by age group, sex and level of human development of the country of birth

parents raising children, traditionally women, is that they are not affected by higher unemployment, nor do most work part-time.

National statistics show that in 2019, 70.2% of women and 78.3% of men were employed. The trend is on the rise, it has reached 73.1% for women and 80.3% for men[6] and 76.8% in total[7] by 2024. While for women these figures are slightly above the EU average, for men they correspond exactly to the average level of employed persons in relation to the total population in this age group – from 20 to 64. In the same group, the unemployment rate for 2015 is 10.8% for men and 9.2% for women. In the period to 2024, it has decreased to 4.3% for men and 3.9% for women[8].

In terms of full-time and part-time employment according to official Eurostat data[9], Bulgaria is characterised by a very low prevalence of part-time work (less than 0.2% of active citizens aged 15-64 work part-time), as well as its almost equal gender distribution in the 2019-2024 period, with the largest difference of 6%. According to a survey conducted by the Bulgarian National Statistical Institute (the "NSI") in 2018, of the 3.069 million people of working age (18–64), 1 million and 22 thousand people were raising children[10]. Of these, 795 thousand people were both parenting and working, 40 thousand were unemployed and 187 thousand were out of the labour force. Of the total number of people combining childrearing with employment, 46% were women, meaning that more women than men are out of the labour market due to childcare responsibilities. Out of the unemployed, 49.6% are women raising children. These figures show an almost equal gender distribution and not much higher unemployment rate among women raising children. The difference is in the rate of persons out of the labour force who are caring for children. The number of women caring for children and not in employment is five times higher than that of men.

The fertility rate for Bulgaria for 2022 and 2023, according to Eurostat, was 1.78-1.81, above the EU average (which was 1.46-1.38). Women in urban areas give birth to an average of 1.67 to 1.71 children, while in rural areas – 2.09 to 2.11 children. The age at which Bulgarian women most often give birth is between 25 and 29 years for 30% of them (with a tendency to decrease in the last five years to 25% in 2023) and between 30 and 34 years for 27-28% of women according to NSI data[11]. Thus, the average age at which mothers gave birth in 2024 in Bulgaria was 29.1 years, per the NSI data[12]. If

[6] [lfsi_emp_a] Employment and activity by sex and age - annual data

[7] Employment - annual statistics - Statistics Explained - Eurostat

[8] Statistics | Eurostat (europa.eu)

[9] Statistics | Eurostat (europa.eu)

[10] Reconciliation of Work and Family Life – Supplementary Module to the Labour Force Survey 2018 | National Statistical Institute (nsi.bg). A new project aimed at surveying data on the reconciliation of work and family life was launched by the National Statistical Institute of Bulgaria in 2025 to collect updated statistical data for that year. The results are expected to become available in 2026. Проект „Наблюдение на работната сила - модул 2025 г. „Съвместяване на професионалния и семейния живот"

[11] Live births by districts, municipalities and mother's age | National statistical institute (nsi.bg)

[12] Average Maternal Age at Birth by Place of Residence, Statistical Regions and Districts | National Statistical Institute (nsi.bg)

childbirth excludes women from active labour force participation, this should mostly be reflected in an increase in the number of unemployed and a decrease in the number of actively employed women after their thirtieth year. But the data published in Eurostat on employment and unemployment for Bulgaria for women before and after the age of 25 and 30, when two-thirds of women should be raising young children, shows neither a decrease in female employment nor an increase in unemployment. On the contrary, the employment gap for younger people, including women over the age of 18, is greater than after the age of 25. The total number of working women aged 16-24 according to Eurostat data for Bulgaria in 2019 was 50,000, while the number of working women aged 25-49 was 917,000. These figures are steadily declining in recent years, with 42,000 of women aged 16-24 working in 2023 and 784,000 of working women aged 25-49 in 2023. It can be assumed that participating in education underlies the lower labour market participation of young women, as giving birth does not seem to affect their employment.

Regarding wage rates, men earned on average between 13.6% and 13.1% higher wages (for the period 2018-2023) then women, with these differences reaching 22-30% higher for men in the financial and insurance, healthcare and manufacturing industries[13]. While the percentage of parents of both genders who work full time does not differ much, the figures for wages show otherwise. Women work on a par with men but are paid less. This may be due to the fact that they – though reluctantly – tend to accept lower pay for the same work, and to the fact that they are prevented from applying for more responsible and posting-related jobs, as these are more difficult to combine with raising young children.

3. Labour law protection of and employment incentives for parents of young children

The report contains information on employment rights in Bulgaria for parents and adoptive parents, as well as on social security rights related to childbirth, adoption and child-rearing. These cover only employed individuals and are defined by Bulgarian labour and social security legislation[14]. Information on social benefits for children will be given further on, because social benefits are granted not only to working parents but to all those who meet the social criteria and give birth/adopt and raise children.

3.1. Maternity leave

Bulgarian legislation grants leave for pregnancy, childbirth/adoption and raising a child, some of which are rights only for the female sex – for mothers and adoptive mothers, guardians -, while others are granted only to men or can be used instead by

[13] Gender Pay Gap

[14] Средкова, Кр. Трудовоправна закрила на работниците и служителите със семейни задължения. – В: Актуални въпроси на семейното и наследственото право. Сборник с доклади, изнесени на национална научна конференция в памет на проф. Лиляна Ненова, София: Университетско издателство „Св. Кл. Охридски“, 2017, 129-146.

the mother or adoptive mother and the father/adoptive father or even the grandparent of the child. It is about taking leave under any employment relationship, without restriction and regardless of whether the beneficiary meets any requirements other than being an employee. Benefits during leave are only paid under social security legislation if the person also has an insurance period of 12 months (was insured for temporary incapacity and maternity). Benefits are paid at the expense of the state social insurance. If employees have not obtained enough relevant insurance period they are entitled to take leave, but it is unpaid leave, as the employer is not obliged to pay any part of the childbirth, adoption and parental benefits.

Every working mother is entitled under Article 50 of the Bulgarian Social Insurance Code (SIC) to 410 days of maternity leave, of which 45 days must be taken before the expected date of delivery. The amount of the benefit paid by the National Social Security Institute (the "NSSI") is 90% of the average income of the mother for the last 24 months as per Article 49 SIC (when the mother was insured for sickness and maternity) and is usually close to the previous net earnings. The mother can return to work according to Article 50a SIC after the child's third month and receive 50% of the benefit from the NSSI (which she would have received if she had been on leave) in addition to her salary from the employer for the remaining days. Few women benefit from this opportunity – in 2024 there were only 799 or 0.01% of all mothers on maternity leave. Another option available to the mother is to transfer these rights after the child's sixth month to the working father, who is entitled to take them until the end of the 410 days. The mother then returns to work and the father takes care of the young child and receives a benefit from the NSSI in the amount of 90% of his average insurance income for the last 24 months. Only 408 fathers exercised this right in 2023[15], compared to over 76,000 women entitled to the same leave. Statistical data indicates that fathers' participation in childcare activities has declined with only 257 male parents taking parental leave transferred from the mother in 2024. This represents approximately 0.01% of the total number of employed parents who exercised the right to maternity leave in 2024. The data show that, despite the opportunity for fathers to take parental leave and be almost fully compensated for their lost earnings with a high benefit during the child's first year, very few fathers make use of this leave. At the same time, due to the high amount of the benefit, mothers in Bulgaria take this leave and return to work when the child turns one year old at the earliest.

Until the end of the second year of childbirth, the mother can stay at home to raise her child, but in the period between the first and second year she received a fixed monthly benefit of € 398 in 2025 (with national minimum wage of € 550 for 2025 and € 620 for 2026). Despite the relatively low amount of the benefit for the leave for the second year of the child – lower than the minimum wage – the data for 2024 indicate that almost 90% of parents (mothers) remain on maternity leave during the child's second year. The legislation encourages mothers to return to work earlier. If her leave is not taken and is not transferred from the mother to the child's father/grandmother/grandfather,

[15] As per NSSI's official data, SPRAVKA_bolnicni_31122024.pdf

the mother can return to work and receive half of the NSSI benefit (amounting to € 199) in addition to her salary from her employer. However, data show that only about 10% of mothers make use of this option. Even fewer mothers return to work after the child's third month – only 1 in 10,000 mothers. Combating this tendency both the main opposition party and the government have proposed increasing this payment – to 100% or 75% of the full benefit. Under these proposals, the increased benefit would be paid by the National Social Security Institute regardless of the fact that the mother would also receive her full employment salary. Ultimately, however, these changes were not included in the State Social Security Budget Act. The draft was not adopted due to the resignation of the government in December 2025.

The adoptive mother has similar rights but receives leave and compensation for the first 365 days of the adoption of a child up to 5 years of age. After that, she is also entitled to take another leave to take care for the adopted child before the child reaches the age of two and receives the fixed amount of € 398 for 2025 as a monthly benefit from the NSSI (as per Article 53c SIC).

Fathers/adoptive fathers are also entitled to 15 days of leave upon birth or adoption of a child and receive a benefit from the NSSI amounting to 90% of the income on which they are insured for sickness and maternity (Article 50, para 6 SIC). Fathers/adoptive fathers using this leave must have at least 6 months preliminary insurance period. Data for 2024 show that approximately one third of insured fathers took the 15-day leave related to childbirth/adoption[16].

Fathers/adoptive fathers are also entitled to take parental leave instead of the mother/adoptive mother after the sixth month from the child's birth or adoption. Her consent is required and she must go back to work. Fathers/adoptive fathers need 12 months of preliminary insurance and can receive a monthly benefit amounting to 90% of their income, but no more than their net salary. As stated above, less than 0.05% of parents/adoptive parents who took leave are fathers/adoptive fathers. The mothers stay at home with the child. Further, in case the mother dies or is seriously ill, the fathers/adoptive fathers can step in and receive maternity leave until the end of the 410 days. They then receive a benefit amounting to 90% of their income and can take the leave until the child's first year, or until year 1 of the adoption (Article 51 SIC).

3.2. Parental leave

The parental leave is not related necessarily to maternity but to the raising of a child[17]. It can be used by any parent or adoptive parent, and it does not necessarily follow childbirth.

Each parent – mother/adoptive mother and father/adoptive father, is entitled to parental leave until the child is eight years old. This leave is established as a labour right for

[16] SPRAVKA_bolnicni_31122024.pdf

[17] More about the name of this type of leave in: Милева, А., Граници на правото на отпуск поради бременност и раждане, Право и граници, редактор/и:Даниел Вълчев и Симеон Гройсман, издателство:УИ «Св. Климент Охридски», 2018, стр.:474-479.

unpaid leave as per Article 167a of the Labor Code[18]. It is up to 6 months for each parent. Up to 5 months of this leave may be transferred to the other parent.
Under the latest amendments resulting from the implementation of Directive (EU) 2019/1158 on work-life balance for parents and carers[19] into Bulgarian law[20], fathers/adoptive fathers are also entitled to up to 2 months of paid parental leave if they have not taken the above-mentioned other leave under Social Insurance Code until the child is eight years old. For the period, they receive a fixed amount monthly benefit from the NSSI (€ 398 for 2025). The data for 2024 show that 3,7 % of fathers took the 2-months parental leave till the age of 8 years of the child.
Parental leave related to a young child can be applied for by filing an application in writing to the employer who must comply with the date specified and must authorise the leave. The employment relationship is preserved during all leave periods, and the employer is obliged to reinstate the employee to their previous position once the statutory periods of leave have expired.
Employees may decide that they want to interrupt their leave and return to work early. The employer is obliged to comply with their request and reinstate them to their position. Employers are also obliged to adjust (raise) respective salaries if there were salary increases within the enterprise – by an act of the employer, via a collective bargaining agreement or by an act of the Council of Ministers – during the period of the parental leave.

3.3. Other entitlements

Individuals on parental leave are also entitled to annual paid leave. That is, for the year on maternity leave, they are also entitled to at least 20 working days of annual paid leave, which they take when they return to work. The period of leave related to pregnancy may commence earlier if medical complications arise. A physician may authorize additional sick leave, which may cover the entire duration of the pregnancy. This leave is not compensated by the employer but by the Social Security Fund, at a rate amounting to 80% of the mother's gross income for an 18-month period. The total period of absence from work may extend to nearly three years.
Labour legislation regulates the right to an hourly leave for a mother to breastfeed and feed a child, which is paid by her employer. After the child's eighth month, this leave may be granted only at the discretion of the child's doctor. Until then, it is taken at the discretion of the mother. This leave is practically not taken by mothers. A prerequisite for the use of these leaves is that the beneficiary is actually raising the

[18] Details of the labour rights of fathers in: Средкова, Кр. Трудови права на бащата. В: Сборник научни изследавния в чест на професор Цанка Цанкова, София: Университетско издателство „Св. Кл. Охридски", 2022, 19-41

[19] Directive (EU) 2019/1158 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 20 June 2019 on work-life balance for parents and carers and repealing Council Directive 2010/18/EU, OJ L 188, 12.7.2019. Details about paternity leaves under Bulgarian Law and the EU Law in: Попова, Ц. Родителски отпуски според правото на Европейския съюз В: Годишник на ЮФ на СУ «Св. Кл. Охридски". т. 90, С.: УИ „Св. Кл. Охридски".

[20] Article 53d of Social Insurance Code is in force from 1 August 2022

child in the household, and the child is not placed in adoption or foster care; is not placed in a childcare institution; the parent has parental rights, etc. All these leaves are recognised in full length as service periods in employment and also insurance periods. As mentioned above, the mother is also entitled to take leave to care for a sick child and for a child's or kindergarten's quarantine – without limitation as to the frequency and period of leave. The child's doctor authorizes it, and the employer is obliged to comply and grant the mother leave to look after the child until recovery. The first two working days of the leave are paid to the mother by her employer, and for the subsequent days the mother receives a benefit from the NSSI in the amount of 80% of her insurance income if she has a preliminary 6 months of insurance for this risk[21]. Although every parent has the right to take childcare leave without limitation, statistical data indicate that only 13% of the total days of family-care leave (for caring for a sick child or another family member) were taken by male employees in 2023, 2024, and the first three months of 2025[22], highlighting the continuing gender imbalance in the use of such leave. Because a portion of these leaves is not specified to be taken by fathers it risks further distancing mothers from the labour market and their professional careers. From the employer's perspective, hiring a young woman for a position of responsibility implies accepting the possibility of such a prolonged period of absence. It can become substantial, posing significant organizational challenges for employers. On average, a woman in Bulgaria gives birth to 1.81 children[23], which means that each female employee is expected to be absent from work for more than four years due to maternity leave over the course of her working life. Given the minimum insurance period for retirement of 36 years and 8 months for 2025 (as per Article 68, para 1-2 SIC), this is not a substantial proportion – less than one-tenth of her total working lifespan. But it becomes more significant with the increase of the number of children.

3.4. Working conditions

Labour law legislation[24] provides protection[25] by easing working conditions for pregnant, breastfeeding and nursing mothers, including related restrictions on certain harsher working conditions – ineligibility for posting of mothers of children up to 3 years of age, and prohibition of night and overtime work for mothers with children up to 6 years of age[26], as well as mothers caring for children with disabilities regardless of their age,

[21] The maximum number of days which mother can take as a paid leave for a sick child is 60 days per year exclusively of the days of the child in quarantine or in hospital (Article 45, para 1, item 1 SIC).

[22] SPRAVKA_bolnicni_31-03-2025.pdf

[23] [demo_frate] Fertility rates by age

[24] Labour Code – Article 312.

[25] Недкова, Ат. Специалната закрила на работещите бременни, родилки и кърмачки в българското трудово право в контекста на Директива 92/85/ ЕИО. В: Актуални проблеми на трудовото и осигурителното право. Том III, София: Университетско издателство „Св. Кл. Охридски", 2009, 130-141.

[26] Мръчков, В. Тенденции в развитието на правната закрила на труда на жената – работничка и служителка, Правна мисъл, 2004, № 4, 62-78.

except with their written consent[27]. A female employee may not be assigned on business trips, night work, or overtime work without her explicit consent. If the work involves night shifts – for example, for doctors, nurses, or police officers – the restrictions on night and overtime work limit the mother's ability to perform her duties and place an additional burden on her colleagues, who must cover the night and overtime shifts. In the case of corporate employees or teachers who cannot be reassigned, the mother should be exempted from business trips and student excursions. These restrictions block mothers' ability to carry out responsible and travel-related work, since posting and overtime work depend on the mother's prior written consent at all times.

Mothers of children up to the age of 6 may ask for home-based (remote) work and the employer is obliged to comply with this request and, upon their return to the office, is obliged to provide the conditions of the previous job, including pay, etc. This right, as well as the right not to be posted, may also be exercised by the father if the mother is unable to do so. Breastfeeding mothers are also entitled to eased working conditions. The employer cannot assign them work which endangers or threatens their safety or health. They have the right to refuse to carry out work which is determined to be harmful to the mother's health or which, after a risk assessment, is determined to pose a significant risk to the mother's health. An ordinance requires the employer to conduct a special risk assessment of a job held by a woman who has returned to work before the 90th day after childbirth or a nursing mother if the job has particular risk factors, processes or working conditions.

Mothers have priority to take their paid annual leave during the summer[28].

All individuals who combine the functions of parent/adoptive parent of a child under 12 years of age and an employee have the right to propose to their employer a change in the duration or distribution of working time – for example, to reduce working hours by moving to part-time work, to propose another change in the content of the legal relationship, including to move to remote work. Other proposals to facilitate the reconciliation of work and family responsibilities are also acceptable.

Labour legislation restricts the dismissal of a mother who has given birth and is on parental leave or is a working mother of a child under 3 years of age. If she is using maternity and parental leave, including for an adopted child, she has an absolute protection against dismissal (Article 333, para 6 of the Labour Code). If the woman is deceased or seriously ill and the father/adoptive father is using the leave, he enjoys the protection against dismissal. The only case when dismissal can be effectuated by the employer is "closure of the whole undertaking". A relative dismissal protection applies to mothers/adoptive mothers of children up to 3 years of age. Where the grounds for termination of the employment relationship fall within the employer's subjective discretion, the employer may only dismiss the employee based on an exhaustive list of legal grounds and if it has first sought and obtained permission from the Labour

[27] Labour Code – Article 310, Article 140(4), item 6, Article 147 (1), item 3.

[28] Labour Code – Article 174.

Inspectorate. Failure to comply with any of these requirements renders the dismissal unlawful and the court revokes it without considering it on its merits[29].

3.5. Implementation of Directive 2019/1158/EU

Directive 2019/1158/EU aims, by taking national legislative measures, to enable an employee who already started to perform his/her employment contract to adapt it to his/her new role as a working carer for a child or other relative. Amendments which could be taken into account relate to working hours, place of work and other terms and conditions of the employment contract. The right of the employee to request an amendment in the content of a concluded employment contract for a fixed period of time related to his/her new role as a parent of a child under eight years of age or caring for a relative for serious medical reasons has been new to Bulgarian labour law[30]. This is not the case with the rights regulated for fathers in the Directive. From the above analysis it can be concluded that there are already too many of them in Bulgarian law. They have only been slightly expanded by the transposition of the Directive by adding an independent right for the father to 2 months of parental leave until each child reaches the age of eight. Due to the transposition of Directive 2019/1158/EU, the requirement for prior insurance period was reduced from 12 to 6 months, but only for male employees and only for receiving benefits during paternity leave for childbirth and adoptive leave for the adoptive father. An important trend is the widening of the range of individuals the necessary care for whom warrants the right to take leave or to propose changes to the terms of the contract of employment on behalf of the care givers. It is allowed that the care-giving is not only related to a child, but also to another relative for important medical reasons. The change related to the caregiver's proposal must be done by a mutual agreement between the employer and the employee. It can also be assumed that this normative change will mainly benefit women workers. Even then, the introduction of this right ensures gender equality since, again for traditional reasons, women are more often involved in caring for relatives. The circumstance of having a sick relative or a relative in need of care is found to have a negative impact on women's employment and as a consequence some women leave the labour market altogether. Certainly, the option of adapting the terms of the employment contract to the period of care for the relative will enable these women to retain their employment. The Bulgarian legislation introduces a reasonable period of 14 days, sufficient for the employer to provide reasoning for refusal if it does not agree with the employee's proposed amendments. The obligation to provide reasoning for the refusal is intended to reflect the concerns of employees combining family and professional responsibilities and, where possible, to adapt their employment relationship to accommodate their changed family role. The Bulgarian legislator introduced as a prerequisite for exercising the employee's right to request an amendment, namely that he/she must have at least 4 months of preliminary length of service. There is ambiguity there as to whether this

[29] Labour Code – Article 333, para 1, item 1 and Article 344, para 3.

[30] Labour Code – Article 167b.

refers to service with the same employer, which is more logical, or to four months of accumulated service in general.

The rights under Articles 6 and 7 of Directive 2019/1158/EU, establishing a carer's leave right and the right to time off from work on grounds of force majeure for urgent family reasons have not been specially transposed. Bulgarian legislation provides significantly broader rights for caring for a sick family member. There is an unlimited period of leave with sickness benefits of 80% of the insured income, provided the person has at least six months of insurance coverage for sickness. The period during which payments from the National Social Security Institute are due is limited to 60 days per child and 10 days per other family member within a calendar year. It should be noted that the granting of leave depends solely on the physician, and the employer is required to accept it upon presentation of the relevant documentation. At the same time, the leave is practically unlimited in duration – determined by the doctor. The only limitation applies to the period of leave during which the person is entitled to benefits, which also requires sufficient insurance coverage for NSSI payments. In practice, the duration of leave and the amount of payment allow the person in need to take leave without interference from the employer. Since more than 80% of leave-takers are women, they are the ones who primarily combine their work with the need to provide care for relatives, without this responsibility being distributed equally between the genders.

Problems are likely to arise with the implementation of the new legislation on paternity leave. The reason is the existence of a wide range of labour and social security rights related to child raising, with the new law resulting in a practical merge of different type of childcare leaves for children up to 8 years of age, for which different prerequisites are established and different rights are granted.

Another change related to the Directive that led to unsystematic legislative approach is the reduction of the required length of insurance period from 12 to 6 months for the use of maternity or adoption leave as per Article 50, para 6 of the Social Insurance Code. A 12-month insurance period is required for all other parental leave benefits. For this type of leave only it has been reduced to 6 months. The Bulgarian legislator could have equalled the requirements for all benefits. As also pointed out above, the overly extended range of employees' rights when raising a small child explains the lack of prevalence in Bulgaria of flexible forms of employment such as part-time work, remote work, etc. Since the legislation regulates uniformly these rights, the practice of employers granting additional rights on the basis of individual or collective agreements is not widespread in the country.

The outcomes of implementing the EU Directives within Bulgaria's already extensive and complex maternity leave system are controversial. The transposition creates unequal qualifying conditions for mothers' and fathers' leave. Despite national efforts, fathers rarely take leave – even those which are reserved for them until the child reaches the age of eight is used by only 0.5% of eligible fathers.

On the other hand, the implementation of stronger legal protections for female workers creates inequality. The legislation does not include corresponding adjustments for

male employees, who do not enjoy the same employment protections. This constitutes unequal treatment, which has yet to be addressed by Bulgarian legislators. This disparity likely reflects societal expectations, where childcare and the reconciliation of personal and professional life are predominantly considered a female responsibility. Illogical and disproportionate recent changes in labour and social security legislation create further imbalances in labour rights. The legislator increasingly establishes labour rights for mothers.[31] In practice, however, granting additional rights to parents makes employers reluctant to hire young women and mothers with small children.

As already mentioned, women work nearly the same number of years as men; however, the pay gap between men and women exceeds 12%, and pension amounts differ even more. According to data on unemployment, educational level, and part-time work distribution – where differences in participation between men and women are minimal – it can be concluded that women in Bulgaria are qualified, work full-time, and perform on par with men, while simultaneously having to reconcile personal and professional life, providing childcare, and receiving lower wages and lower retirement pensions under nearly identical conditions. It is precisely this combination of childcare after maternity leave with professional work that requires substantial legislative correction in order to ensure adequate and equal opportunities.

These measures may include, first, encouraging fathers and adoptive parents to take a share of maternity and parental leave. A portion of the childcare-related rights following the end of maternity leave should be reserved for fathers in order to distribute childcare duties more equally. Second, gender should be removed as a determining factor in labour-law protections related to maternity, thereby ensuring a more balanced and equitable framework. Protective measures should not be concentrated solely on the mother, as this may lead to her being perceived as a less employable worker.

4. Social protection of parents of young children

Bulgarian legislation regulates the provision of various social assistance allowances to parents raising children[32]. Most of them are paid only in cash and are monthly rather than lump-sum benefits. Some of them do not depend on parents' income. They encourage births or aim to provide financial support to parents of twins, disabled children or mothers who are full-time students, as well as helping all parents raising children to prepare them for school.

Birth promotion allowances, which do not depend on income, can be received by practically all parents, holding Bulgarian citizenship, and for those raising children – the children concerned must be raised in the country. The number of allowances paid is declining over the years as births have also declined (per NSI's data[33], from 62,000

[31] For example, the most recent amendment to the Labour Code broadens the right of parents to request a change in their working schedule or to work remotely during the summer vacation, extending it from parents/adoptive parents of children up to 8 years of age to parents/adoptive parents of children up to 12 years of age, as stipulated in Article 167b of the Labour Code.

[32] As per Articles 5a-8e of the Family Allowance for Children Act.

[33] Live births by districts, municipalities and sex | National statistical institute (nsi.bg)

in 2018 to 53,428 in 2024). The amount of one-time childbirth allowances depends on the number of children in the family and are fixed by the National Assembly by the State Budget Act (in 2025 for the birth of a firstborn child of the mother the benefit amounts to € 192; for the birth of the second born child € 460; for the birth of the third born € 230 and for the birth of each subsequent child born € 154). The number of full-time student mothers who receive special childbirth allowance are too few[34]. However, there is an increase in their number from 1,590 in 2017 to 2,106 women in 2021. The whole amount of the allowance they receive is € 1475 per child.

The twin allowance is € 615 for each child, including an adopted one. The primary school and first year of secondary school education allowance is paid if the child is enrolled and attends both school terms, so part of the allowance is paid in the second term (if the child continues to attend full-time school). The amount of the allowance is € 153.

Receipt of the child-raising allowance for a disabled child does not depend on the income of the parents/carers and, unlike all of the above which are one-time allowances, this is a monthly allowance. The amount depends on the degree of disability. These allowances range between € 604 and € 230 per month. In addition, a monthly allowance of € 53 is paid to support the upbringing of disabled children up to the age of two. All the listed allowances are not subject to a minimum family income threshold and can be received by all parents, including working parents, if they are raising children. Only full-time students must not be working to be entitled to receive the allowance.

The majority of social payments under Bulgarian social legislation are granted to vulnerable parents, and proof of low or no income by the parents or caregivers is required. In most cases these payments are paid monthly until the child reaches the age of twenty, if he or she is in school, and parents must prove regular school attendance of children and completion of all required immunizations and preventive medical examinations. None of these social assistance allowances depend on the employment of the person raising the child. These monthly allowances are low in amount (from € 26 to € 100 depending on the income and the number of children in the family). Because of the requirement to prove low or no income to receive them, some parents resort to concealing their actual employment or to declaring that they receive minimum wages, which damages their employment and social security rights afterwards. Lump-sum pregnancy benefits are also paid if the pregnant woman does not receive a benefit from the NSSI for raising a child up to one year of age. These cover only non-working mothers who have to prove low or no income. These allowances are low and not widespread. Unfortunately, there are no official figures on the number of child allowances paid.

None of the above social assistance payments are conditional on the recipients making prior contributions to Social Security Fund. The funds for the provision of these allowances are covered by the State budget funded by the taxes and excise duties paid by all obliged entities in the country – natural and legal persons. Almost all of

[34] Family/children Function | National statistical institute (nsi.bg)

these benefits are not high in amount. This is the case for all payments provided by social assistance, except for the disabled children allowances and those for full-time student mothers. Government spending to cover them represented 1.56% of the country's GDP in 2021, and this figure is declining, for example in 2015 for Bulgaria it was 1.88%. This compares to 1.59% for the Czech Republic and 1.26% for Romania in the same year, compared to an EU average of 2.24%. These two countries have been steadily increasing their state inputs for social benefits and in 2021 they reached – Czech Republic 1.74% and for Romania 1.93%, while for Bulgaria it remained 1.56%[35]. Bulgaria has also increased this spending, but the gross domestic product has grown faster and this increase is proving insufficient.

5. Early childhood education and childcare systems

The Bulgarian state has established and maintains an organized system for the daily care of children of working parents. At present, pre-school education of children is compulsory from the age of four. However, children can be placed in childcare from the age of three months, although it is not at all common.

The system of organized childcare in Bulgaria includes nurseries for children up to the age of 3, kindergartens for pre-school education up to the age of 7[36]. Both forms are financed from the state budget through municipal budgets and parents do not pay fees for them. Their opening hours are very convenient for working parents – between 7am and 7pm. It allows parents to work full-time and use childcare for their child. There are also weekly nurseries and kindergartens which are not common and are not used by parents. In all childcare facilities, children receive continuous care. This includes facilities for afternoon naps and four meals a day, for which parents do not pay extra. The legislation contains extremely high requirements for hygiene, food, premises and staff in nurseries and kindergartens. In nurseries (for children up to 3 years), the staff involved in childcare has a medical degree, and in kindergartens – minimum a pedagogical bachelor's degree or higher education. The child must have all the mandatory vaccinations, should have attended regular check-ups and must be healthy to be enrolled in a childcare facility. Daily monitoring of the children's health is carried out, which brings additional reassurance to parents. Childcare facilities are evenly distributed in the settlements so that there is access to them in every part of the settlement.

There are several problems in the system, the most significant being the insufficient number of places available for children in larger cities. The other is the lack of staff, both specialized and support staff, because of the low salaries paid in the system. There is currently a children enrolment campaign in Sofia's kindergartens. There were 21,000 applications for children turning 4 in 2024 in the city, while only 11,000 places were available in the first round of admissions. As a result, 10,000 families had to

[35] All data quoted from Statistics Eurostat (europa.eu)

[36] Legal basis – Regulation No. 26 of November 18, 2008 on the Establishment and the Regulation of Nurseries and Children's Kitchens and the Health Requirements, Pre-School and School Education Act.

seek other options to raise their children so that the mother can work. The application process is very strictly monitored because of corruption concerns. The application process is held entirely online, with the option of continuous access to information for all parents through the online system.

An additional option to receive state support to pay part of the fee for a private kindergarten has been introduced in 2023 in case the child is not admitted to a municipal kindergarten. The problems of lack of available places are most acute in the big Bulgarian cities and this creates serious public discontent, as the young and working people of the country are concentrated there. This forces the managers to allow an increase in the number of children in a childcare group, which is in breach of the statutory maximum number of children. It also reduces the quality of the childcare service. Despite these shortcomings, the system is very highly regulated and provides working parents with the security they need to continue working.

This system can also be used by children of parents who are not employed – when there are enough free places, and from the age of 4 – all children must attend kindergarten, where they receive compulsory preschool education.

In the kindergartens, children develop social skills, learn Bulgarian when it is not their native language and engage in educational activities. Private kindergartens can also provide preschool education if they meet the legal requirements. The fees payable for a private childcare facility start at € 500 per month and can reach over € 1,000 for Sofia monthly. Therefore, less than 3% of children in Bulgaria attended private kindergartens in 2023, the latest year for which NSI data are available[37]. Over 87% of children in the country are enrolled in kindergartens[38]. This is the most serious incentive for parents, and above all for mothers, to return to work full time after giving birth. It is scarcely possible to better support mothers' return to work than to have the security of knowing that her child is being well cared for by professionals and among children of her own age.

Via a project called "Parents in Employment" the state Employment Agency organizes from time to time an option to finance childcare for children up to five years of age who are not enrolled in kindergartens by caregivers who are unemployed persons[39]. Under the programme, children are cared for 8 hours a day for a minimum wage, which makes the scheme attractive, especially in smaller settlements where average wages are lower. The Employment Agency and the caregiver conclude an employment contract. Parents who apply can be both employed and unemployed and the aim of the project is to provide them with the opportunity to look for and start work. These programmes do not run every year (currently the validity period is until the end of 2026), nor do they have sufficient capacity to take care of all the children whose parents apply. The total number of unemployed people who can be hired as caregivers under

[37] Children enrolled at kindergartens by organization of the learning process and location | National statistical institute (nsi.bg)

[38] Kindergartens, children, pedagogical staff, places and groups in the kindergartens by statistical zones, statistical regions, districts and municipalities | National statistical institute (nsi.bg)

[39] Проект "Родители в заетост"... | Агенция по заетостта (government.bg)

the programme is only 1,850 for the whole country, which is too few considering that in Sofia alone over 10,000 children remained out of kindergarten in 2024.

6. Future challenges

The general conclusion that can be drawn from the recent changes in the Bulgarian legislation is that support for parents of children with disabilities is increasing and working parents are encouraged to have more than one child, which is probably among the reasons for the changed trend in the number of births per woman in Bulgaria in recent years. Legislative amendments regulate the provision of new types of social benefits for children that do not depend on the income of families. The aim is to discourage work outside the labour market and the receipt of undeclared income as a result of receiving benefits. These measures provide incentives for parents who have low incomes, but not very low incomes (for which they would also receive monthly social assistance), to have more children.

In Bulgaria there is both legal and practical equality of participation of men and women with young children in employment. Moreover, full-time work and legal employment are widely used for female parents, and the figures do not differ from those for men. It should be noted that, in terms of employment equality between men and women with young children in Bulgaria, the comprehensive childcare system has contributed much more in practice than the provision of additional leave entitlements, high benefit levels and restrictions on dismissals for mothers of young children. On the contrary, they have led to fewer opportunities and inequality in terms of employment for women, as the enhanced legal protection can make it unattractive for employers to hire them. It can be assumed that this, rather than, for example, a lack of education, qualifications, experience or professional skills, is the reason why women are paid less. They have more difficulty finding higher-paid work, because it requires greater commitment, and this is not compatible with the traditionally higher expectations placed on the mother to care for young and sick children while the father works full time.

The two or four months of parental leave that must be granted to the father under Directive 2019/1158/EU can certainly have a positive effect on the ability of the father to participate more in parenthood, but it cannot separate him from his work to such an extent that it stops his professional development. A far greater contribution would be made by establishing quotas for fathers' participation on an equal footing with mothers in the raising of young children. Another step that would have a greater impact would be to equalise the amount of leave taken by the mother and the father, both when raising a young child, whether healthy or sick, and to increase the nontransferable portions of this leave between the parents so that a greater proportion of it is reserved for the father's sole use.

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Promoting labour market participation of parents with young children in Cyprus

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Abstract

This chapter examines the transformative effect of European legislation on the Cypriot legal framework regarding the protection and promotion of employment of parents with young children. In doing so, it focuses on how recent developments at the EU level, such as the adoption of the Work-Life Balance Directive, resulted in the strengthening of the national legislation regarding all types of leaves and benefits available to working parents of young children. The chapter further explores the introduction of the concept of flexible working arrangements for working parents, while it also analyses the national context regarding early childhood education and care and highlights the importance of EU funding for implementing substantial changes. Finally, remaining challenges are identified which demand further attention.

Keywords: employment of parents; work-life balance; labour law protection; social protection; childcare systems

1. Introduction

The accession of Cyprus to the EU had a profound transformative effect on the national legal framework regarding the protection and promotion of employment of parents with young children.

During the harmonisation process, legislation was adopted providing for special advantages for pregnant and breastfeeding women, and maternity benefits[2] and for the first-time (unpaid) parental leave[3] was introduced at the national level. As an EU Member State Cyprus has transposed all directives dealing with matters of protection

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[2] Protection of Maternity Law of 1997 (Ο περί Προστασίας της Μητρότητας Νόμος του 2007 (N.100(I)/1997)).

[3] Parental Leave and Leave for Force Majeure Reasons of 2002 (Ο περί Γονικής Άδειας και Άδειας για Λόγους Ανωτέρας Βίας Νόμος του 2002 (N. 69(I)/2002)).

and promotion of employment of parents[4]. However, the national legislation was mostly restricted to the minimum requirements set by the relevant directives.

Recent developments regarding the issue of work-life balance greatly influenced the legislation and the policies adopted by the government. Firstly, the inclusion of a specific principle on work-life balance (Principle 9[5]) into the European Pillar of Social Rights and the related principle on childcare and support to children (Principle 11[6]) as well as the adoption of the European Pillar of Social Rights Action Plan put these issues on the national agenda and created political pressure to achieve the set targets.

Secondly, the transposition of the Work-Life Balance Directive (WLBD)[7] introduced a more favourable legislative framework for working parents, which included paid parental leave, (unpaid) carers' leave and provisions for flexible working arrangements.

Thirdly, as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic employees and employers were forced to rapidly adopt to new arrangements, which had previously been uncommon in Cyprus, such as remote working and teleworking. Consequently, the working environment has been gradually transformed and now allows for greater flexibility. Flexible working arrangements can constitute an effective means of achieving work-life balance.

Fourthly, in the process of the European semester cycle, the Council recommendation on the 2019 National Reform Programme of Cyprus[8] highlighted the low participation of children in Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC). In 2019, only 20.7% of children under the age of three participated in ECEC, below both the EU average (35.1%) and the Barcelona target (33%), while the enrolment rate in ECEC for children

[4] Council Directive 92/85/EEC of 19 October 1992 on the introduction of measures to encourage improvements in the safety and health at work of pregnant workers and workers who have recently given birth or are breastfeeding; Council Directive 96/34/EC of 3 June 1996 on the framework agreement on parental leave concluded by UNICE, CEEP and the ETUC; Council Directive 97/80/EC of 15 December 1997 on the burden of proof in cases of discrimination based on sex; Directive 2006/54/EC of the European Parliament and of the Council of 5 July 2006 on the implementation of the principle of equal opportunities and equal treatment of men and women in matters of employment and occupation (recast); Council Directive 2010/18/EU of 8 March 2010 implementing the revised Framework Agreement on parental leave concluded by BUSINESSEUROPE, UEAPME, CEEP and ETUC and repealing Directive 96/34/EC; Directive (EU) 2019/1158 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 20 June 2019 on work-life balance for parents and carers and repealing Council Directive 2010/18/EU.

[5] 'Parents and people with caring responsibilities have the right to suitable leave, flexible working arrangements and access to care services. Women and men shall have equal access to special leaves of absence in order to fulfil their caring responsibilities and be encouraged to use them in a balanced way.'

[6] 'a. Children have the right to affordable early childhood education and care of good quality.
b.Children have the right to protection from poverty. Children from disadvantaged backgrounds have the right to specific measures to enhance equal opportunities.'

[7] Directive (EU) 2019/1158 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 20 June 2019 on work-life balance for parents and carers and repealing Council Directive 2010/18/EU, OJ L 188, 12.7.2019, p. 79–93.

[8] Council recommendation of 9 July 2019 on the 2019 National Reform Programme of Cyprus and delivering a Council opinion on the 2019 Stability Programme of Cyprus (2019/C 301/13).

aged 4 to 6 was 97%[9]. Therefore, a strong focus was placed on ECEC reforms, and this is reflected in the national Recovery and Resilience Plan (RRP) 2021-2026 and in the adoption of legislation which progressively reduces the minimum age for free compulsory pre-primary education.

Finally, the low fertility rate in Cyprus[10] puts an additional pressure for the adoption of measures for the reconciliation of professional and family life[11].

2. Labour market overview

With an overall employment rate of 79.8%[12] in 2024, Cyprus has surpassed the 78% employment target under the 2030 European Pillar of Social Rights Action Plan and has almost reached its national 2030 employment target of 80%[13]. The overall employment rate was 85.8% for men and 74.5% for women[14], resulting in a gender employment gap of 11.3%, slightly higher than the EU average of 10%[15]. In December 2024, the overall unemployment rate was 4.6%[16] (EU average 5.9%[17]), yet unemployment remained marginally higher among women (4.9%) than men (4.3%).

Part-time employment represented 8.9% of total employment but women were disproportionately represented: 11.8% of working women work part-time compared with 6.3% of working men[18]. In addition, women face a greater risk of low-paid employment, since 33% of women are low-paid workers compared with only 14% of men[19].

[9] Information is available at:
https://eurydice.eacea.ec.europa.eu/national-education-systems/cyprus/national-reforms-early-childhood-education-and-care#:~:text=Cyprus%20is%20committed%20to%20ECEC,for%20children%20aged%200%2D6,.

[10] 1.37 live births per woman in Cyprus while the EU average is 1.46 in 2022. Eurostat, Demography of Europe- 2024 edition.

[11] Statement of the Minister of Labour and Social Insurance at the Parliamentary Ad Hoc Committee on the Study of the Demographic Problem on 28th September 2021. Available at: https://www.tothemaonline.com/Article/294511/symfiliwsh-oikogeneiakhs-kai-epaggelmatikhs-zwhs-gia-antimetwpish-ypogennhtikothtas-leei-h-yp-ergasias

[12] This rate is higher than the EU's average at 75,8% in 2024. Eurostat- Employment rate, 2024 (% of people aged 20-64).

[13] European Commission: 2023 Country Report - Cyprus, Institutional Paper 237, June 2023.

[14] Statistical Service of Cyprus, Labour Force Survey (LFS): 4th Quarter 2024, https://www.gov.cy/en/economy-and-finance/labour-force-survey-lfs-4th-quarter-2024/

[15] Eurostat- Gender statistics, 2024,
https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php?title=Gender_statistics

[16] Statistical Service of Cyprus, Labour Force Survey (LFS): 4th Quarter 2024.

[17] Eurostat, Unemployment statistics,
https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/web/products-euro-indicators/w/3-30012025-bp

[18] Statistical Service of Cyprus, Labour Force Survey (LFS): 4th Quarter 2024.

[19] EIGE, Gender Equality Index-Cyprus in 2025 edition,
https://eige.europa.eu/gender-equality-index/2025/country/CY

Gender gaps are also evident in relation to the allocation of skills and access to leadership positions. The over-qualification rate for women was 28.2% in 2024, well above the EU average at 21.3%[20], indicating that women's skills and educational attainment are not fully utilised in the labour market. At the same time, women's representation in senior management remains limited, with only 11.4% of such positions held by women, compared with an EU average of 32.6% in 2024[21]. Moreover, the unadjusted gender pay gap in 2023 was 12.2%[22] (EU average 12%), whereas the gender pension gap was considerably higher at 27.9% (EU average at 25.2%)[23], reflecting the cumulative disadvantages that women face over the life course.

Finally, disparities in labour market outcomes are closely linked to the unequal allocation of unpaid work. In 2025, 43% of women with children aged 0–11 spent more than five hours per day on childcare, compared with only 15% of men[24]. Furthermore, 62%, of women reported doing housework chores (cooking, cleaning, laundry) every day, which is one of the highest percentages in the EU[25]. Notably, the gender gap in full-time equivalent employment rate is particularly wide among couples with children[26], indicating that childcare responsibilities disproportionately affect women's labour market participation and long-term career prospects.

3. Current legislative framework

3.1. Maternity leave and benefits

The Cypriot legislative framework on maternity leave and benefits has closely followed the developments at EU level. The main applicable laws are the Protection of Maternity Laws 1997-2025[27], which transposed the 1992 Pregnant Workers Directive; the Social Insurance Laws 2010-2025[28] in terms of maternity allowance; and the Equal Treatment of Men and Women in Employment and Vocational Training Law[29], which states that

[20] Eurostat- Employment statistics, 2024, https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/web/products-eurostat-news/w/ddn-20250415-1

[21] European Semester 2025, Country report- Cyprus.

[22] Eurostat, Gender pay gap statistics, 2023, https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php?title=Gender_pay_gap_statistics

[23] Eurostat, Gender pension average gap by age group, 2023, https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/databrowser/view/ilc_pnp13/default/table?lang=en

[24] EIGE, Gender Equality Index-Cyprus in 2025 edition, https://eige.europa.eu/gender-equality-index/2025/country/CY

[25] *Ibid.*

[26] *Ibid.*

[27] Οι περί Προστασίας της Μητρότητας Νόμοι 1997 έως 2025 (N.100(I)/1997).

[28] Οι περί Κοινωνικών Ασφαλίσεων Νόμοι του 2010 έως 2025 (N.59(I)/2010).

[29] Οι Περί Ίσης Μεταχείρισης Ανδρών και Γυναικών στην Απασχόληση και στην Επαγγελματική Εκπαίδευση Νόμοι του 2002 έως 2024 (N.205(I)/2002).

any less favourable treatment of a woman related to pregnancy or maternity leave amounts to sex discrimination[30].

Eligible for maternity leave and benefits are full-time and part-time female employees in the private and public sector, self-employed women and voluntarily insured women who are expecting a child or have adopted a child up to 12 years of age. The right to maternity leave is not subject to a period of work qualification or to a length of service qualification.

The scope of the national legislation is broader than the Pregnant Workers Directive[31] because surrogate mothers or mothers who have had a child through surrogacy are also entitled to maternity leave and maternity allowance.[32]

The length of maternity leave was for a long period restricted to the minimum provided by the Pregnant Workers Directive, namely 14 continuous weeks of maternity leave to be taken before and/or after birth, including at least 2 weeks of compulsory maternity leave before confinement. This period has gradually increased in recent years with amendments to the Protection of Maternity law[33]. Currently, the length of maternity leave is 22 consecutive weeks. It is obligatory to take 11 weeks of maternity leave, including 2 weeks prior to the week of the expected birth and the rest following childbirth. In case of third and subsequent deliveries/childbirths, the period of maternity leave is extended to 26 consecutive weeks. The length of maternity leave is extended by 4 weeks per child in the case of the birth of multiple children. The legislation includes provisions for additional maternity leave in case of premature labour or in case the infant is hospitalised right after birth for health reasons. For adoptive mothers of a child under 12 years old the length of maternity leave is 20 weeks. For surrogate mothers the length of maternity leave is 14 weeks, including the 2 weeks which must be taken prior to the week of the expected birth. Mothers who get a child through surrogacy (commissioning mothers) are entitled to the same length of maternity leave as mothers who have given birth, provided that they present a Court order on surrogation and a doctor's certificate confirming the pregnancy.

[30] This law transposed Directive 2006/54/EC of the European Parliament and of the Council of 5 July 2006 on the implementation of the principle of equal opportunities and equal treatment of men and women in matters of employment and occupation (recast).

[31] The Pregnant Workers Directive 92/85/EEC does not require that a mother who has had a baby through a surrogacy agreement should be entitled to maternity leave or its equivalent as it was stated by the CJEU in the cases C-167/12 C. D. v S.T. and C-363/12 Z. v A Government Department and the Board of Management of a Community School.

[32] Non-commercial surrogacy is permitted in Cyprus through strict procedures according to the Implementation of Medically Assisted Reproduction Laws 2015-2023 (Οι περί της Εφαρμογής της Ιατρικώς Υποβοηθούμενης Αναπαραγωγής Νόμοι του 2015 έως 2023 (N. 69(I)/2015)).

[33] In 2000 the length of the maternity leave was increased to 16 weeks with law L.45(I)/2000, in 2007 it was increased to 18 weeks with law L.109(I)/2007 and in 2021 it was increased to 22 weeks but only for the second child and to 26 weeks for a third child or any subsequent children with law L.167(I)/2021.

Once the employer is notified in writing, women entitled to maternity leave are protected against dismissal from the beginning of the pregnancy until 5 months from the end of the maternity leave (Article 4). This protective period is longer than the period stated in Article 10 of the Pregnant Workers' Directive, according to which the prohibition of dismissal ends when the maternity leave ends. The use of maternity leave does not affect seniority or any right to promotion.

In addition, the period during which a working mother is entitled to one hour off work during working hours for breastfeeding and the increased care required for the child[34] has been recently increased from 9 to 12 months following the birth[35]. This one hour break can be transferred to the commissioning mother in cases of surrogacy.

The maternity allowance starts at 72% of the mother's earnings/salary with no upper limit. The maternity allowance increases to 80%, 90% or 100% of earnings for the second, third and fourth child respectively[36]. For public sector employees, the first 12 weeks of leave are fully compensated, while the following six weeks are paid at 72% of the employee's salary[37]. Some private companies cover the remaining 28% for the first child: in such cases, an employer can request the maternity benefit from the state on behalf of the employee, then pay the difference, so that the employee receives a full salary from the employer[38].

3.2. Paternity leave and benefits

Paternity leave is a relatively new concept in Cyprus. It was introduced in 2017 with the Protection of Paternity Law 2017[39], which provided for the right to paid paternity leave for 2 consecutive weeks. While this law aimed to achieve a more equal share of childcare between parents, its scope was very restricted as it applied only to married fathers[40].

[34] Mothers may interrupt their employment for one hour or go to work one hour later or leave work one hour earlier. The one hour off work is considered working time.

[35] The Protection of Maternity (Amendment) Law N.62(I)/2025.

[36] Social Insurance Laws 2010-2025.

[37] Angeli, M. (2025) 'Cyprus country note', in Dobrotić, I., Blum, S., Kaufmann, G., Koslowski, A., Moss, P. and Valentova, M. (eds.) (2025) 21th International Review of Leave Policies and Research 2025, p. 185-190. Available at: https://www.leavenetwork.org/fileadmin/user_upload/k_leavenetwork/annual_reviews/2025/Cyprus.pdf

[38] Angeli, M. (2025), p. 186.

[39] Ο Περί της Προστασίας της Πατρότητας Νόμοι του 2017 και 2022 (N. 117(I)/2017).

[40] Same-sex marriage is not recognised in Cyprus. Same-sex registered partnerships are legally recognised but adoption is not permitted.

The current applicable legislation is the Leaves (Paternity, Parental, Care, Force Majeure) and Flexible working arrangements for Work Life Balance Laws 2022-2025[41] (Work Life Balance Laws) which transposed the WLBD. This legislation entered into force on 16 December 2022, more than four months after the transposition deadline set in the WLBD (Article 20).

Paternity leave is defined as a leave from work taken by a working father following the birth or adoption of a child to take care of that child. According to the national legislation, a working father has now a right to paternity leave irrespective of his marital or family status[42], if his wife or partner gave birth to a child; or he had a child through a surrogate mother[43]; or he adopted a child aged up to 12 years old.

The right to paternity leave is not subject to a period of work qualification or to a length of service qualification and it can be claimed in case of a birth of a stillborn child. The length of paternity leave is 2 consecutive weeks to be taken at any time within the period that starts from the week of childbirth or adoption and ends 2 weeks after the end of the maternity leave. If the mother dies before or during childbirth or during the period of maternity leave, any remaining period of the maternity leave is added to the paternity leave period. However, there is no possibility for a working father to take parental leave on a part-time basis, in alternating periods or in other flexible ways.

The working father has to notify his employer in writing 2 weeks prior to the commencement of the paternity leave (not applicable in case of an unexpected birth). The paternity allowance starts at 72% of the father's earnings/salary with no upper limit and it increases to 80%, 90% or 100% per cent of earnings for the second, third and fourth child respectively[44]. The paternity allowance is not paid if the father receives full remuneration during the period in which the allowance is granted. If he receives a reduced remuneration, the sum of that remuneration and the allowance must not exceed the full salary[45].

3.3. Parental leave and benefits

Parental leave was introduced in 2012 with the Parental Leave and Leave for Force Majeure Reasons Law of 2012[46], which transposed Directive 2010/18/EU. It provided 18 weeks of unpaid parental leave. Currently, the applicable legislation is the Work-Life Balance Laws, which transposed the WLBD and strengthened the right to parental

[41] Οι περί Αδειών (Πατρότητας, Γονική, Φροντίδας, Ανωτέρας Βίας) και Ευέλικτων Ρυθμίσεων Εργασίας για την Ισορροπία μεταξύ Επαγγελματικής και Ιδιωτικής Ζωής Νόμοι του 2022 έως το 2025 (N. 216(I)/2022).

[42] As stated in Article 4 of the Work-Life Balance Directive (WLBD).

[43] The use of surrogate mothers by single fathers or same sex couples is not permitted in Cyprus.

[44] Social Insurance Laws 2010-2025.

[45] Angeli, M. (2025), p. 187.

[46] Ο Περί Γονικής Άδειας και Άδειας για Λόγους Ανωτέρας Βίας Νόμος του 2012 (N. 47(I)/2012).

leave on the grounds of the birth or adoption of a child up until the age of 15 years old. The age coverage for children has only been recently extended from 8 to 15 years of age[47]; accordingly, the scope of the national legislation in this regard goes beyond the requirements of the WLBD.

The legislation covers all working parents in private and public sectors who have children under the age of 15 provided that they have been continuously working for the same employer for a period of 6 months[48]. Therefore, unemployed or inactive parents are not eligible for parental leave. In cases of children with disability, the right to take parental leave has been extended beyond the age of majority and until the child with disability reaches the age of 21 years old[49]. Full-time and part-time workers are also eligible for parental leave.

Same-sex parents do not have access to parental leave because legally in Cyprus same-sex couples cannot parent a child together or adopt a child together or be recognised as the parent of a child who was born through surrogacy[50].

The right to parental leave was extended to self-employed parents with the amendment of the legislation in May 2024[51]. This represents a big step forward since the self-employment status was one of the main reasons for non-eligibility for both mothers and fathers (the other is the short working period before birth)[52]. Expanding access to benefits, particularly for self-employed people working with contracts or in new forms of employment (e.g. platform workers) was included in the Cyprus RRP 2021-2026.

The length of parental leave is 18 weeks[53] for each child, which is longer by 2 weeks than the minimum period of 4 months stated in the WLBD. Widowed parents or

[47] The Leaves (Paternity, Parental, Care, Force Majeure) and Flexible working arrangements for Work Life Balance (Amendment) Law 2025, N.156(I)/2024.

[48] Article 5 of the Work-Life Balance Directive: 'Member States may make the right to parental leave subject to a period of work qualification or to a length of service qualification, which shall not exceed one year.'

[49] The age coverage for children with disability has been recently extended beyond the majority age (18 years old) to 21 years of age by the Leaves (Paternity, Parental, Care, Force Majeure) and Flexible working arrangements for Work Life Balance (Amendment) Law 2025, N.156(I)/2024, 30/12/2024.

[50] Angeli, M. (2025), p. 188.

[51] Leaves (Paternity, Parental, Care, Force Majeure) and Flexible working arrangements for Work Life Balance (Amendment) Law of 2024 (Ο περί Αδειών (Πατρότητας, Γονική, Φροντίδας, Ανωτέρας Βίας) και Ευέλικτων Ρυθμίσεων Εργασίας για την Ισορροπία μεταξύ Επαγγελματικής και Ιδιωτικής Ζωής (Τροποποιητικός) Νόμος του 2024 (N.67(I)/2004)) and Social Insurance (Amendment) (No.2) Law of 2024 (Ο περί Κοινωνικών Ασφαλίσεων (Τροποποιητικός) (Αρ. 2) Νόμος του 2024 (N.66(I)/2024)).

[52] European Institute for Gender Equality, Who is eligible for parental leave in Cyprus? (2021), Available at: https://eige.europa.eu/sites/default/files/documents/20210517_mh0121035enn_pdf.pdf,

[53] The length of parental leave remained the same as with the previous legislation (Parental Leave and Leave for Force Majeure Reasons Law of 2012).

single parents are entitled to 23 weeks of parental leave. Additionally, the length of parental leave increases in the case of children with disability[54].

The working parent must give 3 weeks' advance notice in writing to his/her employer and may request flexible parental leave. The self-employed parent has to notify the Director of Social Insurance Services 3 weeks in advance of his/her intention to take parental leave (shorter period is acceptable in special circumstances).

Parental leave is an individual entitlement for working parents. The current law has increased the period of parental leave that cannot be transferred between parents from 4 weeks to 9 weeks[55]. If the non-transferable 9 weeks of parental leave are not used by a parent, then they are forfeited. This aims to encourage fathers to take parental leave. Every (eligible) working parent can take parental leave for a minimum period of 1 day and a maximum period of 5 weeks per child per year which adds to the flexibility of this leave. The fact that parental leave is expressed in days is an improvement in relation to the previous legislation where the minimum period was 1 week and the maximum period was 5 weeks per year, although the combined use of days and weeks in the current text is somehow confusing.

The Work-Life Balance Laws introduced the obligation of payment for parental leave. However, restrictions were included in the Social Insurance Laws in terms of the total period that the parental leave allowance is paid. From 16 December 2022 (the date of adoption of the legislation) until 1 of August 2024 the parental leave allowance covered a total of 6 weeks of parental leave while the remaining 12 weeks were unpaid. From 1 August 2024 this allowance covers 8 weeks of parental leave, while the remaining 10 weeks are unpaid.

Restrictions were also applicable in terms of the duration for which parental leave allowance is paid per year. From 16 December 2022 (date of adoption of the legislation) until 31 December 2023 the parental leave allowance was paid for up to 3 weeks per year; from 1 January 2024 until 31 December 2024 the parental leave allowance was paid for up to 4 weeks per year and from 1 January 2025 this allowance is paid for up to 5 weeks per year.

These restrictions were included to prevent the possibility of accumulating parental leave allowance requests from parents with children approaching the age of eight (the age coverage for children when the legislative was adopted)[56]. As a result, from December 2022 until December 2023 working parents entitled to parental leave in

[54] Additional 4 weeks for serious disability or medium mental disability and additional 6 weeks for total disability.

[55] This period is slightly longer than the non-transferable period provided in the WLBD which is 2 months.

[56] Report of the Standing Parliamentary Committee of Labour, Welfare and Social Insurance on the bills related to the transposition of the WLBD, dated 29 November 2022.

Cyprus could claim parental leave allowance for only 3 weeks per year, and not for two months as stated in the WLBD[57].

In addition, the Social Insurance Laws provide that parental leave allowance is applicable only if the parent has been employed for a period of 12 months within the previous 24 months before the start of the period for which parental leave allowance is being applied[58].

The parental leave allowance is paid at 72% of the parent's earnings/salary with no upper limit. The employee's social insurance contribution continues to be paid into their social insurance fund for the entirety of the leave period.[59]

Parents also have access to other types of leave, such as carer's leave and leave on grounds of force majeure. Carers' leave was introduced with the Work-Life Balance Law in 2022 in accordance with the provisions of the WLBD. A worker can provide personal care or support to a relative, or to a person who lives in the same household as the worker, and who is in need of significant care or support for a serious medical reason. Therefore, it can be used by parents of young children in addition to parental leave and/or in cases where the child is older than 15 years old. The length of carers' leave is 5 days per year (separately or consecutively) but it is unpaid which makes its use less appealing to working parents. The worker must notify his/her employer in a timely manner, providing appropriate medical documentation. The Work-Life Balance Laws provide that each worker has the right to time off from work on grounds of force majeure for urgent family reasons in the case of illness or accident making the immediate attendance of the worker indispensable. The length of such leave is 7 days per year[60] (separately or consecutively) and it is unpaid. Due to the urgent nature of the situations for which this leave becomes applicable, the worker must notify his/her employer as soon as the event requiring his/her absence occurs.

3.4. Flexible working arrangements

The Work-Life Balance Laws provide that working parents and carers of children up to the age of 15 have the right to request flexible working arrangements for caregiving purposes, provided that they were in continuous employment with the same employer for a period of 6 months. This allows working parents to adjust their working patterns, including through the use of remote working arrangements, flexible working schedules, or reduced working hours. The employer must notify the employee in writing about his/her decision within one month of receiving the request for flexible arrangements.

[57] The WLBD provides that the non-transferable period of 2 months parental leave must be compensated adequately at a level to be determined by the Member States (Preamble para. 31)

[58] Article 29A of the Social Insurance Laws 2010-2025.

[59] Social Insurance Laws 2010-2025.

[60] The duration of carers' leave on grounds of force majeure is not specified in the WLBD.

If the request is postponed or rejected, the employer must provide written justification of the reasons for the postponement or rejection. Workers have the right to return to the original working pattern at the end of the agreed period, or to request a return to the original working pattern before the end of the agreed period if justified by a change in circumstances.

Significant steps have recently been taken regarding flexible working arrangements, and new measures are expected to come into force in the coming months. However, at present, the flexibility requirements are not yet fully applicable in Cyprus.

Teleworking was used when restriction measures were imposed during the COVID-19 pandemic in the absence of regulatory framework for telework. As stated in the Cyprus RRP 2021-2026 'there is no legislation regulating flexible working arrangements in the form of teleworking that would facilitate labour market re-entry of the high share of inactive women due to caring responsibilities and support workers with unforeseen caring responsibilities for children and other dependent'.[61]

In December 2023, legislation was adopted regulating telework in the private sector, the broader public sector (semi-governmental organisations) and the local government authorities, namely the Regulation of the Organizational Framework for Telework Law[62]. Telework is defined as the remote provision of the employees' work, using technology, pursuant to a full-time, part-time or other form of employment contract/relationship, which may be provided from the employer's premises and/or from a workplace outside the employer's premises. This law provides that an optional teleworking scheme can be established upon a written agreement between the employer and the employee[63] or may be formalised through the execution of a collective agreement. It provides a structured framework for telework, ensuring the rights and responsibilities of both employees and employers.

Recently, in December 2025, legislation was also adopted for regulating telework in the public sector, namely the Regulation of Telework in the Public Service Law[64]. Accordingly, telework is defined as a form of organization and performance of work by an employee who works remotely, outside his/her usual place of work, using information and communication technologies. Telework is optional and subject to the approval of the relevant Head of Department, taking into account service needs and operational considerations. In addition, for the employee to be able to work remotely,

[61] Cyprus Recovery and Resilience Plan 2021-2026, p. 481. Available at: https://cyprus-tomorrow.gov.cy/cypresidency/kyprostoavrio.nsf/all/B37B4D3AC1DB73B6C22586DA00421E05/$file/Cyprus%20RRP%20For%20Upload%2020052021.pdf?openelement

[62] Ο περί Ρύθμισης του Πλαισίου Οργάνωσης της Τηλεργασίας Νόμος του 2023 (N. 120(I)/2023).

[63] Such an agreement may be executed at any time during the term of employment by amending the existing employment contract, or at the commencement of the employment relationship.

[64] Ο περί της Ρύθμισης της Τηλεργασίας στη Δημόσια Υπηρεσία Νόμος του 2025 (N.215(I)/2025).

a service-issued portable computer must be provided and he/she must be able to connect remotely to the official telephone, official electronic mail system, and any other information system necessary for the performance of his/her duties.

As stipulated in article 5(3) of the legislation, the maximum number of working days of teleworking per calendar year is to be determined by a decision of the Council of Ministers published in the Official Gazette of the Republic. Based on a decision of the Council of Ministers published in January 2026, the maximum number of teleworking days is set at 20 days per year for 2026 and increases to 50 days from the following year. This framework entered into force in April 2026, allowing sufficient time to provide eligible employees with computers and to enable remote access to the official telephone system and any other information systems necessary to perform their duties. In addition, and pursuant to the provisions of the legislation, the Ministry of Finance must issue guidelines for the effective implementation of telework. These guidelines must include instructions to employees for the adoption of preventive and protective measures aimed at reducing and/or eliminating risks arising during teleworking.

Recently, and in accordance with the provisions of the Cyprus RRP 2021–2026 (Reform 2), under Axis 3.4 on the modernisation of the public service[65], the Council of Ministers adopted Regulations for reduced working hours and the extension of flexible working hours in the public service. These Regulations were approved by the House of Representatives and entered into force in February 2026.

With regard to flexible working schedules, all public sector employees, where feasible and not giving rise to operational difficulties, can have flexible working hours, namely starting work between 7:00 am and 9:00 am and finishing work between 2:30 pm and 4:30 pm[66]. This flexibility is limited and is not specific to parents and carers of young children in the public sector; therefore, it cannot be considered as a measure pursuant to the flexible arrangement provisions of the Work Life Balance Laws.
In addition, the Regulations introduce provisions on reduced working hours for employees who are parents of children up to the age of 15, as well as for carers. These employees can apply for reduced working hours of up to a maximum of 2 hours per working day, with a corresponding reduction in remuneration. Reduced working hours shall not affect the employee's service for the purposes of promotion, annual leave, salary progression (increments), or pension benefits.

[65] Announcement of the Ministry of Finance on the Regulation of Teleworking and Other Flexible Forms of Work in the Public Service, https://www.gov.cy/oikonomia/anakoinosi-tou-ypourgeiou-oikonomikon-gia-ti-rythmisi-tis-tilergasias-kai-allon-evelikton-morfon-ergasias-sti-dimosia-ypiresia/

[66] Public Service (Work Time) Regulations of 2025 (Οι περί Δημόσιας Υπηρεσίας (Χρόνος Εργασίας) Κανονισμοί του 2025 Κ.Δ.Π. 372/2025).

Consequently, public sector working parents and carers of children up to 15 years are now entitled to flexibilty measures. However, it is still too early to evaluate their practical application and effectivess.

4. Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC)

One particular challenge for working parents is the gap between the end of all leaves combined (maternity, paternity and parental), both paid and unpaid, and access to good quality and affordable (public) childcare services. The duration of all leaves combined is 42 weeks (10.5 months), whereas the availability of affordable childcare services is very limited since public kindergartens, which are free, only accept children from 3 to 6 years old. In 2024 there were 51,902 children aged between 0-4 and 47,868 children aged between 5-9 in Cyprus.[67]

As a result, the participation rate in formal childcare for children under the age of 3 is considerably lower than the EU average (40.1% in 2024[68] compared with the EU average of 68.5%)[69] and parents rely heavily on informal settings or private nurseries. The vast majority of children in early childhood educational development were enrolled in private institutions (97.3% in 2023)[70]. The share of childcare responsibility remains disproportionate for women (mothers and/or older female relatives) with adverse consequences for their working life and career.

Increasing participation in early childhood education and care and fostering the employment of people outside the labour force, including those with care responsibilities, are related priorities in the national RRP 2021-2026. In order to enhance the quality, affordability, accessibility, and inclusiveness of ECEC for children aged 0-6, Cyprus has requested technical support from the EU through the Technical Support Instrument (TSI)[71]. In addition, both the Cyprus Recovery and Resilience Facility (RRF) and the European Social Fund Plus (ESF+) support investments in early childhood education and care, which are expected to increase their accessibility for children in Cyprus, while helping reconcile family and working life for those with care responsibilities[72].

[67] Statistical Service of Cyprus, Population De Jure at the end of the year 2024.

[68] European Semester 2025, Country report - Cyprus.

[69] Eurostat statistics, https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/web/products-eurostat-news/w/ddn-20250930-2.

[70] Eurostat, Early childhood education statistics, 2023, https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php?title=Early_childhood_education_statistics

[71] Information available at: https://www.unicef.org/eca/reports/supporting-expansion-and-strategic-development-early-childhood-education-and-care-cyprus

[72] European Semester 2024, Country report - Cyprus.

Legislation was adopted in March 2024 which gradually reduces the minimum age for compulsory pre-primary education entry over the next few years[73]. In the 2025–2026 academic year, the minimum age for attending compulsory pre-primary school was lowered to 4 years and 5 months as of 1 September 2025. The minimum age will be gradually lowered in subsequent academic years, so that by the 2031–2032 academic year it will be 4 years.

Public kindergartens (pre-primary schools) provide compulsory pre-primary education for free, and students are registered based on specific criteria[74]. Their working hours are from 7:45 am to 1:05 pm[75] which is problematic for working parents who must make alternative arrangements for afternoon childcare or adjust their working hours.

There is also a limited number[76] of optional all-day public kindergartens that close at 4 pm. Community[77] and private kindergartens, which are registered at the Ministry of Education, Sport and Youth, also provide compulsory pre-primary education.

In addition, the Council of Ministers has approved two tuition subsidy schemes, providing for the direct payment of subsidies to nurseries and kindergartens approved to participate in the schemes. The objective of these schemes is to ensure the provision of quality care and education services for all children as a fundamental right. Both schemes are implemented by the Deputy Ministry of Social Welfare.

The first scheme, which is being implemented since September 2022 with a total budget of €73 million[78], provides for tuition and feeding subsidy for children up to 4 years

[73] Primary and Secondary Education (Compulsory Attendance and Provision of Free Education) Amendment Law of 2024 (Ο περί Δημοτικής και Μέσης Εκπαίδευσης (Υποχρεωτική Φοίτηση και Παροχή Δωρεάν Παιδείας) (Τροποποιητικός) Νόμος του 2024 (N.30(I)/2024)).

[74] Priority is given to children with special needs, then to children who have reached the minimum age for compulsory pre-primary education and finally socio-economic criteria apply, Ministry of Education, Sport and Youth, Department of Primary Education. Available at:
https://www.moec.gov.cy/dde/kritiria_epilogis.html

[75] Ministry of Education, Sport and Youth, Department of Primary Education. Available at:
https://www.moec.gov.cy/dde/orologio_nipiagogeiou.html#orario

[76] For the 2025-2026 academic year 129 all-day public kindergartens were established, Ministry of Education, Sport and Youth, Department of Primary Education. Available at:
https://www.moec.gov.cy/dde/programs/proairetiko_oloimero/index.html

[77] Community kindergartens receive an annual grant by the government and their fees are low. Their working hours are from 7:45 am to 2:45 pm.

[78] Co-financing of €43.8 million from the European Social Fund under the THALEIA Programme (2021–2027) and from national resources, General information on the tuition and feeding subsidy scheme for children up to 4 years old available at:
https://www.wbas.dmsw.gov.cy/dmsw/ydep.nsf/
All/7D68FC162881C455C2258886003E89B3?OpenDocument

old[79]. It is expected to cover 21.000 children[80] and forms part of the Cohesion Policy Programme Thaleia 2021-2027 which is co-funded by the EU Cohesion Policy Funds and the government[81] under the objective of social inclusion and social cohesion[82]. This scheme aims to strengthen families with young children, provide equal opportunities to children of pre-school age and reconcile family and work life[83].

The subsidy covers up to 80% of the monthly tuition with an upper limit of €350 per month. The amount of the subsidy is calculated based on the family income, the age of the child, the composition of the family and the school's working hours. Eligible for this subsidy are low-income families who receive child allowance.

The second scheme, which started in the 2025-2026 academic year, covers children aged 4 and above, who were born between 01/04/2021 and 31/08/2021[84]. The subsidy covers up to 100% of the monthly tuition with an upper limit of €200/month for private kindergartens and €130/month for community kindergartens. No income criteria are required to participate in this scheme. However, the subsidy applies only to morning attendance from 07:45 to 13:05 for 10 months (September 2025-June 2026). The total cost of this scheme for the academic year 2025-2026 is €1.8 million from the Recovery and Resilience Plan and it is expected to cover up to 2.700 children.

5. Conclusion

Promoting labour market participation of parents with young children has featured prominently in the public discourse in Cyprus over the past few years. This can be attributed to the combined effect of the adoption of the European Pillar of Social Rights and the Work- Life Balance Directive, specific Council recommendations issued in the 2019 and 2020 European semester cycles, related priorities included in the Cyprus RRP and pressure from the social partners.

The legislative framework has been gradually strengthened to protect and promote the employment of parents with young children: the length of maternity leave has been extended; the scope of paternity leave has been broadened to include parents

[79] The scheme was approved by the Council of Ministers on 08/07/2024.

[80] General information on the tuition and feeding subsidy scheme for children up to 4 years old available at: https://www.wbas.dmsw.gov.cy/dmsw/ydep.nsf/All/7D68FC162881C455C2258886003E89B3?OpenDocument

[81] Directorate General Growth, Ministry of Finance, available at: https://www.mof.gov.cy/mof/dggrowth/dggrowth.nsf/cohpolprogthalia_en/cohpolprogthalia_en?OpenDocument

[82] For academic year 2025-2026 the total cost is €17 million.

[83] Information about the Thalia project is available at: https://thalia.com.cy/en/invitations/tuition-subsidy-and-feeding-scheme-for-children-up-to-4-years-old-en/

[84] The scheme was approved by the Council of Ministers on 26/03/2025.

irrespective of marital or parental status; allowance is paid for the non-transferable part of parental leave, and carers' leave as well as the right to request flexible working arrangements for caring purposes have been introduced.

Within this framework, parents who apply for or take these types of leaves are protected from dismissal and against less favourable treatment, whereas their employment rights are also protected.

Nevertheless, complaints are submitted regularly to the Commissioner of Administration and Protection of Human Rights (Ombudsman), acting as Equality Body, in relation to employers' refusal to grant the leaves under the Work-Life Balance Laws[85]. This can be partly explained by lack of awareness on the part of the employers. Therefore, the social partners and the government have an important role to play in raising awareness among employers and employees in relation to the provisions of the Work-Life Balance Laws.

Three main challenges can be identified in this context. Firstly, the duration of paternity leave remains considerably shorter than the duration of maternity leave (2 weeks compared to 22 weeks), resulting in re-enforcing rather than challenging the existing social expectation than women are the primary child-carers.

Secondly, the financial implications of parental leave can be a determining factor on whether the parents will opt to take this leave[86]. The level of the parental leave allowance, which is currently set at 72% of the earnings, may incentivise the lowest earner, who is often the mother, to take parental leave. Stereotypes on gender roles may also discourage fathers' uptake of parental leave. Currently, there are no available statistics on the uptake of parental leave by fathers. However, it is important to monitor the gender-balanced use of family-related leaves and even examine the possibility of providing incentives for such use.

Thirdly, it remains to be seen how flexible working arrangements, including teleworking and reduced working hours, will effectively implemented in relation to public sector employees[87] with young children. This directly affects the correct implementation of the WLBD and must be seen as a priority by both the Pancyprian Public Sector Workers Federation (PASYDY) and the government.

[85] Ombudsman of Cyprus, information is available at:
https://www.ombudsman.gov.cy/ombudsman/ombudsman.nsf/
All/30FCFDA54B01CF9AC22589B4001F245E?OpenDocument

[86] Parental leave is not compulsory.

[87] The total government employment reached 54.976 persons in October 2025. Cyprus Statistical Service, available at:
https://www.gov.cy/en/economy-and-finance/government-employment-by-category-october-2025/

With regard to the provision of formal early childhood education and care (ECEC), important steps have been taken, resulting in a substantial increase in the participation rate of children under the age of three in formal childcare, from 24.4% in 2022 to 40.1% in 2024. The measures adopted by the government in this regard are expected to contribute to improved reconciliation of professional and private life and to support stronger female participation in the labour market.

EU funding made possible the recent adoption of the two schemes to subsidise ECEC. The possibility of using more European funding should be examined aimed at further improving the provision of ECEC, for example by increasing the number of optional all-day public kindergartens.

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Czech Republic and its social protection of parents with young children

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Abstract

The presented article maps the social security of parents with young children in the Czech Republic. It focuses in particular on maternity and parental leave, their duration and the financial security of parents who take such leave. The authors also place the legislation in the Czech Republic in the context of selected legislation in selected EU Member States. The text does not omit suggestions *de lege ferenda* on the topic under study.

Keywords: employment of parents; work-life balance; social protection; parental leave, parental allowance.

1. Introduction

In the course of an employee's career path, it is indisputable that motherhood and childcare represent major factors contributing to precariousness (in the Czech Republic, typically in the career of a woman). The birth of a child represents one of the most important events in a person's life, which, in addition to a considerable number of diverse consequences in the personal sphere, brings with it a temporary suspension of work commitments in the form of maternity leave and subsequent parental leave. The purpose and aim of the legislative regulation of social relations during this period is clearly to protect the health of the mother and child and to give them peace of mind and the necessary facilities both in connection with childbirth and during the subsequent care of the newborn child, when the mutual bond between the child and the mother develops. The employee is protected by the legislation in this highly sensitive period immediately preceding the birth and in the first weeks after the birth, since maternity constitutes an important personal impediment to work, during which the employer is obliged to grant the employee time off work.

The national legislation, through the relevant public social security bodies, guarantees the employee, for the duration of the impediment to work due to childcare, material security, which is closely linked or mutually dependent on the absence from work.

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Especially in recent years, it can be seen that social protection of employees should go hand in hand with efforts to implement the principle of work-life balance. Even though the current measures to support and help achieve work-life balance for employees include, for example, the establishment of a company nursery, adjusting working hours, allowing part-time work, and maintaining contact with the parent by allowing participation in educational events, teambuilding, etc., the typical measure to support the reconciliation of work and family life is the appropriate management of maternity and parental leave. Maternity and parental leave therefore remain essential tools of social protection for parents of young children. The aim of this paper is to introduce the legal regulation of maternity and parental leave and maternity and parental allowance in the Czech Republic and to pose the question whether Czech legislation will stand up to international comparison, and whether it can be considered to sufficiently implement the relevant EU directives, especially the so-called Work-Life Balance Directive.[2]

2. Maternity leave and maternity allowance in the Czech Republic

2.1. Legislation and concept

According to the Labour Code[3], maternity leave in the Czech Republic is reserved for women employees in connection with advanced pregnancy, childbirth and care of the newborn child. The father may only take paternity leave (2 weeks) or parental leave.

Maternity leave shall be granted to a female employee for a period of 28 weeks. If the employee gives birth to 2 or more children at the same time (multiple birth), she is entitled to maternity leave for 37 weeks. Czech legislation does not favour single mothers when taking maternity leave. The employer is obliged to provide the employee with excused leave without wage or salary compensation. During the period of maternity leave, the employee is usually covered by a sickness insurance benefit, specifically maternity allowance, depending on the fulfilment of the conditions laid down in the social security legislation.

Maternity allowance is one of the sickness insurance benefits and as such is governed by the Sickness Insurance Act.[4] It is worth noting that during the effective period of the Sickness Insurance Act, the legal regulation of maternity allowance has not undergone significant changes; that means that for almost 20 years the concept of

[2] Directive (EU) 2019/1158 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 20 June 2019 on work-life balance for parents and carers and repealing Council Directive 2010/18/EU, OJ L 188, 12.7.2019, p. 79–93.

[3] Act No. 262/2006 of the Collection of Laws, hereinafter referred to as Labour Code.

[4] Act No. 187/2006 of the Collection of Laws,, hereinafter referred to as Sickness Insurance Act.

supporting women on maternity leave has remained intact, unfortunately without a follow-up analysis to assess the effectiveness of the system over time.
In terms of the personal scope of the benefit, not everyone in the Czech Republic is covered by the sickness insurance system since it is obligatory only for employees (who earn the minimum income[5]). Therefore, typically businesswomen are not entitled to maternity allowance unless they voluntarily participate in the insurance scheme as self-employed or entrepreneurs.

The basic purpose of maternity allowance is to compensate for lost earnings during the earliest childcare period, Czech legislation provides maternity allowance in the amount of 70% of the reduced income[6] which is significantly lower compared with other European countries (see below). To qualify for maternity allowance the fundamental condition is participation in the sickness insurance system for at least 270 calendar days in the last two years before taking maternity leave. The self-employed person must also meet the condition of having been insured for at least 180 days in the last year before the date on which the period of the allowance begins. The child´s father or the mother´s husband can claim the maternity allowance if he has entered into a written agreement with the mother to care for the child, or if the child's mother is unable or unavailable to care for the child.

The start of maternity leave shall be determined by the employee herself, and the employee shall normally start maternity leave at the beginning of the eighth to sixth week before the expected date of childbirth, as determined by the doctor. If the employee takes less than six weeks of her maternity leave before giving birth because the birth occurs earlier than the date of the doctor's determination, she shall be entitled to maternity leave in full, i.e. for 28 or 37 weeks (as the case may be) from the date of her commencement. However, if the employee takes less than 6 weeks of maternity leave before giving birth for any other reason, she is entitled to maternity leave only from the date of birth until the expiry of 22 weeks, or 31 weeks in case of multiple births.

In view of the strain that childbirth places on a woman's body, pursuant to Section 195 of the Labour Code, maternity leave in connection with childbirth may never be less than 14 weeks and may in no case end or be interrupted before the expiry of 6 weeks from the date of childbirth. This corresponds to Article 8 of Council Directive 92/85/EEC on the introduction of measures to encourage improvements in the safety and

[5] The minimum income for employees to participate in the sickness insurance is 4.500 CZK (approximately € 160) a month.

[6] The employee's income is not counted in full for the purposes of calculating the allowance, but is reduced through a fairly complex and complicated system (there are 3 reduction limits up to which the employee's daily income is counted).

health at work of pregnant workers and workers who have recently given birth or are breastfeeding.[7]

2.2. Legal regulation of maternity leave and maternity benefits abroad – inspiration for Czech legislator

When comparing maternity leave and allowance legislation in the Czech Republic with legislations in other EU Member States, we capture some similarities and also differences that can be used as inspiration.[8] As for the similarities, under the compared laws, during maternity leave, the material security of the employee is not provided through wage or salary replacement by the employer, but rather through a benefit from the public social security system, with the specific exception of Germany.[9]

The *sine qua non* condition common to the compared legal systems is the beneficiary's participation in a public social security system, typically sickness insurance. The only difference between the Member States in this area is the required length of participation in the relevant insurance scheme to be entitled to maternity benefits. The second traditional condition is the absence of income from insured activity during the support period.

The Czech Republic is commonly known for its generous length of maternity and parental leave, which, however, may not always be beneficial for parents, due to its potential impact on employment relations. For example, except for Slovakia, the basic maternity leave in other countries is shorter than in the Czech Republic, however the financial compensation during maternity leave is higher than that granted in the Czech Republic. The majority of the analysed and compared legal regulations guarantee the employee 100% of the average earnings that the employee earned before taking maternity leave for the duration of the maternity leave. This represents the full extent of the employee's material security in France, Hungary, Germany, Poland and Slovenia. The legislation of other countries, while not compensating the employee for earnings up to the original amount, continues to grant the employee a higher level of security than the Czech legislation. In Belgium, the employee is entitled to a benefit of 82% of gross wages; in Slovakia, maternity pay is 75% of the daily assessment base.

[7] Council Directive 92/85/EEC of 19 October 1992 on the introduction of measures to encourage improvements in the safety and health at work of pregnant workers and workers who have recently given birth or are breastfeeding, OJ L 348, 28.11.1992, p. 1–7.

[8] Koldinská, K., Pichrt, J., Morávek, J., Štefko, M., Matějka Řehořová, L. Analysis of the Legal Regulation of Maternity and Parental Leave in Selected EU Member States. SPČR. Prague 2023. available at: https://www.spcr.cz/images/2023/analyzy/Analyza_MD_a_RD_KA4.pdf.

[9] German legislation presents an interesting combination of insurance benefits and employer contributions. The employer is obliged to supplement the maternity allowance paid to the beneficiary by the health insurance (which in Germany includes sickness insurance). However, the employer is entitled to full compensation for these payments, which are financed by a general contribution from all employers under a complex contribution procedure.

It can be assumed that an increase in the material security of employees during maternity leave in the Czech Republic may, with an appropriate combination of adjustments to the length of the support period, contribute to an increase in the birth rate and a more satisfactory financial situation of the caring parents. This, in turn, could motivate parents to return to work and improve the attractiveness of the sickness insurance system in general.

The Czech legislator could also apply more consistent differentiation of the employee's social situation in relation to the number of children born. Some countries differentiate between multiple births by gradually increasing the length of leave time. Czech legislation does not take into account multiple births, it only differentiates between single and multiple births, which leads to the mother of quadruplets having the same social protection as the mother of twins. This also applies to the situation when the child is taken into care instead of being cared for by the parents. This creates a certain injustice, as the legislation does not take sufficient account of what are obviously very complex and difficult situations, even if they are not very frequent. An adequate increase in social protection would probably not place any particular burden on employers or the state budget.[10]

There are also differences regarding the potential for economic activity during maternity leave. In the Czech Republic, it is not possible to combine maternity leave with other work for the same employer (part-time maternity leave) while other work or economic activity for a woman during maternity leave is not excluded, but it must be different than insured activity. In this sense, women on maternity leave are financially and professionally disadvantaged, as they are forced to leave the workforce and, as a result, their career growth is slowed down when they return. Last but not least, it has implications for remuneration or helps to 'resist' the phenomenon known as the 'gender pay gap'. Related to this is the fact that some Member States explicitly provide for the obligation to 'top up' pay upon returning from maternity leave to the level of the wages and other benefits a woman would have received had she not taken maternity leave. In this area, the countries surveyed are undoubtedly a source of inspiration for future considerations on how to better ensure real work-life balance in the Czech Republic.[11]

[10] French legislation differentiates the length of maternity leave according to the number of children in the family: the maternity leave for the 1st and 2nd child is 6 weeks before birth, 10 weeks after birth, and for the 3rd child it is 8 weeks before birth, 18 weeks after birth. In the case of multiple births, the period of leave is extended to - 12 weeks before birth, 22 weeks after birth in the case of 2 children; 24 weeks before birth and 22 weeks after birth in the case of 3 or more children.

[11] For example, the Hungarian legislation provides for the employer's obligation to make an offer to the returning employee to adjust her remuneration after maternity leave based on the average annual salary increase for employees in the same job category in the intervening period. Where there are no such employees with the employer, the average annual salary increase actually realised by the employer shall be used.

3. Parental leave and parental allowance in the Czech Republic

3.1. Legislation and concept

Parental allowance is governed by the State Social Support Act.[12] Through this non-insurance based and untested social security benefit, the state participates in covering the costs of nutrition and other basic personal needs of families with small children, in accordance with the definition of state social support benefit pursuant to Section 1 para. 1 of the State Social Support Act.

A condition for entitlement to parental allowance is the personal full-time and proper care for a child under three years of age, while care can also be provided for the child by another adult. A parent can also place the child in a crèche, kindergarten or other similar facility for children. If the child is under two years of age, he/she may not attend these facilities for more than 120 hours in a calendar year; for older children, the children's attendance at these facilities is not monitored.[13]

The parent's economic activity is not monitored in any way and the entitlement to the benefit is not conditional upon the actual taking of parental leave. This means that the parental allowance can be received, for example, even in a situation where the parent returns to work full-time. In practice, however, this situation does not occur very often. Parental allowance is usually drawn for the period during which parental leave is also taken.

While maternity and paternity benefits are sickness insurance benefits that replace income lost as a result of maternity or paternity leave (i.e. important personal impediment to work), the parental allowance benefit, as a state social support benefit paid from the state budget, serves more as a type of state contribution to the upbringing of a child, or as a certain 'social wage'.[14] This regulation of parental allowance is undoubtedly in line with the guarantee of social rights. The Constitutional Court stated in this regard that "the essential content of the right of parents caring for children to assistance from the state is defined by the Constitutional Court as ensuring a minimum social standard, or guaranteeing a minimum standard of human dignity".[15] The conditions for entitlement to parental allowance are, as follows from the above-mentioned, very

[12] Act No. 117/1995 of the Collection of Laws, hereinafter referred to as the State Social Support Act.

[13] Section 31 of the State Social Support Act.

[14] On the characteristics of state social support and individual benefits of this system, see, for example, Koldinská, K. et al. Social security law. C.H. Beck. Prague. 2022.

[15] The Constitutional Court has recently commented on the regulation of parental allowance in its judgment Pl.ÚS 1/20., (paragraph 41). The manner in which this right is fulfilled and reflected in legal regulations is then left by the Constitutional Court to the discretion of the legislator.

loose. Basically, anyone who has children can draw parental allowance, regardless of their financial, social or work situation.

With effect from 1 January 2024, among other things, the parental allowance has been increased and its maximum support period has been aligned with the length of parental leave.[16] From 1 January 2024, the parental allowance is CZK 350,000 if it is drawn for the oldest child in the family, or (as of 1 January 2026) CZK 700,000 if it is used to care for multiples. Parental allowance, as well as parental leave, can be drawn until the child is 3 years old.

The parental allowance, along with parental leave should be the main tool for social protection of parents of young children, enabling them to effectively reconcile work and family life. Reconciling work and family life is an important means of achieving equal opportunities for men and women and a fairer distribution of care responsibilities.[17] This is evidenced by the latest statistics, according to which, for example, in 2023, 267,300 people received parental allowance, of which only 5000 were men.[18] The economic thinking of the family often leads to the fact that the man prefers to stay full-time at work and the children are taken care of by the woman, who often has no choice but to actually stay at home and take full-time maternity and parental leave, because there is a lack of capacity in pre-school facilities and part-time job offers.

In fact, in Czechia, only 14.5% of women work part-time[19], whereas in the Netherlands, for instance,66.64% of women do.[20] The Czech Republic also shows, among other things, the largest gap in employment rates (-16.3 percentage points), where the employment rate for women without children reached 90.5% compared to 74.2% for women with children.[21] According to a recent survey, in Czechia, there is a lack of 20,000 places in child care facilities for children under 3 years, for children under 1 year they practically do not exist (if so, then on payment and they are very expansive).[22]

[16] Act No. 407/2023 of the Collection of Laws, amending, in particular, the State Social Support Act, Act No. 73/2011 of the Collection of Laws on the Labour Office of the Czech Republic and on Amendments to Related Acts, and Act No. 111/2006 of the Collection of Laws on Assistance in Material Need.

[17] For the study of the issue of work-life balance in the Czech Republic, see Pichrt, J., Tomšej, J. (eds) Balancing on the edge of work-life balance and transparency, Prague, Wolters Kluwer, 2022.

[18] Ministry of Internal Affairs and Communications, Number of recipients of parental allowance by gender. Information available at:
https://www.mpsv.cz/vybrane-statisticke-udaje

[19] Czech Statistical Office. The Development of the Czech Labour Market – 3. Quarter of 2025. Available at: https://csu.gov.cz/produkty/the-development-of-the-czech-labour-market-3-quarter-of-2025.

[20] Eurostat data – available at
https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php?title=Part-time_and_full-time_employment_-_statistics.

[21] Detto.

[22] Data available at
https://www.expats.cz/czech-news/article/czech-nurseries-capacities-short-of-20000-places-for-toddlers.

The goal to share the caring responsibilities between parents is apparently easy to pronounce under the Czech conditions, but all the more difficult to achieve, especially that the increase of parental allowance and leave can also have a welfare trap effect.[23] However, a relatively recent sociological survey shows that 70% of men would like to stay at home with their child for at least part of their parental leave.[24]

In the Czech Republic, a relatively unique benefit formula is applied, through which the monthly amount of parental allowance is calculated.[25] Under certain circumstances (basically in the case of a sufficiently high income), the recipient of the parental allowance can choose the length of the parental allowance. The higher the income, the greater the flexibility and the possibility to draw the parental allowance within six months.

According to the current legislation, each recipient of parental allowance could choose the amount of the allowance, up to CZK 15,000 per month. The increase in parental allowance from 1 January 2024 means that parents with high incomes are able to draw parental allowance in 6 months at the earliest, drawing up to CZK 58,333 per month.[26] However, this choice can only be made by those who can prove that at least one of the parents in the family can be assessed 70% of the 30 times the daily assessment base (for the purposes of calculating maternity benefit) in an amount exceeding CZK 15,000 on the date of birth of the youngest child in the family. Additionally, the selected amount of parental allowance may not exceed 70% of the 30 times the daily assessment base per month.[27]

[23] Although the relationship between parental leave and parental allowance has not been monitored for a long time and there are no statistics mapping the development over a longer period of time, the CERGE-EI study published in 2022 (Grossmann, J., Pertold, F., Šoltéz, M., Šarboch, M., Zapletalová, L. The Effect of Increasing the Parental Allowance on Women's Participation in the Labour Market. Prague: IDEA - CERGE-EI. 2022. Available at: https://idea.cerge-ei.cz/files/IDEA_Studie_14_2022_Rodicovska/IDEA_Studie_14_2022_Rodicovska.html#p=3) suggests that the increase in parental allowance itself causes the opposite effect on the labour market than that which parental allowance should promote, namely the reconciliation of work and family life. The study shows that the income effect of the increase in parental allowance in 2020 was reflected in mothers' decisions about work involvement, and for many of them the period of drawing parental allowance was extended. The labour market participation rate of mothers of three-year-old children has fallen from 70% to 60%, and the labour market participation rate of mothers of two-year-olds has fallen by 6 percentage points to 20%. A more significant decrease in work participation occurred among mothers who received parental allowance for their first child. In terms of educational attainment, the impact of the increase in parental allowance was felt especially for mothers with a university education. The share of working mothers in this group decreased by a third (by 16.4 p.p.) and the number of hours worked by them decreased by 4.8 hours per week (a decrease by 30%).

[24] Tátové na rodičovské (Dad's as parents) Information available at: https://www.ceskovdatech.cz/clanek/163-tatove-na-rodicovske/.

[25] In none of the countries examined in the above-cited study does a similar solution appear, the benefit is usually set relatively simply, both in terms of the conditions for entitlement to it and in terms of the benefit formula.

[26] The taxable income of the parent reached about CZK 85,000.

[27] Section 30 (3) (b) of the State Social Support Act.

At the end of 2022, only 8% of all recipients of parental allowance drew more than CZK 13,000 per month, while at least 60% of recipients had this option due to their income.[28] As mentioned above, a mere increase in the parental allowance will probably not lead to a reduction in the length of the period during which parents (mostly mothers) stay at home with their children and 'fall out' of the labour market. If, for example, a parent reached the average wage in the national economy, i.e. CZK 42,500, his parental allowance would be CZK 29,167 and the shortest duration for drawing of the parental allowance would be 12 months, i.e. approximately until the child is 1.5 years old. If the parental allowance is drawn for 24 months, its monthly amount would be CZK 14,583, and if it is drawn until the child is 3 years old, i.e. for 30 months, the parental allowance is CZK 11,667.

It is clear from the above that the parental allowance does not represent a source of decent income if the parent draws it until the child is two or three years old. However, due to the current lack of pre-school facilities and an insufficient number of part-time job offers, most women remain dependent on parental allowance or other benefits of state social support or assistance in material need, which the family often does not qualify for, given that the family's decisive income usually comes from the father working full-time. This creates an income dependence of the family, or the mother, on the parent who remains working full-time, which is usually a man.

In the opinion of the authors of this article, the parental allowance thus represents an insufficiently flexible, relatively complicated allowance that is paid for too long, which, in combination with the lack of places in pre-school facilities and the low flexibility of the labour market, excludes from the labour market for a relatively long time those who take over the main caring responsibilities of children, mostly women. The current regulation of parental allowance does not provide for a sufficient opportunity for an effective division of caring roles in the family, and if the parental allowance is drawn for a longer period of time, like up to age of 3 of the child, it does not represent a decent income for the caregiver. A mere increase in the benefit, without modernising its concept, will probably not lead to better opportunities for reconciling work and family life.

This is also evidenced by a study mapping the situation of families from 2018-2022, which shows, among other things, that "most parents from the monitored types of families prefer state support in the form of services to financial support, which should also take the form of tax relief rather than the payment of social benefits. Financial assistance would be most welcomed by parents from multi-child families and single parents, with both groups preferring it more often in the form of tax relief."[29]

[28] See the explanatory memorandum to Act No. 407/2023 of the Collection of Laws.

[29] Křečková Tůmová, N., Nešporová, O., Svobodová, K., Paloncyová, J., Höhne, S. Situation of families with children in the Czech Republic in the years 2018-2022. RILSA Policy Briefs 4/2023. Available at: https://katalog.vupsv.cz/fulltext/PB_04-2023.pdf.

Therefore, the parental allowance may still be the subject to changes to promote work-life balance and a fairer distribution of care roles between men and women, while other Member States' regulations can represent a valuable source of inspiration.

3.2. Legal regulation of parental benefits abroad – inspiration for the Czech Republic

As the issue of work-life balance is still insufficiently addressed in the Czech Republic, a team from the Faculty of Law of Charles University prepared a comparative study in 2023 that dealt with the legal regulation of maternity and parental leave in selected EU Member States.[30] This study can also be used as inspiration for Czech legislation, which in international comparison seems to be insufficiently supportive of the reconciliation of work and family life.

Social security linked to parental leave is a matter of public insurance in most European countries, and the benefits paid during parental leave are mostly financed by the compulsory social insurance system and administered by an insurance company, which is usually a state body or at least a state administration. Another solution, similar to the Czech one, is a system of family benefits, where the parental allowance is a non-insurance benefit financed from the state budget, as is the case, for example, in Germany. In most countries, the main source of security during parental leave is usually a benefit from the public social security system, typically from social insurance. This means that participation in the insurance scheme is a condition for entitlement to the benefit, but in some countries the legislation does not require any 'waiting period' and the insurance benefit can be drawn, for example, from the first day of the existence of the insurance relationship. However, it is usual that a certain period of participation in the social insurance system is set as a condition for entitlement to parental benefit, in other words, the usual condition is that a certain preliminary waiting period has been met. Of course, there are also countries where parental allowance is not linked to participation in the insurance scheme. For example, the German regulation of parental allowance is similar to the Czech model. Parental allowance is provided here as a family benefit, financed from the state budget.

A big question for the Czech legislator is the implementation of the requirement for the non-transferability of the right to at least 2 months of parental leave to the other parent, as regulated in Article 5 of Directive 2019/1158. As mentioned above, even without this requirement of EU law, the Czech legislation has remained somewhat 'behind' European trends and basically does not provide for support for the division of care roles.

Countries that are successful in supporting the effective reconciliation of work and family life usually pay relatively high parental benefits, for a shorter period of time,

[30] Koldinská, K., Pichrt, J., Morávek, J., Štefko, M., Matějka Řehořová, L. Analysis of the Legal Regulation of Maternity and Parental Leave in Selected EU Member States. SPČR. Prague 2023. Available at: https://www.spcr.cz/images/2023/analyzy/Analyza_MD_a_RD_KA4.pdf

which are then followed by guaranteed opportunities for flexible work and sufficient capacity of affordable childcare services. Some countries are gradually introducing the so-called part-time parental allowance, which is de facto not the case in Czechia.

4. Possible conclusions and proposals de lege ferenda for the Czech legislator

The Swedish experience is very valuable and inspiring. In Sweden, there has been a significant shift in the legislation over the last 40 years that promotes an equal sharing of caring roles. In 1974, mothers received 99.5% of all days of parental allowance, while fathers received 0.5%. In 2022, mothers received 70 percent of the days of parental allowance and the share of fathers increased to about 30 percent.[31] Also, the structure of parental insurance legislation with earnings-dependent benefits and long vacation periods is considered by many researchers to be the main explanation for why Sweden has managed to combine a relatively high birth rate with a high rate of female labour market participation and low child poverty.

The German regulation of parental benefits (the combination of insurance benefits and employer contributions) can also be considered inspirational for the Czech legal environment for two reasons: parental benefit is not an insurance benefit as it is in other countries, and at the same time, the legislation contains interesting tools for the effective reconciliation of work and private life and a fairer division of caring roles.

In Slovenia, parental leave was previously a right of the mother, which was transferable to the father. Both parents cannot take parental leave at the same time, with the exception of extended parental leave (in the case of twins or multiple births, multiple children, special needs, but not in the case of premature birth) and the non-transferable part (60 days). Both parents can take it at the same time if they take it in the form of partial absence from work (both work part-time and take care of the child part-time). One of the biggest advantages of the Slovenian regulation of paternity and parental leave is that it is paid generously throughout the whole period (100% of previous income).

The experience of other European countries represents a very valuable source of inspiration for considering possible changes to the Czech legislation on parental allowance. At the same time, it is clear that none of the legal regulations can be adopted as they are. On the basis of the above, however, it is possible to make some proposals for changes to Czech legislation on parental allowance so that it better meets the requirement for work-life balance and a fairer distribution of care roles between men and women.

[31] Srov. např. Duvander, A.-Z., Ferrarini, T., Thalberg, S. Swedish parental leave and gender equality Achievements and reform challenges in a European perspective. Arbetsrapport/Institutet för Framtidsstudier; 2005:11. Available at:
https://www.iffs.se/media/1118/20051201134956filU8YIJLRAaC7u4FV7gUmy.pdf.

The de lege ferenda proposals concerning the legal regulation of parental allowance in the Czech Republic are the following:

- It would be appropriate to consider shortening the support period of parental allowance, e.g. up to 2 years of age.
- Clearer rules for part-time parental leave and support of taking it up would further help.
- Introduction of some benefits for single parents in the field of social rights (e.g. prior place in the kindergarten, higher child support etc.).
- An issue that has not yet been resolved is the non-transferability of part of the benefit. Following alternative solutions could be considered:

a) increase in parental allowance if the other parent (usually the father) will take care of the child and take parental leave,
b) introduction of a new benefit that would "supplement" the parental allowance if the child is cared for by the other parent,
c) a more significant change in the concept of parental allowance according to the Slovenian or Swedish model.

All three options would undoubtedly require changes in labour law regulations as well as in the regulation of parental allowance as such. In the given situation, it may be recommended that the legislator aim for the minimum requirement of the WLB Directive, i.e. 2 non-transferable months, with the provision that it would be impossible to have a concurrence of gainful activity with drawing parental allowance during this period. Of course, it would also be possible to consider partial drawing of parental allowance together with taking parental leave for part-time work.

As for the matter of part-time parental leave, even though the rules in the Czech legislation are not clear, as of the 1 June 2025, an employee, despite taking parental leave, is (to a limited extent) given the chance to perform the same work for the employer on the basis of an atypical employment relationship (work agreement concluded outside the employment relationship). Although the authors of this article are of the opinion that this is definitely not an ideal way of reintegrating parents into the labour market, the legislator sees this as another instrument towards better reconciliation of work and family life.

Any of the above-outlined variants of changes in the regulation of parental allowance aimed at better reconciling work and family life would undoubtedly require a prior detailed analysis of the economic and social impacts and the effect on the position of individual types of families, employees, self-employed persons as well as employers. However, if Czech society intends to realistically move towards reconciling work and family life, comprehensive changes in the regulation of social protection of parents with children are probably inevitable.

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Promoting labour market participation of parents with young children in Germany

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Abstract

The reconciliation of raising children and participation in the labour market has become a central issue in Germany's social and labour policy. This study examines the legal framework, labour market conditions and social protection mechanisms that aim to promote the labour market participation of parents with young children. It traces the historical development from the traditional one-earner family model prevalent in West Germany until the late 1970s towards a more dual-earner oriented system. Particular attention is given to labour law instruments such as parental leave, part-time work and telework, as well as to social benefits including parental allowance and child benefit. These measures seek to support parents financially and provide flexibility in employment, thereby facilitating a better balance between work and family responsibilities. The article concludes that strengthening childcare infrastructure, improving working conditions in childcare professions and expanding flexible care options are essential steps to enable parents to participate more fully in the labour market.

Keywords: employment of parents; work-life balance; labour law protection; social protection; childcare systems, Germany

1. General context

The compatibility of raising children and the world of work is now a high priority in the public debate in Germany. This was not always the case. Until the end of the 1970s, the usual model of the one-earner marriage prevailed, at least in West Germany. The man was the main earner, almost always in full-time employment, and the woman was responsible for bringing up the children. As soon as a child was on the way, the mother, if she was employed at all, dropped out of the labour market. The law in force at the time encouraged this behaviour. Women needed their husband's permission to take paid employment outside the home. They could not even open their own bank account to transfer their wages to without their husband's consent. In the public sector, which included the post office, telephone and railroads, as well as in large companies, the legal regulations stipulated that only one partner could be employed. If a woman married, she had to resign. The law stipulated that the wife had to devote herself entirely to the household. If these duties were neglected, the husband could forbid other activities.

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Due to this very patriarchal legislation, the number of working women was relatively low. Women with children were generally only employed if there was no main breadwinner or if their income was very low. In this case, women usually worked part-time. Women working alongside bringing up children was socially frowned upon. In German, there is the term "Rabenmutter" (raven mother). This refers to women who are gainfully employed even though they have underage children. Despite the enormous social change since the end of the 1970s, this term still enjoys a certain popularity in conservative circles today. Conservative political circles also tried to persuade women to give up gainful employment in favour of raising children. The social benefits introduced for this purpose were referred to in political discourse as "stove premiums".

Since the 1980s, this model of the one-earner marriage has been on the wane for various reasons. The antiquated legal provisions that enshrined the husband's right of decision and veto have been removed from the law.[2] Today, women have a far better education than their mothers and grandmothers and want to make use of this in their careers.[3] The almost 40-year division of Germany continues to play a strong role in social consciousness. In the former socialist GDR, almost all women were employed. The opportunities to reconcile work and childrearing were supported by the state through childcare facilities and generous arrangements for time off work (e.g. if the child was ill). In West Germany, on the other hand, it was not socially desirable for women to work while bringing up children.

Unfortunately, with reunification in 1990, these opportunities to reconcile working and raising children in East Germany tended to be reduced. Despite several legislative initiatives and major investments, it is still generally difficult for young families to reconcile bringing up children and working. Inadequate childcare facilities are a major obstacle. Due to increased mobility, family alternatives (e.g. grandparents) are less available. Professional childcare (e.g. kindergarten) is very expensive and eats up a considerable proportion of earnings. For this reason, it is not financially viable for many young families if one partner takes on gainful employment in addition to raising children. Although the issue of reconciling family and employment is very much part of the public debate, it is still very inadequately resolved in practice.

[2] The main reform came into force on 1st July 1977 (Erstes Gesetz zur Reform des Ehe- und Familienrechts vom 14. Juni 1976 [1. EheRG], BGBl. I Nr. 67, 1421

[3] At universities more than 52 per cent are female. There is an high increase in law faculties and medicine bur still a lack in technical studies,
https://www.destatis.de/DE/Themen/Gesellschaft-Umwelt/Bildung-Forschung-Kultur/Hochschulen/Tabellen/frauenanteile-akademischelaufbahn, state on 9 December 2025

2. Labour market situation

Germany has a population of just under 83.5 million inhabitants, of which around 42.3 million are women and 41.2 million are men.[4] The number of people in employment has risen continuously since 2006 and stands at 42.0 million, which corresponds to an employment rate of almost 77%.[5] Almost 35 million people are covered by statutory social insurance, but this is not very meaningful because there are a number of occupational groups (e.g. civil servants, self-employed persons) who are not subject to compulsory insurance.

a) Unemployment

The unemployment rate varies greatly from region to region. It is significantly lower in the southern federal states (Bavaria 3.7%) than in the east and north of the republic (Bremen 15%). The national average is 6.8%, slightly lower for women (5.8%) than for men (6.2%). There are also hardly any differences between the sexes in terms of age structure. Among women, 8% of the registered unemployed are under the age of 25, among men this is 10%. The proportion of 25- to 55-year-old persons is the same for both genders and stands at 65%.[6] There are also no differences in terms of education. In each case, 55% of the registered unemployed have no vocational qualification. However, there is a significant difference among single parents. Among women, 16% of the registered unemployed are single parents, compared to only 1% of men. This correlates with the figures according to which the majority of single parents are women.
It is particularly difficult for single parents to reconcile raising children and working due to a lack of reliable childcare options.

On the other hand, there are almost 700,000 vacancies that cannot be filled. The demand for trained specialists is enormous. There is also a debate as to whether social security in the event of unemployment creates false incentives for families not to pursue gainful employment. This is because social security in the event of unemployment (citizen's allowance)[7] provides a financial supplement for each child. On the other hand, no additional benefit is paid for gainful employment.

[4] https://www.destatis.de/EN/Themes/Society-Environment/Population/Current-Population/_node.html#sprg267530

[5] https://www-genesis.destatis.de/datenbank/online/statistic/13211/table/13211-0001/search/s/VW5lbXBsb3ltZW50

[6] https://eures.europa.eu/living-and-working/labour-market-information/labour-market-information-germany_en#national-level---germany

[7] Bürgergeld (Citizan's Allowance) Social Code Book 2

Share of employed persons in the population aged 15 and over in % (as of April 2, 2024)			
Age from ... to ... years	Total	Men	Women
15 to 19	28.1	29.5	26.6
20 to 24	70.2	72.2	68.1
25 to 29	82.3	85.5	78.8
30 to 34	84.3	89.9	78.4
35 to 39	84.8	90.4	79.0
40 to 44	86.6	91.0	82.2
45 to 49	87.4	90.3	84.5
50 to 54	86.5	89.6	83.5
55 to 59	83.1	86.7	79.6
60 to 64	65.4	69.4	61.5
65 to 69	20.2	23.9	16.8
15 to 64	77.2	80.8	73.6
65 and older	9.0	11.8	6.7

b) Gender pay gap

As in most countries, there is also a gender pay gap in Germany. Despite formal equality between men and women, the unadjusted figure (i.e. only the pay gap) is 18%, although it has been falling for some time. Interestingly, in East Germany (former GDR) it is only one third at 6%. The adjusted gender pay gap excludes the part of the pay gap that is based on structural differences (endowment effects) such as the level of education, occupation, qualifications, work experience, etc. of men and women.[8]

The most interesting aspect is the labour market-related gender pay gap. This shows that average wages are lower for women because, on the one hand, they work in lower-paid jobs (especially in the social sector) and are less likely to hold well-paid management positions. In addition, the number of hours worked is lower due to part-time employment and the entire working life is shorter due to raising children. Moreover, many married women have little incentive to extend their working lives. No taxes or social security contributions are payable on earnings up to €603 (1 January 2026). If this limit is exceeded, contributions must be paid to the health insurance fund. This is a crucial point since this privilege of being fully co-insured with the partner without additional payment makes it less attractive for women to increase their working hours and earnings. Unfortunately, the regulation also means that many women have little or no entitlement to old-age insurance. As a result, many women end up in poverty in old age.

[8] Federal Statistical Office, Press release N° 453 of 16 December 2025, https://www.destatis.de/DE/Presse/Pressemitteilungen/2025/12/PD25_453_621.html

c) Labour force participation of young parents

The labour force participation of young parents has tended to increase. This is not always because young parents want to work, but because they have to work to cover the high cost of living. In large cities and conurbations in particular, it is almost impossible to pay rent without a second income.

It is worth noting that there are now more young men who work part-time, at least for a certain period of time, in order to devote themselves to bringing up children. This is encouraged by the Parental Leave Act, which allows paid leave from work to raise children.

3. Labour law protection of and employment incentives for parents with young children

In addition to a financial benefit (parental allowance), parents have the option of interrupting their employment relationship for three years to raise children (parental leave). They have the right to return to employment with their previous employer, but not necessarily to their old job.

a) Parental leave (Elternzeit)[9]

Parental leave refers to the period of unpaid leave from work after the birth of a child. The entitlement to parental leave lasts until the child reaches the age of three. Up to 12 months of parental leave can also be transferred to the period between the child's 3rd and 8th birthday. Parental leave can be split between the parents or only taken by one parent.

The indicator shows the proportion of mothers and fathers on parental leave in relation to all parents in employment. Parents with a job also include people who are absent from work for more than three months. All mothers and fathers between the ages of 20 and 49 whose youngest child is under the age of 6 are taken into account.

Women take parental leave significantly more often than men. In 2023, just under a quarter of all mothers whose youngest child is under the age of 6 were on parental leave. Among fathers, this only applied to 1.8%.

The rate of parental leave decreases as the mother's age increases. While in the 20 to 29 age group, the proportion of mothers on parental leave was 38.2%, this figure was only 25.2% among 30 to 39-year-olds. Among mothers aged 40 to 49, this proportion was only 10.3%. There were no significant age differences for fathers. The parental leave rate is significantly higher for parents with children under the age of 3.

In 2023, the parental leave rate for mothers whose youngest child is under the age of three was 43.9%, 20 percentage points higher than for mothers with children under the age of 6. This suggests that mothers often take parental leave until their child reaches the age of three.

[9] Gesetz zum Elterngeld und zur Elternzeit (Bundeselterngeld- und Elternzeitgesetz - BEEG), Federal Parental Allowance and Parental Leave Act.

Although the proportion of fathers whose youngest child is under the age of three increased, this must be seen against the background of the already low parental leave rate of fathers.

Proportion of parents on parental leave out of all working parents in 2023 in %			
Parents with child	Total	Men	Women
Youngest child under 3 years	20.5	3.0	43.0
Youngest child under 6 years	11.9	1.8	23.9

Since the introduction of the Federal Parental Allowance and Parental Leave Act on January 1, 2007, the proportion of applicants has risen continuously. The proportion of parents on parental leave whose youngest child is under the age of 6 increased by 1.6 percentage points between 2012 and 2022, from 10.8% to 12.4%.
The proportion of mothers on parental leave is significantly higher. From 2012 to 2022, their share rose by 3.3 percentage points to 25.1%.
The increase in the parental leave rate is more pronounced for fathers, albeit at a lower level. At 1.8%, the proportion of fathers on parental leave in 2022 was almost twice as high as in 2012 (1.1%).
In 2023, the parental leave rate fell by 0.5 % points compared to the previous year. The decline is exclusively attributable to mothers (-1.2 percentage points). The increase in mothers working part-time with the youngest child under the age of 6 in 2023 compared to the previous year suggests that mothers are opting to return to work part-time earlier. The parental leave rate for fathers has not changed compared to the previous year.[10]

b) Part-time employment

The law on part-time employment[11] allows employees in companies with at least 15 employees to apply to their employer for part-time employment. No justification is required, but the argument of raising children makes it more difficult for the employer to reject the application for operational reasons.
In 1991, the overall part-time rate was still just under 14 percent (men: 2.1 percent, women: 30.2 percent). Over time, the part-time rate has continued to rise in almost every year, with a few exceptions, although the increase has been less pronounced in recent years in particular. Looking at the development between 1991 and 2019 from a gender perspective, it is noticeable that the part-time rate for women was always far higher than that of men and that the increase was also stronger. Almost 49 per cent of women work part-time whereas only 12 percent men have reduced working hours.[12]

[10] https://www.destatis.de/EN/Themes/Labour/Labour-Market/Quality-Employment/Dimension3/3_9_PersonsParentalLeave.html

[11] Gesetz über Teilzeitarbeit und befristete Arbeitsverträge (Teilzeit- und Befristungsgesetz - TzBfG), 21. December 2000, BGBl. I S. 1966.

[12] https://www.destatis.de/DE/Presse/Pressemitteilungen/2025/05/PD25_175_13.html

c) Telework and home office

The same applies to applications for teleworking or working from home. During the coronavirus pandemic in particular, employers have increasingly permitted teleworking and working from home, and in some cases, it was even required by law. Legally, when teleworking, the employer must equip the workplace at home (e.g. with furniture), whereas when working from home, this is the employee's responsibility.

Working from home offers employees the opportunity to better balance their private life with their job. From the employee's perspective, for example, family and other personal obligations can be better fulfilled and leisure time can be used more effectively. While most employees welcome the opportunity to work from home, especially if they have family commitments, many employers would like to restrict or abolish it again once the pandemic is over. However, due to the severe shortage of skilled workers, well-trained employees can now negotiate more flexible working conditions with their employer as part of their work-life balance.

In 2023, 23.5% of all employees in Germany worked from home. Of these, 13.2% worked from home every day or for at least half of their working hours. A further 10.4% worked from home on less than half of their working days. The proportion has almost doubled compared to the pre-coronavirus level. In 2019, 12.9 % of employees still worked from home. In the first coronavirus year of 2020, it was 21.0%. In 2025, the quota remained with 24 per cent stable but with less days at home[13].

Whether and to what extent employees work from home also depends on whether they are employed or self-employed. At 39.3%, self-employed people with employees work from home significantly more often than employees (21.4%). While the proportion of self-employed persons with employees has hardly changed compared to 2019, employees work from home much more frequently than before the coronavirus (2019: 9.6%). Solo self-employed persons (53.4%) work from home most frequently. Of these, 76.5% even spent at least half of their working time at home every day.

There are also differences when looking at socio-demographic aspects such as gender or age. At 24.1%, men work from home slightly more often than women (23.0%). At 27.8%, the 35 to 44 age group used the option of working from home more frequently than the working population as a whole.

d) Directive 2019/1158[14].

Directive 2019/1158 also had to be implemented in Germany. The German government was of the opinion that the requirements were met with the existing legislation. Critics complained above all that there is an entitlement to a reduction in working hours, but not to a change in the individual work schedule. Likewise, the options for a further reduction in working hours and the right to increase working hours are

[13] https://www.destatis.de/DE/Presse/Pressemitteilungen/2025/09/PD25_N051_13.html?templateQueryString=home+office

[14] Directive (EU) 2019/1158 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 20 June 2019 on work-life balance for parents and carers and repealing Council Directive 2010/18/EU, PE/20/2019/REV/1, *OJ L 188, 12.7.2019, S. 79-93*

insufficiently regulated. The EU Commission had initiated infringement proceedings against Germany.[15] However, this was concluded at the pre-trial stage on 1 June 2023[16].

4. Social protection of parents with young children

Since the mid-1980s, there have been various legislative initiatives to support young families in reconciling bringing up children and working.

a) Child-raising allowance (Erziehungsgeld)[17]

For births between January 1, 1986 and December 31, 2006, child-raising allowance was a cash benefit for a parent who primarily raised the child. The parent was only allowed to work part-time for a maximum of 30 hours per week, and certain income limits could not be exceeded. When it was introduced in 1986, the amount and duration of child-raising allowance was set at DM 600 (appr. €307) for ten months, later gradually increased to two years. Since 1998, beneficiaries could decide whether they wanted to receive the standard amount for a maximum of 24 months or the so-called budgeted child-raising allowance for a maximum of twelve months at a higher rate.

Three federal states (Thuringia, Saxony, Bavaria) voluntarily paid an additional state child-raising allowance (Landeserziehungsgeld) in the second or third year of life. At present, only the federal state of Saxony continues to pay this additional income-related benefit.[18] However, it is only paid if there is no space in a public care institution available.

It was criticized that the child-raising allowance put housewives in a much better position than before, disadvantaged working mothers and discriminated against single mothers. Mothers were to be motivated by the child-raising allowance to concentrate on family responsibilities for several years and to withdraw from gainful employment for this purpose, which was also referred to as the "mothers' trap", as mothers who took advantage of this leeway were "practically eliminated as competitors for jobs with promotion opportunities".

b) Parental allowance (Elterngeld)[19]

Parental allowance is now paid for children born after January 1, 2007.

Parental allowance is generally limited to twelve months immediately after the birth of the child. Entitlement can be extended to a maximum of 14 months in total by adding (at least two) partner months. Single parents are entitled to fourteen months of

[15] INFR(2022)0347 Germany

[16] https://ec.europa.eu/implementing-eu-law/search-infringement-decisions/?lang_code=DE&typeOfSearch=byDecision&active_only=0&noncom=0&r_dossier=INFR(2022)0347&decision_date_from=&decision_date_to=&submit=Suche&langCode=EN&version=v1&refId=INFR(2022)0347&activeCase=false&page=1&size=10&order=asc&sortColumns=leadDg

[17] Gesetz zum Erziehungsgeld und zur Elternzeit 6 December 1985, BGBl. I S. 2154

[18] https://www.elterngeld.de/landeserziehungsgeld/

[19] Gesetz zum Elterngeld und zur Elternzeit, 5. December 2006, BGBl. I S. 2748

parental allowance. The amount depends on the net income of the parent applying for parental allowance and serves as compensation for wages.
Parents who were unemployed or without income before the birth of their child receive the minimum amount of €300 for 14 months.
Although parents are entitled to parental leave until their child reaches the age of three, parental allowance is granted for a maximum of fourteen months. This is intended to provide an incentive to return to work earlier.
The primary aim of parental allowance is to enable parents to leave work temporarily without having to accept too great a reduction in their standard of living. Linking the parental allowance to the level of previous salary should also encourage academics in particular to decide to have more children.
The parental allowance is designed to mitigate the so-called rollercoaster effect. This effect results from the fact that in modern partnerships in which both partners are employed, one parent (typically the woman) usually gives up work for a shorter or longer period after the birth of a child. This significantly reduces the family income and the partner who is no longer working becomes economically dependent on the other partner. Only when the child is old enough for both partners to be (fully) gainfully employed again would the income return to the previous level and the economic dependency ends - until the birth of the next child. As this rollercoaster effect is particularly noticeable with higher incomes, it is regarded as a central reason for the low birth rate among the 'highly qualified'.

Entitled to parental allowance is a parent if he/she

1. has a place of residence or habitual abode in Germany,
2. lives in the same household as the child,
3. looks after and brings up this child themselves and
4. is not in gainful employment or is not in full-time employment.

There is no entitlement to parental allowance if income exceeds €200,000 for both single parents and couples since April 2024 and €175,000 from April 2025.

Reference period and duration

Parental allowance is paid for months of the child's life and not for calendar months. For example, if a child is born on July 27, the first month of entitlement runs from July 27 to August 26. Income earned during a month for which parental allowance is paid is offset against the parental allowance and reduces it.
Since April 1, 2024, both parents can generally receive the basic allowance for a maximum of one month at a time; parents of multiples or children with disabilities can do so for longer. This encourages parents to take turns receiving parental allowance. Studies have shown that this can be an opportunity for a long-term partnership-based division of care work. When fathers take parental leave alone for a period of time,

this not only strengthens their bond with their children, but also contributes to them becoming more involved in childcare later on in family life.[20]
Single parents with sole custody or right of residence can also claim the two "partner months" for themselves if the child's mother was in gainful employment before the child was born.

Flexibility through Parental Allowance Plus

Parents of children born after 1 July 2015 are entitled to Parental Allowance Plus, a more flexible form of parental allowance. Parental Allowance Plus can be drawn for "twice as long and half as much as full parental allowance" if you work part-time at the same time, i.e. up to a maximum of 28 months. However, the parental allowance still puts partners who share childcare equally at a disadvantage compared to couples where one of them only provides childcare and the other works full-time, as they may receive significantly less support.

Partnership bonus

There is also a partnership bonus in addition to parental allowance if both parents work 24 to 32 hours a week while receiving parental allowance. This involves up to four additional months of parental allowance for each parent. These months must be taken consecutively and in parallel and the conditions must be met in all four months. The fact that the partner bonus does not apply at all if only one parent is working has been criticized.
The partnership bonus is partly similar to the equality bonus (Jämställdhetsbonus) of the Swedish parental allowance but is less flexible.

Relevant income (assessment period)

In principle, the average net income of the applicant from gainful employment in the twelve calendar months prior to the calendar month of the birth is decisive for the calculation of parental allowance (monthly net income). In case of self-employed persons, the monthly net income is calculated as 1/12 of the annual profit.

Amount of parental allowance

Parental allowance is income-dependent and amounts to between 65 and 100 percent of the previous net monthly income, with a maximum of €1,800 and a minimum of 300 euros per month.

[20] https://www.bmbfsfj.bund.de/bmbfsfj/aktuelles/alle-meldungen/neue-regelungen-beim-elterngeld-237792

Monthly net income:	Proportion of the resulting parental allowance to the income lost
between 0 and €1,000	67 percent increases by 0.1 percentage points for every two euros by which the monthly net income falls below €1,000, up to a maximum of 100 percent. If the earned income falls to zero during parental leave and the applicant's monthly net income is between €300 and €340, the parental allowance amounts to 100% of the monthly net income. Mothers or fathers who have no income during the assessment period receive a minimum parental allowance of €300, which is offset against some other social benefits.
between €1,000 and €1,200	67 percent
higher than €1,200	67 percent decreases by 0.1 percentage points for every two euros by which the monthly net income exceeds €1,200, up to 65 percent, which is reached from a monthly net income of €1,240.
higher than €2,769.23	Parental allowance generally amounts to €1,800 (= 65% of €2,769.23; maximum value)

If a father or mother reduces their working hours after the birth, this part-time employment may not exceed 32 hours per week, otherwise they will no longer be entitled to parental allowance.
For part-time employees, the income from part-time work is also taken into account.
If you have a child under the age of three or at least two children under the age of six (not counting the newborn), you will receive a sibling bonus on top of your parental allowance. This amounts to ten percent, but at least €75 per month.
In the case of multiple births, there is a bonus of €300 per month for the second and each additional child.

Tax treatment

Parental allowance is exempt from social security contributions and tax, but is subject to the progression proviso, i.e. it can lead to a higher tax rate.

Offsetting other social benefits

Other income replacement benefits "which, according to their purpose, replace this income from gainful employment in whole or in part" are offset against the parental allowance. Offsetting against unemployment benefit II (citizen's allowance) is often criticized as a de facto cancellation of parental allowance for unemployment benefit recipients and thus often a decision against the child.
These benefits are not taken into account if the entitlement to parental allowance is limited to the minimum parental allowance and, if applicable, the multiple child bonus.

Health insurance cover while receiving parental allowance

Parental allowance recipients who were already covered by statutory health insurance as compulsory members before receiving parental allowance continue to be insured free of charge for the duration of their parental allowance receipt, provided they have no other income in addition to the parental allowance.
Those who were previously voluntarily insured in the statutory health insurance scheme must (continue to) pay the contribution for voluntarily insured persons. If they have no other income in addition to the parental allowance, they pay the minimum contribution.
- Statistics on parental allowance recipients[21]
Of the children born in 2008, 96% of mothers and 21% of fathers applied for parental leave. Parental allowance was claimed by 27% of fathers in Bavaria, but only by 12% in Saarland. Fathers received an average of €1,140 nationwide in 2012, mothers €701. The reasons for the differences included differences in the labour force participation of men and women; 9 out of 10 men but only 7 out of 10 women were employed before the birth of their child.

Recipients	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	2017	2018
Mothers	630,906	642,572	623,454	640,084	657,033	1,350,000	1,400,000
Fathers	153,141	167,659	176,719	194,275	217,545	410,000	433,000
Total	784,047	810,231	800,173	834,359	874,578	1,760,000	1,833,000

According to a study, parental allowance has led to an improvement in the income of parents of young children. Academic families, older parents and parents of only children have benefited the most, while very young parents and single parents are worse off than before as a result of the parental allowance.
28% of fathers took parental leave. The average length of parental leave for fathers was 3.3 months. According to another study, the number of first-time parents with a university degree increased by 30% following the introduction of parental allowance. Among women with the highest incomes, the number of births increased by 70%.

c) Criticism on parental allowance

Income for self-employed persons

For self-employed persons, the assessment period is the income of the last financial year before the birth, based on the tax assessment notice.
There is often an overlap between the desire to have children and the start-up phase, which is why many self-employed mothers only receive the minimum rate. For many reasons, planning to have children is even more difficult and complicated for the self-employed. Those affected have to decide again and again between having a child and being self-employed.

[21] https://www.destatis.de/DE/Themen/Arbeit/Arbeitsmarkt/Qualitaet-Arbeit/Dimension-3/elternzeit.html

Preference for high earners

Parental allowance "primarily motivates high-earning, highly qualified women [...] to have more children and then return to work as quickly as possible". For recipients of unemployment benefit II (Bürgergeld), students and low earners, the conversion of child-raising allowance into parental allowance resulted in significant financial disadvantages, even with the retention of a credit-free basic amount of €300.

Short entitlement period and little flexibility

Experts consider parental leave to be too short at 12 months. To increase flexibility, the introduction of a flexibly manageable parental allowance account with a quota of days off if unforeseen care needs arise for children, similar to the 60-day time quota provided for in Sweden.

Lack of effectiveness

The funds spent of around 4.5 billion euros per year are disproportionate to the benefits achieved by parental allowance. There is a "deadweight effect", whereby the parental allowance is used for behaviour that would have taken place even without the additional incentive. Since the introduction of parental allowance, the number of births has fallen from around 685,000 in 2007 to around 665,000 in 2009. Germany continues to have one of the lowest birth rates. It is particularly striking that a total of 39% of 35 to 39-year-old female academics in Germany live without children in the household.[22]

Lack of compensation for inflation

Since parental allowance was introduced in 2007, it has not been adjusted for inflation.

d) Childcare allowance (Betreuungsgeld)

From August 1, 2013, parents were able to receive a childcare allowance of €100 or €150 for up to 22 months following parental allowance if they did not have their child looked after in a publicly funded childcare facility or in a daycare centre, but instead looked after their child themselves at home or had it looked after by a non-publicly funded provider.[23] This regulation was declared unconstitutional by the Federal Constitutional Court on July 21, 2015, as the federal government lacked the corresponding legislative authority.[24]

However, the federal state of Bavaria continued to pay a family allowance (Familiengeld) from its own state budget. It amounted to €250 per month up to a total of €6,000 for two years. The parents of more than 1 million children received this benefit. In addition, since 2019 low-income families (earnings limit €60,000 + €5,000 per

[22] https://www.destatis.de/DE/Themen/Gesellschaft-Umwelt/Bevoelkerung/Geburten/_inhalt.html?templateQueryString=GEBURTENRATE

[23] Betreuungsgeldgesetz, 15. Februar 2013 BGBI I S. 254

[24] Federal Constitutional Court 1 BvF 2/13 - 21 July 2015

child) could get a monthly creche benefit (Krippengeld) of €100 until the child's 3rd birthday. Both benefits should be transferred into a total payment of €3,000 on the 1st birthday of the child.
For the 2026 budget the Bavarian government cancelled these two allowances but did not replace them. Now, young parents get nothing at all. The government promised to invest the money in better care facilities and more qualified staff. Critics said that decision was taken on the background that migrants have more children and thus profited disproportionally more from this additional individual benefit.

e) Child benefit (Kindergeld)[25]

Other social benefits for families include child benefit, which amounts to €259 for each child regardless of income. It is also paid for children living in EU-countries if the parents are working and are taxed in Germany. There is a heavy debate whether it should be paid at a reduced level if the costs of living are lower than in Germany[26]. For non-EU countries the payment depends on the respective social security agreement.

f) Tax relief

There are also income tax concessions. For every child, parents can deduct €9756 of their taxable income.[27] However, it is not possible to both receive the child benefit and the tax relief. At the end of the year, the tax office provides the most favourable amount.

g) Child supplement in the event of unemployment[28]

A supplement of €357 - €420 is paid for children in receipt of citizen's allowance (Bürgergeld). Extra-payments are possible for special needs (e.g. school excursions, private teaching).

h) Leave of absence when children are ill

If the children fall ill, each parent can receive up to 15 days child sickness benefit (90% of net salary).

i) Pension increase[29] (Kindererziehungszeiten)

3 pension points are credited for each child. These 3 points correspond to notional gross earnings of €50,493 per year, which is significantly more than many young parents actually earn. 1 pension point increases the old-age pension for €40.79. This means that rearing up one child increases the future old-age pension for some €122.37 per month (as in 2025).

[25] The child benefit is regulated in §§ 62ff. Income Tax Act. It is not part of the social security system but of the tax system.

[26] https://www.bundestag.de/webarchiv/textarchiv/2018/kw42-de-kindergeld-573248

[27] § 32 Abs. 6 Income Tax Act.

[28] § 23 SGB II

[29] § 56 SGB VI

5. Early childhood education and childcare systems

On January 1, 2015, the Daycare Expansion Act (TAG)[30] came into force. It is aimed at the quality-oriented and needs-based expansion of daycare and the further development of child and youth welfare.

But the number of childcare facilities is highly insufficient. The number of missing places oscillates around 15 to 20 per cent.[31] If a community (city) cannot offer an adequate place in due time parents can go to court. As a rule, the childcare facility should not be farer away than 5 km or a travel time of 30 minutes by public transport. Parents have to show the child is three years old and that they have made sufficient efforts to find a place for childcare. If the claim is successful the city has to find a public place or pay for a private solution as financial damage, instead[32]. The parents may get compensation for loss of earnings if they have to stay at home or private placement with a private childminder or additional costs for longer ways to another childcare facility.

a) Childcare up to the age of 6

The TAG is primarily aimed at the equitable expansion of childcare, in particular daycare for children under the age of three. By October 2010, 230,000 additional places were to be created nationwide in daycare centres, crèches or with childminders. The demand for educational and childcare services is now being specified in more detail by formulating quality criteria and extended to include day care. Child day care is to develop into an equally important alternative and give parents a choice between the various care options. The associated support services and steps for the qualification of childminders are explained in § 23 TAG.

The number of children under the age of three in daycare fell by around 8,400 to a total of 848,200 children as of March 1, 2024 compared to the previous year. This means that there were 1.0% fewer children under the age of three in daycare than on March 1, 2023. While the number of children under the age of three in daycare had risen in 2022/2023 (2023: +2.1%, 2022: +3.6%), there has been a decline in 2024 for the first time since 2021. According to the Federal Statistical Office, the childcare rate had risen to 37.4% nationwide by the reporting date (2023: 36.4%),[33] so the negative development is due to the population trend and the declining number of children under the age of three. There was a 3.1 % increase in the number of daycare centre staff compared to the previous year, while the number of childminders fell by 3.8 %.

[30] Gesetz zum qualitätsorientierten und bedarfsgerechten Ausbau der Tagesbetreuung für Kinder, TAG

[31] https://www.zeit.de/gesellschaft/familie/2017-05/kinderbetreeung-kitaplaetze-betreuungsluecke-deutschland-nrw-bremen

[32] Federal Supreme Court (BGH) 20 October 2016 Az. III ZR 278/15, 302/15 und 303/15.

[33] https://www.destatis.de/DE/Themen/Gesellschaft-Umwelt/Soziales/Kindertagesbetreuung/_inhalt.html

Proportion of men

In 2022, the proportion of men among educational staff in daycare centres was 7.9 %. In 2012, it was still 4.1 %. On March 1, 2022, a total of around 681,000 people were directly involved in the educational care of children in daycare facilities, almost 53,500 of whom were men. Ten years earlier, on March 1, 2012, 438,000 people worked in educational childcare, of which around 18,000 were men.[34]

The proportion of men is highest among young employees and it is likely that the proportion of male educators in childcare facilities will continue to increase. The younger the employees directly involved in educational care in childcare facilities, the higher the proportion of men: in 2022, 12.6% of employees under 30 were male, compared to only 2.8% of employees aged 50 and over.

The highest proportion of men was among employees under 20 years of age at 17.9%, and the lowest among 60 to 64-year-olds at just 2.0%.

The proportion of men among those completing school-based training to become nursery teachers is similarly high to that of younger employees: in 2021, it was 17.7 %. In 2012, it was still 13.3 %.

Childminders

Some children are not looked after in daycare centres, but by childminders. On March 1, 2022, just under 41,900 people were employed in child day care.

Although male childminders (1,700 people) are still very rare compared to all childminders (40,100 people), the proportion of men has also increased from 2.7% in 2012 to 4.1% in 2022.

There is 1 male childminder for every 24 female childminders.

Statistics

Child daycare Children in daycare facilities by age group on 01.03.2024							
Children in daycare facilities							
Total of which aged from ... to under ... years							
		0 to 3				*3 to 6*	*6 to 14*
			0 to 1	1 to 2	2 to 3		
Germany	3 937 137	717 248	7 984	233 171	476 093	2 220 628	999 261
Former federal territory	2 892 901	522 881	4 995	155 042	362 844	1 811 912	558 108
New federal states including Berlin	1 044 236	194 367	2 989	78 129	113 249	408 716	441 153

[34] https://www.destatis.de/DE/Presse/Pressemitteilungen/Zahl-der-Woche/2023/PD23_34_p002.html

Child daycare facilities according to various characteristics (March 1, 2024)			
		By type of provider	
	Total	Public providers	Independent providers
of which by number of closing days per year	60 662	20 195	40 467
0	2443	899	1544
1 to 4	2603	962	1641
5 to 9	5595	2079	3516
10 to 14	3026	1081	1945
15 to 19	4764	1624	3140
20 to 24	14990	4656	10334
25 to 29	18772	6286	12486
30 to 39	8099	2484	5615
40 to 49	166	50	116
50 to 59	78	33	45
60 and more	120	41	85
Average number of days closed	20,7	20,3	20,9

Daycare facilities with children aged ... to under ... years (26 September 2024)			
	Total	Public providers	Independent providers
0 to 3	1931	553	1378
2 to 8 (excluding schoolchildren)	18064	6082	11982
5 to 114 (schoolchildren only)	3998	1901	2097
with children of all age groups	36669	11659	25010
of which			
with single-age groups	13840	4817	9023
with mixed-age groups	6548	1978	4570
with mixed-age and single-age groups	16281	4864	11417
namely:			
Daycare centres with integrative care	25213	8194	17019
Daycare facilities for disabled children	220	19	201
Daycare facilities for children of company employees	779	101	678
Daycare facilities run by parents' initiatives	3990	-	3990

Daycare rates for children under 6 years of age (26 September 2024) in %		
	of which aged from ... to under ... years	
	0 to 3	3 to 6
Germany	37,6	91,3
Former federal territory	33,9	90,8
New federal states including Berlin	55,2	93,7

Costs of childcare

Nursery fees differ not only from state to state, but also from city to city and from facility to facility.
In the south of Germany, nursery fees are significantly lower than in the north. On average, parents in Hamburg pay around twice as much for a half-day place as in Stuttgart or Munich.
Private kindergartens, e.g. Waldorf kindergartens or Montessori kindergartens, are generally more expensive than municipal facilities.
If there are siblings in a daycare centre, the daycare place for the second child often costs 25-30% less (sibling bonus).
In many southern and central German cities and municipalities, the last year of kindergarten is even free of charge.
Low earners and recipients of unemployment benefits can apply to the youth welfare office for a reduction in daycare fees.
In Berlin and Hamburg and a few other cities parents can get a voucher (Kita-Gutschein)[35] if they urgently need care in the first year of the child. In the two subsequent years the voucher helps to reduce the costs. In Berlin, which has the constitutional status of a federal state, childcare facilities are free of charge and parents have only to pay appr. €50 for meals.
Daycare costs are tax-deductible.

b) Primary school children

In Germany, school lessons are traditionally held Monday to Friday from 8 a.m. to 1 p.m., for primary school children usually only from 8 a.m. to 12 noon. This presents working parents with major challenges when it comes to childcare in the afternoon and often even makes part-time employment impossible. Schools are also regularly not equipped for lunchtime catering (e.g. canteen).

[35] https://www.babelli.de/kita-gutschein/

It is only in recent years that all-day childcare services with lunchtime meals have been established. As school matters are the responsibility of the federal states, the services on offer vary greatly and depend on the financial resources of the state.
The results on all-day care for primary school children show that there was still a gap between parents' childcare needs and the childcare rate on average across Germany in 2022. More places are needed in all-day school and after-school care programs as well as other childcare options for primary school children in order to meet parents' needs. As of 1 August 2026, parents will be legally entitled to a full day care in primary school.[36] A study[37] shows that 150,000 additional places are necessary to cope with need of parents. Critic voices warn that some federal state will ask for high co-payments to avoid the parents' wish for all-day care at school.

6. Future challenges

There are still major differences between eastern and western Germany when it comes to the childcare rate for children under the age of three.
There is a gap between parents' childcare needs and the childcare rate: this gap is still greater for children under three than for children aged between three and five.
Opening hours in child daycare differed greatly between East and West Germany. In the east, daycare facilities for children before they start school opened significantly earlier. In addition, facilities for children before school entry also closed later than in the west.
Ten years after the legal entitlement to childcare from the age of one came into force, there is not only a lack of childcare places. A large proportion of working or job-seeking parents who officially have a place for their child in a nursery or with childminders also cannot rely on reliable childcare: Appr. 57 percent of them experienced reductions in childcare hours and/or even temporary closures of the facility due to staff shortages. Insufficient funding and the associated shortage of skilled workers in childcare professions make childcare facilities unreliable. A study showed[38] that of the 469 parents surveyed who had placed their children in a daycare centre or with childminders, 38% stated that the facility had closed temporarily in the three months prior to the survey due to a lack of staff. For 47 percent, this led to reductions in the agreed care times. As some of the parents had to cope with both cuts and closures, the overall rate of those affected was 57.4%.
This poses major problems for many parents in their everyday lives: 67% of those surveyed stated that they found the loss of childcare or the reduction in hours stressful.
30 percent even rate the situation as "very stressful". Just under half of the mothers and fathers affected took leave or reduced overtime during the closure or reduction in

[36] https://www.bmfsfj.de/bmfsfj/service/gesetze/gesetz-rechtsanspruch-ganztagsbetreuung-grundschulen-178966, § 24 SGB VIII

[37] Institut der Deutschen Wirtschaft (IW): „Ganztagsbetreuung für Grundschulkinder", https://www.iwkoeln.de/studien/wido-geis-thoene-in-westdeutschland-ist-noch-ein-ausbau-noetig.html

[38] https://www.boeckler.de/de/pressemitteilungen-2675-kinderbetreuung-51190.htm

childcare hours in order to compensate for the gap in childcare. Just under 30 percent had to temporarily reduce their working hours.

Partners or relatives/friends were often involved in childcare to somehow bridge the gap. Within partnerships, there is a characteristic gender-specific difference: while 63% of fathers in heterosexual relationships stated that their partner had stepped in to help with childcare, only 33% of mothers reported this about their partner.

There are generally too few positions in daycare centres, as childcare ratios are inadequate and training opportunities are limited. Under these circumstances, nursery nurses tend to leave the profession. The shortage of skilled workers in early education in turn exacerbates the shortage of workers in other sectors. This is because parents, especially mothers, who cannot rely on stable childcare are forced to limit their employment rather than expand it. One possible approach to improving the situation would be to launch a comprehensive training initiative for childcare professions, accompanied by significantly improved staffing ratios and higher remuneration.

Another challenge faced by many parents concerns the supervision of schoolchildren in the afternoons and during school holidays. Even if the promised full-day school care were to function effectively, the current severe shortage of places means that there are hardly any financially affordable options available during school holidays, which amount to around twelve weeks per year. As a result, parents often have to rely on family support (for example, grandparents) or divide their own six weeks of annual leave accordingly. For single parents without family support or a partner, however, managing this situation is particularly difficult.

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How labour market participation of parents with young children is promoted in Finland

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Abstract

In Finland, the labour market participation of parents with young children has been promoted by different means: the special labour-law protection of parents, the possibility to use family leave, the payment of family-related social benefits, municipally-organised child day care services and, finally, the action of labour market participants. While Finland has historically been characterised by high employment rates among women, parental leave has kept women away from the labour market more often than men. The Family Leave Reform implemented in 2022 aims to change this situation by introducing a certain amount of family leave designated separately for men and women. The reform promises to increase equality between men and women as regards care responsibilities and enhance women's participation in the labour market. In the future, the labour market participation of parents with young children in Finland will additionally be influenced by EU policy in this field and by changing industrial relations in Finland, recent labour law reforms as well as the development of company specific practices.

Keywords: employment of parents; work-life balance; labour law protection; social protection; childcare systems.

1. General context

Finland is a Nordic welfare society and equality between men and women and the participation of parents with young children in the labour market is a central policy area. Therefore, this topic is assigned high priority in politics, regardless of which parties are in government, although there are naturally some differences between political parties.

As a political and labour market issue, balancing work and family life has also been a long-lasting topic of public debate in Finland. The work-life balance is a multifaceted phenomenon, the achievement of which requires the application of legislative norms and the implementation of different workplace practices. Since the work-life balance is a broad and, in some respects, time-related phenomenon, the topics of public debate vary over time. Recently, the focus of the debate in Finland has been the Family Leave

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Reform. In addition, occasionally, the discussion has turned to discrimination on the basis of pregnancy, especially in the case of fixed-term employment[2] and when an employee is unable to return to their previous work tasks after family leave.[3] These problems were recognised in the former prime minister Sanna Marin's Government Programme[4] as well as in a working group dealing with problems connected to parents returning to work after family leave.[5] In addition, low birth rates and, in connection, measures on how to balance work and family life have appeared in the public debate recently. Finland currently faces a challenging age distribution, with approximately 23% of the population over the age of 65.[6] The demographic structure is linked to the labour market and especially labour shortages in certain sectors,[7] which again influences the Finnish economy and economic policy.[8] Thus, means to encourage families to have children have also been discussed. A key policy in this area has been the application of measures to balance work and family life. Moreover, it is noteworthy that the government has introduced an equal pay programme for the years 2024–2027, and the programme will also address ways of improving the balance between work and family life. [9]

The Family Leave Reform, a significant reform in this area, based on the Government Programme of Sanna Marin,[10] was passed and entered into force in 2022. One of the key objectives of the reform was to distribute family leave and care responsibilities equally between men and women within the family. Additionally, the reform aimed

[2] When an employee informs her employer that she is pregnant, her fixed-term contract may not necessarily be renewed even if the employee has previously worked for several fixed terms in the same position (successive fixed term contracts). However, if the employer recruits a new employee for the same tasks, they are seen to have discriminated against the former employee on the basis of her pregnancy.

[3] According to Chapter 5, Section 9 of the Employment Contract Act, at the end of a period of leave referred to in this chapter [parental leave], employees are, primarily, entitled to return to their former duties. If this is not possible, employees shall be offered equivalent work in accordance with their employment contract, and, if this is not possible either, other work in accordance with their employment contract is to be proposed.

[4] Sanna Marin Government Programme 2019, p. 144., <https://julkaisut.valtioneuvosto.fi/bitstream/handle/10024/161935/VN_2019_33.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y >

[5] Ministry of Employment and the Economy, *Työhönpaluuta perhevapaan jälkeen selvittäneen työryhmän muistio* (Työ- ja elinkeinoministeriön julkaisuja Työ ja yrittäjyys 21/2014, Memo from the working group on return to work after family leave), <https://tem.fi/documents/1410877/2859687/Ty%C3%B6h%C3%B6npaluuta+perhevapaan+j%C3%A4l-keen+selvitt%C3%A4neen+ty%C3%B6ryhm%C3%A4n+muistio+14052014.pdf>

[6] Finnish Statistics, <https://stat.fi/en/statistics/vaerak>

[7] Liisa Larja, Juho Peltonen, *Työvoiman saatavuus, työvoimapula ja kohtaanto-ongelmat vuonna 2022* (Työvoimatiekartat -hankkeen loppuraportti, TEM-analyyseja 113/2023, Labour supply, labour shortages and mismatches in 2022), <https://julkaisut.valtioneuvosto.fi/bitstream/handle/10024/164550/Ty%C3%B6voimatiekartat_hankkeen%20loppuraportti_tarkistettu.pdf>

[8] General government EDP debt in relation to GDP was **86.6**% in 2025, <https://stat.fi/en/statistics/jyev#keyfigure-clv3prg7p4nze07w2pic40amj>.

[9] Programme of Prime Minister Petteri Orpo's Government, 4.2 Developing working life and wellbeing at work, <https://valtioneuvosto.fi/en/governments/government-programme#/4/2>.

[10] Sanna Marin Government Programme 2019, p. 144.

to reduce pay differences between the sexes. Moreover, it was accompanied by the Government's stated aim that the reform should take account of all kinds of families.[11] Since the Family Leave Reform was a broad and value-related reform, it understandably generated much public discussion. Opinions were divided, especially concerning whether legislators or the family should decide how parental leave is used and divided between family members. If, in the past, the debate concerning the work-life balance was more strongly concentrated on improving the position of women in the labour market, recently it has been broadened to arguments concerning the functioning of the economy and the labour market. Such a discussion can be explained in part by the labour shortages faced, in particular, by some female-dominated sectors, such as social and health care.[12]

The issue of unpaid work is also connected to the work-life balance and equality issues. In the Finnish context, this issue is occasionally discussed. According to surveys conducted in Finland, compared to men, women assume a larger part of the responsibilities connected to raising children, such as parent-school communication, caring for a sick child or general childcare.[13] Although women in Finland are often placed in an unequal position regarding home responsibilities, the share of undeclared work performed at home is nonetheless small. This is supported by tax incentives that aim to reduce undeclared work and the 'grey economy'. For example, when hiring a nanny or childcare professional to work in a child's home, some of the cost can be tax deductible based on tax credit for household expenses.[14]

2. Labour market situation

In 2025, the average number of employed persons in Finland was 2,590,000. The employment rate was 76.0%and the unemployment rate was 9.7%. The employment rate of men was 76.4% (2025) and for women 75.6 % (2025). In turn, the unemployment rate of men was 10.2% (2025), whereas women's unemployment rate was 9.1%.[15] The age cohorts and educational attainment of employed persons is described in Table 1.

[11] '*Diverse families' or* 'different types of families' is a concept used to describe foster parents, *adoptive parents,* single-parent families or families formed by sexual minorities. (See, Government proposal 129/2021, 7, 49,160, <https://finlex.fi/fi/esitykset/he/2021/20210129>)

[12] Larja and Peltonen 2022, pp. 16–17.

[13] Henna Attila, Marjut Pietiläinen, Miina Keski-Petäjä, Päivi Hokka ja Markku Nieminen, *Tasa-arvobarometri 2017* (Sosiaali- ja terveysministeriön julkaisuja 8/2018, Gender equality barometer 2017.), pp. 101–104, <https://julkaisut.valtioneuvosto.fi/bitstream/handle/10024/160920/STM_08_2018_Tasa-arvobarometri%202017_net.pdf?sequence=4&isAllowed=y>

[14] Income Tax Act (Tuloverolaki), 30 December 1992 (1992/1535), Section 127 a – 127 c, <https://www.finlex.fi/fi/laki/ajantasa/1992/19921535>

[15] Official Statistics of Finland (OSF), Labour force survey [online publication]. Reference period: 2025, ISSN=1798-7857. Helsinki, Statistics Finland, https://stat.fi/fi/julkaisu/cmfpdadi40gsg07un1urfrm3q?utm

Table 1. Age cohorts and educational attainment of the esmployed in 2024[16]

		Share of persons aged 15 or over without an upper-secondary qualification, %,	Share of persons aged 15 or over with at least an upper-secondary qualification, %	Share of persons aged 15 or over with a below upper-secondary qualification, %	Share of persons aged 15 or over with tertiary-level qualification, %
15–19	Males	86.0	14.0	14.0	0.0
	Females	86.1	13.9	13.9	0.0
20–24	Males	23.3	76.7	71.5	5.1
	Females	18.0	82.0	70.2	11.7
25–29	Males	19.4	80.6	53.5	26.8
	Females	14.5	85.5	42.8	42.3
30–34	Males	19.1	80.9	46.9	32.9
	Females	13.9	86.1	37.6	47.6
35–39	Males	20.1	79.9	43.7	34.4
	Females	13.3	86.7	34.5	50.8
40–44	Males	19.2	80.8	42.8	35.5
	Females	10.9	89.1	33.3	53.8
45–49	Males	16.3	83.7	42.8	38.1
	Females	8.8	91.2	31.5	57.5
50–54	Males	17.4	82.6	42.3	37.8
	Females	9.5	90.5	32.6	55.7
55–59	Males	16.9	83.1	45.1	35.6
	Females	9.4	90.6	36.7	51.7
60–64	Males	16.8	83.2	47.8	33.6
	Females	10.2	89.8	41.1	46.8
65–69	Males	21.4	78.6	44.9	32.6
	Females	15.7	84.3	41.7	41.3

As Table 1 demonstrates, the educational attainment of the employed can be summarised by two observations: first, more men than women have no upper-secondary school qualification. Second, more women possess a tertiary-level qualification, like a university degree. This development has continued for some time, and some professions (medicine, law) are transforming from male to female-dominated sectors.

[16] Population aged 15 or over by level of education, gender and age, 2024 by Age, Gender and Information <https://pxdata.stat.fi/PxWeb/pxweb/en/StatFin/StatFin__vkour/statfin_vkour_pxt_12bs.px/ >

The average earnings of women were 84% of what men earned across the labour market in 2024.[17] The pay gap between women and men across the entire labour market can be explained by the fact that women and men work in different sectors and occupations.[18] However, among women the use of longer periods of family leave affects wage developments.[19] Thus, in 2022, the occupation-related pay gap was 6.7%; meaning women earned 6.7% less than men in the same occupation.[20] However, it is worth noting that since 2006, due to Equal Pay Programmes prepared in tripartite working groups, the pay gap has narrowed by 4%.[21] Also good practices, which are addressed in Part 4, explain this development.

The employment rate of mothers of small children depends on the age of the child. Mothers whose child is under one year old are typically at home taking care of the child. By contrast, more than half of mothers whose child is between one to two years old are employed, and when the youngest child is 3–6 years old, the employment rate of mothers rises to over 80%.[22] Correspondingly, the employment rate of fathers of small children is approximately 90%. During the last three years, the employment rate of mothers of small children has increased. In particular, employment has increased from 62.8% to 66.3% among mothers whose youngest child is under three years old.[23] Level of education also affects the employment of mothers of young children. When mothers have completed a university degree, and are often in permanent employment, they will return to their work more swiftly compared to mothers with a lower education.[24]

[17] Official Statistics of Finland (OSF), Basic information on gender equality between women and men, < https://stat.fi/fi/tilastot/tietoa-teemoittain/sukupuolten-tasa-arvo >

[18] The most female-dominated sectors in 2022 were health and social services (women 85%), services (women 73%) and education (women 69%), whereas the most male-dominated sectors were construction (men 90%), transportation and storage (men 79%), and agriculture, forestry, fishery and mining (men 75%), Finnish Institute for Health and Welfare (THL),
<https://thl.fi/en/topics/gender-equality/gender-equality-in-finland/work-and-income>

[19] Outi Viitamaa-Tervonen, Niklas Bruun, Anja Nummijärvi, Kevät Nousiainen, Paula Koskinen Sandberg, *Samapalkkaisuuden perusteet ja edistäminen* (Sosiaali- ja terveysministeriön raportteja ja muistioita 2019:28, Promotion of equal pay), p. 17,
<http://urn.fi/URN:ISBN:978-952-00-4059-8>

[20] THL, Gender Pay Gap,
<https://thl.fi/aiheet/sukupuolten-tasa-arvo/tasa-arvon-tila/tyo-ja-toimeentulo/sukupuolten-palkkaero>

[21] THL – Equal Pay Programme 2020–2023, Programme-based measures of the Government and labour market confederations,
<https://julkaisut.valtioneuvosto.fi/bitstream/handle/10024/162623/STM_2020_38_rap.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y> and Viitamaa-Tervonen *et al* (2019).

[22] Official Statistics of Finland (OSF), Labour force survey [e-publication] ISSN=1798-7857. Families and work 2020. Helsinki: Statistics Finland,
<http://www.stat.fi/til/tyti/2020/14/tyti_2020_14_2021-11-02_tie_001_en.html>

[23] Official Statistics of Finland (OSF), Labour force survey [online publication]. Reference period: 2024. ISSN=1798-7857. Helsinki: Statistics Finland,
< https://pxdata.stat.fi/PxWeb/pxweb/en/StatFin/StatFin__tyti/statfin_tyti_pxt_13nx.px/table/tableViewLayout1/ >

[24] Government proposal 129/2021,36, <https://finlex.fi/fi/esitykset/he/2021/20210129>

The Finnish labour market model is characterised by the interaction between legislation and collective agreements. Mandatory legislation sets the minimum terms and conditions of employment while collective agreements are means of agreeing on 'monetary matters'. The most essential component of the Finnish labour market model is the generally applicable collective agreements.[25] These agreements set the minimum terms and conditions of employment contracts for all employees – terms and conditions which must also be followed by non-organised employers.[26] Thus, generally applicable collective agreements tend to emphasise the importance of collective agreements in the determination of the terms and conditions of employment.

Finnish industrial relations have changed gradually over the past 10 years. Until 2015, the incomes of employees were agreed at the national level in income policy agreement by labour market confederations and also representatives of the state were 'involved' in these negotiations.[27] In 2015, the Confederation of Finnish Industries (EK) withdrew from national income policy agreements (2015 onwards) but promised to continue to participate in tripartite groups, such as legislative drafting groups and groups dealing with social security and pension affairs.[28]

However, the tradition has continued that the government and labour market confederations prepare both the Equal Pay Programme, in order to foster equal pay between women and men, and also measures and good practices concerning the work-life balance, like support for parents returning to work from family leaves.[29] Family leaves and the balancing work and family life as a means of promoting equality between women and men came up in an interesting context. Namely, at the beginning of 2025, a new statutory export-driven wage model entered into force. According to the model, the national conciliator could not – in practice – exceed the so-called general line of wage increases, which is determined by the level of wage increases export sector which is male-dominated. The model was strongly criticised, especially by female-dominated sectors, such as the social and health care sector, that such sectors will fall systematically behind in wage developments. Interestingly, the government's proposal

[25] Niklas Bruun, *Työoikeuden perusteet* (Alma Talent 2022, Basics of Labour Law), pp. 14–15.

[26] According to the Employment Contract Act, '[t]he employer shall observe at least the provisions of a national collective agreement considered representative in the sector in question (generally applicable collective agreement) on the terms and working conditions of the employment relationship that concern the work the employee performs or nearest comparable work' (Employment Contract Act, Chapter 2, Section 7). The Committee for Confirming the General Applicability of Collective Agreements assesses whether the collective agreement can be verified as generally applicable in the sector.

[27] State support for negotiations e.g. by providing tax solutions or by committing to the implementation of social packages.

[28] Confederation of Finnish Industries (EK), EK's amendment to its internal rules paves the way for local agreements, <https://ek.fi/ajankohtaista/tiedotteet/ekn-saantomuutos-viitoittaa-tieta-kohti-paikallista-sopimista/>

[29] Samapalkkaisuusohjelma 2024–2027. Hallituksen ja työmarkkina- keskusjärjestöjen ohjelmalliset toimenpiteet (Equal pay programme 2024-2027: measures by the Government and the social partners), <http://urn.fi/URN:ISBN:978-952-00-6872-1>

mentioned that development of provisions in collective agreements concerning family leaves could reduce wage segregation.[30] In other words, the multifaceted pay equality problem was partly sidelined by another equality problem.

3. Labour law protection of and employment incentives for parents with young children

3.1 Rights and employment incentives promoting the employment of parents

The employment of parents with young children is protected and promoted by three sets of rules: rules concerning equal treatment and protection from discrimination, provisions safeguarding the right to different kinds of family leave, and stronger protection in the case of the termination of employment contracts.

Section 6 of the Constitution of Finland[31] states that 'everyone is equal before the law´ and 'no one shall, without an acceptable reason, be treated differently from other persons on the ground of sex, age, origin, language, religion, conviction, opinion, health, disability or other reason that concerns his or her person.' In addition, the Equality Act[32] contains provisions on non-discrimination based on gender. Furthermore, Chapter 2, Section 2 of the Employment Contracts Act (ECA)[33] requires that 'an employer must treat all employees equally, unless deviating from this is justified in view of the duties and position of the employees.'

Pursuant to Section 6 of the Equality Act, the employer has a duty to 'promote equality between women and men within working life in a purposeful and systematic manner'. Among other obligations, the employer must 'facilitate the reconciliation of working life and family life for women and men by paying attention especially to working arrangements'. Employers hiring at least 30 persons must prepare a gender equality plan at least every two years (Section 6a of the Equality Act).
Section 7 of the Equality Act forbids direct and indirect discrimination based on gender. Among others, direct discrimination includes treating someone differently for reasons of pregnancy or childbirth, while indirect discrimination includes treating someone differently based on parenthood or family responsibilities. Therefore, as a rule, discrimination against employees based on their parenthood or family obligations is forbidden. The employer must treat parents equally to employees with no children

[30] Goverment prposal 146/2024, p. 29–30 and 52–53.

[31] The Constitution of Finland (Perustuslaki), 11 June 1999 (731/1999), <https://www.finlex.fi/en/laki/kaannokset/1999/en19990731_20180817.pdf>

[32] Act on Equality between Women and Men (Laki naisten ja miesten tasa-arvosta), 8 August 1986 (609/1986), <https://www.finlex.fi/en/laki/kaannokset/1986/en19860609_20160915.pdf>

[33] Employment Contracts Act (Työsopimuslaki), 26 January 2001 (55/2001), <https://www.finlex.fi/en/laki/kaannokset/2001/en20010055_20180597.pdf>

and facilitate the reconciliation of working and family life. Nor the provisions in the collective agreement, which are essential for determining pay, shall be discriminatory.[34]

Parents' right to different forms of family leave supports the reconciliation of work and family life. In Finland, Chapter 4, Section 1 of the ECA lays down several types of family leave that parents can use, including:

a) pregnancy leave: 40 workdays (including Saturdays) can be used by the (expecting) mother before and after childbirth (Chapter 9, Section 2, Health Insurance Act (HIA),[35]
b) special pregnancy leave: this leave can be used by the expectant mother if working conditions are harmful to the health and safety of the foetus or the mother and the harm cannot be eliminated or the mother cannot be transferred to another job from the moment at which the harm is detected until the start of pregnancy leave (Chapter 9, Section 3, HIA),
c) parental leave: this comprises 320 workdays, which begin after the pregnancy leave has ended. Both parents can use half of the parental leave period (Chapter 5, Section 6, HIA) until the child reaches the age of two. Sixty-three workdays of parental leave can be transferred to the other parent (Chapter 9, Section 6, HIA), and full parental leave can be used by one parent if the other parent does not have the right to parental leave or is unable to take care of the child. Parental leave can be used continuously or divided into a maximum of four parts, each of which must last at least 14 days (Chapter 4, Section 1, ECA).

The employee is not required to agree on the use of the abovementioned leave with the employer. It is sufficient for the employee simply to inform the employer of the use of this leave (Chapter 4, Section 1, Section 3a, ECA).

Employees also enjoy the right to use other forms of (flexible) family leave. The use of some requires the agreement of the employer. Such forms of leave include:
a) partial parental leave: this can be used by both parents to work part-time at the same time. Working time cannot exceed 5 hours a day, and the leave must be agreed with the employer (Chapter 4, Section 2a, ECA).
b) childcare leave: it begins after the end of parental leave and is intended for the full-time care of a child under the age of 3. It can be used by both parents, but not

[34] See. statements of The Ombudsman for Equality: Työntekijän oikeus työehtosopimuksessa sovittuun kertakorvaukseen perhevapaalla ollessaan (Employee's right to a lump sum agreed in the collective agreement while on family leave) (TAS/124/2023) https://tasa-arvo.fi/-/tyontekijan-oikeus-tyoehtosopimuksessa-sovittuun-kertakorvaukseen-perhevapaalla-ollessaan-tas-124-2023-annettu-25.3.2024- and Osittaisella vanhempain- ja hoitovapaalla olevalla tulee olla oikeus täyteen kertakorvaukseen (A person on partial parental and child care leave must be entitled to a full lump sum) (TAS/204/2023) https://tasa-arvo.fi/-/osittaisella-vanhempain-ja-hoitovapaalla-olevalla-tulee-olla-oikeus-tayteen-kertakorvaukseen-tas-204-2023-annettu-25.3.2024-

[35] Health Insurance Act (Sairausvakuutuslaki), 21 December 2004 (1224/2004), <https://www.finlex.fi/en/laki/kaannokset/2004/en20041224_20110911.pdf>

at the same time. It can also be used in parts; both parents can divide the leave into a maximum of two parts, one of each lasting at least one month (Chapter 4, Section 3, ECA).
c) partial childcare leave: this can be used until the end of the second school year (July) if the employee has worked for the employer for at least 6 months during the last 12 months. This leave must be agreed with the employer (Chapter 4, Section 4, ECA).
d) temporary childcare leave: this consists of 1–4 workdays to care for or arrange care for a child under the age of 10 who has unexpectedly become ill (Chapter 4, Section 6, ECA).
e) temporary right of absence for compelling family reasons: this can be used if an employee's immediate presence is necessary for any unforeseen and compelling family reason owing to illness or accident (Chapter 4, Section 7, ECA).
f) agreement-based leave of absence to care for a family member or another person close to the employee. The prerequisite is that an employee's family member or someone else close to her/him requires special care. The employer must strive to arrange the employee's duties so that they may be absent from work for a fixed period. No maximum or minimum period is set (Chapter 4, Section 7a, ECA).
g) carers' leave: this leave can be taken for a maximum of 5 working days a year to provide personal assistance or support to a relative or loved one living in the same household as the employee. The prerequisite is that the relative or loved one is in terminal care or requires significant assistance or support for a serious illness or serious injury that has significantly lowered their functional capacity and requires the immediate presence of the employee (Chapter 4, Section 7b, ECA).

The employer is not required to pay wages during the above listed family leaves. For example, temporary childcare leave, temporary right of absence for compelling family reasons, agreement-based leave of absence to care for a family member or another person close to the employee, and carers' leave can be fully uncompensated. However, many collective agreements have agreed on the payment of wages for certain family leave periods. An employer who pays employees leave wages and holiday pay may apply to the Social Insurance Institution of Finland (Kela) for compensation.[36]

Following the Family Leave Reform, employer practices regarding wage payments during family leave have raised concerns about potential gender discrimination. The Ombudsman for Equality has examined cases in which employers compensated mothers during parental leave, either exclusively or for longer durations than fathers. In her statement, the Ombudsman for Equality found that employers cannot, without being guilty of discrimination, pay wages for parental leave only to mothers or pay wages and employment benefits for longer periods to mothers than to fathers after the family leave reform came into force. The Ombudsman also pointed out that the equal treatment of mothers and fathers is also required in the case of maternity leave. As

[36] Ministry of Economic Affairs and Employment of Finland, *Family leave*, <https://tem.fi/en/family-leave>

regards earlier practice where employers paid wages for a longer maternity leave period compared to paternity leave before the Family Leave Reform, the Ombudsman found that there was no discrimination in question. According to the Ombudsman, women on paid maternity leave and men on paternity leave have not been in a comparable or comparable position with each other.[37]

In the case of other (longer term) family leaves, parents are entitled to various benefits paid by Kela after a child is born and as the child is growing. Social insurance benefits paid to parents are discussed more specifically in Part 4. of this article.

At the end of a family leaves employees are, primarily, entitled to return to their former duties and if this is not possible, employees shall be offered equivalent work. The equivalent work is defined based on what is agreed upon in the employee's employment contract (Chapter 5, Section 9, ECA). Despite the employee's statutory right to return to his or her "previous work task ", there are cases where this has not happened. However, returning to "previous work task" is not always unambiguous, as the employer has the right to reorganize its operations. Therefore, The Ombudsman for Equality has taken the view that in this case the employer must take into account not only the provisions of the Employment Contracts Act but also the prohibitions of discrimination in the Equality Act and the possibility that a presumption of discrimination may arise.[38]

Finally, in Finland, parents with young children enjoy enhanced protection from unlawful dismissal. Generally, the employer cannot terminate an indefinite employment contract without a valid and significant reason (Chapter 7, Section 1, ECA). This rule also applies to employees with children. However, the ECA specifically emphasises that the employer shall not terminate an employment contract based on an employee's pregnancy or because they are exercising their right to the family leave. If the employer terminates the employment contract of a pregnant employee or an employee on family leave, the termination is deemed to have occurred due to the employee's pregnancy or family leave unless the employer can provide evidence to the contrary. If there are financial and production-related grounds for termination, the contract with the employee on family leave can be terminated only if the employer's operations cease completely (Chapter 7, Section 9, ECA).

In short, Finnish legislation protects the parents of young children during the recruitment process, throughout the duration of the employment contract and in case

[37] Isän oikeus palkkaan ja työsuhde-etuihin vanhempainvapaan ajalta perhevapaauudistuksen jälkeen (Father's right to salary and employment benefits during parental leave following family leave reform), Tasa-arvo valtuutetun lausunto TAS/114/2023, 27.3.2024, <https://tasa-arvo.fi/-/isan-oikeus-palkkaan-ja-tyosuhde-etuihin-vanhempainvapaan-ajalta-perhevapaauudistuksen-jalkeen-tas-114-2023-annettu-27.3.2024>

[38] Syrjintäepäily perhevapaalta palatessa (Suspicion of discrimination when returning from family leave) (TAS/102/2025) https://tasa-arvo.fi/-/syrjintaepaily-perhevapaalta-palatessa-tas-102-2025-

of the termination of employment. Parents cannot be discriminated against in these instances. On the contrary, they enjoy additional rights and guarantees that enable the reconciliation of work and family life, such as the right to various forms of family leave, the right to special working conditions that help reconcile work and family, and, finally, enhanced protection in the case of the termination of employment. Among the different forms of family leave, there are also many flexible arrangements that allow every family to reconcile family and work obligations according to their personal needs.

3.2 The influence of the Work-Life Balance Directive and atypical employment among parents

Based on Directive 2019/1158,[39] family leave in Finland was renewed on 1 August 2022. Before the reform, the father of the child had the right to paternity leave lasting 54 workdays. Additionally, the mother had the right to maternity leave lasting 105 workdays (40 workdays of pregnancy leave after the reform), and one of the parents had the right to parental leave. The length of parental leave was 158 workdays (320 days after the reform), and the parents had the right to decide whether or how they divided the leave between them. Although the former rules enabled parents to decide freely on who used parental and childcare leave, in practice almost 90% of parental leave and over 90% of childcare leave was used by women. Nonetheless, the use of paternity leave had increased from 70% in 2006 to almost 80% in 2017, and paternity leave used at a different time from the maternity or parental leave of the mother had grown from 11% to almost 40%. However, 80% of fathers did not fully use their paternity leave.[40] Therefore, a reform was necessary to encourage fathers to take advantage of family leave. Along with these changes, the right to carers' leave was also introduced.

The implementation of the Directive and the Family Leave Reform considerably improved the protection of young parents, enabling them to spend more time at home to take care of their child. The reform may also exert a positive influence on equality between women and men in working life. Sharing parental leave equally between the parents is expected to increase the participation of women in employment and at the same time increase the participation of men in care duties. The introduction of carers' leave may help parents with children suffering from serious illnesses or injuries.

While the amendment is still new, and the actual outcomes of the Family Leave Reform are yet to be revealed, some preliminary outcomes can be shown. According to the Ministry of Social Affairs and Health, in 2025 only 4% of families in Finland shared parental leave equally. One of the reasons for this is that many families believe that the parent who earns more should return to work sooner. However, the calculations show that the family's total net income will remain the same or even increase if both of the

[39] Directive (EU) 2019/1158 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 20 June 2019 on work-life balance for parents and carers and repealing Council Directive 2010/18/EU, OJ L 188, 12.7.2019, p. 79–93.

[40] The Government's Proposal 129/2021.

parents use all earnings-related parental leave days. If one of the parents does not use the parental leave, she/he will lose the right to parental allowance calculated on the basis of earlier income and the other parent (often the mother) will continue taking care of the child and receive substantially smaller sum of child home care allowance. This again will affect negatively the accrual of the pension of that parent.[41] These results show that the Family Leave Reform has not had an immediate effect on more equal distribution of parental leave between men and women.

In Finland, no general statistics are collected concerning the participation of parents in atypical employment. However, some information is gathered on part-time and telework, and such work can be performed if agreed upon by the employer and the employee. Hence, to use these atypical forms of work, parents must sign a part-time employment contract or agree on the performance of telework during the conclusion of their employment agreement. If the employee wishes to begin working part-time instead of full-time or perform telework after the birth of their child, they must reach an agreement with the employer to amend the initial contract.

The latest statistics concerning the participation of parents in part-time work can be found in the 2023 Finnish Labour Force Survey. The performance of part-time work is connected to the age of the child. According to the survey, 16% of mothers was engaged in part-time work. Part-time work was used most often when the child was younger than three years old. 30% of mothers with children aged 1–2 years worked part-time. By contrast, only 12% of mothers with children over the age of seven were engaged in part-time work. During the same period, only 4% of fathers independent of their children's age were in part-time work. [42]

The primary reason why parents who would like to work part-time do not pursue this option is financial, according to 45% of respondents. Additionally, 20% of parents considered that it would be difficult to arrange part-time work, while 9% feared that the workload required in part-time positions would be similar to that required in full-time work.[43] Hence, it appears that while parents would like to perform more part-time work, they are often forced to work full time for financial reasons.

[41] *Laskelmat paljastavat: Perhevapaiden tasainen jako voi tuoda jopa tuhansien eurojen hyödyn* (Calculations reveal: Equal distribution of family leave can bring benefits worth thousands of euros), Sosiaali- ja terveysministeriö (7.11.2025), <https://stm.fi/-/laskelmat-paljastavat-perhevapaiden-tasainen-jako-voi-tuoda-jopa-tuhansien-eurojen-hyodyn>

[42] *Alle kolmevuotiaiden lasten äidit aiempaa useammin töissä vuonna 2023* (Mothers of children under three years of age will be working more often in 2023), Official Statistics of Finland (OSF), Labour force survey 2023 <https://stat.fi/julkaisu/cln0fvd43884u0avtkiua21yu>

[43] Minna Salmi, Johanna Närvi, Johanna Lammi-Taskula, Erika Mäntylä, 'Osa-aikaisten perhevapaiden ja osa-aikatyön käyttö, mahdollisuudet ja esteet' in Minna Salmi, Johanna Närvi (eds.) *Perhevapaat, talouskriisi ja sukupuolten tasa-arvo.* (Use of part-time family leave and part-time work, opportunities and obstacles) (THL 2017).

In 2022, 40.4% of workers in Finland occasionally worked at home, and around 23% of workers teleworked regularly. In households with children, the share of telework was slightly higher than in households without children. More specifically, 45.3% of workers from families with children and two parents performed telework occasionally, while the share of telework among families with two adults and no children was 41.6%. In families with one adult and children, the share of telework was 45.4%, and, in single-person households, it was 38.2%.[44] In 2024 7% of workers performed full-time telework, 12% worked from home at least 50% of their working time and 19% of workers performed telework less than 50% of their working time. Compared to 2022 the share of telework has declined.[45] There are no statistics available on the share of telework among parents in 2024.

A study conducted by the Finnish Institute of Occupational Health (2023–2024) found that telework reduces employee workloads. The research also highlighted that remote work helps individuals better manage the demands of both professional and personal life. These advantages were especially pronounced in roles involving independent tasks and among families with children. Notably, fathers of young children experienced the greatest reduction in workload. According to the researchers, remote work enables families to coordinate their schedules more effectively and spend more meaningful time together.[46] Thus, compared to employees with no children, parents are slightly more engaged in telework and this practice is proved to have positive effects on the workload of fathers and work-life balance.

Permanent employment remains the dominant work arrangement in Finland. Although no specific data exists on parents with young children in fixed-term jobs, general statistics provide some insight. In 2024, 16% of all Finnish workers were employed on fixed-term contracts. This type of work was more common among women, with 19% working under fixed-term agreements compared to 14% of men. The lack of permanent work was the reason for fixed-term employment for 61% of these workers and the age groups of fixed-term employees who wanted permanent work were 25–34 and 35–44-years-old. Women reported the lack of permanent work as the reason for their fixed-term employment more often than men.[47]

[44] Pertti Taskinen, *Alankomaat on etätyön ykkönen – Suomi lähellä EU-maiden kärkeä* (The Netherlands is number one for teleworking - Finland close to the top in the EU) (25.8.2023), <https://stat.fi/tietotrendit/artikkelit/2023/alankomaat-on-etatyon-ykkonen-suomi-lahella-eu-maiden-karkea/>

[45] *Etätyön tekeminen väheni vuonna 2024 – mutta vain aavistuksen* (Remote working declined in 2024 – but only slightly) (22.4.2025), <https://stat.fi/tietotrendit/artikkelit/2025/Etaetyoen-tekeminen-vaeheni-vuonna-2024-mutta-vain-aavistuksen>

[46] Janne Kaltiainen, Sampo Suutala, Jari Hakanen, *Hyvinvointi ja yhteisöllisyys monipaikkatyön ytimessä* (Well-being and community spirit at the heart of multi-location work) (Työterveyslaitos 2025)

[47] *Vuonna 2024 työllisiä vähemmän ja työttömiä enemmän kuin vuonna 2023* (In 2024, there was fewer employed people and more unemployed people than in 2023) (6.3.2025), https://stat.fi/julkaisu/cm6t61nrx64gr07uqjmu2d7v5>.

Insecurities related to fixed-term work can influence one's willingness to have a family. As fixed-term work is more common among younger workers and women, it may affect their desire to have children and their opportunities to balance their careers and parenthood. Some fixed-term workers may postpone becoming parents, as an unstable work situation can make them hesitate about combining parenthood and paid work.[48] These age groups are also the most likely to have young children, which suggests that they are disproportionately represented in fixed-term employment arrangements.

At the moment, the ECA restricts the use of fixed-term employment contracts by requiring the existence of a justified reason for the conclusion of the contract. The Government is planning to ease the conclusion of fixed-term contracts. It is proposed that in the future a fixed-term employment contract could be concluded without justified reason in cases where it is the first employment contract between the employer and the employee, or if the employee had worked for the same employer more than five years ago. A fixed-term contract could be concluded without justified reason for a maximum of one year.[49]. The flexibilization of the conclusion of fixed-term agreements will probably increase the share of fixed-term agreements. This again will be reflected in the engagement of parents of young children in fixed-term work and in their willingness to have children and/or their possibilities to balance work and parenthood. Therefore, this reform is criticized by trade unions especially female-dominated sectors, where fixed-term contracts already are used most frequently. The amendments are expected to enter into force in spring 2026.

4. The role of employers and good practices in enhancing the labour market participation of parents

As explained earlier, in Finland, collective agreements play a crucial role in determining the working conditions of employees. However, as regards guarantees to working parents, legal regulation mainly contains provisions that cannot be derogated from in either employment contracts or collective agreements. As a result, collective agreements can strengthen but not dilute the statutory guarantees provided to parents. Many collective agreements contain provisions concerning, for instance, medical examinations associated with pregnancy and the payment of wages during pregnancy leave and parental leave.[50] For example, the Trade Sector Collective Agreement mandates the payment of wages to employees using pregnancy leave for 40 workdays and for employees using parental

[48] Johanna Närvi, *Määräaikainen työ, vakituinen vanhemmuus: Sukupuolistuneet työurat, perheellistyminen ja vanhempien hoivaratkaisut* (Fixed-term work, permanent parenthood: Gendered careers, family formation, and parental care arrangements), (THL 2014).

[49] Government proposal 199/2025, p. 63-67.

[50] Collective agreement of Technology Industry Employees between Technology Industry Employers of Finland and Industrial Union 6.2.2023–30.11.2024, 120, 128, <https://www.teknologiatyonantajat.fi/sites/teknologiatyonantajat/files/inline-files/TES%202023-2024%20TEO_www27032023_0.pdf>

leave for the first 36 workdays.[51] If the employer pays the employee a wage for at least one month during pregnancy or parental leave, they can apply for family leave allowance of € 2500 from Kela.[52] Additionally, during the period when the wage is paid, pregnancy leave and parental leave allowance is paid to the employer.[53] As mentioned earlier, the social partners also foster the equal pay of men and women and develop good work-life balance practices through the Equal Pay Programme.

Several practices can help to achieve a better work-life balance. For example, the Finnish Institute of Occupational Health lists the following good practices:

1. Using flexible working time arrangements in employment contracts.
2. Allowing remote work, which creates better opportunities for combining work and family life and enables the use of commuting time for family responsibilities.
3. Good practices for returning to work from family leave to support parents.
4. Well-organised practices for substituting for parents in the case of unexpected leave of absence for family reasons.
5. Childcare and other services that facilitate everyday life. In the workplace, it is worth discussing whether the personnel feel the need for services that support everyday life and whether the employer can organise them. One example is the employer's provision of care services for a sick child.
6. Consideration of the family in the workplace. If the family can familiarise themselves with the workplace and the work, they will better understand the work of the parent, spouse or child and the requirements related to it. For example, organising family events in the workplace could be an option.[54]

These practices are optional for the employers, and there is no general information on how common they are in real life. Finnish legal regulation supporting parents with young children is rather broad. However, employers can always provide even better working conditions than those required by law and implement good practices that support the participation of parents in the labour market. Nonetheless, the existence of good practices can vary considerably between different sectors and between different employers, in addition to which, non-legal matters such as corporate culture and management attitudes affect the implementation of these practices. Some flexibility on behalf of the employers can be detected as regards the use of flexible forms of work. For example, a substantial share of parents with young children works in part-time or telework, both of which need to be agreed with the employer.

[51] Trade Sector Collective Agreement 1.2.2023–31.1.2025, 11/2023, Section 19, < https://www.pam.fi/wp-content/uploads/2023/11/Taitto_TES_kauppa2023_PAM.pdf>.

[52] Perhevapaakorvaus työnantajalle (Family leave allowance for the Employer), Kela, <https://www.kela.fi/tyonantajat-perhevapaakorvaus>.

[53] Vanhempainpäivärahan hakeminen työnantajalle (Application to the employer for parental allowance), Kela, <https://www.kela.fi/tyonantajat-vanhempainpaivarahojen-hakeminen>

[54] Finnish Institute of Occupational Health, Työn ja muun elämän yhteensovittaminen (Reconciling work and life), <https://www.ttl.fi/teemat/tyohyvinvointi-ja-tyokyky/tyoura/tyon-ja-muun-elaman-yhteensovittaminen>

5. Social protection of parents with young children

In Finland, in addition to labour law guarantees, the employment of parents is supported by the payment of several parental allowances during leave periods. Since 1 August 2022, parental allowances comprise:

a) pregnancy allowance which is paid for the period of pregnancy leave. The amount of pregnancy allowance is 90% of one three-hundredths of the insured's annual income from work confirmed in taxation if that income does not exceed € 50,606 a year; for the part in excess of this, the amount of pregnancy allowance is 32.5 % of one three-hundredths of the annual income from work (Chapter 9, Section 1, 2; Chapter 11, Section 1 Health Insurance Act (HIA);
b) special pregnancy allowance which is paid for the period when the expectant mother is prevented from performing her work due to a hazard related to the insured's duties or working conditions until the right to pregnancy allowance commences. The amount of special pregnancy allowance is the same as the amount of pregnancy allowance (Chapter 9, Section 3, 4; Chapter 11, Section 1 HIA);
c) parental allowance which is paid for the period of parental leave. For the first 16 workdays, the amount of parental allowance is 90% of one three-hundredths of the insured's annual income from work confirmed in taxation if the annual income from work does not exceed € 50,606; for the part that exceeds this amount, the parental allowance is 32.5 % of one three-hundredths of the annual income from work. After 16 days, the amount is 70% of one three-hundredths of the annual income if it does not exceed the sum of € 32,892. For the part that exceeds this amount, up to an annual income of € 50,606, the daily allowance is 40%, and, for the part in excess of € 50,606, it is 25% of one three-hundredths of the annual income from work (Chapter 9, Section 5, 6; Chapter 11, Section 1 HIA);
d) partial parental allowance which is paid for the period of partial parental leave. The amount of partial parental allowance is 50% of the full parental allowance (Chapter 9, Section 11; Chapter 11, Section 1 HIA).

In 2024, 142 974persons received the abovementioned parental allowances. Of these, 77 882were women and 65 092 were men. Of the total sum of parental allowances granted, 79% was paid to women and around 21% to men. Compared to 2023, the sum paid to men grew from 15,6 % to 20,9 %, which can be partly explained by the Family Leave Reform. Furthermore, 46 472mothers received pregnancy allowance and 230 mothers' special pregnancy allowance.[55] This figure supports earlier statistics concerning the employment rate of fathers and mothers of small children, proving that before the Family Leave Reform, most forms of early-age family leave were used mainly by women.

[55] Kela, Statistics on family with children 2024,
< https://tilastojulkaisut.tietotarjotin.fi/lapsiperhe-etuus/2024/>

Following parental leave, parents can apply for different allowances to arrange their childcare:

a) child home care allowance which is paid for taking care of the child at home until the child is 3 years of age provided that the child does not have a place in municipal early childhood education. The parent can work or take annual leave at the same time as child home care allowance is received. Child home care allowance is also paid for other siblings under school age who do not have a place in municipal early childhood education until the family's youngest child has reached the age of 3. The amount of primary child home care allowance is € 377.68 per month while, for siblings under the age of 3, it is €113.07, and, for those over the age of 3 years, € 72.66 (Act on Child Home Care Allowance and Private Day Care Allowance[56] (CHCAA) Section 4). Municipalities can increase the child home care allowance by paying a municipal supplement if so decided;
b) private day care allowance which is paid if the child is under school age and either attends private early childhood education or is in the care of a paid childminder. Kela pays the allowance directly to the private childminder or the provider of early childhood education. The parent pays the part of the day care fee which is not covered by the allowance. The amount of care allowance is € 192.28 per month for each eligible child. A care supplement can be paid if the family's income does not exceed a certain amount (for example, in a family of four people, the care supplement is not paid if their income exceeds € 5065.13 per month). The maximum amount of the care supplement is € 265.85 per month for each eligible child. Additionally, municipalities can pay a municipal supplement to the private day care allowance if so decided (Section 3b, 5, 6 CHCAA);
c) flexible care allowance which is paid to a parent of a child under 3 years of age who is working as an employee or self-employed person no more than an average of 30 hours per week or no more than 80% of normal full-time hours. Flexible care allowance is available even if the child has a place in municipal or private early childhood education. If working hours do not exceed 22.5 hours per week or 60% of normal full-time working hours, the allowance is € 269.24 per month. In turn, for working time of 22.5–30 hours per week or 60–80% of normal full-time working hours, the allowance is € 179.49 per month (Section 13a, CHCAA);
d) partial care allowance is paid to the parents of children who are in the first or second year of school if the parent works 30 hours a week or less and uses partial childcare leave. The amount of partial care allowance paid is € 108.15 per month (Section 13, CHCAA).

[56] Act on Child Home Care Allowance and Private Day Care Allowance (Laki lasten kotihoidon ja yksityisen hoidon tuesta), 20. December 1996 (1128/1996), <https://www.finlex.fi/fi/laki/ajantasa/1996/19961128>

In 2023, 106.722 families received childcare subsidies. More specifically, 71.550 families received home care allowance, 10.535 families private day care allowance, 21.571 families flexible care allowance and 15.100 families partial care allowance.[57]

In addition to allowances enabling parents to take care of their young children, a maternity grant and child benefit are paid in Finland. The maternity grant, provided by Kela, can be applied for if the pregnancy has lasted at least 154 days (about 5 months). The parent can choose between a maternity package or a cash benefit of € 170 (Maternity Grants Act[58] Section 2,7). Kela also pays child benefit for children under 17 years of age who live in Finland. The amount of child benefit increases with the number of children. For one child, it is € 94,88 per month, for the second child, € 104,84 per month, for the third child, € 133,79 per month, for the fourth child, € 173,24 per month, and for the fifth and each additional child, € 192,69 per month (Child Benefit Act[59] Sections 1 and 7). In 2022, 532,964 families received child benefit in Finland, and the maternity grant was paid to 43,920 families. More families (70.5%) chose the maternity pack than the cash benefit.[60]

In Finland, some benefits are intended for the full-time care of the child, and therefore working at the same time is not permitted. By contrast, in the case of more flexible allowances, working is allowed. More specifically, working is forbidden when a person receives pregnancy or special pregnancy allowance or parental allowance. In turn, working is permitted if the person receives partial parental allowance, child home care allowance, private day care allowance, flexible care allowance, or partial care allowance.

In some conditions, the payment of generous parental and family allowances can lead to a welfare trap; meaning that women stay away from the labour market because it is financially more beneficial to remain at home with their children. In Finland, the discussion has focused predominantly on the way child home care allowance affects employment and gender equality. Studies dealing with this issue have found that the majority of the recipients of this state support (over 90%) are women. Long absences from working life weaken women's position in the labour market and reduce their pension savings.[61] Moreover, the low level of compensation offered by home care allowance is connected to poverty in families with children: slightly more than one in ten households receiving home care allowance also receive income support at the same

[57] Kela Statistical Yearbook 2022, <http://urn.fi/URN:NBN:fi-fe20231211153138 >

[58] Maternity Grants Act (Äitiysavustuslaki), 28 May 1993 (477/1993), <https://www.finlex.fi/fi/laki/ajantasa/1993/19930477>

[59] Child Benefit Act (Lapsilisälaki), 21 August 1992 (796/1992), <https://www.finlex.fi/fi/laki/ajantasa/1992/19920796>

[60] Kela Statistical Yearbook 2023, < https://helda.helsinki.fi/server/api/core/bitstreams/4a1bf285-a346-4ea2-9024-e798792eafe0/content>

[61] Eva Österbacka, Tapio Räsänen, 'Back to work or stay at home? Family policies and maternal employment in Finland' (2022), 35 Journal of Population Economics 35, 1071.

time[62]. According to research, the use of home care support is determined by both structural and ideological factors. Low-educated people and mothers in a vulnerable labour market position use home care allowance longer than others.[63] Taking care of a child with the support of home care allowance may be an alternative to being unemployed.[64] The main reason to return to work is connected to the rather challenging financial situation of the family during the child home care allowance period.[65]

To support especially the engagement of migrant women in employment, the Government is proposing amendments to sections 2 and 3 of CHCAA to implement the so-called Norwegian model of home care allowance. The proposal suggests that a three-year residence requirement for both parents would be stipulated as a condition for receiving home care allowance. In single-parent families, the requirement would apply to the parent living with the child. The residence requirement would also apply to other guardians living with the child and to the spouse or cohabiting partner of the parent or other guardian. In the future home care allowance would not be paid if a guardian or his or her spouse has lived in Finland for less than three years after reaching the age of 16.[66]

6. Early childhood education and childcare systems

The Act on Early Childhood Education and Care[67] provides the right for the child to early childhood education and care. In addition, the Act states that municipalities are obliged to organise early childhood education and care. Early childhood education and care can be principally arranged in two ways: 1) day-care centres or 2) family day care. In addition, pre-school education for children at the age of 6 is part of early

[62] Tuija Korpela, *Työmarkkinatukea ja vähimmäismääräisiä päivärahoja täydennetään yleisesti asumistuella ja perustoimeentulotuella*. (Labour market support and minimum daily allowances are generally supplemented by housing benefit and basic income support) Kelan Tutkimusblogi 18.12.2018. <https://tietotarjotin.fi/tutkimusblogi/725079/tyomarkkinatukea-ja-vahimmaismaaraisia-paivarahoja-taydennetaan-yleisesti-asumistuella-ja-perustoimeentulotuella>

[63] Anneli Miettinen, Miia Saarikallio-Torp, Äitien kotihoidon tukijaksot lyhentyneet – väestöryhmittäiset erot yhä suuria. (Shorter periods of support for mothers in home care - large differences still exist between population groups.) (Yhteiskuntapolitiikka 2023), <https://www.julkari.fi/handle/10024/146467>.

[64] Anne Mattila, *Ansiotöitä vai lapsenhoitoa? Valinnanvapaus ja reunaehdot pienten lasten äitien valinnoissa*. *(*Paid work or childcare? Freedom of choice and constraints on the choices of mothers with young children.) Väitöskirja. (Helsingin yliopisto, 2019)

[65] Anu Kinnunen, Johanna Lammi-Taskula, Anneli Miettinen, Johanna Närvi, Miia Saarikallio-Torp, *Perhevapaat ja työn ja perheen yhteensovittaminen muuttuvassa työelämässä* (Family leave and reconciling work and family in a changing working life) (Sosiaali- ja terveysturvan tutkimuksia, 2024), < https://helda.helsinki.fi/server/api/core/bitstreams/6adc6cd8-e35c-419a-87ea-d290f89acf16/content>.

[66] *Hallituksen esitys eduskunnalle kotihoidon tuen Norjan mallista,* Ministry of Social Affairs and Health, <https://stm.fi/hanke?tunnus=STM050:00/2025>.

[67] Act on Early Childhood Education and Care (Varhaiskasvatuslaki), 13 July 2018 ((540/2018), <https://www.finlex.fi/fi/laki/ajantasa/2018/20180540>.

childhood education, although this is regulated in the Basic Education Act[68]. Based on this Act, the child is obliged to participate in pre-school education in the year prior to the beginning of school. An application for a place in early childhood education and care should be filed with the municipality four months prior the commencement of pre-school education.[69]

Formerly, child daycare was considered part of social services. However, in 2013, the Act on Early Childhood Education and Care replaced the Act on Children's Day Care. Consequently, today, the legislation emphasises more the interests of the child, whereas the former act focused more on parents' right to receive a day care place for their child. Therefore, the primary purpose of day care is no longer to promote the employment of parents (primarily mothers) but to ensure the early childhood education and care of the child. [70] For this reason, children whose parents do not work are also entitled to full-time early childhood education and care.[71] Regardless of the explicit aim of the legislation, early childhood education and care systems nevertheless enable the employment of parents.

Parents are largely satisfied with childcare services, the location of the day-care facility, the variety of activities and the safety of the children. They are less satisfied with staff turnover and the use of substitute personnel. [72] Parents who use child home care allowance claim that their choice is motivated not by dissatisfaction with childcare services or early childhood education but by the wish to spend more or longer time with their child.

7. Future challenges

Finland has succeeded to implement several good practices to support the participation of parents with young children in the labour market. A broad range of (flexible) parental leaves, the unilateral right of a parent to use the most important leaves, the payment of social benefits for the leave period, and well-advanced child-care possibilities enable the parents to engage in professional work life. The valuation of equal treatment between men and women in the society as well as the increasing flexibility of employers towards parents enforces the participation of parents in the labour market.

[68] Basic Education Act (Perusopetuslaki), 21 August 1998 ((628/1998), <https://www.finlex.fi/fi/laki/ajantasa/1998/19980628>.

[69] Act on Early Childhood Education and Care, Chapter 4, Section 17.

[70] Tuomas Kotkas, Kaarlo Tuori, *Sosiaalioikeus* (Social Law) (Alma Talent, 2023), pp. 343–335.

[71] Act on Early Childhood Education and Care, Chapter 3, Section 12.

[72] Vanhempien barometri — varhaiskasvatus ja esiopetus, Suomen Vanhempainliitto, 2024 <https://vanhempainliitto.fi/wp-content/uploads/2024/05/Vanhempien_barometri_varhaiskasvatus_ja_esiopetus.pdf>

In the future, the labour market participation of parents with young children in Finland will be influenced by three main factors: EU policy in this field, the changing industrial relations in Finland, and, finally, the Family Leave Reform.

The implementation of the European Pillar of Social Rights, in particular Principle 2 (gender equality) and Principle 11 (childcare and support to children), will influence future regulation of the work-life balance in Finland. In addition to affecting the regulatory limits of national legislators, it could challenge the action of Nordic and national labour market models.

While collective agreements in Finland have historically been agreed at the national level, the latest developments show that negotiations have becoming more decentralised (sectoral or employer) level. This turbulence may also affect the working conditions of parents with young children. For example, Equal Pay Programmes promoting equality and the work-life balance have been drawn up in cooperation with the government and the labour market confederations since 2006. While the government and labour market organisations have also agreed on the Equal Pay Programme for the period 2024–2027,[73] it is uncertain whether this tradition will be continued for the following periods.

The Family Leave Reform entered into force just a few years ago, and its long-term effects are still unclear. While according to initial statistics, men have begun to use parental leave more often than earlier, the division of parental leave between men and women is still rather unequal. Only 4% of families share parental leave equally mainly because traditions or misunderstanding as regards the earnings during parental leave period. More equal division of care responsibilities between men and women should be promoted to advance the participation of women in the labour market. One of the factors that has likely kept low-educated mothers at home has been the payment of child home care allowance, and this has not changed as a result of the reform. Parents do not claim to use this allowance because of their dissatisfaction with day care services. Hence, one of the ways to avoid this welfare trap could be to terminate the payment of child home care allowance. This change would not lead to negative consequences for the child either, because the Family Leave Reform has increased the duration of parental leave; thus, very small children can remain at home even if child home care allowance is not paid. The Government has made the first step to avoid the negative outcomes of child home care allowance by proposing amendments to home care allowance regulations. In the future, migrants receive home care allowance only if they fulfil three-year residence requirement.

[73] Finnish Government, Equal Pay Programme of Prime Minister Petteri Orpo's Government and central labour market organisations published (28.6.2024),
< https://valtioneuvosto.fi/en/-/1271139/equal-pay-programme-of-prime-minister-petteri-orpo-s-government-and-central-labour-market-organisations-published>

One relevant trajectory that will also need to be addressed in future research is related to recent legislative reforms (export-driven wage model, reduction of the grounds for dismissal and the proposal for the right to agree first, one-year fixed-term employment contract without a justifiable reason) and their gender impact as well as impact on parents who are or take family leaves. Although legislation does not directly result in adverse consequences, in some cases it may increase the risk of discrimination on the basis of pregnancy, parenthood and family responsibilities[74].

As regards future research, parents' use of flexible working time arrangements should be further studied. This article has showed that part-time and telework are rather often used among parents. However, it is rather unclear whether parents use other more precarious forms of work more often than workers without children. In addition, the role of child home care allowance as part of the entire childcare system should be reviewed critically due to its negative impact on parents whose labour market position is already weak. Furthermore, company-specific good practices in balancing work and family life should be researched in more detail and the outcomes communicated to promote their broader use.

[74] See e.g Statement of The Ombudsman for Equality (TAS/7402025)

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Promoting Labour Market Participation of Parents with Young Children in France

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Abstract

France has established one of the most extensive and institutionally developed policy frameworks in Europe to support the reconciliation of professional and family life. This framework rests on a combination of relatively generous paid parental leave arrangements, substantial public investment in early childhood education and care, and a set of legal protections designed to safeguard parents' attachment to the labour market. With a female employment rate reaching 72.2% in 2024 and nearly 58% of children under the age of three enrolled in formal childcare arrangements, France is often cited as a comparatively effective case in facilitating high levels of maternal employment alongside relatively sustained fertility rates.

Notwithstanding these achievements, important structural limitations remain. Access to high-quality childcare continues to be marked by pronounced socioeconomic and territorial disparities, which disproportionately affect low-income households and those residing in less urbanised areas. Moreover, the persistence of a substantial "child penalty" in women's earnings trajectories underscores the enduring impact of parenthood on gendered labour market outcomes. Recent policy reforms aimed at promoting a more equitable sharing of parental leave between mothers and fathers have so far yielded only modest changes in paternal behaviour, casting doubt on their ability to transform entrenched norms and incentives.

Against this backdrop, we should provide an overview of the current configuration of French policies aimed at supporting parental employment, evaluating their effectiveness in light of available evidence, and highlighting key areas in which further policy development is required. Particular attention is given to the dual objectives of advancing gender equality within the labour market and ensuring that all parents, regardless of socioeconomic status, can benefit equitably from existing support mechanisms.

1. Introduction

The challenge of reconciling parental responsibilities with labour market participation represents one of the most pressing policy concerns facing contemporary European societies. In an era of persistent gender inequality, demographic pressures, and

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evolving family structures, the ability of parents -particularly mothers - to maintain stable employment while raising young children has profound implications for economic growth, social cohesion, gender equity, and child welfare. France presents a particularly instructive case for this investigation, as it has invested substantially in supporting working parents while simultaneously grappling with the limitations and paradoxes of its current policy framework.

France occupies a distinctive position within the European landscape of family policy. The country has achieved what many nations consider an enviable balance: a female employment rate of 72.2% in 2024 (a historic high), combined with approximately 58% of children under three enrolled in formal childcare arrangements. These figures position France as a comparative success in facilitating maternal employment while maintaining relatively high fertility rates—outcomes that many developed economies struggle to achieve simultaneously. The French policy model combines relatively generous paid parental leave provisions, substantial public investment in early childhood education and care, statutory childcare subsidies, and workplace protections designed to safeguard parents' labour market attachment.

However, these aggregate achievements mask critical structural inequalities and persistent challenges that undermine both the effectiveness and equity of existing arrangements. Evidence reveals that while overall maternal employment has increased, this growth conceals divergent trajectories based on education, income, and geographic location. Children from high-income families have access to formal childcare at rates nearly four times higher than those from disadvantaged backgrounds —a gap exceeding 45 percentage points. Mothers continue to experience earnings penalties of 22-30% over the five years following childbirth, with penalties approaching €23,480 during that period for less-educated mothers. Recent policy reforms aimed at promoting more equitable sharing of parental leave between mothers and fathers have yielded only minimal changes in paternal behaviour, raising fundamental questions about the adequacy of current policy design and cultural transformation efforts.

Throughout this analysis, two critical themes emerge. First, success in this domain requires moving beyond incremental adjustments to confront fundamental structures perpetuating inequality—expanding childcare capacity alone will prove insufficient without ensuring affordability, accessibility, and quality for all families; earmarking parental leave for fathers cannot succeed without adequate compensation and cultural transformation; and protecting women from discrimination provides limited benefit if mothers subsequently face career penalties lasting decades. Second, addressing these challenges demands integrated approaches combining supply-side and demand-side interventions, temporal as well as service-based policies, and attention to both individual incentives and collective norms. France possesses the financial and institutional capacity to achieve these objectives, but doing so requires political commitment to transforming the entrenched patterns that continue limiting opportunities for mothers, constraining choices for fathers, and perpetuating inequality across generations.

2. The Current State of Parental Employment in France

2.1 Female Employment Trends and Maternal Labour Force Participation

France ranks among European countries with the highest activity rates for mothers with young children, reflecting decades of policy development aimed at supporting working parents. The overall female employment rate reached 72.2% in December 2024, representing a historic high for the country. However, this aggregate figure masks important variations based on parental status and the age of children. Maternal employment rates differ substantially depending on the age of the youngest child: approximately 60-65% of mothers with children under three years are employed, rising to 75-80% for mothers whose youngest child is between three and five years old. [3] This pattern reflects the critical transition point at age three when children enter France's mandatory and free preschool system (*écoles maternelles*).

Research by Henri Martin at the French National Institute for Demographic Studies reveals that while female labour force participation increased dramatically from the 1920s cohort through the 1970s cohort, these gains have stagnated for women born after 1970. At age 40, the female labour force participation rate rose from 69% for women born in 1945 to 86% for those born in 1975, representing a 17-percentage point increase.[4] However, this convergence between male and female employment rates is now occurring primarily through declining male participation rather than continued gains for women. The gender employment gap among parents with young children remains at approximately 10-12 percentage points, significantly larger than the gap between childless men and women.

2.2 The Child Penalty and Its Differential Impact

The "child penalty" —the reduction in labour market outcomes experienced by mothers following childbirth— constitutes one of the most significant barriers to maternal employment in France. Recent research using administrative data demonstrates that French mothers experience a child penalty of approximately 22-30% in monthly earnings over the five years following the birth of their first child.[5] This penalty results primarily from reduced employment rates and hours worked rather than from wage discrimination for those who remain employed. Crucially, fathers experience little to no earnings penalty following childbirth, and in some cases even observe a small earnings premium.

The magnitude of the child penalty varies dramatically by educational attainment, revealing how socioeconomic stratification shapes maternal employment outcomes.

[3] Trading Economics (2024). France: Female employment rate (Eurostat data).

[4] Institut national d'études démographiques (INED) (2023). Stagnating female employment rates in France after several decades of growth.

[5] Crémèr, J., Barigozzi, F., & Thibault, F. (2023). Debate on labour markets and family policies. Toulouse School of Economics Magazine, Issue 25.

Highly educated mothers experience a gross child penalty in monthly earnings of only 6-16% relative to fathers, while mothers with secondary education only face penalties of 35-37.5%. For less qualified mothers, the employment rate penalty alone approaches 33%, and the cumulative earnings loss over the observed years following birth is nearly ten times higher than for highly educated mothers —approximately €23,480 compared to €2,480.[6] These disparities reflect differential access to quality childcare, the higher opportunity cost of childcare relative to wages for low-income mothers, and the concentration of less-educated mothers in jobs offering fewer flexible work arrangements.

2.3 Gendered Patterns of Career Adjustment

Research on firm-level dynamics reveals that the child penalty operates not only through direct reductions in hours and employment but also through mothers' sorting into lower-paying firms following childbirth. After having children, mothers tend to favour firms offering more flexible work hours and proximity to home, which may facilitate childcare logistics but often comes at the expense of career advancement opportunities and higher wages. This sorting effect accounts for approximately 2 percentage points of the gender wage gap among parents, compared to only 0.7 percentage points for non-parents. The firm effect gap appears clearly around the first childbirth and deepens over the life cycle, generating wage losses that persist even thirty years after the birth.[7] Part-time employment constitutes another major channel through which motherhood affects labour market outcomes in France. While 27% of employed women work part-time, this proportion rises substantially among mothers, particularly those with young children. The increase in female labour force participation across cohorts has not corresponded entirely to full-time-equivalent employment gains, as a significant portion has taken the form of part-time working. Part-time parental leave has become increasingly common, representing approximately 40% of total PreParE (shared child education benefit) take-up, with mothers particularly concentrated in this category. Research suggests that the option of reduced working hours during parental leave may facilitate transitions to permanent part-time work schedules, with lasting effects on earnings.[8]

[6] Observatoire français des conjonctures économiques (2025). Gender, parenthood and labour market outcomes. OFCE Working Paper 2025-02.

[7] Institut national de la statistique et des études économiques (INSEE) (2018). Emploi et revenus des ménages en France.

[8] United Nations Economic Commission for Europe (UNECE) (2023). Countries in figures: France. Sciences Po (2022). Wage inequality: The price of motherhood. Cogito Research Platform.

3. Policy Framework for Supporting Parental Employment

3.1 Maternity and Paternity Leave Provisions

France provides comprehensive paid maternity leave through its social security system, with duration varying based on birth order and family composition. For a first or second child, mothers receive 16 weeks of fully paid leave (six weeks before and ten weeks after birth), extending to 26 weeks for a third child, 34 weeks for twins, and 46 weeks for triplets or more. These benefits are calculated based on the mother's average daily earnings over the three months preceding leave and are subject to a statutory cap, though many employers provide supplementary payments to reach full net salary, particularly in the public sector and for executive positions.[9]

Paternity leave was significantly expanded in 2021, extending it from 14 to 28 days, with seven days now mandatory. This reform positions France more favourably compared to the European average of 2.3 weeks for paternity leave. However, despite the relatively generous duration, evidence suggests that paternity leave alone has a limited impact on the fundamental distribution of childcare responsibilities. Research across ten European countries found that while the introduction of paternity leave increased mothers' employment rates by up to 17% in the long run and average hours worked by 2-4%, the effects varied substantially across countries and appeared to operate primarily through reduced employer discrimination against all mothers rather than through direct effects on fathers' care work.[10]

3.2 Parental Leave Reform and Earmarking for Fathers

The 2015 reform of France's parental leave system represents one of the most significant recent attempts to promote paternal involvement and maternal employment. Before the reform, parental leave could be shared between parents, but was predominantly taken by mothers—less than 2.4% of fathers participated. The reform introduced non-transferable leave periods: for first-time parents, each parent receives six months of paid leave (up from a shared total of six months), while for subsequent children, each parent receives 24 months (reduced from a shared total of 36 months). The government predicted this earmarking would increase the fathers' participation rate to 25%.[11]

However, rigorous evaluation of the reform using administrative data reveals deeply disappointing results. In response to a 25-percentage-point decline in mothers' participation rate triggered by the reduction in maximum leave for second-time parents, fathers' participation increased by less than one percentage point, almost exclusively through part-time leave

[9] United Nations Economic Commission for Europe (UNECE) (2023). Countries in figures: France. Sciences Po (2022). Wage inequality: The price of motherhood. Cogito Research Platform.

[10] Aix-Marseille School of Economics (AMSE) (2021). Parental leave and labour supply. Working Paper No. 10. Playroll (2024). Maternity and paternity leave in France.

[11] OFCE (2021). Parental leave reforms and gender equality. Working Paper 2021-06.
Service-Public.fr (2024). Parental leave entitlements in France.

arrangements. For first-time parents, where the reform should have been most favourable by adding months specifically for fathers without reducing mothers' leave, father take-up remained minimal.[12] This failure highlights the limitations of earmarking policies when financial incentives remain weak—PreParE benefits amount to only €456 per month for full-time leave, approximately one-third of the minimum wage—and when broader cultural norms and workplace expectations continue to position mothers as primary caregivers.

The reform succeeded in increasing maternal labour market earnings by reducing the duration of very long leave absences; however, it did not achieve its stated objective of promoting a more equitable sharing of care responsibilities. This outcome aligns with international evidence suggesting that earmarked leave must be accompanied by adequate compensation levels and measures addressing workplace discrimination against fathers who take leave to meaningfully shift gendered care patterns.[13]

3.3 Childcare Subsidies and Tax Credits

France operates a complex system of financial support designed to reduce the cost burden of childcare on working families. The *Complément de libre choix du mode de garde* (CMG), administered by the Family Allowances Fund (Caisse des Allocations Familiales, hereinafter CAF), provides income-based subsidies covering up to 86.5% of childcare costs for families using registered childminders or private childcare services. The subsidy amount varies based on household income, number of children, and child age, with monthly contributions ranging from €600 to €850. For childcare provided by a registered maternal assistant (*assistante maternelle*), the CAF covers 100% of employer social security contributions, while for home-based care by a nanny, 50% of contributions are covered up to specified caps.[14]

The tax credit system provides additional support through two main mechanisms. For childcare provided outside the home by registered facilities or childminders, families receive a tax credit equal to 50% of direct childcare costs (excluding meals) up to €3,500 per child annually, yielding a maximum credit of €1,750 per child. For home-based care, a more generous credit offers 50% of eligible costs up to an annual expenditure ceiling of €12,000, plus €1,500 for each additional child, translating to a maximum credit of €7,500 for a two-child household. These credits are provided even if families owe no income tax, with the balance refunded directly, and the system allows for advance payments to reduce upfront cost burdens.[15]

Research on the effectiveness of childcare subsidies reveals complex dynamics. A 2004 French reform that increased subsidies for families with children under three resulted in a 50% reduction in childcare expenditures and a substantial increase in subsidized childcare use, but produced only a very modest increase in female labour supply. This suggests that

[12] Caisse nationale des allocations familiales (CNAF) (2019). Family policies and gender equality: International comparisons.

[13] OFCE (2023). Family policy reforms and labour supply. Working Paper 2023-08.

[14] Les Petits Chaperons Rouges (LPCR) (2024). Calculating the cost of daycare in France. Welcome to France (2024). Childcare options for children under school age.

[15] ESCEC International (2024). Tax benefits for families in France. French Tax Online (2023). Deductible charges on French income tax.

while financial barriers constitute one obstacle to maternal employment, they interact with other factors, including childcare availability, quality and workplace flexibility. Evidence from Quebec, Canada where a more comprehensive reform provided universal childcare slots at $5 per day, demonstrated larger effects on maternal employment, indicating that supply-side interventions ensuring childcare availability may be more effective than demand-side subsidies alone.[16]

3.4 Early Childhood Education and Care Infrastructure

France's early childhood education and care (ECEC) system operates through two distinct phases under different administrative authorities, creating both opportunities and challenges for working parents. For children under three, care is provided primarily through collective facilities (crèches) with various organizational models—traditional neighbourhood crèches (up to 60 places), mini-crèches (smaller capacity), company crèches (located at workplaces), and parental crèches (managed by parent associations)—as well as through individual childminders (*assistantes maternelles*) who provide home-based care. Drop-in centers (*haltes-garderies*) offer occasional care, and multi-reception establishments combine different care modes.[17]

Access to this care is not guaranteed as a legal entitlement, and availability varies substantially by geographic area and socioeconomic status. Overall participation rates for children under three range from 31.4% to 58%, depending on measurement methodology and income level. The OECD reports that in France, 32.5% of children from low-income backgrounds participate in formal childcare, compared to approximately 77.5% of children from high-income families—a gap of more than 45 percentage points. This makes France one of the countries with the highest inequality in childcare access among European nations, despite substantial public investment in early childhood services.[18]

Administrative complexities, application mechanisms that vary by locality, limited availability in certain regions (particularly suburban and disadvantaged areas), and high remaining out-of-pocket costs for low-income families all contribute to these access inequalities.

From age three, the picture transforms dramatically. Pre-primary education (*école maternelle*) became mandatory in 2019 under the law for a school of trust, ensuring universal free access for all children from age three to six. Participation rates reach 100% for this age group, supported by qualified teaching staff paid by the state and premises provided by municipalities. This structural shift at age three explains the substantial increase in maternal employment rates when children reach preschool age, as families transition from a highly inequitable and costly childcare market to universal free provision.[19]

[16] Lefebvre, P., & Merrigan, P. (2008). Quebec's $5-a-day childcare policy and mothers' labour supply. NLSCY Evidence Study.

[17] Eurydice (2024). Organisation of centre-based early childhood education and care in France. European Commission.

[18] OECD (2023). Enrolment in childcare and pre-school education. OECD Family Database.

[19] IZA World of Labor (2020). Do childcare policies increase maternal employment? Organisation mondiale pour l'éducation préscolaire (OMEP) (2021). From early childhood to preschool education in France. see 15.

4. Workplace Policies and Flexibility Arrangements

4.1 Legal Framework for Flexible Work

France enacted progressive telework legislation in 2017, granting employees a legal right to request remote work arrangements, along with protections for work–life balance, including the right to disconnect from work-related communications outside normal working hours. Employers may refuse telework requests in individual cases only if they provide an objective justification. The standard 35-hour workweek and limitations on overtime apply equally to remote and on-site workers. However, this framework relies heavily on voluntary employer participation and mutual agreement on specific arrangements, and it lacks standardized enforcement mechanisms to ensure consistent implementation across sectors.[20]

The flexibility afforded by telework can particularly benefit parents managing childcare responsibilities, allowing them to reduce commuting time and adjust work schedules around school hours or childcare availability.[21] Some French companies have implemented innovative flexibility approaches specifically targeting parents, including annualized part-time work (allowing employees to work more hours during certain periods and fewer during others, such as school holidays), Wednesday-off programs (as Wednesday is a half-day in French schools), and flexible schedules accommodating variable childcare needs. L'Oréal introduced its "Wednesday for mothers" program in 1976, later transforming it to "Wednesday for parents" to encourage father participation, though take-up remains predominantly female.

4.2 Corporate Initiatives and the Parenthood Charter

Approximately 400 French employers representing over 3 million employees (more than 10% of the French labour force) have signed the Parenthood Charter (*Charte de la Parentalité*), committing to educate managers and HR departments on taking better account of parenthood and creating favourable environments for employees with children. Signatories implement various measures, including monitoring wage progression for women during and after maternity leave (with companies like Total guaranteeing automatic salary increases equivalent to industry averages during maternity leave and close monitoring for five subsequent years), establishing internal networks for working parents, and providing on-site childcare facilities or childcare support services.[22]

Gender equality agreements are now mandatory for companies with more than 50 employees in France, requiring specific commitments on pay equity, career

[20] RemoFirst (2024). Remote work regulations in France. French Business Advice (2024). Rules governing teleworking in France.

[21] United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs (UNDESA) (2012). Family policies and work–family reconciliation. UN Expert Group Meeting Paper.

[22] Ministère des Solidarités et des Familles (2024). Charte nationale de soutien à la parentalité. Government of France.

advancement, work-life balance, and prevention of discrimination and harassment. Companies must calculate and publish a professional equality index, with corrective measures required when scores fall below thresholds. Recent agreements in both private and public sectors include provisions specifically supporting parenthood, such as extended paternity leave beyond legal requirements, additional leave for medical assistance for procreation or pregnancy complications, enhanced sick child leave policies, and guaranteed flexible work arrangements during pregnancy and early childhood.[23]

Despite these initiatives, implementation remains uneven across sectors and company sizes. Small and medium enterprises, which employ a substantial portion of the French workforce, often lack the resources and HR infrastructure to implement comprehensive work-life balance programs. Additionally, research indicates that mothers' career choices after childbirth are constrained by actual workplace practices rather than formal policies alone—the availability of flexible arrangements on paper does not guarantee their use without cultural change that destigmatizes fathers taking leave or mothers working full-time with young children.[24]

5. Challenges and Areas for Policy Development

5.1 Inequality in Childcare Access

The stark socioeconomic gradient in childcare access for children under three represents perhaps the most critical challenge undermining efforts to promote maternal employment in France. With only 17% of disadvantaged families accessing formal ECEC infrastructure compared to 78% of well-off families, France exhibits one of the highest inequality rates among European countries despite investment levels comparable to those of Nordic nations. This disparity creates a vicious cycle: mothers in low-income households—who would benefit most economically from employment and whose children would gain the most developmentally from high-quality early education—face the greatest barriers to accessing the childcare necessary to enable labour market participation.[25]

Multiple factors contribute to this inequality. Collective childcare facilities often operate on a first-come, first-served basis or use priority criteria that inadvertently favour middle-class families with stable employment histories and documentation. Private childminders, while more available, require families to pay costs upfront before receiving CMG reimbursements, creating liquidity constraints for low-income households. Geographic disparities compound the problem, with certain suburban and disadvantaged neighbourhoods experiencing lower coverage rates than urban centres or

[23] TDF Group (2024). Corporate commitment to gender equality and parenthood.
EHESP (2025). Gender Equality Action Plan 2024–2026. CNRS (2024). Gender Equality Action Plan 2024–2026.

[24] See 5.

[25] See 16.

affluent areas. Administrative complexity—including varying application procedures across municipalities and requirements to navigate multiple benefit systems—creates additional barriers for families with limited education or language proficiency.[26]

Addressing these inequalities requires supply-side interventions to expand capacity, specifically in underserved areas, simplification of application and benefit systems, guaranteed priority access for low-income families, reduction of remaining out-of-pocket costs through increased subsidies, and potentially the extension of the legal entitlement to childcare —currently guaranteed only from age three— to younger children.[27]

5.2 The Persistence of Gendered Care Norms

The failure of the 2015 parental leave reform to significantly increase fathers' care participation reveals the deeply entrenched nature of gendered expectations around childcare and breadwinning roles in France. Despite official rhetoric emphasizing shared parenting and gender equality, mothers continue to take more than 97% of parental leave, shoulder most career adjustments following childbirth, and experience substantial earnings penalties, while fathers' careers remain largely unaffected. This pattern persists even in a policy environment offering relatively generous leave provisions and legal protections.[28]

Cultural norms positioning mothers as primary caregivers interact with economic incentives to perpetuate this division. The low benefit level of PreParE (€456 per month) means that in most households, it is economically rational for the lower-earning parent—typically the mother due to pre-existing gender wage gaps—to take leave. Workplace cultures that stigmatize fathers taking extended leave or working part-time, particularly in management and professional positions, create disincentives even when formal policies exist. The concentration of women in jobs offering greater flexibility but lower advancement potential suggests that many mothers make constrained choices, adapting to expectations of intensive mothering rather than expressing genuine preferences.[29]

International evidence suggests that shifting these patterns requires multifaceted interventions including higher income replacement rates for parental leave (ideally approaching full wage replacement up to a reasonable cap), substantial non-transferable leave reserved for fathers (the EU now mandates at least two months), active campaigns challenging gender stereotypes in care and employment, measures addressing workplace discrimination against fathers who use leave, and transformation of workplace cultures to normalize flexibility and care responsibilities for all parents regardless of gender.[30]

[26] Renestance (2024). CAF child benefits in France.

[27] First Years, First Priority (2021). France country profile.

[28] Kleven, H., Landais, C., Posch, J., Steinhauer, A., & Zweimüller, J. (2021). Measuring the child penalty early in a career: The case of young adults in France. IZA Discussion Paper No. 14763. See 9-11.

[29] See 5.

[30] CNAF (2019). Family policies and gender equality. See 9.

5.3 The Child Penalty and Long-term Career Impacts

Even mothers who remain employed experience persistent wage penalties extending decades after childbirth, particularly through sorting into lower-paying firms and sectors offering greater family-friendliness but fewer advancement opportunities. This long-term scarring effect contributes to cumulative lifetime earnings gaps and ultimately to gendered retirement income disparities. For mothers with secondary education only, the earnings losses are particularly severe, approaching €23,480 over just the first years following birth.[31] These penalties reduce women's economic autonomy, discourage childbearing among career-oriented women, and perpetuate gender inequality across generations.

Addressing the child penalty requires interventions throughout the employment lifecycle, not just during the early years. Policies must include guarantees of career progression and wage increases equivalent to peers during maternity and parental leave (as some French companies have implemented), active monitoring and correction of pregnancy and motherhood discrimination in hiring and promotion, expansion of quality part-time positions in skilled occupations allowing career advancement, normalization of career flexibility and non-linear paths for both mothers and fathers, and potentially consideration of care credits in pension calculations to recognize unpaid care work.[32]

5.4 Quality and Regulation of Early Childhood Services

While France has invested substantially in ECEC infrastructure, concerns persist about quality variation across providers and the adequacy of staff qualifications, particularly in the private childcare market. Minimum qualification requirements vary by setting and role, with some positions requiring only ISCED level 3 credentials (equivalent to completed secondary education), and staff-to-child ratios differ between age groups—one professional for five non-walking children versus one for eight walking children. Research indicates that the quality of childcare is crucial for child developmental outcomes, with low-quality care potentially creating risks that offset the benefits of maternal employment.[33]

Ensuring consistently high-quality ECEC across all settings requires strengthened qualification requirements for staff, improved compensation and working conditions to attract and retain skilled professionals, mandatory quality standards enforced through regular inspections, greater investment in pedagogical support and professional development, and comprehensive quality assessment systems providing transparent information to parents. The transition between care settings (from *crèches* to *école maternelle* at age three) also requires attention to ensure continuity in children's development.[34]

[31] Toulouse School of Economics (2023). Debate on family and labour economics. See 5.

[32] Centre d'études de l'emploi et du travail (CEET) (2017). Motherhood wage penalty: A public–private comparison. CNAM.

[33] See 17. See 25.

[34] See 25.

6. International Context and Comparative Perspectives

6.1 European Union Policy Framework

France's parental employment policies operate within the broader context of EU directives and targets. The 2019 (EU) Work-Life Balance Directive mandates that all member states offer at least ten working days of paternity leave and individual rights to four months of paid parental leave, including at least two months that cannot be transferred to the other parent. This represents an attempt to standardize provisions promoting gender equality across Europe and directly influenced France's policy direction.[35]

The Barcelona Targets, established by the European Council in 2002, set goals for childcare availability: at least 90% of children between three years and mandatory school age, and at least 33% of children under three should have access to childcare by 2010. France meets and exceeds the first target with its universal preschool system, but falls short on the second for disadvantaged populations, despite overall participation rates approaching or exceeding 33%. The EU has recently updated these targets, requiring countries with participation rates under 20% to increase by at least 90%, and those between 20-33% to reach at least 45% participation, with particular attention to children at risk of poverty or social exclusion.[36]

6.2 Learning from Nordic and Other European Models

Comparative analysis reveals that France occupies a middle position among European nations—more supportive than many Southern and Eastern European countries but less comprehensive than Nordic welfare states in terms of equity, generosity, and success in promoting both high maternal employment and high fertility. Countries like Denmark and Sweden achieve more equitable childcare access across income groups, higher maternal employment rates, narrower child penalties, and more substantial father involvement in care through combinations of universal childcare entitlements, high income replacement during parental leave, and substantial non-transferable leave reserved for fathers.[37]

However, France's model emphasizes "free choice" in childcare arrangements—supporting various care modes including parental care, private childminders, collective facilities, and informal arrangements—rather than the universal public childcare provision characteristic of Nordic countries. This approach reflects French political traditions valuing family autonomy and diverse institutional actors, but results in greater inequality and complexity than universalist models. Evidence suggests that the rhetoric

[35] OECD (2023). Paid parental leave: Gender gaps. Barcelona Time Use Initiative (2023). Life balance policies.

[36] European Parliament (2013). Work–family reconciliation policies. European Commission (2019). Education and Training Monitor.

[37] See 16.

of choice masks constrained options for many families, particularly those with lower incomes who face limited actual choices due to availability and cost barriers.[38]

In Spain, Barcelona's time-use initiative offers an alternative framework emphasizing temporal rather than just service-based interventions, including time banks, extended public facility hours, flexible workplace arrangements, and coordination of school and work schedules to reduce time poverty for working parents.[39] While not directly addressing childcare provision, this approach recognizes that service availability alone is insufficient without attention to the temporal coordination challenges parents face daily.

7. Policy Recommendations and Future Directions

7.1 Expanding and Equalizing Childcare Access

France must prioritize reducing socioeconomic inequalities in childcare access for children under three. This requires targeted expansion of capacity in disadvantaged neighbourhoods and rural areas, simplified application procedures with single-point entry systems, guaranteed priority access for low-income working families, increased CMG subsidies and reduced out-of-pocket costs for low-income households, consideration of universal entitlement to childcare from earlier ages (potentially from one year when maternity leave ends), and active outreach and support services helping families navigate the system.[40]

Some French municipalities have experimented with progressive pricing models where family contributions depend more heavily on income, and expanding such approaches could improve equity. Additionally, coordination between different administrative systems (CAF, municipalities, employers) through integrated service platforms could reduce the navigation burden on families.[41]

7.2 Reforming Parental Leave to Genuinely Share Care

Learning from the 2015 reform's failure, future parental leave policy must address the fundamental economic and cultural barriers preventing fathers' participation. This includes increasing PreParE benefit levels to provide meaningful wage replacement (at least 67% of prior earnings as recommended by the EU), extending non-transferable leave reserved for fathers beyond current durations (the EU mandates at least two months, but evidence suggests longer periods may be necessary to establish new care patterns), maintaining or extending job protection and career advancement guarantees during leave, implementing active campaigns promoting fathers' care roles and challenging gender stereotypes, and monitoring and addressing workplace discrimination against fathers who take leave.[42]

[38] National Institute of Population and Social Security Research (Japan) (2003). Population and family policy analysis.

[39] Eurocities (2023). Barcelona and time-use innovation.

[40] See 16. See 25.

[41] See 25.

[42] See 9.

Some research suggests that part-time leave options, while potentially attractive to fathers by reducing income loss, may inadvertently perpetuate rather than transform gendered care patterns by allowing minimal paternal engagement.[43] Policy design must balance flexibility with transformative objectives, potentially prioritizing full-time leave for fathers during critical bonding periods.

7.3 Addressing the Child Penalty Through Comprehensive Measures

Reducing the long-term career penalties mothers experience requires interventions extending beyond leave policies to address workplace practices and career structures. Measures should include mandatory monitoring of wage progression and promotion rates for mothers versus comparable workers, active enforcement of anti-discrimination provisions related to pregnancy and parenthood, development of high-quality part-time positions in skilled occupations with career advancement paths, normalization of flexible and non-linear career trajectories for all workers, consideration of care work in pension calculations, and support for mothers returning to work after career interruptions including retraining programs.

Several French companies have implemented wage monitoring systems during and after maternity leave, automatically providing average industry increases and requiring explicit justification for any deviation from peer progression.[44] Expanding such practices through collective agreements or regulation could prevent penalties from accumulating.

7.4 Strengthening Quality Standards and Professional Development

Ensuring that expanded childcare access supports rather than compromises child development requires attention to quality alongside quantity. This includes raising minimum qualification requirements for ECEC staff to at least ISCED 6 (bachelor's level) for lead professionals, improving compensation and working conditions to attract and retain qualified staff, implementing mandatory quality standards with regular enforcement inspections, investing in ongoing professional development and pedagogical support, developing transparent quality assessment and information systems for parents, and ensuring smooth transitions between care settings including coordination between the *crèche* and the *école maternelle*.[45]

France's investment in an universal, high-quality *école maternelle* from age three provides a model that could potentially be adapted for younger age groups, though the appropriate pedagogical approaches differ for infants and toddlers versus preschool children.[46]

[43] See 11.

[44] See 30.

[45] OECD (2018). Early maternal employment and child development in five OECD countries.

[46] See 17.

7.5 Coordinating Temporal and Service Policies

Beyond service provision, parents need temporal coordination, allowing work and care responsibilities to align. France could learn from Barcelona's time-use initiative by implementing extended and flexible hours for public services, coordinating school schedules with typical work hours, guaranteeing rights to flexible work arrangements for parents with stronger enforcement mechanisms, supporting employer adoption of family-friendly practices through incentives and technical assistance, and developing neighbourhood-level coordination platforms linking childcare, schools, extracurricular activities, and workplace schedules.[47]

Some French cities have experimented with extending playground and school facility hours, offering drop-in childcare for urgent needs, and creating time bank systems where parents exchange childcare and other services. Scaling such innovations could complement service expansion.[48]

7.6 Ensuring Non-Discriminatory Access to Childcare for Self-Employed and Non-Standard Workers

The socioeconomic inequalities in childcare access documented throughout this report extend beyond income gradients to encompass systematic exclusion based on employment status. Non-salaried workers—including self-employed entrepreneurs, liberal professionals, artisans, and intermittent workers in cultural and performance sectors—face structural barriers to accessing crèche places despite France's rhetoric of universal support for working parents. The inter-enterprise childcare model (*crèches inter-entreprises*), which pools employer contributions to finance reserved places for employee children, inherently excludes workers outside traditional salaried employment relationships. Self-employed parents cannot access the *Crédit d'Impôt Famille* (family tax credit) unless they employ salaried staff who also utilize the childcare facility, and even then, eligibility requires that at least some salaried employees benefit from the arrangement.

This creates arbitrary discrimination based not on childcare need or capacity to work, but on employment contract type and family composition—a self-employed parent may access employer-subsidized childcare only if their spouse or partner works for a participating enterprise. Intermittent workers in France's entertainment and cultural sectors encounter particularly acute difficulties. Despite often substantial annual workloads and professional obligations, their irregular schedules render them ineligible for most crèche allocation systems, which prioritize families with stable, predictable employment patterns.[49]

Municipal crèches typically operate first-come, first-served waiting lists or priority criteria emphasizing employment stability, inadvertently penalizing entrepreneurial

[47] See 37.

[48] See 37.

[49] Agence France Trésor (2023). Les inégalités d'accès aux crèches et leurs enjeux économiques. Government of France.

activity and creative professions that generate economic and cultural value but lack conventional employment structures. This exclusion directly undermines stated policy objectives of supporting parental employment and advancing gender equality. Many self-employed mothers report that the inability to access affordable, reliable childcare constitutes the binding constraint on their professional activity, forcing them either to reduce work substantially or to rely on informal arrangements offering limited developmental benefits for children. The concentration of women among certain categories of self-employed workers—including liberal professions and small-scale entrepreneurship—means that these access barriers disproportionately affect maternal employment.

7.7 Enhancing Parental Leave Compensation to Enable Genuine Choice

Recent policy discourse and empirical research converge on a critical limitation of France's parental leave system: the profound inadequacy of financial compensation relative to the economic realities facing families with young children. While France provides relatively generous leave duration compared to many European countries, the income replacement during parental leave often fails to provide a meaningful choice about whether to provide intensive parental care or maintain employment. Psychologist and family specialist Marie-Estelle Dupont has articulated this constraint clearly in recent public commentary: the barrier preventing mothers from taking extended leave to care for young children is frequently not cultural preference or career ambition but economic impossibility. When parental leave (PreParE) provides only €456 monthly—approximately one-third of minimum wage—most families cannot afford for either parent to take extended leave, regardless of their preferences regarding care arrangements or beliefs about child development during critical early periods.[50]

This structural inadequacy reflects a fundamental contradiction in French policy design. Maternity leave provides full or near-full wage replacement (typically 100% of net salary up to the social security ceiling) for sixteen weeks, recognizing that mothers require financial security during pregnancy and immediate postpartum recovery. In contrast, parental leave—which parents might extend to provide care during documented critical developmental windows in the first years of life—provides only minimal flat-rate compensation bearing no relationship to prior earnings. This disparity signals that French social protection values short-term income replacement for medical recovery but devalues ongoing parental care provision, even during periods research identifies as having substantial importance for child attachment, language development, and socioemotional growth.[51]

To target support toward families with genuine need and maintain appropriate work incentives, income replacement could be capped at a reasonable ceiling (for example, 1.5 times the median wage) while maintaining full replacement for lower

[50] Marie-Estelle Dupont (2022). Se libérer de son moi toxique.

[51] Les Petits Chaperons Rouges (2024). Quelles sont les obligations des employeurs concernant les crèches?

and middle-income families, similar to the approach taken with other social insurance benefits. The enhanced compensation should be accompanied by strengthened job protection and career progression guarantees, ensuring that parents who take extended leave do not experience the sorting effects into lower-wage firms and sectors that currently perpetuate the child penalty documented earlier.

Conclusions

France has constructed an extensive policy architecture supporting parental employment through paid leave provisions, childcare subsidies, universal preschool, and workplace protections that place it among Europe's more family-friendly nations. Female employment rates have increased substantially across cohorts, the gender employment gap has narrowed, and France achieves relatively high fertility alongside relatively high maternal employment—outcomes that many countries struggle to combine. However, significant challenges undermine the effectiveness and equity of this system, including dramatic socioeconomic inequalities in childcare access for children under three, persistent gendered patterns of care responsibility despite recent reforms, substantial and lasting child penalties affecting maternal careers and earnings, and quality variations across childcare providers.

Addressing these challenges requires moving beyond incremental adjustments to confront fundamental structures perpetuating gender inequality in employment and care. Expanding childcare capacity alone will prove insufficient without attention to accessibility, affordability, and quality for all families regardless of income. Earmarking parental leave for fathers without adequate financial compensation and cultural transformation cannot shift deeply rooted care patterns. Protecting women from employment discrimination during pregnancy and maternity leave provides limited benefit if mothers face career penalties extending decades through sorting into lower-paying positions and sectors.

A comprehensive approach must therefore integrate supply-side interventions ensuring universal childcare access from early ages, demand-side subsidies removing cost barriers particularly for low-income families, leave policies promoting genuine sharing of care through adequate compensation and substantial non-transferable periods for fathers, workplace regulations and cultural initiatives addressing discrimination and supporting flexibility for all parents, attention to quality ensuring childcare supports child development, and coordination of temporal structures reducing conflicts between work and care schedules. France possesses the policy foundations and financial capacity to achieve genuine gender equality in employment and care, but realizing this potential requires political commitment to transforming entrenched patterns that continue limiting opportunities for mothers, constraining choices for fathers, and perpetuating inequality across generations.

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Social protection of working parents with young children in Greece

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Abstract

As the search for a proper work-life balance is constant, increasing attention is being paid to the consequences of having children for their parents' employment and to the level of social protection that is provide by countries to working parents. Parents may quit their jobs to take care of their children or may work more in order to cope with the additional costs. Striking this balance is challenging, as countries aim to keep the workforce intact, while still fulfilling their social protection role, applying measures that enable working parents to provide sufficient care for their children. In this paper the various measures implemented by Greece will be analysed.

Firstly, the maternity benefits will be presented, including the perinatal period and the protection and absence from work of pregnant women. In particular, maternity benefits related to pregnancy, childbirth, maternity leave, and special benefits will be presented. Furthermore, paternity protection benefits will be examined, including paid paternity leave and some special provisions regarding fathers working in the Armed Forces and the public sector. In the same vein, the new parental leave of up to four months will be presented, followed by the provisions for child allowance. Finally, there will be concluding remarks regarding the recent developments in Greece towards the simplification and improvement of social protection. The article argues that, although extremely essential benefits in kind have been introduced, cash benefits should also be considered, as they can currently be deemed insufficient.

Keywords: social protection, maternity benefits, paternity benefits, parental leave, work-life balance

1. Introduction

The consequences of having children on parents' employment are constantly under research. Parents may need to work harder to cover the additional costs of raising children, which would imply a positive correlation between having children and the employment rate[2]. Conversely, young parents may also decide to quit their job in order to spend more time raising their children, which could lead to a negative correlation between caring for the

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[2] G. Manalis and M. Matsaganis, In focus – Employment of men and women with or without children, Greek & European Economy Observatory, 2022, ELIAMEP (Hellenic Foundation for European and Foreign Policy)

child and employment. Recent Eurostat data show that both of these opposite effects occur in the labour market, however which one prevails depends mainly on gender. In 2018, one in three persons in the European Union (EU-28) aged 18-64 years had care responsibilities (34.4% compared with 65.6% who had no care responsibilities at all)[3]. Women tend to have more childcare responsibilities with 52.2% in comparison to 47.8% of men[4].

In Greece, more than 80% of persons who reduced their working time for childcare reasons were women, which was also the case for 18 Member States of the EU in 2018[5]. Furthermore, a relatively low percentage of almost 18% of Greek employees declared that they can make use of flexible working time at work and to take whole days off to provide care[6]. At the same time almost 80% of the employees in Greece reported that they do not face any obstacle at work reconciling work and family life[7]. This contradiction may be explained by the important role of family and relatives in Greek society and especially the contribution of grandparents who support and care for their grandchildren. Additionally, a relatively low percentage of 19% of Greek respondents interrupted their employment for at least one month to care for their children during their course of life[8]. As to the gender gap, the share of men who took a career break for childcare reasons is below 4.1% in all EU Member States, except Sweden; specifically, in Greece 25% of women in employment or with previous employment experience, aged 18-64 had a work interruption (more than 6 months) for childcare reasons[9].

As shown below, the relevant social protection in Greece combines a wide range of benefits in kind with certain limited cash benefits to the working mothers and fathers. However, in view of the cost of living, it is doubtful whether the cash benefits are sufficient. In any case, Greece probably does not experience a welfare trap, because parents cannot afford to stay out of work given the financial demands of their family obligations. The latter can be combined with the recent Eurostat data revealing that Greeks continue to hold the lead in working hours, compared with workers in the rest of Europe.[10].

[3] EUROSTAT, available at: https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index. php?title=Reconciliation_of_work_and_family_life_-_statistics#Childcare_responsibilities_effect_ work_arrangements

[4] Eurostat Labour Force Survey (LFS) 2018., Population by care responsibilities and labour status, available at: (lfso_18cresls) (lfso_18cresed) (lfso_18creshc) (lfso_18cresdu) (lfso_18cresnat)

[5] Figure 13: Women, aged 18-64, having reduced their working hours to facilitate childcare responsibilities (% of persons having reduce their working hours to facilitate childcare responsibilities), Eurostat LFS, 2018.

[6] Figure 14: Employees by their perceived possibility to use time flexibility and taking whole days off to facilitate care responsibilities, Eurostat LFS, 2018.

[7] Figure 16: Persons in employment with care responsibilities by main obstacle at work for reconciliation, Eurostat LFS, 2018.

[8] Figure 18: Population in employment or with previous employment by effects of childcare on employment, Eurostat LFS, 2018.

[9] Figure 20: Share of persons in employment or with previous employment experience, aged 18-64 with a work interruption (more than 6 months) for childcare reasons by sex, Eurostat LFS, 2018.

[10] Average number of actual weekly hours of work in main job, by sex, age, professional status, full-time/ part-time and economic activity (from 2008 onwards, NACE Rev. 2) available at: https://ec.europa.eu/ eurostat/databrowser/view/lfsa_ewhan2/default/table?lang=en

2. Maternity

Maternity is considered the part of the perinatal period – as long as the maternity leave lasts – during which special protection is provided to the mother and the child with the central point being the birth[11]. Childbirth and the related conditions of childbirth and breastfeeding are natural functions of the female body, but they interrupt usual activities[12]. Greek Law 1302/82, which ratified Article 4, paragraph 2 of the International Labor Organization (ILO) Convention No. 103/52 mandates the granting of sufficient resources to the pregnant woman for the healthy maintenance of herself and her child, as well as ensuring a satisfactory standard of living[13].

Regarding the protection and break from work of pregnant women, there are provisions in Law 1302/1982, and in Article 15 of Law 1483/1984, Article 9 of Law 2224/1994, as well as Article 142 of Law 3655/2008, while measures to improve the safety and health at work of pregnant and lactating working women were determined by Presidential Decrees 176/1997 and 41/2003[14].

At the same time, the Ministerial Decision (Government Gazette B 2127/21.6.2017) regarding the establishment of the written consent of the mother for the administration of substitute breast milk to newborns in hospitals and maternity wards is also relevant to the rights of mothers. The provision of substitute breast milk to newborns within the country's public and university hospitals, private clinics and other hospitals that pursue a public benefit purpose is permitted for acceptable medical reasons or after the written consent of the mother[15]. The written consent is preceded by informing the mother about the benefits of breastfeeding for the health and development of the infant, for her own health, as well as about the possible risks involved in the incorrect use of breast milk substitutes[16] Although maternity care is provided to both the directly and indirectly insured woman, the National Organization for Health Care Services Provision (EOPYY) provides maternity care through the contracted health providers[17], and only the directly insured has the right to maternity benefits[18].

[11] Ang. Stergiou, Maternity protection in social security law, Sakkoulas publications, AthensThessaloniki, 1989, p. 34.

[12] CH. Agallopoulos, Social insurance, Athens, 1955, p. 240.

[13] Ang. Stergiou, Social Security Law, Sakkoulas publication, Athens-Thessaloniki, 2014, p. 632.

[14] K. Lanaras, Social insurance of IKA, Sakkoulas publication, Athens-Thessaloniki, 2013, p. 469.

[15] Chr. Morfakidis, Human rights' perspective, University material, Faculty of Social Work, Democritus University of Thrace. 2020

[16] Ibid.

[17] Citizen's Advocate, Unified character of the medical-midwifery care provided by the institution, Social Security Law Review 2011, p. 966.

[18] Ang. Stergiou, Social Security Law (2014), p. 631.

2.1. Maternity benefits of pregnancy and labour and basic maternity leave

Directly insured mothers are entitled to maternity benefits for a total of 119 days, i.e. pregnancy and labour allowance. These allowances are paid for 56 days before the expected day of delivery (pregnancy allowance) and for 63 days after (maternity/labour allowance) if the mother has preliminary obtained 200 insurance days by working during the last 2 years and abstained from work during the aforementioned pregnancy and maternity/labour periods. (Article 34, par. 1 and Article 39, par. 1 A.N. 1846/1951, Article 11 L. 2874/2000)[19]. These benefits are equal to the basic sickness benefit and family allowances[20]. The payment of the allowance is based solely on the occurrence of childbirth and does not depend on the duration of the pregnancy (premature birth is also covered), nor on whether the foetus is born alive or on the survival of the newborn after birth[20].

Regarding self-employed mothers, it is worth noting that, according to Article 44 of Law 4488/2017:1, maternity benefit can also be granted to pregnant self-employed women, presumed self-employed mothers in terms of Article 1464 of the Civil Code and to self-employed women who adopt children up to two years of age. Law 4097/2012 on the implementation of the principle of equal treatment of men and women when exercising independent professional activity has been amended due to the implementation of Directive 2010/41/EU into Greek law, which resulted in adding a second paragraph to Article 6 of Law 4097/2012.

Equivalent to maternity benefit is the basic maternity leave (for pregnancy and labour) for the employee employed under private law, regardless of working time and professional status, with a probable date of delivery certified by a doctor: i.e. 56 days or 8 weeks (pregnancy leave) are granted before the possible date of delivery and 63 days or 9 weeks (maternity leave) after delivery (Article 11 of Law 2874/2000)[21].

Adherence to the time intervals is mandatory. In the event of an employee giving birth prematurely, the rest of the leave is granted after the birth, so that the leave time reaches a total of seventeen (17) weeks[22]. The presumed mother in terms of Article 1464 of the Civil Code, who obtains a child through the process of surrogacy, as well as the employee who adopts a child, from the time the child joins the family

[19] Ibid, at p. 632.
Ang. Stergiou, Social Security Law (2014), p. 631, K. Lanaras, Social insurance of IKA (2013), p. 466. General Confederation of Greek Workers, Maternity benefits, available at: https://www.kepea.gr/aarticle.php?id=2312# Also information of the National Social Security Fund (EFKA) is available at: https://www.efka.gov.gr/el/menoy/sychnes-eroteseis/paroches-se-chrema/epidoma-metrotetas/epidoma-metrotetas-misthoton [20] General Confederation of Greek Workers Maternity benefits.

[20] Opinion of the Legal Council of the State 431/2010 and 194/2005, Article 9 of Law 2224/1994, Article 11, paras. 1 and 2 of Law 2874/2000, Articles 8 and 11, par. 4 of Presidential Decree 176/1997 which implemented Directive 92/85/EEC into Greek legislation.

[21] K. Lanaras, Social insurance of IKA (2013), p. 470.

[22] Labour Inspection-Independent Authority, information available at: https://www.hli.gov.gr/ergasiakes-scheseis/nomothesia-ergasiakes-scheseis/adeies-ergasiakes-scheseis/adeies-gia-tin-prostasia-tis-oikogeneias/adeia-mitrotitas-adeia-toketou-kai-locheias/

and up to the age of eight (8), is entitled to the postnatal part of her maternity leave (9 weeks), as well as to all kinds of remuneration and allowances related to it, as long as the mother meets the conditions defined in the individual statutory provisions of her insurance fund (Article 34 of Law 4808/2021).[23] In addition, these provisions also apply to employees with a Private Law Fixed Term without an organizational position (Chapters C' and D' of P.D. 410/1988).[24]
The maternity allowance for uninsured mothers (maternity allowance for the uninsured) which used to be granted by the Social Solidarity Directorates is now granted by the welfare departments of the municipalities based on Law 1302/1982 and circular P2B/3904/96 of the Ministry of Health.

2.2. Special maternity protection

Working mothers (employed and self-employed alike) are entitled to the so-called special maternity protection of 9 months pursuant to Law 3655/2008 and Law 4808/2021, if the mother does not make use of the reduced working hours provided alternatively. During this special leave, the OAED (National Institution for Employment) is obliged to pay the mother a special maternity benefit (insurance benefit), which is equivalent to the minimum wage as determined by the National General Collective Labor Agreement (E.G.S.S.E.) at the time. In addition, the mother receives a proportional amount for holiday bonuses and leave allowances based on this wage[25].
Mothers working in the public sector are entitled to paid maternal leave of 9 months or to reduced working hours (Article 53 Law 2683/99). The time of the special maternity protection leave qualifies as an insurance period in the main pension and sickness branch of the relevant social security institution. The Special Maternity Protection Leave is granted by the employer after the end of the pregnancy and labour leave or the leave equal to the reduced working hours or the annual normal leave.
Insured mothers can use all or part of the leave. They can also interrupt it with the written agreement of the employer. In any case, the remaining leave is not carried over to another period.
Moreover, there is a possibility of transferring part of the leave from the mother to the father of the child providing a total duration of up to seven calendar months, regardless of the employment status of the father (employed or self-employed). The mother can exercise the first part of the leave and transfer the rest to the father, vice versa or more than one exchange can be made by mutual agreement of the parents.

[23] Ministry of the Interior, Circular No. 28/5/2020 Prot.: DIDAD/T.69/117/οικ.11102 SUBJECT: Law 4674/2020 "Strategic Development Perspective of Local Self-Government Organizations, Regulation of Ministry of Interior competence issues and other provisions" – Regulation of civil servant leave issues, p. 14.

[24] Ministry of the Interior, Circular No. 28/5/2020., p. 15.

[25] Ang. Stergiou, Social Security Law (2014), p. 633.

2.3. Supplementary maternity benefits

Maternity benefits alone are not sufficient for the economic security of the women during this sensitive period, since they only replace part of the income lost; that is why the legislator introduced supplementary maternity benefits granted by the OAED (pursuant to Law 549/77 and P.D. 776/77, Regulation of supplementary maternity benefits)[26]. Thus, the working mother is first entitled to receive her wages based on the provisions of Articles 657, 658 of the Civil Code. For the rest of the period, she is entitled to receive additional benefits from the OAED. The amount of the additional maternity benefit corresponds to the difference between the insured person's regular earnings, based on her legally paid salary at the start of maternity leave (pregnancy and childbirth), and the maternity benefits provided by e-EFKA – IKA section.

3. Paternity protection

Paternity protection in Greece focuses on paid paternity leave for a certain period of time along with the possibility of transferring part of the maternity leave to the father. The recently adopted Law 4808/2021[27] has substantially simplified the previous various legal provisions regarding the legal protection of the fathers' rights. According to Article 27 of Law 4808/2021 (in compliance with Articles 4 and 8 of Directive (EU) 2019/1158),

1. Every working father is entitled to a paid paternity leave of fourteen (14) days, which must be taken upon the birth of the child. This leave may either a) be granted two (2) days before the expected date of delivery, in which case the remaining twelve (12) days are granted, in whole or in part, directly following the birth of the child within thirty (30) days of the date of birth; or b) be granted entirely after the date of birth. For the orderly operation of the business, the employee informs the employer of the expected day of delivery, so that the latter is informed in time.
2. Paternity leave is compulsorily granted by the employer and does not depend on previous employment or seniority or on the employee's marital or family status.
3. In case of adoption or fostering of a child, up to eight (8) years of age, paternity leave is granted upon the child's integration into the family.

However, there are special provisions concerning fathers working in the Armed Forces and those working in the public sector. In the Armed Forces, parental leave is described in Article 19 of the Joint Decision of the Minister and Deputy Minister of National Defence in force since 2016 (Government Gazette B'2808), according to which leave granted is at least nine months with the increments provided for cases of multiple

[26] Ang. Stergiou, Social Security Law (2014), p. 632.

[27] For Labor Protection – Establishment of an Independent Authority "Labor Inspection" – Ratification of Convention 190 of the International Labor Organization on the Elimination of Violence and Harassment in the World of Work – Ratification of Convention 187 of the International Labor Organization on the Framework for the Promotion of Safety and Health at Work – Incorporation of Directive (EU) 2019/1158 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 20 June 2019 on the balance between professional and private life, other provisions of the Ministry of Labor and Social Affairs and other urgent regulations

pregnancies, single, divorced, widowed parents, while the entire granted leave is paid. The paid paternity leave for child raising is granted to the fathers working in the Armed Forces even if the mother is unemployed.

Fathers working in the public sector, according to Article 53, par. 2. of Law 3528/2007, are entitled to a nine months long paid leave to raise a child, as long as he does not use the reduced hours provided. Alternatively, the working time of the employee who is a parent is reduced by two hours per day, if he has children up to the age of two, and by one hour, if he has children between the ages of two and four. Additionally, an unpaid leave is provided. The unpaid leave is granted independently to each natural, adoptive and foster parent, without the opinion of a service council, when it comes to raising a child up to eight years of age.

4. The rights of working mothers and fathers to parental leave

Articles 48 to 55 of Law 4075/2012[28], implement into Greek law Directive 2010/18/EU on the revised framework agreement on parental leave. Article 1 of Law 1256/1982 (A'65) and Article 115 of Law 4052/2012 (A'41) define as working parents the natural, adoptive or foster parents, employed in the private, public sector and the wider public sector, with any employment relationship or form of employment, including part-time and fixed-term contracts, contracts or relations through a temporary employment company, and salaried mandate relationship, regardless of the nature of the services provided. Furthermore, parents who have applied or made use of parental leave, are not only protected from any unfavourable professional conditions, but also from the very termination of their employment contract (dismissal), in accordance with article 52 of Law 4075/2012 Labor and insurance rights Protection of workers (Clause 5 of the Agreement – framework Annex of the Directive).

4.1. The new parental leave for child-rearing of up to 4 months

Recent Law 4808/2021[29] incorporated the new Directive (EU) 2019/1158 on work-life balance into Greek law.

A parental leave for raising a child up to 8 years of age, lasting up to 4 months is provided by Article 28 of Law 4808/2021. According to Article 28 of Law 4808/2021, as modified later by Law 5078/2023, every working parent or person exercising parental care has an individual and non-transferable right to parental leave for the upbringing

[28] Chapter VI. Incorporation into national law of Council Directive 2010/18/EU of 8 March 2010 on the implementation of the revised framework-agreement for parental leave contracted by BUSINESSEUROPE, UEAPME, CEEP and ETUC.

[29] For Labor Protection – Establishment of an Independent Authority "Labor Inspection" – Ratification of Convention 190 of the International Labor Organization on the Elimination of Violence and Harassment in the World of Work – Ratification of Convention 187 of the International Labor Organization on the Framework for the Promotion of Safety and Health at Work – Incorporation of Directive (EU) 2019/1158 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 20 June 2019 on the balance between professional and private life, other provisions of the Ministry of Labor and Social Affairs and other urgent regulations.

of the child, lasting four months, which they can use continuously or in parts, until the child reaches the age of eight years old. In case of adoption or fostering of a child up to eight years of age, parental leave is granted from the time the child joins the family (paragraph 1. of Article 28).

For the first two months of the parental leave, the OAED is required to pay a parental leave allowance to each parent, monthly, in an amount equal to the statutory minimum wage, as determined from time to time, as well as a proportion of holiday gifts and leave allowance based on the aforementioned amount. If there are more children, the parents' right to parental leave and allowance applies separately to each child, as long as one year of actual employment with the same employer has elapsed since the end of the leave granted for the previous child, unless otherwise specified more favourable than a specific provision of law, decrees, regulations, collective labour agreements, arbitration awards or employer-employee agreements (paragraph 3). Exceptional special arrangements for the protection of parents of twins and multiple children are provided, as well as for single parents. If both parents are employed by the same employer, they can decide, by joint declaration, which one of them will make use of this right first and for how long (paragraph 4).

Applications from parents with disabilities, parents of children with disabilities, with long-term or sudden illness, large families and single parents due to the death of a parent, total removal of parental care or non-recognition of children, as well as from women after maternity leave and the special maternity protection benefit, are granted with absolute priority. Also, given that employers are obliged to grant the leave in a one-month period after the application (two months, if the smooth operation of the business is substantially disturbed), priority is given to the applications of parents of children due to hospitalization or illness of the child or due to disability or serious illness of a spouse, cohabiting partner, relative, parents of twins, triplets or more children, as well as parents after premature birth.

The period of leave during which the employee receives an allowance qualifies as insurance time in the main pension and sickness branches of the relevant insurance body, as well as in the relevant auxiliary insurance bodies, and the prescribed contributions are calculated on the case-by-case mentioned above amount, from which the OAED withholds the prescribed insured contribution and pays it to the relevant insurance institution, together with the prescribed employer contribution borne by OAED. For the non-subsidized period of parental leave, which is taken into account both for the establishment of the insurance right and for the calculation of the amount of the pension, the parent may obtain full insurance coverage from his/her insurance institution after recognition of his/her time of absence, according to Article 40 of Law 2084/1992, since it has not been agreed that the employer will pay him/her wages.

4.2. Reduced working hours as a childcare leave

According to Article 37 of Law 4808/2021, working parents, regardless of the type of activity of the other parent, even if the other parent does not work, are entitled, to childcare leave. The leave is granted for a period of thirty months from the end of the

maternity leave or the special maternity protection benefit of Article 36 or the parental leave of Article 28, as reduced hours. During the above-mentioned period, the parent exercising this right is entitled either to arrive one hour later or to leave work one hour earlier each day or to interrupt the working time by one hour daily, in accordance with their application.

Alternatively, upon agreement of the parties, the reduced working hours may be granted in other ways, such as:

a) Reduced working hours by two hours per day for the first twelve months and by one hour per day for the following six months.
b) Full days of leave, which are distributed on a weekly basis, corresponding to the total number of hours, within the time period in which the employee is entitled to reduced hours for the care of the child.
c) Continuous leave of equal duration, granted once or in parts, within the time period in which the employee is entitled to reduced hours for the care of the child.
d) In any other way the parties agree.

Adoptive and foster parents are entitled to receive a childcare permit from the time the child joins the family and as long as the child has not reached the age of eight.

4.3. Parental right to monitor a child's school performance

According to Article 38 of Law 4808/2021, working parents have the right for every child, up to eighteen years of age, who attends elementary or secondary education courses, as well as parents of a child with special needs, regardless of the child's age, who attends a special education structure of the Ministry of Education or is enrolled and attends programs in Day Care Centres for people with special needs, Creative Employment Centres for people with special needs and special schools, to be absent, without a cut of their wages and with the permission of the employer, for certain hours or the whole day, from their work, until the completion of four working days, every calendar year, in order to visit their children's school, to monitor their school performance and general attendance.

5. Child allowance – the current cash benefit

Article 214 of Law 4512/2018 contains provisions for the child allowance. In 2018 a single child allowance has been established which replaced the 15 previous types. Child allowance is paid taking into account the number of dependent children, the equivalent family income and the category of equivalent family income. A necessary condition for the granting of the allowance is the submission of an income tax return each year. To determine the beneficiary families, three categories of equivalent family income are defined, as follows: Category A: up to € 6,000, Category B: from € 6,001 to € 10,000, Category C: from € 10,001 to € 15,000. For the first category: € 70 per month for the first dependent child, additional € 70 for the second child, additional € 140 per month for the third and each dependent child beyond the third. For the second category: € 42 per month for the first dependent child, additional € 42 per month for

the second child, additional € 84 per month for the third and each dependent child beyond the third. For the third category: € 28 per month for the first dependent child, additional € 28 per month for the second dependent child, additional € 56 per month for the third and each dependent child beyond the third.

The benefit at issue is a non-contributory benefit which is granted by the National Organization of Social Assistance and Social Solidarity (OPEKA) after submission of the necessary electronical application. Dependent children for the payment of the child benefit are natural, adopted or recognized children, as long as they are unmarried and do not exceed 18 years of age, or 19 years if they attend secondary education. In addition, children with a disability rate of 67% or higher are considered, as well as orphaned children or an orphaned child from the same family when both parents have passed away.

According to article 214, par. 11 of Law 4512/2018 (after the modification by the Law 4659/2020), the child allowance is granted to other nationals beyond Greek citizens, as expatriate foreigners holding the Special Identity Card, EU and European Economic Area citizens, refugees (article 2 of Law 4636/2019 (A' 169) or stateless persons (Law 139/1975 (A' 176)), and citizens of other states who have resided in Greece for the past twelve years, as this results from the submission of income tax returns of themselves or their spouses. As defined in article 214, par. 12, Law 4512/2018, the child benefit is exempt from any tax, fee, contribution or withholding in favour of the State or a third party and is not counted in the total, real or assumed, family income unless expressly provided for by the legislative framework of social protection. Lastly, it has to be noted that some special, higher than the foregoing cash benefits are granted by OPEKA to mothers of three or more children who are or used to be farmers (now pensioners).

As for 2024, in view of the inflation, higher family cash benefits are provided for civil servants, i.e. € 70 for one child, € 120 for two, € 170 for three and € 220 for four children. Additionally, special cash benefits may be provided depending on the various professional categories of the private sector.

6. The role of grandparents in social protection: the new program "Neighborhood Nannies"

The brand new "Neighborhood Nannies" program falls under the axis of actions promoting the reconciliation of family and professional life, which is one of the main objectives of the European Strategy for Equality, for the coming years. The project was implemented initially at a pilot level in 62 municipalities of the country. By the end of 2025, the "Neighborhood Nannies" program was expanded throughout the country, offering financial support to families with preschool-aged children. It mainly concerns the care of infants aged from two months to 2.5 years, and provides for financial support mainly for working parents, single parents, foster parents and the family in general, for the care of their child or children, either within the family home or in the home of a caregiver. The program allows grandparents to participate as official caregivers, receiving a fee of up to € 500 per month for caring for their grandchildren

at home or € 300 per month for part-time or unemployed parents. Payment is made by vouchers, which cover the caregiver's fee. The candidate curators (caregivers) are registered in the platform https://ntantades.gov.gr/ and the interested parents make an application to choose the curator from the official register. This formal employment of the relatives as home educators supports parents' employment through the creation of a safe environment for their little children while strengthening the family network, which plays a very important role in everyday life and social protection in Greece.

7. Conclusion

In Greece, there have recently been legal developments towards the simplification and improvement of the national legal framework regarding social protection and especially family enhancement taking into account the demographic challenge. There are various leaves for the working parents enabling them to take care of their children. In addition, the option of reduced working hours for the same wage, the inclusion of self-employed mothers in the modified legal framework and the recognized importance of breastfeeding, are considered as positive steps towards the desirable work-family balance. Reduced working hours for the same wage could be considered as an 'updated part-time work, while the 9 months maternal leave in the public sector is undoubtedly an important measure which has been extended to the working mothers of the private sector. Nevertheless, although working mothers' and fathers' parental rights appear to be respected - meaning that they have the opportunity given by the law not to work for some hours or months to spend time with their children -, they still have to work many hours in order to cope with the cost of living. In general, under the current circumstances, the cash benefits could be deemed insufficient, except for special categories of working parents with three or more children. However, the benefits in kind continue to play an essential role.

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Promoting labour market participation of parents with young children in Hungary

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Abstract

Work-life balance is a central issue in Hungarian family policies when considering ways to enhance the labour market participation of parents with young children. Driven by the findings of international research, which confirms that supportive labour market measures also contribute threefold to the willingness to have children, Hungary has also taken significant steps to support young parents' endeavours to work, if they choose to do so. The article presents the measures which are both complex and flexible, offering tailored solutions for various life circumstances. These include generous maternal, paternal and parental leaves and benefits, allowing parents to stay home with state support coupled with strong labour law protections. While leaves foster strong parent-child bonds, it may also create challenges for reintegration into the workforce. In order to avoid extended career breaks that can result in skill depreciation and difficulty in returning to employment, young parents can avail themselves of state funded childcare services, nurseries and kindergartens. The article aims at giving a horizontal view on how the overarching goal to balance work and family responsibilities at both the micro (individual family) and macro (societal) levels, is implemented in Hungary with a work-and-family-based societal model, being developed as a priority since 2010.

Keywords: employment of parents; work-life balance; labour law protection; early childcare systems; Hungary.

1. General context

On 1 January 2025, there were 9,539,502 people in Hungary.[2] According to statistics from Eurostat, Hungary's employment rate for 15-64 year olds increased significantly between 2010 and 2024, rising from 57% to 75.1%. Since 2014, Hungary's employment rate has consistently exceeded the EU average, reaching a historic high of 75.1% in 2024. While in 2010, Hungary's employment rate was below the EU average for all age

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[2] EUROSTAT, Population change - Demographic balance and crude rates at national level – annual data (2025). Available at: https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/databrowser/view/demo_gind__custom_17386375/bookmark/table?lang=en&bookmarkId=575b34ea-a6f1-4e9b-ab05-f388dacfe051&c=1752063997367&page=time:2025

groups except those aged 30-34, by 2024, the country outperformed the EU average across all age groups between 25-64.[3]

According to Eurostat, in 2024, in the realm of atypical work, only 4.2% of workers in Hungary (20-64) were employed part-time, compared to 17.1% across the EU. This difference was even more pronounced in the 15-24 age group, with only 10.6% working part-time in Hungary compared to 33.8% in the EU. The share of part-time workers in the 15-64 age group in the EU has not changed much between 2011 and 2024. In 2011, 4.4% of men aged 15-64 were employed part-time in Hungary (EU-27: 7.3%). In 2024, 2.6% of men aged 15-64 (EU-27: 8.4%) worked part-time. In 2011, 8.1% of women aged 15-64 in Hungary (EU-27: 29.4%) worked part-time. In 2024, 6.1% of women aged 15-64 (EU-27: 28.4%) worked part-time. Part-time employment is below the EU average, the 5th lowest among the countries.[4]

Meanwhile, unemployment in Hungary has steadily decreased over the past decades, with the overall unemployment rate[5] dropping from 10.8% in 2010 to 4.5% in 2024, despite fluctuations since 2019 and COVID-19.[6] Hungary also reported favourable figures: 4.6% of men (EU average: 5.7%) and 4.4% of women (EU average: 6.2%) were unemployed as a percentage of total employment.

In terms of age groups and educational attainment among the employed, 38.5% of those with primary education in Hungary were employed in 2024, compared to the EU average of 46.1%.[7] For individuals with secondary education, 79% were employed, slightly above the EU average of 73%. Meanwhile, 91% of those with tertiary education were employed, also exceeding the EU average of 86.5%. Employment rates for those with secondary and tertiary education have steadily increased in Hungary since 2014, whereas employment for those with primary education has stagnated since 2018. The employment rate for the youngest cohort (15-24 years) with primary education was notably low at 8.4% in 2024, compared to the EU average of 18.9%. However, the employment rate for young individuals with secondary education is close to the EU average, standing at 42.4% (EU average: 45.9%). Furthermore, those with tertiary education have an employment rate that slightly exceeds the EU average, reaching 64% (EU average: 62.5%).[8] For the middle age group (25-49 years), employment rates across all three educational attainment levels are slightly higher than the EU average. In 2024, the employment rate for individuals with primary education in Hungary was 65.9%, compared to the EU average of 63.7%. The most significant gap appears among those with

[3] EUROSTAT, Employment and activity by sex and age - annual data (2025). Available at: https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/databrowser/view/LFSI_EMP_A__custom_19342237/default/table

[4] EUROSTAT, Part-time employment and temporary contracts – annual data (2025). Available at: https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/databrowser/view/lfsi_pt_a__custom_19343070/default/table

[5] Unemloyment - Percentage of population in the labour force

[6] EUROSTAT, Unemployment by sex and age – annual data (2024). Available at: https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/databrowser/view/une_rt_a__custom_19345344/default/table https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/databrowser/view/lfst_hheredch__custom_12901674/default/table?lang=en

[7] EUROSTAT, Employment by educational attainment level – annual data (2024). Available at: https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/databrowser/view/lfsi_educ_a__custom_19346061/default/table

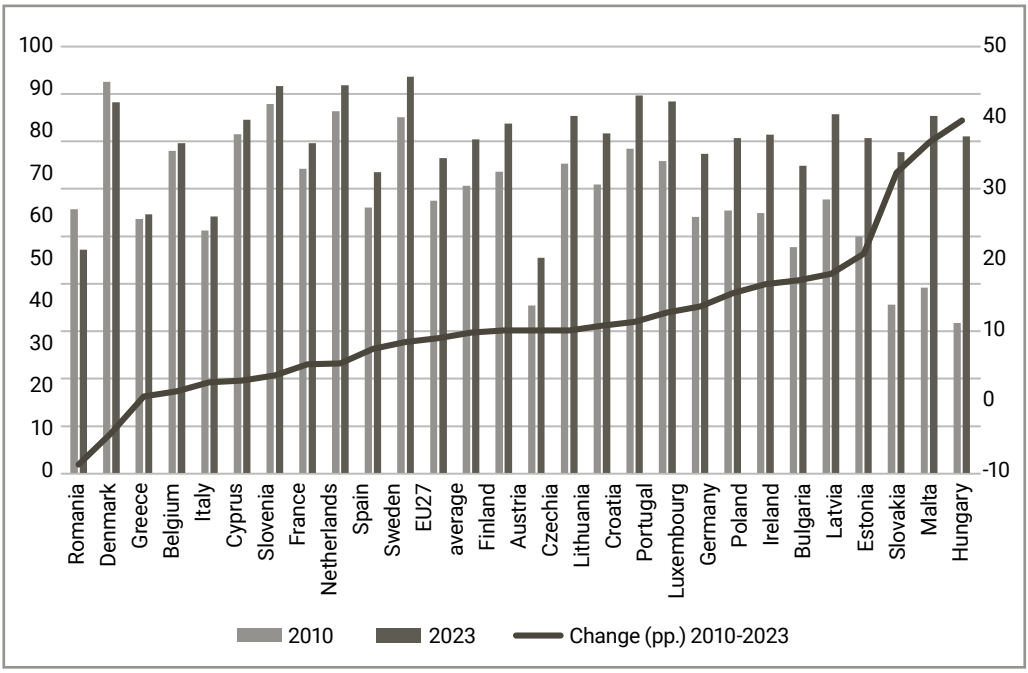
[8] EUROSTAT, Employment rates by sex, age and educational attainment level (%) (2024). Available at: https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/databrowser/view/lfsa_ergaed__custom_19354936/default/table

secondary education, where 88.8% are employed compared to the EU average of 82.9%. There is also a nearly five percentage point difference for those with tertiary education, with Hungary at 94.2% and the EU average at 89.5%. Finally, the employment rate for the oldest age group (50-64) is also generally at or above the EU average.

In 2010, the employment rate among 18-64 years old parents with children under age 6 in Hungary was 53.0%, which was lower than the EU-27 average (70.8%). Over the past 14 years, this figure has risen to 82.4% in Hungary (EU-27 average: 77.7%). Employment rates for men with young children aged 18-64 are higher than those for women in both Hungary and the EU. Notably, the share of employed men in this demographic has increased from 2010 to 2024. In Hungary, the employment rate for men with young children was 77.0% in 2010 (EU-27: 85.6%) and rose to 91.8% in 2024 (EU-27: 89.4%). For women with children under age 6, the employment rate in Hungary increased from 31.7% in 2010 (EU-27: 57.4%) to 73.7% in 2024 (EU-27: 67.1%).[9]

The development shall be looked at in a timeline which shows that a remarkable shift is traceable.[10]

Figure 1. Employment rate of females with children, less than 6 years, 18-64 years (%)



Source: Eurostat; table code: lfst_hheredch

[9] EUROSTAT, Employment rate of adults by educational attainment level, number of children and age of youngest child (2025). Available at: https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/databrowser/view/lfst_hheredch__custom_19355391/default/table

[10] Pári András, Fűrész Tünde, Rövid Irén (2024): Population of Europe – from a Hungarian perspective, In Barzó Tímea (ed.) Demographic Challenges in Central Europe: Legal and Family Policy Response, Miskolc, Central European Academic Publishing.

While in 2020 Malta had the largest increase compared to 2010, since 2021 Hungary has had the largest increase every year.[11] All of these Eurostat data was also confirmed by the January 2021 data collection of KINCS. The KINCS research examined what people think about roles within the family, yielded the following results.

On the subject of family roles, the statement showing the greatest agreement is that it is good to have two earners in one family – 90% of respondents thought so, or completely so. There was also extremely high agreement with the statement that it is best for a mother with young children to be able to work flexibly – 82% of the respondents were of this opinion. There was also over 80% agreement with the statement that the role of a housewife and mother of a family is worth at least as much as working at a workplace. Almost half of the people (49.6%) agree that in Hungary women and men receive the same wages for the same work. Overall, it is clear that women's social roles, and with it the roles of mothers, have significantly increased in value, so it turns out to be necessary for women to take their place in the world of work in addition to their role in the family. Demographic, fertility and sociological aspects are also related to the development of employment, as KINCS research confirms in other studies.[12]

Labour shortages have been a characteristic issue in Hungary for years. A research commissioned by the Employers' and Industrialists' Association (MGYOSZ) and supported by EU funding, was published in January 2024 and highlighted that in the post-COVID-19 period, labour shortages have become a pressing problem across all employment groups, whether unskilled, with secondary, or higher vocational qualifications.[13] Regional disparities are also evident: the majority of employers who struggle to find new workers with secondary education, and especially those without vocational qualifications, or only manage to do so after an average of a year of searching, are located in the West Transdanubian region. This is most likely due to the pull effect of the Austrian border. On the other hand, companies in the eastern part of the country and the capital have complained the most about the unavailability of labour with university or college degrees. According to a study by BusinessEurope, the largest employers' association in Europe, the European labour market will lose

[11] Due to the new EU regulations that entered into force in January 2021, in addition to those who work with child care allowance and benefit (gyed and gyes), those who were previously considered inactive or unemployed are also considered employed, who last worked before using childcare, who receive a cash benefit during the absence, and the after receiving benefits, they can return to their previous workplace. The time series were traced back to 2009, so the data from 1992-2008 and from 2009 and beyond can be directly compared. Source: HCSO, available at: https://www.ksh.hu/docs/eng/modsz/mun_meth.html

[12] Pári András, Rövid Irén (2023): Családra vágyunk! : A Kopp Mária Intézet a Népesedésért és a Családokért felméréseinek eredményei 2018 óta. (Desired family: The results of the Mária Kopp Institute for Demography and Families surveys since 2018.) MÁLTAI TANULMÁNYOK. A Magyar Máltai Szeretetszolgálat Tudományos Folyóirata, 2023/4: pp. 20–35. http://doi.org/10.56699/MT.2023.4.2

[13] Bogóné Dr. Jehoda Rozália, Dr. Vakhal Péter (2024): A munkaerő- és szakember-utánpótlás jellemzői Magyarország különböző régióiban – trendek és kihívások (The characteristics of labor and professional supply in different regions of Hungary – trends and challenges), MGYOSZ -Kopint Datorg Zrt., January 2024. Project „CORE – Capacity Building of Resilient Employers in Hungary 101051655". Available at: https://mgyosz.hu/projektjeink/20240410-survey-kiadvany.pdf

35 million people from its working-age population by 2050.[14] In Hungary, this figure is approximately 30,000 individuals per year, and the available labour reserves within society are also diminishing.[15] The same research also examined another issue, specifically addressing what the Hungarian labour market will look like in 2035. The study states that "The need for a slow life refers to phenomena connected to sustainability and a closer relationship with nature, as well as the growing desire for relaxation in a fast-paced world. For young people, in particular, the concept of a workplace has changed significantly compared to a few decades ago. For Generation Z, flexible working conditions and a strong work-life balance are of utmost importance".[16] Regarding the employment of young parents, the above emphasizes the need for full participation in the Hungarian labour market, highlighting the critical importance of engaging this group. It also reinforces that balancing work and personal life is a key factor in sustaining an inclusive and equitable labour market in Hungary.

2. Protection of working parents with young children in Hungary

2.1. The importance of equal treatment

In Hungary, the Fundamental Law contains the principle of equal treatment in Article XV: "(1) Everyone shall be equal before the law. Every human being shall have legal capacity. (2) Hungary shall guarantee fundamental rights to everyone without discrimination and in particular without discrimination on the grounds of race, colour, sex, disability, language, religion, political or other opinion, national or social origin, property, birth or any other status. (3) Women and men shall have equal rights. (4) By means of separate measures, Hungary shall help to achieve equality of opportunity and social inclusion".[17] The right to work is laid down in Article XII: "(1) Everyone shall have the right to choose his or her work and occupation freely and to engage in entrepreneurial activities. Everyone shall be obliged to contribute to the enrichment of the community through his or her work, in accordance with his or her abilities and potential. (2) Hungary shall strive to create the conditions that ensure that everyone who is able and willing to work has the opportunity to do so".

[14] BusinessEurope (October 2023): Analysis of labour and skills shortages: Overcoming bottlenecks to productivity and growth. Available at: https://www.businesseurope.eu/sites/buseur/files/media/reports_ and_studies/2023-10-23_analysis_of_labour_and_skills_shortages.pdf

[15] Bálint Adrienn, Galambvári Gabriella, Bogóné Dr. Jehoda Rozália, Dr. Vakhal Péter (2024): A magyar régiók munkaerőpiaca 2035-ben – stratégiai előrejelzés (The labor market of hungarian regions in 2035 – strategic forecast), MGYOSZ -Kopint Datorg Zrt., Budapest 2024. Project „CORE – Capacity Building of Resilient Employers in Hungary 101051655". Available at: https://www.mgyosz.hu/projektjeink/20240410Foresight-kiadvany.pdfp. 25.

[16] Ibid., p. 24.

[17] The Fundamental Law of Hungary is available in English at: https://njt.hu/jogszabaly/en/2011-4301-02-00

Hungary's cardinal law on the protection of families (Act CCXI of 2011) in its Chapter III (The protection of the family and the commitment to have children is the field of employment) stipulates that (1) Parents who bring up minors shall be entitled to special labour law protection under the relevant Act of Parliament and to allowances which ensure the reconciliation of their parental role and work and the protection of family life throughout their employment. In order to reconcile family and work, the State shall encourage work in a part-time regime and in other atypical work arrangements. Equal treatment in the workplace is governed by two key laws: Act CXXV of 2003 on Equal Treatment and the Promotion of Equal Opportunities (referred to as the ETA Act)[18] and Act I of 2012 on the Labour Code (referred to as the Labour Code). The ETA Act ensures equal treatment in general employment matters, including during the hiring process, while the Labour Code protects workers' rights within employment relationships.

Discrimination is defined as prohibited when an individual or group, due to actual or perceived characteristics, receives less favourable treatment than another in a comparable situation, or is placed at a significantly greater disadvantage.[17] Protected characteristics under the ETA Act include gender, skin colour, ethnic origin, age, etc. and also so-called 'other protected characteristic', that can be relevant when an individual faces discrimination based on a status linked to a vulnerable social group.[19] From the Supreme Court's judgment KGD 10/2011.,[20] it can be inferred that a higher, managerial position held by an employee at a given employer before maternity leave can be considered as an 'other characteristic'. In the case, upon the employee's return after giving birth, the employer perceived that the employee could no longer perform her duties at the previously expected level. In essence, in this specific case – besides the claimant's motherhood – the position held at the employer may also be considered a protected characteristic.[21] This is explained by the fact that the claimant's managerial position played a particularly important and integral role in her career and daily work activities. The Supreme Court evaluated this as a circumstance related to the employee's workplace status, which may qualify as an 'other characteristic' and granted protection on this basis. This phenomenon is typical in relation to gender

[18] The ETA Act is available in English at: https://njt.hu/jogszabaly/en/2003-125-00-00 [17] Article 8 of the ETA Act on prohibiting both direct and indirect discrimination.

[19] Laura Gyeney, Gábor Kártyás, Éva Lukács Gellérné (2023): European Social Union – National Report Hungary, In Kornezov Alexander (ed.) XXX FIDE Congress in Sofia, 2023, Vol. 3: European Social Union, Sofia, Ciela Norma, p. 308. Available at: https://www.researchgate.net/publication/377840731_European_Social_Union_-_National_Report_Hungary_-_XXX_FIDE_Congress_in_Sofia_2023_Vol_3_ European_Social_Union

[20] Zaccaria Márton Leó (2016): Az egyéb helyzet, mint védett tulajdonság koncepcionális sajátosságai a magyar joggyakorlatban (The conceptual characteristics of "other situations" as a protected characteristic in Hungarian case law), MAGYAR MUNKAJOG E-folyóirat 2016/1., p. 32. Available at: https://hllj.hu/ letolt/2016_1/M_03_Zaccaria_hllj_2016_1.pdf

[21] Lőrincsikné Lajkó Dóra (2006): A munkáltatók munkajogi és szociális jogi kötelezettségei a terhes munkavállalók viszonylatában (Employers' labour law and social law obligations regarding pregnant employees), Munkaügyi Szemle, 2006/1. pp. 46–50.

based discrimination, even though employers should be supporting pregnant or new mothers in maintaining their job security.[22]

In practice, employers often argue that they were unaware of the claimant's protected characteristic. However, Hungarian case law places the burden on the employer to prove they were unaware of the protected characteristic, rather than requiring the claimant to demonstrate the employer's knowledge. Research indicates that Hungarian law and case law align with EU directives and effectively protect claimants. As Halmos notes: "The rules on shared or reversed burden of proof are central to anti-discrimination law. While pre-accession national law already referred to reversed burden of proof, the ETA Act, in line with EU Directives, clarified and refined the parties' obligations. Although national rules now meet EU standards, they may be seen as somewhat favourable toward claimants."[23]

Part-time and fixed-term workers are also protected under the ETA Act. Article 8, point r) recognizes part-time and fixed-term employment as protected characteristics. Additionally, the Equal Treatment Authority has acknowledged temporary worker status as a protected characteristic.[24]

Article 12 (1) of the Labour Code establishes that equal treatment must be maintained in all aspects of employment relationships, especially in terms of remuneration. Remedies for violations of this requirement must not infringe upon the rights of other employees. While the ETA Act addresses broader equality issues, the Labour Code emphasizes labour rights and the principle of equal pay for equal work.[25]

2.2. Maternity, paternity and parental leave

Employed mothers are entitled to 24 weeks of maternity leave upon the birth of their child, with a mandatory minimum of 2 weeks.[26] Maternity leave must be arranged so that no more than 4 weeks are taken prior to the expected birth date. Maternity leave is also granted to employees who are caring for the child based on an enforceable court judgment or enforceable guardianship authority decision due to the mother's health condition or death.

Employed fathers are entitled to 10 working days of paid paternity leave following the birth of their child (or children, in the case of twins).[27] This leave must be used within two months of the birth and may be taken in no more than two parts. For the first 5 working days, the father receives absence pay (100% of his earnings), and for the

[22] Zaccaria Márton Leó (2016), p. 33.

[23] Halmos Szilvia (2018): The Impact of EU Law on Hungarian Anti-discrimination Law in Employment, ELTE Law Journal, 2018:2., pp. 81-99.

[24] EBH 173/2015., EBH 449/2013. and EBH 273/2011.

[25] Article 12 of the Labour Code.

[26] Article 115 (1) c) and Article 127 of the Labour Code.

[27] Article 146 (4) of the Labour Code.

remaining period, he is entitled to 40% of his absence pay.[28] Before 1 January 2023, the duration of paternity leave was limited to just 5 days. The extension to 10 days is a result of the implementation of Directive 2019/1158 on work-life balance.[29]
Parental leave is a labour law definition, this is an additional leave that can be taken after maternity or paternity leave for the purpose of caring for a child, until the child turns 3 years old. This leave can be taken by both the mother and the father, depending on the family's choice. This leave exists in the law parallel to the childcare leave (for the purpose of caring for their child until the child reaches the age of three).[30]
The duration of the childcare leave takes until the child's age of 3 years, the paid parental leave is 44 days if the employee has a one year long preliminary employment relationship. This period is recognized as an insurance relationship, and the parent claiming the leave is entitled to job protection (protection against dismissal). During the paid parental leave, the employee is entitled to 10% of the absence pay, however, the sum must be reduced by the amount of cash child benefits like the childcare fee (GYED).[31] The 44 days long paid parental leave is a new, additional instrument in Hungarian law, a result of implementing Directive 2019/1158 on work-life balance.

2.3. Insurance-based benefits for parents with young children

There are benefits in Hungary which are available basically to mothers or fathers who have insurance status. These are as follows.

Infant care fee and infant care fee extra

During maternity leave mothers are entitled to infant care fee (CSED) from the state.[32] The allowance is paid for up to 24 weeks, or a maximum of 168 days after the child's birth.[33] It is based on prior earnings and subject to preliminary employment or insurance coverage. To qualify, the mother must have been insured for at least 365 days in the 2 years preceding the birth. Currently, the amount of CSED is the highest among childcare benefits, and since 1 July 2021, it has been set at 100% of the previous year's average earnings (100% of the calendar daily base). There is no upper

[28] Sipka Péter,Zaccaria, Márton Leó (2022): Tisztességes munkáért méltányos bérezés kontra versenyképesség – az európai minimálbér-irányelv jelentősége és várható hatásai (Fair pay for decent work vs. competitiveness – the significance and expected effects of the European minimum wage directive), MUNKAJOG 2022:4, pp. 1-8.

[29] Directive (EU) 2019/1158 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 20 June 2019 on work-life balance for parents and carers and repealing Council Directive 2010/18/EU, OJ L 188, 12.7.2019, p. 79–93.

[30] Paid parental leave is in Article 118/A. of the Labour Code while unpaid leave for caring for the child is in Article 128 of the Labour Code.

[31] Article 146 (5) of the Labour Code.

[32] Gellérné Lukács Éva (2023): A csecsemőgondozási díj és gyermekgondozási díj igénybevételével kapcsolatos megújult szabályok (The updated regulations regarding the application of the infant care fee and the childcare fee), MUNKAJOG, 2023:4, pp. 75-80.

[33] Molnár Balázs (2021): Foglalkoztatottak gyermekvállalását és gyermeknevelését segítő ellátások Magyarországon (Benefits supporting employees in family planning and child-rearing in Hungary), MUNKAJOG, 2021:1, pp. 64-71.

limit, and since July 2025 it is exempt from personal income tax. This results in the mother receiving a higher net income after giving birth than she did while working. From 2025, after 90 days (three months) following the birth of the child, mothers may return to work while continuing to receive the infant care fee, with the benefit paid at 70 percent of its original amount. This measure, introduced under the name CSED Extra, entered into force on 1 July 2025 and aims to support earlier labour market re-entry for mothers without the total loss of childcare-related benefits.[34]

Childcare fee

When the entitlement to infant care fee (CSED) terminates (after 168 days), employed mothers or fathers are entitled to childcare fee (GYED), which is a monthly cash benefit paid by the state until the child is 2 years old, or until the child is 3 years old for twins. Only one of the parents can take the childcare fee (GYED) for the same child. When the insured parent takes GYED, they are on childcare leave for the purpose of caring for their child (that is legally different from the paid parental leave in the previous point).[35] Pursuant to Article 128 of the Labour Code an employee is entitled to childcare leave for the purpose of caring for their child until the child reaches the age of three. During this period the employee is entitled to take a job. Article 128 (3) expressly states that "The employee is entitled to childcare leave for the duration of the childcare fee." During this period the employee is entitled to job protection.[36]

The childcare fee (GYED) is based on prior earnings which require preliminary insurance periods before the birth. To qualify, the insured parent caring for the child in their household must have been insured for at least 365 days in the 2 years preceding the birth.[37] The fee is paid by the state, its amount is calculated at 70% of the average eligible income per calendar day, capped at a maximum of 70% of double the current minimum wage per child, which amounts to HUF 451,920 (€ 1,170) gross per month in 2026. If a parent qualifies for GYED for more than one child simultaneously, the maximum amount is calculated separately for each child. GYED is subjected to pension contributions meaning that it qualifies as insurance period which will entitle the parent to pensions.

Since 2010 GYED has been gradually developed, become more flexible and the circle of its beneficiaries has been extended. From 2014 – after the introduction of GYED Extra – it has been possible to work and take a job while receiving GYED at the same time which is a measure that counteracts the welfare trap. Parents do not lose the

[34] https://kormany.hu/hirek/csed-extra-2025-julius-1-tol-munkavegzes-mellett-is-jar-a-csecsemogondozasi-dij-es-csokkennek-a-burokratikus-terhek

[35] Paid parental leave is in Article 118/A. of the Labour Code while unpaid leave for caring for the child is in Article 128 of the Labour Code.

[36] Article 65 of the Labour Code.

[37] Section 42/A (1) and Section 42/E (1) of Act LXXXIII of 1997 on Mandatory Health Insurance Benefits. Gellérné Lukács Éva (2023): Nagykommentár az egészségbiztosítási törvényhez (Commentary to the Act on Mandatory Health Insurance Benefits), Wolters Kluwer, Budapest. Commentary on childcare allowance.

benefit upon returning to work, which enables them to get it as an extra payment covering child-raising costs (e.g. nursery or private care).
During the last decade the benefit has been expanded with the introduction of 'Grandparent GYED' and also a type of GYED available for students in tertiary education ('Student GYED'). Non-retired grandparents, who meet the criteria of having worked 365 days in the last 2 years, can take GYED if they are the ones who provide care for the child. GYED for students in tertiary education can be accessed by parents, too. A higher education student can receive a so-called child care fee for graduates if she meets all of the following conditions: had an active higher education status for at least 2 semesters within 2 years before the birth of the child, at the time of birth of the child, no more than 1 year has elapsed since the suspension or termination of the student status, raises the child in her own household, is a citizen of Hungary or an EEA Member State, had a place of residence in Hungary at the time of birth of her child.
In 2018, a new benefit called ÖFD (adoptive parent allowance) was introduced. This is available to insured individuals who are raising a child who has reached the age of 2, or 3 in the case of twins, with the intention of adoption. Essentially, ÖFD functions as an adoptive parent's GYED.
Since July 2025 the child care fee (GYED) and the ÖFD became exempt from personal income tax.[38]

2.4. Tax credits for employed persons

Family-type taxation has been in force in Hungary since 2011 and in 2025 the government launched its largest family tax reduction programme to date, in which the tax and contribution payment obligation of parents raising children is reduced on the basis of the number of children.[39] A spouse who is entitled to family allowance or lives with such a person in the same household, as well as a pregnant woman and her spouse, may benefit from personal income tax and contribution allowance, even jointly or shared. The condition for the discount is the declared employment or other gainful occupation.
The family tax and contribution allowance can be applied already from the age of 91 days of the foetus. The amount of the family tax allowance has increased in two stages: from 1 July 2025 it rose by 50 percent, and in January 2026 it doubled compared to the previous level. The net monthly amount per child increases with the number of children in the family: in 2026 it is HUF 20,000 for a family with one child, HUF 40,000 per child for a family with two children, and HUF 66,000 per child for large families (3 or more children).[40] Deduction can also be applied from personal income tax (family tax credit) and social security contributions (family contribution benefit). In this respect the positive effects of these measures could be further strengthened with the duplication of the amount of tax reduction.As part of Hungary's largest family

[38] https://nav.gov.hu/sajtoszoba/hirek/Fontos_adovaltozasok_lepnek_ma_hatalyba

[39] Section 29/A-B of Act CXVII of 1995 on Personal Income Tax.

[40] https://nav.gov.hu/sajtoszoba/hirek/Jovore_jon_a_dupla_csaladi_adokedvezmeny

tax reduction programme to date, personal income tax exemption is being gradually extended to every mother raising more than one child. Throughout their career, until retirement they don't have to pay personal income tax at all. From 1 January 2020, all mothers with four or more children are exempt from paying personal income tax (currently 15%).[41]

From 1 January 2022, young people under the age of 25 do not have to pay personal income tax if their monthly income does not exceed the average wage (HUF 656,785, that is, € 1,707 in 2025).[42] In 2025, the discount means a maximum tax saving of HUF 98,518 (€ 256) per month, which is how much more young people can receive.[43] If their wage is more than that, they have to pay tax on the amount above HUF 656,785. It can be used for the last time in the month in which the beneficiary reaches the age of 25.

Additionally, from 1 January 2023, women who have children before the age of 30 are exempt from personal income tax up to the amount of the average wage tax until their age of 30.[44] In 2025, the discount is provided up to HUF 656,785 (€ 1,651) per month and can reach a maximum tax saving of HUF 98,518 (€ 248) per month.[45] If their wage exceeds that amount they have to pay tax on the exceeding amount. This tax credit and the tax credit for young people under the age of 25 cannot be applied at the same time. Finally, if at least one of the spouses has had their first marriage, their income may increase by HUF 5,000 (€ 12) per month for 2 years after conclusion of the marriage.[46]

2025 was a landmark year of tax exemptions for mothers. Starting in July of that year, mothers raising children under the age of two became eligible for tax exemptions, as they are not required to pay taxes on either the infant care fee or the child care fee. From October 2025, mothers raising three children were granted full personal income tax exemption. From 1 January 2026, mothers under the age of 40 raising two children also become exempt from PIT; as planned this exemption will be extended in several phases to all mothers raising two children by 2029. As a result, an estimated half a million mothers are expected to be exempt from personal income tax in Hungary in 2026, rising to one million by 2029.

To summarize the personal income tax exemption for mothers, it can be concluded that in the case of mothers we can identify distinct major groups based on three criteria:

- age (mothers under 30)
- life situation (mothers receiving child-care fee or child-raising fee)
- number of children (mothers with more than 2 children)

[41] Section 29/D of Act CXVII of 1995 on Personal Income Tax.

[42] Section 29/F of Act CXVII of 1995 on Personal Income Tax.

[43] https://nav.gov.hu/ado/szja/szja-kedvezmenyek/25-ev-alatti-fiatalok-kedvezmenye

[44] Section 29/G of Act CXVII of 1995 on Personal Income Tax.

[45] https://nav.gov.hu/ado/szja/szja-kedvezmenyek/30-ev-alatti-anyak-kedvezmenye

[46] Section 29/E of Act CXVII of 1995 on Personal Income Tax.

The government first introduced the personal income tax exemption for mothers of four children, followed by young people under 25, then mothers under 30, and in 2025 the tax exemption was extended to mothers with young children and mothers of three children, and in 2026 to mothers of two children. Several objectives can be identified in providing personal income tax exemptions for mothers, including increasing employment rates, reducing the wage gap, encouraging people to have children, bringing forward the age at which women have children, and more generally eliminating financial disadvantages associated with raising children.

An analysis[47] highlights that personal income tax exemption could significantly reduce the wage gap between women and men. According to the model, in 2024, men's average gross earnings were 15.9 percent higher than women's. However, the personal income tax exemption increases net wages by 22.5 percent, thereby eliminating the disparity in net earnings between mothers and men; in fact, the gap reverses in favor of women, who gain a 4.4 percentage point advantage over men due to the tax exemption. As a result of the personal income tax exemption for mothers, women's income disadvantage is thus transformed into an advantage, which is one of the most important stated goals of family policy centered on mothers. The additional income provided by the personal income tax exemption for mothers thus helps ensure that having and raising children does not entail financial disadvantages, but rather creates an advantageous situation.

2.5. Universal benefits of parents with young children

There are benefits in Hungary which are universal and available to mothers and fathers irrespective of their insurance status. These are as follows.

Birth grant

Birth grant is a one-off benefit following childbirth, subject to the condition that the pregnant woman participates in pregnancy care at least 4 times. Its amount is HUF 64,125 € 167) in 2025 and HUF 85,500 (€ 222) for twins per child. The adoptive parent is also entitled to maternity allowance.

Baby Bond

The Baby Bond is a registered government bond that can be purchased until the child is 18 years old. For all children born in Hungary and born abroad with Hungarian citizenship or "Hungarian ID", the state provides a life start allowance of HUF 42,500 (€ 110), which is deposited in a deposit account in the Hungarian State Treasury. If a Treasury Start Securities Account is subsequently opened for the child and the support is transferred to it, it will continue to be remunerated as a Baby Bond, on

[47] KINCS(2025): Elindult az új adócsökkentési program https://www.koppmariaintezet.hu/docs/Elindult_az_uj_csaladi_adocsokkentesi_program_elemzes%2020250701_vegl.pdf

which any additional amounts can be paid into the account until the child is 18 years old. Currently, the state pays an annual inflation plus an interest premium of 3% on the amount on the account. The account can be accessed after the child has reached the age of 18, at the earliest after the 3rd year following the opening of the account and at the expiry of the Baby Bond.

Childcare allowance

The childcare allowance (GYES) is a monthly financial benefit provided to the parent responsible for raising the child in their own household, from birth until the child turns 3 years old (or up to 6 years for twins and up to 10 years for a permanently ill child).[48] This allowance cannot be received alongside the infant care fee or childcare fee. The monthly amount is set at the current pension minimum of HUF 28,500 (approximately € 74) per child, with the same amount applicable for each twin. Job protection is provided for the recipient of the childcare allowance. During the payment period of the benefit the parent is entitled to take a job similar to childcare fee period.[49] Additionally, grandparents are eligible for the childcare allowance if the child is over 1 year old, is raised by the parents, and there are no other children in the household receiving this allowance. Once the child reaches 3 years of age, grandparents may engage in work for up to 30 hours per week, or full-time if the work is performed from home.

Child raising support

Families with three or more children are entitled to child raising support (GYET), which provides a monthly amount equal to the current pension minimum, i.e., HUF 28,500 (approximately € 71), regardless of the number of children.[50] This support is available from the age of 3 until the youngest child turns 8. Eligibility ends if the number of children under 18 in the household falls below three. Parents can also engage in earning activities for up to 30 hours per week, or without a time limit if the work is done from home.[51]

Family allowance

In Hungary, family allowance is granted on a universal basis for a child living in the household until the age of 18. Its monthly amount (HUF 12 200 – 25 900) depends on the number of children raised in the family, type of the family (single or two-parent family) and the child's health status. This can be extended to the age of 20 if the child is studying in a full-time public education institution or vocational training institution,

[48] Article 20 of Act LXXXIV of 1998 on the Support of Families.

[49] Article 130 of the Labour Code.

[50] Article 23 of Act LXXXIV of 1998 on the Support of Families.

[51] Dani Csaba – Gellérné Lukács Éva (2012): Hazai szabályozás uniós kitekintéssel: családok szociális ellátása; öröklési jog az Európai Unióban (Rules on support of families nationally and with a view on the EU), In: Szeibert Orsolya (szerk.) Család, gyermek, vagyon : A joggyakorlat kihívásai : Családjogi tanulmánykötet, Budapest, HVG-ORAC (2012) pp. 481-496.

and to the age of 23 in the case of a disabled child.[52] A condition of the allowance is that the child attends kindergarten or school. The person entitled to the allowance is the biological or adoptive parent, as well as the spouse/partner living with the parent, guardian or the head of the institution where the child is placed. A person over the age of 18, or who is permanently ill or severely disabled and is no longer entitled to educational allowance may apply for child raising allowance in his/her own right.

2.6. Carer's leave and benefits in case of a sick child

In Hungary, an employee who cares for a relative with a serious medical condition or someone living in his/her household is entitled to 5 days of unpaid leave per year.[53] Both parents are entitled to extra leave for their children under the age of 16: 2 working days for one child, 4 working days for two children, 7 working days for three or more children, during which the employee is entitled to an absentee pay equal to 100% of his/her earnings. Extra leave increases by 2 working days per disabled child.[54]

Childcare sick pay is regulated in the Act on Mandatory Health Insurance Benefits, according to which the working parent is entitled to sick pay for a sick child under the age of 12.[55] Its duration depends on the age of the child: no time limit under 1 year; up to 84 days for a child aged 12-35 months; 42 days for a child aged 36-71 months; and 14 days per year for a child aged 6-12 years. Single parents are entitled to double leave. The sick pay amounts to 50 or 60% of actual earnings up to a ceiling based on the minimum wage: the maximum daily amount of sick-pay is one-thirtieth of twice the minimum wage, in 2025 HUF 19,387 (€ 50) gross per day.[56] Regarding the length of the benefit, the Hungarian childcare sick pay is a generous legal instrument giving the chance to the child to fully recover under the care of their parents.

A parent (including an adoptive parent) caring for a child who is permanently ill (foreseen to be cared for more than 3 months) or severely disabled and unable to care for himself/herself is entitled to financial support.[57] The fee for caring for children at home (GYOD) has been introduced in 2019, its amount in 2026 is HUF 322,800 (€ 810), of which 10% pension contribution is deducted. Those raising two sick children will receive one and a half times this amount, HUF 484,200 (€ 1,220). Besides receiving this subsidy, earning activities outside the home can be carried out for up to 4 hours a day, and the duration of working from home is not limited.

[52] Chapter II of Act LXXXIV of 1998 on the Support of Families.

[53] Article 55 (1) l) of the Labour Code.

[54] Article 118(1)-(2) of the Labour Coe.

[55] Article 46 of Act LXXXIII of 1997 on Mandatory Health Insurance Benefits

[56] https://szocialiskozlony.hu/Cikk/az-egeszsegbiztositas-penzbeli-ellatasai

[57] Article 38 of Act III on Social Assistance. See Tamás Gyulavári, Éva Gellérné Lukács, Anita Kaderják, Kata Nagy (2021): European Semester 2020-2021 country fiche on disability equality. Hungary, Brussels, European Commission, p. 15. Available at: https://www.researchgate.net/ publication/378497073_European_Semester_2020-2021_country_fiche_on_disability_equality_Hungary [50] Article 61(3) of the Labour Code. [51] Article 61(4) of the Labour Code.

2.7. Flexible working arrangements

In Hungary, breastfeeding mothers are entitled to 2 x 1 hour per day (2 x 2 hours for twins) for the first 6 months and 1 hour per day (2 hours for twins) for the following 3 months as breastfeeding break.

Parents returning from parental leave are entitled to request flexible working arrangements. There are two cases: requests which the employer is obliged to cope with and requests which the employer can consider. First, the employer is obliged, upon the employee's request, to modify the employment contract to part-time work corresponding to half of the full-time working hours until the child reaches the age of four – or until the child reaches the age of six in the case of an employee raising three or more children.[50]

Secondly, an employee, until their child reaches the age of eight or the caregiver employee (except during the first six months of employment), may request: a) modification of their place of work, b) modification of their work schedule, c) employment through teleworking, or d) employment on a part-time basis.[51] The employee must submit a written request for changes, providing justification and specifying the desired date of the change. The employer must respond in writing within fifteen days of receiving the employee's request. If the request is denied, the employer must provide justification. If the refusal is unlawful or if the employer fails to respond, the court may substitute the employer's consent.

2.8. Other measures and benefits

The role of intergenerational solidarity in promoting labour market participation of parents with young children shall be mentioned. The preferential old-age pension for women is considered an old-age pension in every respect. A woman is entitled to this personal pension regardless of her age, provided she has at least 40 years of eligible service time.[58] Only the service time gained through employment and recognized based on benefits received for raising children qualifies as eligible service time. As a general rule, within the 40 years of eligibility, at least 32 years must be gained through employment-related service time. This means that up to 8 years of the eligible service time can be recognized for child-rearing. However, the pension can also be granted based on 40 years of employment alone. The "Nők40" scheme could serve as a form of "grandmother pension," helping women who retire before the statutory retirement age to actively participate in the care, supervision, and upbringing of their grandchildren.

An adequate level of language skills to enable further learning and easier and faster access to the labour market is essential for today's young people. From 1 July 2020, mothers and fathers receiving CSED, GYED or GYES are able to take their first language test for free.[59] Additionally, as of 1 July 2020, mothers, fathers and grandparents receiving

[58] Article 18 (2a)-(2d) of Act LXXX of 1997 on Social Security Pension Benefits.

[59] Article 2 (1a) of Government Decree 503/2017 (XII. 29.) on support provided for the cost of the first successful language exam and the first advanced-level final exam in a foreign language

CSED, GYED or GYES can also take their driving licence course and test for free.[60] These measures effectively can help them to reintegrate into the labour market.

3. Early childhood education and care

Article 4 of Act CCXI of 2011 on the protection of families stipulates that „(1) A working parent is entitled to receive assistance from the state during working hours for the care of their child. (2) The state supports the employment participation of parents raising children by providing services that flexibly adapt to the needs of families in relation to the daytime care and supervision of minor children. (3) The state particularly encourages and supports the daytime care and supervision of minor children in small communities and family-like environments."

Childcare facilities are typically defined as environments that provide care and education for children who are not yet of mandatory school age (generally under 6 years old). These facilities fall within either the social service system, the educational system, or both, depending on the Member State, and play a significant role in enhancing the employability of both mothers and fathers.[61]

In 2002, the Barcelona European Council established goals for the availability of high quality and affordable childcare for preschool-aged children. The targets included providing care for 90% of children aged 3 until they reach mandatory school age and for 33% of children under the age of 3.[62] In 2018, the Commission released a report assessing the progress made by Member States towards achieving these objectives from 2013 to 2016. The overall percentage of children receiving care in formal childcare settings for ages 3 to mandatory school age rose significantly in the EU, increasing from 83% to 86.3% between 2011 and 2016.[63]

Hungary's situation is particularly noteworthy. In 1989, there have been 1000 nurseries in Hungary, covering overwhelmingly all demands, however this system was largely dismantled[64] and had to be re-built in accordance with new demands and societal expectations. In Hungary, the kindergarten is compulsory and free of charge from the age of 3 to 6, and children get free meals depending on the family's income and other considerations (e.g. at least three children raised in the family). Approximately three-quarters of children are entitled to free meals. Primary education can be started at the age of 6.

[60] Article 2/A. of Government Decree 55/2018 (III. 23.) on support provided for the cost of the basic traffic knowledge course and exam.

[61] Gellérné Lukács Éva (2021): Support for Families – a way to tackle COVID-19 and its implications in Hungary, Hungarian Yearbook of International Law and European Law, 9:1, pp. 91-110. Available at: https://www.researchgate.net/publication/355851808_Support_for_Families_A_Way_to_Tackle_COVID-19_and_Its_Implications_in_Hungary

[62] Presidency Conclusions, Barcelona European Council 15-16 March 2002.

[63] Commission Report on the development of childcare facilities for young children with a view to increase female labour participation, strike a work-life balance for working parents and bring about sustainable and inclusive growth in Europe (the "Barcelona objectives"), COM(2018)273 final, Brussels, 8.5.2018.

[64] Makay Zsuzsanna (2015): Family support system – Childraising – Employment In Monostori Judit – Őri Péter – Spéder Zsolt (eds.): Demographic Portrait of Hungary 2015, pp. 57-74.

In 2024, 16,6% of children aged 0-3 received nursery care (including private childcare), which is a considerable increase compared to 2005, when this figure was only 7%.[65] From 2019 those parents who could not find a public nursery place for their children are entitled to a monthly contribution of € 110 to be able to pay the fee of the private nursery.

Nurseries accept children aged 20 weeks to 3 years. Since the nursery system was restructured in 2017, parents now have a variety of options to choose from, including traditional institutional nurseries, as well as mini, family, and workplace nurseries. In municipalities where there are more than 40 children under the age of 3, nursery care must be provided, which can be organized by the municipalities either independently, through agreements, or by forming associations. Nursery care in municipal-run institutional nurseries is mostly free of charge, typically covering only the cost of meals. Additionally, it is also free for children from families with three or more children, as well as for those who are permanently ill or disabled. In 2024, one in three Hungarian settlements had a nursery, ensuring that nursery care is accessible in all districts across the country.

100% of those aged 3-6 went to kindergarten in 2024, which shows an increase of 15 percentage points compared to 2005, when the participation rate was 85%.

From September 2024, the Hungarian State Treasury will provide a monthly subsidy of HUF 50,000 to rural working parents whose children attend nurseries, which can be used for nursery care and/or meal fees. A parent raising their child alone, as well as a parent with a child of special educational needs, eligible for early development, permanently ill or disabled, may be provided with a monthly allowance of up to HUF 65,000 per child.

4. Summary and future challenges

In Hungary, the years of the 2008-2010 economic crisis hit families the hardest. That time family benefits were cut, family tax credits and housing allowances were abolished, and the paid childcare period was shortened.[66] In 2011, Act CCXI of 2011 on the protection of families has been passed, the underlying idea of which is that "the family and having children should not be a risk of poverty".[67] Supportive family policies became a priority in Hungary ever since. An important goal is to achieve a better standard of living for families with children in financial terms than if they had not taken on children.[68] Over the past decade, Hungarian family policy has undergone a significant transformation, characterized by a notable shift: work-related

[65] https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/databrowser/view/TEPSR_SP210__custom_19645772/default/table

[66] Fűrész Tünde, Molnár Balázs (2020): A családbarát Magyarország építésének első évtizede az Európai Unióban. (The first decade of family friendly Hungary in the European Union), Kapocs, 2020:3–4, pp. 3–11.

[67] Act CCXI of 2011 on the protection of families, preamble.

[68] Tünde Fűrész – Árpád József Mészáros (2024): Pronatalist Family Policy, the Response of the Second Hungarian Presidency of the Council of the European Union to European Demographic Challenges, In Tibor Navracsics, Balázs Tárnok (eds.) The 2024 Hungarian EU Presidency, Ludovika Publisher, Budapest, pp. 165-190., p. 166.

family benefits have gained substantial value, with a strong focus on employment- and wage-related support.[69] Additionally, the objectives extend beyond mere income replacement; the family support system takes a holistic approach.[70] It is important for parents, but especially for women, that so many measures focus on helping mothers to participate in the labour market, which is three times more effective demographically than general measures.[71]

The development of insurance-based cash benefits, including the infant care fee (CSED) and the childcare fee (GYED) has been continuous over the past decade. Both the scope of beneficiaries and the available amounts have been expanded. Hungary has successfully introduced various measures to encourage the labour market participation of parents with young children, especially by providing parents to work and keep their childcare benefits at the same time.

Family tax credits and contribution allowances increased the income level of working parents with young children since 2011, but the most credit can be realised if a person has three children. According to studies, tax credits have resulted in more families having a third child.[72] From 2020 to 2025, several new tax credits have been introduced to encourage childbearing, support child-rearing and recognize mothers' efforts for the rest of their lives, also to increase the number of mothers who have their first child sooner in time. Personal income tax exemptions for young mothers, mothers with young children, and mothers with two or more children are crucial steps toward recognizing mothers' contributions to social development. These personal income tax exemptions could help eliminate the wage gap between women and men, which is one of the best ways to reduce social inequalities and an important expression of financial appreciation for mothers. It can be said that over the past decade, benefits aimed at supporting child-rearing for insured working parents, mostly mothers have been significantly strengthened.[73]

Regarding early childhood and education, Hungary has shown a remarkable development in the last decade, lots of new places have been opened for children in nurseries and the participation of children from age 3 in kindergartens reached 100% in 2023. This is a major step forward in enhancing work-life balance. These initiatives have been crucial in facilitating the high level of labour market engagement among parents.

[69] Makay Zsuzsa (2018): Családtámogatás, női munkavállalás (Family suppport, female employment). In: Monostori Judit – Őri Péter – Spéder Zsolt (szerk.): Demográfiai Portré 2018. Jelentés a magyar népesség helyzetéről. (Demographic portrait, Report KSH Népességtudományi Kutatóintézet, Budapest, 83. o.

[70] Ibid., p. 71.

[71] Matthias Doepke, Fabian Kinderman (2019): Bargaining over Babies: Theory, Evidence, and Policy Implications. American Economic Review, Vol. 109:9, September 2019, pp. 3264–3306.

[72] Zsolt Spéder, Lívia Murinkó, Livia Sz. Oláh (2020): Cash support vs. tax incentives: The differential impact of policy interventions on third births in contemporary Hungary, Population Studies, 74:1, pp. 39-54.

[73] Fűrész Tünde – Molnár Balázs (2021): The first decade of building a family-friendly Hungary, Quaderns de Politiques Familiars 2021:7, pp. 1-12. Pári András, Varga Anikó, Balogh Enikő (2019): Magyar családpolitikai folyamatok a Családvédelmi Akcióterv 2019. szeptember végén rendelkezésre álló eredményeinek tükrében (Hungarian family policy developments in light of the results available by the end of September 2019 under the Family Protection Action Plan), Kapocs, 2019:3-4, pp. 12-25.

Having said that, reconciling work and family always remains a challenge, although for nowadays it could be declared that work and having children became mutually reinforcing and not mutually exclusive factors in Hungary. An important requirement for the functioning of the system is that the right to choose to return to labour market should be real: the possibility of returning to work should not only be theoretical, but could also be used in practice by the parent who chooses to do so.

In several cases the programs and measures introduced so far have resulted in visible success, and should be continued to provide further opportunities for families, such as:

- Further broadening the availability of childcare services, building new daycare centres and nurseries for children under three, eliminating the existing waiting lists in some centres; further moving to a balance in respect of rural and urban demands. Continuous improvement of access to childcare services remains a priority in order to protect families, which requires mobilising the necessary resources.
- Further strengthening the family friendly workplace attitudes: addressing negative employer attitudes towards parents who are absent from the labour market for long periods of time (i.e 3 years); developing programmes and tools to support labour market reintegration so that employers do not see long parental leave as a sign of less commitment or obsolescence of skills.
- Introducing and strengthening measures to promote part-time working and flexible working arrangements in Hungary, which could help to activate more parents with young children to return to the labour market.
- Further action may be needed to change public perceptions of fathers' use of parental leave even more. It can have a significant impact on mothers' opportunities in the labour market.
- Continue to maintain, preserve and expand the lifetime tax exemption for women with more than two children, as well as other personal tax exemptions available to mothers, as this ensures predictable and stable financial security for mothers.

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Promoting labour market participation of parents with young children in Ireland

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Abstract

The express identification of the married family in 1937, with dedicated gendered spousal roles, as the only Constitutionally recognised family under Irish law greatly influenced lawmakers' reluctance to support women who chose to work outside the home. Rather the family was regarded as optimum where the woman was supported financially by her husband and was not forced by economic necessity to work outside the home, to the neglect of her duties. Almost 90 years since the inception of the Irish Constitution, there has been a seismic shift in the law and policy approaches to the provision of supports to parents and carers to enable active workplace participation, with measures in respect of childcare, parental leave, and remote working now enabled to facilitate greater work life balance, an acknowledgement of the range of caring roles that often are undertaken alongside workplace employment. This chapter will trace the development of Irish law and policies, which have been very positively impacted by EU obligations, and demonstrate an increasingly meaningful, and ever improving emphasis on families, parents, and carers by successive Irish governments.

1. Parental participation in the Irish workplace

Any assessment of the supports available to parents in the workplace in Ireland necessitates an understanding of the status of the family under Irish Constitutional law and the gendered roles expressly identified for the father and mother in such a family. Article 41 sets out the special position of the family and expressly identifies its elevated position and the superior nature of its status and associated rights. The State recognises the Family as the natural primary and fundamental unit group of society, and as a moral institution possessing inalienable and imprescriptible rights, antecedent and superior to all positive law. The longstanding existence of both legal and social norms for the division of parental obligations between the workplace and the home has informed the slow development of a more equal approach to the regulation and protection of the rights of all parents in the workplace in Ireland.

Historically, both societal and legal norms in Ireland resulted in labour market participation being dominated by men with both an expectation and in some instances a legal obligation for married women to forgo participation in employment upon marriage. The express Irish Constitutional preferential treatment of the marital family is twinned with a patriarchal

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view of the domestic role of the mother within that family unit, with express Constitutional recognition in Article 41.2.1 'that by her life within the home, woman gives to the State a support without which the common good could not be achieved'.[2] Thus, a very particular and protective view of the marital family with designated gender-specific roles was expressly identified by the 1937 Constitution and has formed the basis for the State's approach to the regulation and almost immovable defence of the marital family since then. Article 41.3 of the Irish Constitution requires the State to 'endeavour to ensure that mothers shall not be obliged by economic necessity to and engage in labour to the neglect of their duties in the home', meaning that no woman should be forced through economic necessity to work outside the home. The matter was brought before the Irish people by way of referendum in March 2024, the majority of those voting rejecting the proposal to replace this controversial provision with a more gender-neutral commitment relating to carers within the home. The 'No campaign' succeeded on two fronts; a minority view that a woman's work in the home deserves express recognition and a strong view that the replacement provision did not adequately protect and/or reward the work of carers and would have the effect of diluting the State's legal duty to support such care. This gendered view of spousal roles has historically permitted the Irish legislature to provide financial support exclusively for women in the home; widowed and unmarried, to the exclusion of their male counterparts.[3] From a societal perspective, it is only since the lifting of the Marriage bar in 1973 that the presence of women in the workplace has been gradually accepted by Irish society.[4]

Within a heterosexual marriage, the 2016 Women and Men in Ireland Survey[5] reported that a married woman was now far more likely to work outside the home compared to when these Constitutional ideals were framed, with 40.4% of married women working 30-39 hours per week, shattering the myth that a woman not in paid employment is the normalised role

[2] When written in 1937, Bunreacht na hEireann (Irish Constitution) in referencing the marital family in Article 41 has been regarded as referring to the married heterosexual family. A challenge to this position was defeated in the High Court in *Zappone and Gilligan v Revenue Commissioners and others* [2006] IEHC 404. However, in 2015 by way of public vote, marriage equality became lawful in Ireland, with a Constitutional footing in Article 41.4. Non-traditional family formations including same sex couples and cohabitants had been legislatively provided for in the Civil Partnership and Certain Rights and Obligations of Cohabitants Act 2010, which predated the introduction of marriage equality and provided recognition for registered same-sex relationships as well as legal rights and obligations for qualified cohabitants. The rights introduced by way of legislation have always been lesser rights than those attaching to spouses in a marital relationship.

[3] Louise Crowley, Sheltering the Homemaker in Irish Family Law: Ireland's Failure to Evolve with the Shifting Social and Family Norms (2018) Int'l Surv. Fam. L. 271.

[4] Deirdre Foley, Their proper place': women, work and the marriage bar in independent Ireland, c. 1924–1973, Social History (2022) Vol. 47 No. 1 60 - 84, available at: https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/03071022.2022.2009692

[5] In 1973, Ireland's unemployment rate was 5.7% of the active population; the rate reached 16.3% in 1988. In 2001, Ireland hit its lowest unemployment rate of 4.2%. However, after the economic crash, the unemployment rate hit another high rate of 15.9% in 2012. Since that point, Ireland has seen a decrease in its unemployment rate to its current level of 4.4% in May 2024, despite a slight increase in the post-COVID-19 era. Unemployment rates were almost the same for both sexes in 2023, at 4.1% for male and 4.3% for women.

of the married woman.[6] The same 2016 report demonstrated that workplace participation rates of married women at that time were only 3.5% lower than those who were single.[7]

The "Women in the Labour Market 2023-2024" report demonstrates that since 2010 the number of women reporting their principal economic status as "engaged in home duties" has fallen by 60%, from 520,500 to 208,200.[8] Additionally, recent data from the Central Statistics Office (CSO) further demonstrates the ever increasing involvement of married women in the workplace, finding that "the number of married women in employment rose by 21.5% over the five years from Q4 2019 to Q4 2024".[9] The number of all women in employment has more than doubled in this period from 641,800 to 1,310,600, an increase of 104.2% compared to an equivalent increase of 50.5% for men. This demonstrates clear evidence of the growing participation of women in the Irish workforce and the indisputable need for concomitant childcare and welfare supports. However, a November 2025 CSO report[10] has revealed that Irish men earn €14,000 a year more on average compared to women. Young female workers who were new entrants to the workforce during 2024 were being paid 31% less when compared to their male counterparts.[11]

In respect of the participation of men and women in the Irish workplace where they are parenting solely or as a couple, the CSO 2019 Women and Men in Ireland Survey[12] reported interesting findings that demonstrated a clear gender divide. The employment rate for women aged 20-44 who were lone parents or part of a couple (with or without children) was 72% in 2018. However, there were large variations in employment rates recorded between women with and without children. This rate varied from 88.1% for women in a couple with no children to 66.8% for women whose youngest child was aged between 4 and 5 years of age, a decrease of 21.3 %. One year later in the CSO Household survey, the rate for couples with children fell from 78.5% to 76.9%, while for lone parents it fell from 64.3% to 60.7%. The fall in employment rate for couples without children was however less pronounced, decreasing from 75.8% to 75.1% over the same period.

[6] Central Statistics Office, *Women and Men in Ireland*, 2016.

[7] IBEC, *Labour Market Participation of Women*, October 2016.

[8] Central Statistics Office, *Women in the Labour Market 2023-2024*, available at: https://www.cso.ie/en/releasesandpublications/ep/p-wlm/womeninthelabourmarket2023-2024/.

[9] Central Statistics Office, *Key Findings - Women in the Labour Market 2023-2024*, 2024, available at: https://www.cso.ie/en/releasesandpublications/ep/p-wlm/womeninthelabourmarket2023-2024/keyfindings/#:~:text=The%20changing%20dynamic%20of%20women,a%2068.8%25%20increase%20for%20men.

[10] Central Statistics Office, *Key Findings - Gender Balance in Business Survey 2025*, available at: https://www.cso.ie/en/releasesandpublications/ep/p-gbb/genderbalanceinbusinesssurvey2025/keyfindings/.

[11] Ronan Smyth, "Young female workers paid 31% less than male counterparts", *The Irish Examiner*, 10 November 2025, available at: https://www.irishexaminer.com/business/companies/arid-41740089.html.

[12] Central Statistics Office, *Women and Men in Ireland*, 2019.

One Family, Ireland's organisation for people parenting alone, shared parenting and separating, relying upon data from the CSO Q2 2020 "Labour Force Survey Households and Family Units" report, considered in detail the employment rate of lone parents. They identified these rates and compared them to 2019 rates with reference to the age of the child(ren):

- Where youngest child aged up to 5 years: 53.2% (down 6.8%)
- Where youngest child aged 6 to 11: 65.6% (down 1.9%)
- Where youngest child aged 12 to 17: 62.1% (down 8.8%)

It was suggested that one possible explanation for this could be "that the increased cost of older children is making employment a necessity for more parents."[13] It is also likely that the disqualification from eligibility for the One Parent Family Payment once the youngest child turns 7 is likely to have forced some recipients into the labour market. Further interesting findings included that whilst 5.6% of lone parents were classified as unemployed... 2.4% of adult members of couples with children were so classified in the same period. Concluding their observations, One Family noted that 58.7% of lone parents in Q2 2020 were participating in the labour market, compared to participation rates of 76.3% for adult members of couples with children, and 49.4% for the adult members of couples without children. Thus again, this serves to emphasise the importance of supporting the presence and contributions of lone parents in the workplace. However, it remains the case that lone parents are much more likely to be employed on a temporary contract (7.6%) when compared to adults in two parent families (4.6%).[14]

In March 2024, the Central Statistics Office (CSO) launched the Women and Men in Ireland Hub,[15] a new platform using the latest data from the CSO and other public service bodies to provide comprehensive data on Women and Men in Ireland. The information provided considers six main themes: Gender Equality; Work; Education; Health; Safety and Security, and Transport. In launching the Hub, the CSO published data for marketplace engagement for 2022. In light of the post pandemic shift towards remote working, the number of women working from home increased by 306% between 2016 and 2022. The number of men working from home rose by 114% in the same period; 31% of working women work part-time, compared with just 14% of men. The workplace participation rate remained higher for men than women across all age groups.

[13] One Family, *Facts and Figures*, September 2025, available at: https://onefamily.ie/media-policy/facts-figures/#:~:text=Lone%20parents%20and%20employment,members%20of%20couples%20without%20children using data from CSO Labour Force Survey Households and Family Units Q2 2020.

[14] *Ibid.*

[15] Central Statistics Office, *Women and Men in Ireland Hub*, available at: https://www.cso.ie/en/releasesandpublications/hubs/p-wmi/womenandmeninirelandhub/.

Most recently, the ESRI 2024 report "*Lone Parent Transitions, Employment transitions and Poverty Outcomes*" noted that employment rates among lone parents and for women in general are strongly influenced by their level of education and the number and age of children for whom they care. Citing the work of Sprong and Maître 2023, their report notes that Ireland ranks worst out of 27 EU countries in the proportion of lone parents living in very low work intensity households".[16] Noting the data published by the 2021 Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) family database, they reference the finding that the employment rate of lone parents in Ireland is 10 percentage points lower than the OECD and EU averages, whereas the rate for mothers with partners was equal to the OECD average of 74%.[17] The presence of children had a much smaller effect on the employment rate for men. Men in a couple with no children had an employment rate of 91.5%, while the rate for men whose youngest child was aged 4-5 increased to 92.7%. In 2020, Irish women's rate of employment was 72.2%, compared to Irish men's rate of employment of 85.3%, which represented a gender gap of approximately 13%.[18] By Q4 2025, the employment rate for males aged 15-64 was 78.4%, and 70.6% for females, a reduced gender gap of 7.8%.[19] Finally of note, as published in the 2024 Labour Force Survey, in Q4 2024, 67.3% of those in part-time employment were female. Tellingly, the most common reason cited for the part-time nature of work amongst women (32.8%) was their need to look after children, followed by "school, education and training" (21.6%).[20] Conversely in the same period, only 5.3% of men working part-time referenced looking after children as the main reason for their working status.

2. Carers who work

In considering the proposed Work Life Balance and Miscellaneous Provisions Bill 2022, the Oireachtas report relying on data from the European Quality of Life Survey 2016[21] outlined the employment profile of carers, noting that 55% of those providing care on a daily basis are in employment; 70% for male daily carers and 45% for female daily carers, suggesting that men are more likely to combine care and paid employment,

[16] Lone parent transitions, employment transitions and poverty outcomes (2024) at 6, citing Stepanie Sprong and Bertrain Maître, Thematic report on poverty and social inclusion indicators: poverty and social inclusion indicators in the Roadmap for Social Inclusion 2020–2025 in comparative perspective covering 2018–2021 (2023) Dublin: Department of Social Protection.

[17] Helen Russell, Bertrand Maitre, Lone Parent Transitions, Employment Transitions and Poverty Outcomes (2024) Research Series No. 193, Dublin: ESRI. at 6.

[18] Dáil Éireann debate - Wednesday, 29 March 2023, available at: https://www.oireachtas.ie/en/debates/debate/dail/2023-03-29/23/ per Deputy Cairns TD.

[19] Central Statistics Office, *Employment Labour Force Survey Q4 2025*, available at: https://www.cso.ie/en/releasesandpublications/ep/p-lfs/labourforcesurveyquarter42025/employment/.

[20] The July 2025 data from the central statistics office indicates that the rates of unemployment for men sit at 5% and 4.7% for women. Central Statistics Office, *Monthly Unemployment July 2025*, available at: https://www.cso.ie/en/releasesandpublications/ep/p-mue/monthlyunemploymentjuly2025/.

[21] Eurofound, European *Quality of Life Survey 2016*, available at: https://www.eurofound.europa.eu/en/surveys-and-data/surveys/european-quality-of-life-survey/eqls-2016.

although a significant portion of women also do so.[22] As regards the take-up of family-related leave and flexible working arrangements, a 2019 ESRI and Irish Human Rights and Equality Commission research paper "Caring and Unpaid Work in Ireland"[23] found that 45% of women and 29% of men provided either childcare or adult care on a daily basis. This timely report uncovers that over half of those carrying out unpaid care work are juggling these responsibilities with employment, and that women are overrepresented in the cohort of employees who avail of reduced hours in order to facilitate care and unpaid work.[24] The report firmly notes that from an Irish perspective,

> *"[w]hile we have seen advances in recent years, including increased participation by women in the workplace, we have yet to see adequate supports for caring and unpaid work. Nor, crucially, have we yet seen adequate measures to reconfigure the gendered nature of care work, and to create the conditions to encourage men to take on more such work."*[25]

More recently, a report from ActionAid Ireland and the National Women's Council, "*A Feminist View of Care and Economic Equality*" revealed that in Ireland 98% of full-time carers are women and women do twice as much unpaid care and housework as men.[26] 2026, President of Ireland Catherine Connolly noted that of the 500,000+ family carers in Ireland, more than half are balancing care with paid employment. She was critical of current supports, stating that carers are "insufficiently recognised" and called for greater state support for them.[27]

3. Statutory provision for the rights of parents in the workplace

European legislation on equality has had a major impact on Ireland. It is hard to believe that it was only in 1973, when Ireland joined the EU, that the ban on the employment of married women in the public sector was lifted.[28] In the workplace, EU laws have ensured that men and women are entitled to equal pay for doing the same job.[29] They have also

[22] Oireachtas Library & Research Service, 2022, L&RS Bill Digest: Work Life Balance and Miscellaneous Provisions Bill 2022. Bill No. 92 of 2022 Work Life Balance and Miscellaneous Provisions Bill 2022 (oireachtas.ie) at 43-44.

[23] Helen Russell, Raffaele Grotti, Frances McGinnity and Ivan Privalko, Caring and Unpaid Work in Ireland (2019) Dublin: ESRI, available at: https://www.esri.ie/publications/caring-and-unpaid-work-in-ireland.

[24] Oireachtas report.

[25] Oireachtas report

[26] Danielle Neilson, Shelly Gaynor, Georgia Grogan and Sarah McEntee, *A Feminist Vision of Care and Economic Equality, (2023)*, National Women's Council, available at: https://www.nwci.ie/images/uploads/A-Feminist-Vision-of-Care-and-Economic-Equality.pdf.

[27] RTE, "Contribution of family carers 'insufficiently recognised' - *President*", 7 March 2026, available at: https://www.rte.ie/news/ireland/2026/0307/1562148-connolly-family-carers/.

[28] Deirdre Foley (2022).

[29] The provisions of the *Anti-Discrimination (Pay) Act 1974* came into force in December 1975, giving effect to the EEC Equal Pay Directive (75/117/EEC) ensuring women and men have the right to equal pay when working for the same, or associated employers, in the same workplace and when engaged upon 'like work'.

provided legal guarantees on fair treatment and entitlements to maternity and paternity leave, outlined below. Additionally, in 2021, Ireland strengthened its gender pay gap legislation, ensuring greater transparency around equal pay. Ireland now stands 7th in the EU's Gender Equality Index.[30] The Principal Act governing parental leave rights in Ireland is the Parental Leave Act 1998, as amended, which when first introduced sought to give effect to Council Directive 96/34/EC on The Framework Agreement on Parental Leave. The 1998 Act established the statutory right of parents, natural or adoptive, to 14 weeks unpaid leave, to spend time looking after their children. This 14-week period was extended to 18 weeks following the implementation of Council Directive 2010/18,[19] and was most recently extended to 26 weeks by section 4 of the Work Life Balance and Miscellaneous Provisions Act 2023, amending section 6 of the Parental Leave Act 1998.[31] The Work Life Balance and Miscellaneous Provisions Act 2023 was signed into law in Ireland on the 4th of April 2023, to give effect to Directive EU 2019/1158 on Work Life Balance for Parents and Carers.[32] In introducing the 2019 Directive into Irish law, the 2023 Act significantly amends existing domestic legislation, enhancing employees' rights to leave for medical care purposes, enhances the rights of women returning to work after pregnancy, regulates the right to request flexible working arrangements for caring purposes and other related improvements. The Act provides for the introduction of new rights for employees to support a better balance of family life, work life and caring responsibilities, including a right to seek remote working arrangements, and it provides a statutory basis for leave entitlements for victims of domestic violence. Minister Coveney noted that the transposing of the Directive into domestic law in Ireland confirms that the Government is "...committed to facilitating and supporting remote working, to reduce our time commuting and to enable families to spend more time together."[33] The European Commission reported that as of 2 August 2022, all Member States must apply EU-wide rules to improve work-life balance for parents and carers. "These rules set out minimum standards for paternity, parental and carers' leave and establish additional rights, such as the right to request flexible working arrangements, which will help people develop their careers and family life without having to sacrifice either. These rights, which come in addition to existing maternity leave rights, were achieved under the European Pillar of Social Rights and are a key milestone towards building a Union of Equality."[34]

[30] Diversity Journal, Stories about the EU and equality and inclusion in Ireland, by Barbara Nolan, Head of the European Commission Representation in Ireland, 2022, available at: https://ireland.representation.ec.europa.eu/system/files/2022-01/DIVERSITY%20JOURNAL.pdf

[19] European Union (Parental Leave) Regulations 2013 (S.I. No. 81 of 2013).

[31] In 2021 survey, one in fifty (2.2%) of employees availed of unpaid parental leave.

[32] Council Directive 2019/1158 repealed Council Directive 2010/18/EU.

[33] Lili Lonergan, "Rights for remote working and more flexibility introduced for parents and carers", *Limerick Live*, 7 March 2024, available at: https://www.limerickleader.ie/news/national-news/1442818/nationalrights-for-remote-working-and-more-flexibility-introduced-for-parents-and-carers.html.

[34] European Commission, Press Release: "New rights to improve work-life balance in the EU enter into application today", Brussels, 02 August 2022.

The European Commission noted that the aim of the Directive on work-life balance is to increase both the participation of women in the labour market and the take-up of family-related leave and flexible working arrangements. The benefits of a more flexible approach to working arrangements have been highlighted in research undertaken with Irish Families. The TCD report *"Work life Balance and Social Inclusion"* found that finding suitable childcare arrangements and dealing with the long commute every day are the two main problems faced by the working parents and carers interviewed, and it is often for one of these reasons that people in this group changed their working hours or the way their working hours were organised.

The 2023 Act, introduced under the joint direction of the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Employment and the Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth brought into operation the right under section 20 to request remote working arrangements for all employees. This includes the right under section 8 to request flexible working arrangements for parents and carers and the employer in each instance is obliged to consider the request under sections 21 and 8(C) respectively. Additionally, Ministers Coveney and O'Gorman approved and published the Code of Practice for Employers and Employees Right to Request Flexible Working and Right to Request Remote Working.[35] The Code of Practice which will support both employers and employees in the implementation of the provisions of the Act was developed by the Workplace Relations Commission (WRC), in consultation with trade unions and employer representative bodies.

The significance of this legal development has been emphasised by Dr. Laura Bambrick, Head of Social Policy and Employment Affairs at the Irish Congress of Trade Unions (ICTU). Whilst recognising the States' obligation to comply with the requirements of EU law to give working parents and carers the right to request flexible working, she also commended the overarching vision of the EU, identifying that "[t]he EU wants member states to do more to help workers balance their work and family lives, to encourage men to be more involved in providing care, and to support more women to remain in employment."[36]

Some 2 years post enactment of this seminal legislation, two separate research projects have illustrated the experiences of employers and employees following the implementation of its provisions. Evidently, the findings of the Morgan McKinley Global Workplace Study demonstrate the strong appetite for such accommodations with 59% of respondents indicating a willingness to forego a pay rise in return for more flexible arrangements. The results of the Census Wide 2024 survey also affirm that the demand amongst workers for flexible arrangements remains high with 71% of respondents to their survey stating

[35] Available at: https://www.workplacerelations.ie/en/what_you_should_know/codes_practice/codeof-practice-for-employers-and-employees-right-to-request-flexible-working-and-right-to-requestremote-working/.

[36] Sharon Ni Chonchuir, "Workplace wellbeing: What flexible working rights do carers and parents have?" *Irish Examiner*, 7 April 2023, available at: https://www.irishexaminer.com/lifestyle/healthandwellbeing/arid-41111212.html.

that access to flexible working arrangements was of "great importance" to them.[37] These survey results were regarded as evidence of "a strong demand for more flexible working arrangements, key trends in talent retention and the disproportionate experiences of women and lone parents."[38] However, what appears to be a growing challenge to this family-focussed approach is the growing expectation amongst many employers for employees to increase their workplace presence. In September 2024, it was reported that there was a growing expectation amongst employers that employees should return to the workplace "due to concerns about performance and collaboration".[39] Figures released by the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Employment in August 2024 indicate that "up to 30 July 2024, 18 people had filed complaints with the Workers Relations Commission about applications they had made for remote or flexible working.[40] It is thus important for parents and those with caring responsibilities to have meaningful access to flexible working arrangements as outlined below.

4. Right to request remote working arrangements including for caring purposes

In addition to section 20 of the 2023 Act, which introduces a statutory right for all employees to make a request for remote working arrangements,[41] section 8 of the Act inserts a new Part IIA in the Principal Act, the Parental Leave Act 1998, placing on a statutory footing the right to request a flexible working arrangement specifically for caring purposes. Family Carers Ireland data states that 83% of all carers are of working age and estimate that *"...[o]ne in 9 Irish workers juggle caring responsibilities with paid employment, with this figure likely to increase significantly over the coming years as Ireland's older population, rate of disability and the incidence of people living with a chronic condition continues to increase steadily."*[42]

[37] Census Wise august 2024 find reference

[38] Laura Varley, "Parents and caregivers want more flexibility at work, survey finds", *Silicon Republic*, 23 August 2024, available at:
https://www.siliconrepublic.com/careers/employers-missing-mark-flexible-working-survey-indeed.

[39] Catherine O'Flynn, "Employers are calling staff back to the office. What are your rights?" *The Irish Times*, 2 September 2024, available at:
https://www.irishtimes.com/advertising-feature/2024/09/02/employers-are-calling-staff-back-to-the-office-what-are-your-rights/.

[40] Brian Donovan, "18 remote or flexible work complaints filed with WRC this year" RTE, 2 August 2024, available at: https://www.rte.ie/news/ireland/2024/0802/1463106-remote-flexible-work-wrc/.

[41] Eligibility to request a remote working arrangement requires that the employee has at least 6 month's service completed, and details of the proposed remote working proposal must be submitted by the employee in writing no less than 8 weeks before the proposed commencement date. Section 13B (6) requires the employee to specify the form of the flexible working arrangement requested and the date of commencement and duration of the flexible working arrangement.

[42] Family Carers Ireland submission to the Department of Justice on Work Policies for Family Carers, 2020, available at: https://familycarers.ie/media/1432/submission-to-the-dept-justice-on-flexible-work-policiesfamily-carers-ireland.pdf.

Similarly, according to the 2024 Workplace Equality Report on Parental Leave and Caregiving Support,[43] "...[o]ver half (56%) of respondents believe taking parental leave negatively impacts career progression, with 60% of those affected being women." The absence of adequate flexibility in work arrangements emerged as a key factor, with 48% of respondents complaining that "their workplace lacks adequate support for employees with caregiving responsibilities. Only 36% felt their workplace provided sufficient resources to balance work and caregiving."[44] Commenting on the report findings, Rena Weld of Matrix has emphasised the importance and indeed the employer benefits of these accommodations.

"Ireland's workplaces need to create environments where parents and caregivers feel supported and encouraged. The reality is that employees with caregiving responsibilities contribute significantly to the workforce and deserve career opportunities that aren't compromised by their commitments outside of work. Employers who recognise and act on this will benefit from higher retention and increased morale among staff, ultimately creating a stronger, more resilient workforce."[45]

Employees eligible to make an application under Part IIA includes an employee who is a parent of a child and who is or will be providing care to that child.[28] The new section 13(B)(3) of the Parental Leave Act provides that such a flexible working arrangement for the care of a child shall end when the child attains the age of 12 years. Where the child is the subject of an adoption order and has reached the age of 10 prior to the making of the adoption order, but is not yet 12 years, the flexible working arrangement shall not expire within 2 years of the commencement of that arrangement. Where the child concerned has a disability or a long-term illness, the flexible working arrangement shall expire not later than when the child reaches the age of 16 years, or ceases to have that disability or long-term illness, whichever occurs first.

The new section 13B (6) sets out the nature of the employer's obligations upon receipt of a request for flexible working arrangements, including to consider the employee's needs, the needs of the business and the requirements of the code of practice. The employer is obliged to respond as soon as is reasonably practicable but must respond within 4 weeks,[29] although this timeframe can be extended to 8 weeks. Where requested by the employer, the employee must furnish a copy of the child's birth certificate or a certificate of placement within the meaning of the Adoptive Leave Act 1995. Where the request for remote working arrangements is refused, the employer must inform the employee in writing of the reasons for refusal.[30] Finally of note, an employer can terminate the remote

[43] Matrix Recruitment, "2024 Workplace Equality Report", available at: https://www.matrixrecruitment.ie/blog/2024/12/2024-workplace-equality-report-1?source=linkedin.com.

[44] *Ibid.*

[45] Irish Tech News, "Bullying and Harassment Rife in Irish Workplaces, Survey Reveals", 24 December 2024, available at: https://irishtechnews.ie/bullying-harassment-rife-in-irish-workplaces/.

working arrangement in certain circumstances if they are satisfied that the arrangement is having a substantial adverse effect on the operation of the business.[31]

Where leave is needed for medical purposes, section 6 of the 2023 Act inserts a new section 13A into the Parental Leave Act that entitles an employee to five days unpaid medical leave in a twelve-month period. This is stated to allow them to provide "significant care or support for a serious medical reason" for a person who is in a specified relationship with the employee, to include a child of the employee.[46]

5. Social welfare income maintenance support for families

Citing both Regan and Watson, Redmond et al, in acknowledging the high risk of poverty and deprivation amongst single parents internationally, have noted the deprivation rates experienced by one parent families as being particularly high in Ireland.[47] To support such families, the One-Parent Family Payment (OPFP) is a means tested payment which is made to men or women who are caring for a child or children without the support of a partner. The scheme was introduced on a transitional basis on 2 January 1997 and replaced the Lone Parent's Allowance and the Deserted Wife's Benefit. When introduced in 1990, the Lone Parents Allowance became a gender-neutral payment for one parent families, howsoever formed, providing financial assistance, *inter alia*, for those in the workplace with limited income. Up until recently, OPFP was paid to eligible persons up until their youngest child was 18 years of age, or 21 years if in full-time education.

The long duration of payment without any requirement to seek education or employment was heavily criticised for contributing to the low employment rate among single parents.[48] The issue was considered at length by the 2005 Working Group established by the Irish Department of Social and Family Affairs. The resultant report 2006 report was critical of the duration and passive nature of the payment, noting "long term welfare dependency is not in the best interests of the lone parent, their children or society in general".[49] The report sought to significantly alter the manner

[46] Sections 6(5)-(6) require the employee as soon as reasonably practicable, to confirm in the prescribed form to the employer, that they have taken or intend to take, such leave. The employer may request, and the employee is obliged to provide information relating to; the employee's relationship with the person in respect of whom the leave for medical care purposes is proposed to be taken or was taken, the nature of the personal care or support required to be given by the employee to the person concerned and relevant evidence relating to the need of the person for the significant care or support concerned.

[47] Paul Redmond, Seamus McGuinness, Claire Keane, The impact of one parent family payment reforms on the labour market outcomes of lone parents, Oxford Economic Papers (2023) Vol. 75 No. 2 346 - 370.

[48] OECD Family database, *Employment rates are especially low for single mothers,* 2021, available at: https://www.oecd-ilibrary.org/economics/employment-rates-are-especially-low-for-single-mothers_78a8cb0a-en.

[49] Department of Social and Family Affairs, (2006), Proposals for Supporting Lone Parents, Dublin: Stationery Office.

in which the State provides welfare supports to lone parents, recommending the restructuring of both the OPFP and the Qualified Adult Allowance into a household means-tested Parental Allowance (PA) to assist all low-income families. In terms of activation conditions, it sought to introduce a requirement for recipients to be available for work, at least on a part-time basis, when the youngest child reached a certain age. In 2011, the Government announced that this reform was finally to be introduced on a phased basis between 2012-2015, meaning the payment would stop once the youngest child in a recipient's care turned 7, a considerable shift from the existing entitlement to payment for so long as care for a child was maintained. In the context of these significant reforms, One Family has argued that lone parents continue to face significant barriers in accessing and participating in the labour market and in combining their work and caring roles, noting that increased employment amongst lone parents has positive child welfare outcomes, including outcomes for teenage children, where incomes rise as a result of such employment.[50]

To encourage workplace engagement, from 2020, a parent in receipt of OPFP, currently €244 per week, can earn €165 per week which will be disregarded in the means assessment for the OPFP, with half of all additional earnings assessed as means. Helpfully, recent legislative changes resulted in parents no longer needing to prove they are actively seeking maintenance in order to qualify for One-Parent Family and Jobseeker's Transitional Payments.[51] Additionally, another more recent adjustment has meant that the money received in respect of child maintenance is no longer included in any means-based social welfare tests, including in respect of the One Parent Family Payment.[52]

Notably, the OPFP was classified as a Family Benefit with effect from 5 May 2005 in terms of EU Regulation 883/2004 on social security coordination. The effect of this is that an EEA national, who is employed or self-employed in Ireland and paying Irish Pay Related Social Insurance (PRSI), does not have to satisfy the Habitual Residence condition to claim OPFP. Such entitlement continues where the person becomes unemployed and is in receipt of Irish Jobseeker's Benefit or incapable of work and in receipt of Illness Benefit. These entitlements are payable even if his or her children are habitually resident in another EEA State. The amount of Family Benefits payable by the Department of Social Protection will depend on whether there is entitlement to Family Benefits from another EEA State in respect of the same children.

[50] Candy Murphy, Patricia Keilthy and Louise Caffrey, Lone Parents and Employment: What are the Real Issues? Key Findings, Conclusions and Recommendations, 2008, available at: https://www.onefamily.ie/wp-content/uploads/Lone-Parents-Employment-Report-Summary12.pdf?_gl=1*1w9hkxd*_gcl_au*OTkwMTA4MTcuMTcxODAzNTkxMA.

[51] Section 7 of the *Social Welfare and Civil Law (Miscellaneous Provisions) Act 2024* repealed part 12 of the S*ocial Welfare Consolidation Act 2005*.

[52] Section 8 of the *Social Welfare and Civil Law (Miscellaneous Provisions) Act 2024* amended Schedule 3, Part 3 of *Social Welfare Consolidation Act 2005*.

The Working Family Payment (WFP) is a weekly, tax-free payment available to employees with children. It gives extra financial support to families with children depending on their income and family size. To qualify for WFP an applicant must meet all of the following criteria:

- Work in the Irish State and pay tax and PRSI in Ireland.
- Work 38 or more hours every fortnight, which can be a combination of hours from different jobs.
- Weekly hours can be combined with hours worked by a spouse, civil partner or cohabitant.
- The employment must be likely to last at least 3 months.
- The applicant must have at least one child aged 18 or between 18 and 22 years and in full-time education who normally lives with the applicant.
- The applicant must earn less than a set amount according to their family size.[53] The amount payable under the WFP is 60% of the difference between the average weekly family income and the income limit that applies to that family. Payments are assessed on an annual basis unless a change is requested by the applicant.

The October 2025 budget announcement from the Government that the weekly income thresholds for WFP will increase by €60 for all family sizes from January 1 2026 is very welcome. Further, all such families will now also be eligible to receive the Fuel Allowance. These developments have been commended by the Children's Rights Alliance, who called it a "significant change", as "more families working and in receipt of a low wage will become eligible for this important support and families already in receipt of the payment may now be able to take up more hours in employment."[54]

Notwithstanding these welcome improvements, reform of the Working Family Payment system has long been mooted. In September 2023, the ESRI launched a proposal calling for the introduction of a two-tier system, echoing the previous calls from the Commission on Taxation and Welfare (2022), the National Economic and Social Council (2007; 2021) and the Children's Rights Alliance (2010). Under this system, any supplementary child income support would be based on income levels and family status, including number of children, rendering employment status insignificant,[55] thereby widening the cohort of parents that would become eligible to receive WFP.[56]

[53] The relevant financial earning limits vary depending upon the number of children who normally reside with the applicant; 1 child €531; 2 children €632; 3 children €733; 4 children €834; 5 children €960; 6 children €1,076; 7 children €1,212 and 8+ children €1,308.

[54] Children's Rights Alliance, *Budget 2026: What does it mean to young people and children?*, available at: https://childrensrights.ie/wp-content/uploads/2025/10/Budget-2026-What-Does-it-Mean-for-Children-and-Young-People-1.pdf.

[55] Barra Roantree and Karina Doorley, Poverty, Income Inequality and Living Standards in Ireland: Third Annual Report (2023) Dublin: ESRI and Community Foundation Ireland, available at: https://www.esri.ie/system/files/publications/JR4_6.pdf.

[56] *Ibid*, at 40.

If implemented, this two-tier system would repeal the current incentive on part-time work, a welcome change by some scholars. The report cites the views of Blundell that "part-time employment produces little wage progression and so contributes little to the exit of individuals from low-pay work or reliance on in-work welfare to maintain a decent standard of living."[57] However, the report does acknowledge that the current part-time requirement to receive WFP can also be desirable for low-income parents having to combine paid work with their caring responsibilities.

The Jobseeker's Transitional Payment (JST) of €244 per week (an increase of €41 per week in the last 2 years) is a special arrangement under the Jobseeker's Allowance scheme which supports lone parents with young children to return to work and typically becomes available upon the expiration of entitlement to One Parent Family Payment. A qualifying applicant cannot be cohabiting with a partner, and their youngest child must be over the age of 7 and under the age of 14. The payment is supplemented by €50 for each qualifying child under the age of 12, and €62 per week for each qualifying child aged over 12. A person in receipt of JST can take part in a course or education and may also claim a student maintenance grant from Student Universal Support Ireland. They do not have to be available for and genuinely seeking full-time work to allow them to meet caring responsibilities where they have young children. Where employment is secured when in receipt of JST, childcare supports are available. Additionally, a person in receipt of JST can work part-time for five days and still get JST, subject to a means test. Often this can allow a recipient to work mornings only, whilst children are in school.

The Back to Work Family Dividend (BTWFD) scheme helps families move from social welfare to work. It gives financial support to people with qualified children (up to 18, or aged between 18 and 22, who are in full-time education) who take up employment or self-employment and stop claiming Jobseeker's Payment or OPFP. BTWFD is paid every week for up to two years and the amount payable is determined by the number of qualifying children in the applicant's care.[58]

Despite the undoubted elevated status of the family based on marriage as outlined in the opening paragraphs of this chapter, the recent decision of the Supreme Court of Ireland in *John O'Meara and others v The Minister for Social Protection, Ireland and The Attorney General*[59] declared as unConstitutional the exclusion of a surviving long term male cohabitant from receiving widows state pension on the death of his partner and mother of his children. Whilst the State had argued that to be a widow the applicant

[57] *Ibid* at 31, Richard Blundell, Inequality, Redistribution and Wage Progression, Economica (2022) Vol. 89, No. S1.

[58] In year 1, payment is €46 a week for each child under 12 up to a maximum of 4 children and €54 a week for each child over 12 to a maximum of 4 children. For year 2 €23 a week for each child under 12 to a maximum of 4 children and €27 a week for each child over 12 to a maximum of 4 children.

[59] [2024] IESC 1.

would have to have been married to the deceased person, he was successful in his challenge. Whilst the Constitution permits differential treatment between married and unmarried couples, in this case it was determined that enforcing a distinction between them would be unjustifiable, and thus arbitrary and indiscriminatory. In *O'Meara*, it was ruled that the Widower's Contributory Pension, until then only available to married couples and civil partners, ought to apply as well to unmarried, cohabiting parents. This decision was reached on the basis that the pension was meant to benefit the children of surviving parents, even if indirectly, meaning eligibility ought not to be linked to the civil status of the parents. It was recognised that this pension addressed the financial loss experienced by the death of a partner, both to account for the potential lost income earned by the deceased party, and to relieve the surviving partner of their obligation to work after the death of the children's parent.[60] Allowing eligibility for this pension to apply to all cohabiting parents regardless of their marital status will have a meaningful impact on the lives of surviving (working) parents. Research indicates that, "compared to a married household, widowed households have a significantly higher likelihood of non-take-up [of the Working Family Payment]."[61] Munoz-Higueras et al suggest that this is due to the additional administrative work required to apply for another social benefit payment, as well as perceptions of fairness, especially for parties already in receipt of insurance-based benefits. The well publicised ruling in O'Meara will hopefully increase the number of applicants and ideally trigger a streamlining of the application process.

6. Maternity and paternity leave

The entitlement to leave is enshrined in the Maternity Protection Act 1994 as amended. Maternity rights were first introduced under Irish law by the Social Welfare Act 1952, which introduced a maternity grant, together with an allowance that was payable for 12 weeks but did not provide any job security.[62] Additionally, the allowance was lost if during the period it was payable the claimant engaged in any occupation other than domestic duties in her own household.[63] Section 8(1) of the Maternity Protection of Employees Act 1981 provided a minimum statutory entitlement to 14 consecutive weeks paid maternity leave and, importantly, the right to return to work after the birth of their child. These new and improved rights apply to all women who have worked for eight hours or more per week. The period of maternity leave was extended on a number of occasions and since 2007 is now available for 42, of which 26 weeks are paid at 70% of earnings, up to a maximum of €299 per week, provided that the mother is either employed or self-employed, and has paid sufficient social insurance

[60] *Ibid* at para 34.

[61] Diego Muñoz-Higueras, Stephan Koppe, Rafael Granell et. al., Non-take-up of in-work benefits: determinants, benefit erosion and indexing, Journal of Labour Market Research (2024) Vol. 55 No. 22, available at: https://doi.org/10.1186/s12651-024-00385-8.

[62] *Social Welfare Act*, 1952.

[63] Section 12(4)(a).

contributions, with the remainder of the leave period unpaid. Employers have the discretion to top up maternity benefit if they wish; in 2021, of the 39,028 women who availed of maternity benefit, representing 5.5% of female employees, almost one third of women on maternity leave did not receive any additional financial support from their employer.[64] All employees (including casual workers) who become pregnant are entitled to this Maternity Leave, regardless of how long they have been working for the organisation or the number of hours worked per week.

6.1. Paternity Leave

The Paternity Leave and Benefit Act 2016 commenced on 1 September 2016 and introduced statutory paternity leave and benefit for relevant parents. As set out in the legislation, a "relevant parent" is defined as the father of the child, the spouse, civil partner or cohabitant of the mother. The leave applies to only one person, except in the case of adoption, whereby a biological father may have already taken paternity leave, in which case the legislation allows the subsequent adopting father to also take leave. In the case of stillbirth or a miscarriage, the entitlement to paternity leave continues. If one parent dies, then the other parent inherits whatever paternity leave has not yet been taken. In terms of financial benefit, Paternity Benefit is a payment for employed and self-employed parents who are on Paternity Leave from work and who satisfy certain PRSI contribution conditions. It is paid for two weeks at EUR 299 per week, the same rate as Maternity Benefit, Adoptive Benefit and Parent's Benefit. Like maternity leave, employers can top up paternity benefit if they wish. The leave can be taken at any time in the 26 weeks following the birth of the child (or placement in the case of adoption). 4 weeks' notice is required before the leave may be taken however there is provision for shorter notice. The legislation allows for the postponement of leave in certain circumstances, such as the sickness of a relevant parent and/or hospitalisation of the child. In 2022, paternity benefit was paid to 3.4% of male employees, a fall from 3.9% in 2021. In 2020, just over 50% of fathers in employment did not claim paternity benefit, up from 48.2% in 2019.[65] The Central Statistics Office (CSO) has published details of the prevalence and nature of take up of leave by parents in Ireland.[66] The 2019-2022 analysis illustrates that there were 39,028 claims for maternity benefit and 25,442 for paternity benefit in 2022. Parent's leave (different from parental leave, outlined above) is limited to the child's first 2 years, or in the case of adoption, within 2 years of the placement of the child with the family and permits each parent to take up to 7 weeks unpaid leave. Parents with adequate social insurance contributions can claim parents benefit whilst on leave, the current rate is EUR 299 per week and it is

[64] Central Statistics Office, *Key Findings Employment Analysis of Maternity and Paternity Benefits 2019 - 2022*, available at:
https://www.cso.ie/en/releasesandpublications/ep/p-eampb/
employmentanalysisofmaternityandpaternitybenefits2019-2022/keyfindings/.

[65] *Ibid.*

[66] *Ibid.*

available to both parents.[67] The CSO 2019-2022 report further notes the increase in take up by both parents of additional parents' benefit, allowing for leave up until the child's second birthday. 63% of maternity benefit recipients commencing maternity leave in 2021 availed of this parent's benefit leave compared to 39% of paternity benefit recipients. In an April 2025 related report, the Economic and Social Research Institute (ESRI) noted "...[c]hild-related leave policy has a role to play in the gender income gap, which often starts after the birth of a child."[68]

A 2025 report published by the Irish Human Rights and Equality Commission (IHREC) and the ESRI "*Child Related Leave: Usage and Implications for Gender Equality*" provides a timely and illustrative examination of the rate of take-up of child-related leave benefits in Ireland, and the associated implications for gender equality in the workplace. The report acknowledges the importance of child related leave such as Maternity, Paternity and Parent's Leave, all introduced to support parents to work whilst supporting their wish to care for their young children. The report recognises that efforts to enhance the accessibility of childcare and the belated introduction of paternity leave represent deliberate moves to challenge the traditional social expectation that women ought to focus on children and caring at the cost of their careers. The introduction of both paternity leave and parental leave seek to support both parents to have opportunities to combine work with care caring at the cost of their careers. However, it remains indisputable that societal norms and practices, together with the well demonstrated childcare gap, serve as major contributors to the Gender Wage and Pension gaps. The report states that ... "on average Irish women spend double the time of men on caring and more than twice as much time on housework.... women are also overrepresented in the cohort of employees who avail of reduced hours in order to facilitate care and unpaid work." Thus, continued progress must be made to support parents in the workplace to better combine work with childcare responsibilities to "address persistent, structural inequality between women and men". Unfortunately, the rate of take-up of these benefits remains low.

Analysing the gathered data, the report estimates that between 2019 and 2022, a little over half of eligible fathers availed of paternity leave, and between 2020-2021, 25% of eligible fathers and 66% of eligible mothers availed of parental leave.[69] Although this level of take up is not uncommon internationally, they note that concerns arise related to income, given the flat rate nature of the payments. What can be gleaned

[67] In 2021, just 1.7% of employees took parents' leave.

[68] Karina Doorley, Simona Sándorová and Bertrand Maître, The Effect of Child-Related Benefits on Poverty and Deprivation in Ireland, Budget Perspectives 2026 (2025) Dublin: ERSI, available at: https://www.esri.ie/system/files/publications/BP202601.pdf.

[69] Claire Keane, Anousheh Alamir, Frances McGinnity et. al., Child related leave: Usage and implications for gender equality, Jointly-published Reports 12 (2025) Dublin: ESRI and Irish Human Rights and Equality Commission (IHREC), available at: https://www.esri.ie/publications/child-related-leave-usage-and-implications-for-gender-equality.

from this report is that higher-earning fathers are much more likely to avail of their paternity leave entitlements than lower earning fathers, a fact that continues a pattern of unequal sharing of child care responsibilities between parents.[70] This discrepancy results in the unequal sharing of child care responsibilities between the genders, and serves to perpetuate the gendered challenges faced by mothers living in lower socio economic conditions. Additionally, it is very likely that gendered caring norms and workplace factors have a significant impact too.

6.2. Sick leave provisions

The Sick Leave Act 2022 provides for and regulates the introduction and provision of sick pay entitlements for all employees. From 1 January 2024, an employee is entitled to 5 statutory days sick leave, where they will be paid by their employer.[71] The State has committed to increasing this entitlement to 7 days for 2025 and to 10 days for 2026, to be introduced by Ministerial Regulations. Despite such commitments, the entitlement remains limited to 5 days in 2026. Employees are entitled to a rate of 70% of their usual daily earnings up to a maximum of €110 a day, where leave is certified.[72] To qualify for statutory sick leave an applicant employee must have completed 13 weeks continuous service with the employer and provide a medical certificate confirming that the employee is unfit to work due to their illness or injury. The limited time of paid sick leave has been shown to have a particularly detrimental impact on one parent families. The most recent data on parental sick leave patterns is reported in the CSO 2021 survey on Workplace Personal and Work-Life balance[73] which showed that 20% of lone-parent workers had taken unpaid sick leave, compared with 6.1% of workers in families with two adults with dependent children, and 3.8% of households where there were three or more adults. Thus, the introduction of a statutory right to paid sick leave will provide employees whose employer does not operate a paid sick leave scheme, to receive State support for the period allowed. Where an employee is on long term sick leave and has income cover insurance, their earnings will be covered, subject to the terms of that policy. Where an employee is on sick leave beyond the statutory entitlements under the Sick Leave Act, they can apply for a weekly social welfare illness benefit payment, which can be claimed by someone who is unable to work, and who has the requisite social insurance contributions made in the relevant tax year. The rate of Illness Benefit depends on the applicant's average weekly earnings in the relevant tax year, with a maximum payment of €254 weekly, and an additional

[70] The ESRI analysed sample data from births between 2019 and 2022 and determined that only half of fathers were availing of paternity entitlements. This report surmises that employers in lower paid jobs are less likely to provide payments to new fathers in addition to their statutory benefits which directly contributes to their reluctance to avail of paternity leave due to "income-related concerns".

[71] Section 5 of the *Sick Leave Act 2022*.

[72] The Sick Leave Act 2022 (Prescribed Daily Rate of Payment) Regulations 2022.

[73] Central Statistics Office, *Personal and Work-Life Balance 2021 - Main Results*, available at: https://www.cso.ie/en/releasesandpublications/ep/p-pwlbmr/personalandwork-lifebalance2021-mainresults/leaveintheworkplace/.

€168.60 weekly if the applicant has an adult dependent. The additional payment for qualifying children, now referred to as Child Support Payment provides an additional €50 per child aged under 12 and €62 per child aged 12 and over.

7. Childcare

Figures published by the OECD illustrate the impact of childcare costs on the net income of parents across its member states. In respect of working parents relying on paid childcare in Ireland, a couple (one parent on 67% of the average wage and the other on minimum wage) spends 26% of their disposable income on childcare, whilst a single parent (earning 67% of the average wage) spends 25% of their disposable income.[74] These findings are calculated by comparing the net income of a family that uses full-time childcare for two children under 4 years old and an otherwise identical family where no childcare costs are incurred.

The payment of universal child benefit has long represented the core of the Irish state childcare strategy, with little direct involvement in the provision of or investment in childcare services.[75] Horgan has confirmed the longstanding Irish policy that has treated childcare as the private responsibility of parents resulting in what she regards as "a dearth of public provision, regulation or support for parents since the foundation of the state." She identifies the values prominent in the 1937 Constitution and subsequently reflected in legislation as informing this "non-interventionist policy with respect to childcare provision" which expected parents to meet the needs of their children "almost completely unaided by the State". Equally, little support, if any, is provided by the State for parents who elect to provide care for their children in the home. Non-familial care for children is typically provided by private or community-based services, as childcare services are not directly provided by the State.

In more recent years, efforts were made by the State to supplement the cost of childcare, through the introduction in January 2010 of the Early Childhood Care and Education Scheme (ECCE) and the National Childcare Scheme. The ECCE is a free, universal two-year preschool programme available to all children and is funded by the Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration, and Youth (DCEDIY). The scheme provides two years of childcare and early education (3 hours, 5 days a week) for children aged 3 or older.[76] Since 2018, the scheme was expanded from

[74] OECD, *Net Childcare Costs*, available at:
https://www.oecd.org/en/data/indicators/net-childcare-costs.html (accessed 20 May 2026).

[75] Deirdre Horgan, Childcare in Ireland: Themes and Issues, Irish Journal of Applied Social Studies (2001) Vol. 2 No. 3 104 - 117, available at: https://arrow.tudublin.ie/ijass/vol2/iss3/8.

[76] The programme is provided for 3 hours per day, 5 days per week over 38 weeks per year (or 182 days which can be found on the provider's ECCE calendar), and the programme year runs from 1st September to 30th June each year, available at:
https://www.gov.ie/en/publication/2459ee-early-childhood-care-and-education-programme-ecce/[48]
https://www.ncs.gov.ie/en/

one to two years of free pre-school delivered over 38 weeks of the year, in line with the school year. 4,022 services were contracted to deliver the ECCE programme in 2020/2021. This was a 4% decrease compared to the previous year. The programme has been regarded by the government as a transformative success which has "provided important learning and development opportunities to all young children, in particular children with a disability and children from disadvantaged backgrounds."[77] It was reported in October 2024 that over 1,000,000 children, 1/5 of the population had benefited from the programme, which reports uptake rates in excess of 96% of eligible children.[78] The National Childcare Scheme (NCS)[48] is also funded by the DCEDIY and is the first statutory entitlement to financial support towards the cost of childcare for families in Ireland. Introduced in November 2019, the scheme provides financial support for families in respect of their early learning and childcare costs. There are two distinct subsidies available for children aged between 24 weeks and 15 years of age, and applicants are entitled to receive the higher of the two benefits as calculated in their particular circumstances. The universal subsidy is not means tested and when introduced provided €1.40 per hour for a maximum of 40 hours per week, whereas the income assessed subsidy is means tested and is calculated based on a family's circumstances. The amount payable is determined on family income, child's age and educational stage, and the number of children in the family.

New NCS subsidy rates were made effective from 2 September 2024, with the minimum hourly subsidy increasing by 53% to €2.14. Additionally, the hourly subsidy under the NCS sponsor referral programme, which makes special provision for vulnerable children, was increased to €5.30 for children aged between 1 and 2 years old, and to €5.87 for children aged two or older.[79] According to the Department, for families using State registered childcare, these increases would reduce weekly costs up to €96.30 per child, or over €5,000 annually.[80] It is hoped that the high costs incurred by Irish parents identified in the OECD report will reduce in light of these developments. However, other necessary reforms have been identified. Dooley and O'Shea have noted that "the maximum number of subsidised hours... available through the means-tested NCS subsidy depends on the employment status of the parent(s)." If both parents (or the only parent in the case of one parent families) work or are in education, the child is entitled to the Enhanced Hours Subsidy (EHS). This subsidises up to 45 hours of childcare per week. Families with at least one parent not in work/education can receive the Standard

[77] Government's free pre-school programme ECCE reaches the one million milestone as results of independent review is published.

[78] *Ibid.* per (then) Minster for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth, Roderic O'Gorman.

[79] Press release: "Thousands of Families to Benefit from Substantial Reductions in Early Learning and Childcare costs from 2 September", available at:
https://www.gov.ie/en/department-of-children-disability-and-equality/press-releases/thousands-of-families-to-benefit-from-substantial-reductions-in-early-learning-and-childcare-costs-from-2-september/

[80] *Ibid.*

Hours Subsidy (SHS) for up to 20 hours per week.[81] This has attracted valued criticism from the Irish Human Rights and Equality Commission (IHREC), which challenges the manner whereby the means-tested element of the subsidy can only be available where parents are either working or studying. "This indicates that the objective of the National Childcare Scheme is to encourage labour market participation, rather than provide access to ECEC for children in low income families as a matter of right."[82]

One Family argues that subsidies should be linked to "children's needs and best interests" and calls for a "radical shift of government approach to a publicly funded universal model of early years care."[83] Such a system they argue would combat the current "over-reliance on privatised care provision."[84]

In their ESRI's study, Dooley and O'Shea assessed "how the cost coverage of the NCS would differ if the parameters of the means-tested components of the NCS had evolved in line with wage growth between 2019 and 2025."[85] Indexing the income threshold to such wage growth would require an "increase of the maximum income threshold to €77,586 from €60,000 and the minimum income required to qualify for the highest rate to €33,620.60 from €26,000. This is in line with wage inflation of 29.31% from 2019, when the policy was introduced, to 2025."[86] Their research indicates that the failure to index the maximum income threshold to inflation has made many families ineligible to receive the subsidy, yet in practice, their need remains the same. The study estimates that *"...the NCS covers more than one-quarter of the cost of care for children in formal childcare. This figure is higher for recipients of the means-tested subsidy and for low-income households, compared to recipients of the universal subsidy or high-income households."*[87] One final challenge which has been steadily growing in impact is the accessibility of childcare. Government Deputy Norma Foley recently acknowledged that the problem is not just cost, but also accessibility, recognising that while the capacity for early learning and childcare capacity is increasing, the demand remains higher than availability, particularly for younger children.[88]

[81] Karina Dooley and Richard O'Shea, *Childcare subsidies, childcare costs and benefit erosion: Simulations for Ireland* (2025) ESRI Working Paper No. 799.

[82] Irish Human Rights and Equality Commission, Policy Statement on Care 2023, at 55; One Family, Joint Committee on Gender Equality, *Unfinished Democracy: Achieving Gender Equality Final Report* (2022), at 87.

[83] One Family, Joint Committee on Gender Equality, *Unfinished Democracy: Achieving Gender Equality Final Report* (2022), at 87.

[84] *Ibid,* at 88.

[85] Karina Dooley and Richard O'Shea (2025) at 14.

[86] *Ibid,* at 14.

[87] *Ibid,* at 17.

[88] Childcare Services Dáil Éireann Debate, Thursday 8th July 2025, available at: https://www.oireachtas.ie/en/debates/question/2025-07-08/735/, answering question 735.

It has been reported that some creches turn down 5 to 6 children per day.[89] This problem is particularly acute in Dublin, where the significant lack of childcare places is now driving (mostly) female employers out of the workforce. The Dublin Chamber of Commerce has identified the associated dangers, warning that 9 in 10 businesses struggle to retain staff.[90] Thus, the Chamber recognises that "while recent budgets have reduced costs for many parents, Ireland's childcare system remains fragmented and unsustainable, placing immense strain on family finances and limiting workforce participation".[91] The Government expresses itself to remain committed to improving accessibility, announcing in Budget 2026 that approximately 35,000 additional children will benefit from increased funding for the National Childcare Scheme (NCS), compared to 2025[92] and that 2,300 new childcare places will be created.[93]

However, these developments have already been subjected to criticism. Jack Horgan Jones, writing in the Irish Times about the additional €125 million budget allocation to early learning and childcare was particularly critical. He regarded it as being "unlikely to move the dial much on affordability, with Minister for Children Norma Foley arguing that there will instead be an increase in places, wage increases for workers in the sector and money to extend facilities."[94] Similarly, Doireann Crosson, Head of Policy for the National Women's Council, stated that "the funding for 2,300 additional places is well below what would be needed to significantly reduce the number of approximately 50,000 children currently on waiting lists."[95] She was also critical of the decision to deliver the additional places through existing schemes that rely on private providers.[96] Ultimately, she regarded the Government's approach as failing to "address

[89] *The Journal*, "Your stories: The stress, strain and heartbreak of trying to find childcare in Ireland", 6 April 2024, available at: https://www.thejournal.ie/ireland-child-care-crisis-experiences-stories-6345068-Apr2024/.

[90] *The Irish Times*, "Childcare Crisis driving employees out of workforce", 13 January 2025, available at: https://www.irishtimes.com/business/2025/01/13/childcare-crisis-is-forcing-employees-out-of-the-workforce-says-dublin-chamber/.

[91] *Ibid.* per Mia Finnegan.

[92] Citizens Information, *Budget 2026*, available at: https://www.citizensinformation.ie/en/money-and-tax/budgets/budget-2026/#a768ca (accessed 20 May 2026).

[93] Department of Children, Disability and Equality, *Speech by Minister for Children, Disability and Equality Norma Foley on Budget 2026*, 15 October 2026, available at: https://www.gov.ie/en/department-of-children-disability-and-equality/speeches/speech-by-minister-for-children-disability-and-equality-norma-foley-on-budget-2026/.

[94] Jack Horgan-Jones, "From childcare to welfare: five takeaways from Budget 2026", *The Irish Times*, 7 October 2025, available at: https://www.irishtimes.com/your-money/2025/10/07/from-childcare-to-welfare-five-takeaways-from-budget-2026/.

[95] National Women's Council, Press Release: "Government misses the mark for women in its first Budget", 7 October 2025, available at: https://www.nwci.ie/learn/article/budget_2026_government_misses_the_mark_for_women_in_its_first_budget.

[96] *Ibid.*

the systemic issues in [Ireland's] childcare system", and to "kickstart Ireland's move towards the public system of early childhood education and care that we need."[97]

The Children's Rights Alliance has also deemed the "the failure to increase the income threshold to receive the maximum subsidy under the NCS" disappointing, considering the government's pledge to fight child poverty.[98] Early Childhood Ireland, highlighted how this Scheme "hinders the development of new services in areas of need."[99] Redmond et al, relying on Martin,[100] emphasise the importance of these policies, referencing existing evidence demonstrating that "...that activation can be relatively successful for lone parents with young children, so long as childcare supports are available".[101] From a children's rights perspective, these policy and strategy shifts towards the provision of direct financial support for parents of young children has been very much welcomed by practitioners in the sector. "This shift to universal pre-school provision explicitly acknowledges a vast body of research that argues investment in quality early childhood education is vital."[102] Similarly, Russell et al regard these developments as "a clear shift in policy intent and focus."[103] The exorbitant costs faced by Irish families was recently reported upon, O'Connell citing the work of Doorley and others in a 2019 Economic and Social Research Institute report which notes that "...parents in Ireland are paying what are amongst the highest childcare costs in the OECD region, all of the reports show Ireland coming out on top with really, really high childcare costs."[104] The Journal.ie has also reported on the high costs for parents, again referencing the OECD report, noting that in 2020 33% of earnings was spent on childcare by Irish couples where both parents were earning average wage.[105]

[97] *Ibid*.

[98] Children's Rights Alliance, *Budget 2026: What does it mean to young people and children?* , available at: https://childrensrights.ie/wp-content/uploads/2025/10/Budget-2026-What-Does-it-Mean-for-Children-and-Young-People-1.pdf.

[99] Early Childhood Ireland, "Early Years and School Age Care overlooked in Budget 2026", 14 October 2025, available at: https://www.earlychildhoodireland.ie/early-years-and-school-age-care-overlooked-in-budget-2026/.

[100] John P. Martin, Activation and active labour market policies in OECD countries: Stylised facts and evidence on their effectiveness, IZA Journal of Labor Policy (2025) Vol. 4 No. 1 1 - 29.

[101] Paul Redmond, Seamus McGuinness, Claire Keane (2023).

[102] Dr. Gerardine Neylon, An Analysis of the Free Pre-School Year in Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) scheme – from a Practitioner's Perspective, International Conference on Engaging Pedagogy 2012 (ICEP12) ITB, Dublin, 14 December 2012.

[103] Helen Russell, Frances McGinnity, Éamonn Fahey and Oona Kenny, Maternal employment and the cost of childcare in Ireland (2018) Research Series No. 73, Dublin: ESRI.

[104] Jennifer O'Connell, "Ireland's childcare cost crisis: 'My friends in Finland pay €150 per month for creche. My husband and I pay €1,100′", The Irish Times, 3 September 2022, available at: https://www.irishtimes.com/life-style/people/2022/09/03/irelands-childcare-cost-crisis-my-friends-in-finland-pay-150-per-month-for-creche-my-husband-and-i-pay-1100/.

[105] *The Journal*, "Increased State spend on childcare 'not enough' to solve crisis for parents and providers", 3 February 2022, available at: https://www.thejournal.ie/childcare-crossroads-part-one-5669360-Feb2022/.

Furthermore, sourcing and securing adequate childcare facilities is proving increasingly difficult in the Irish context. The OECD report also noted the issues relating to accessibility, as even where it can be afforded it may not be available, depending on geographical location; Ireland is ranked 14th out of 41 nations surveyed in a 2020 UNICEF when it comes to accessibility of childcare options.[106] There is a severe shortage of creche and childcare places for babies and toddlers, made more difficult because of the success of the ECCE scheme. In 2021/22, 107,711 children benefitted from the ECCE programme with 95% of the eligible cohort availing of at least one year of the ECCE programme.[107] It is estimated that more than 800,000 individual children have benefitted from the programme since its inception. Whilst this has made access to childcare facilities more possible for many families, perhaps the unintended outcome has been a significant reduction in spaces available for babies and toddlers in such facilities. Given the eligibility for ECCE is a minimum age of 3 years old, there is a shortage of places for babies, making it especially difficult for women to return to work after maternity leave.

In addition, the Irish childcare system has stringent requirements in terms of the required ratio of staff member to children, with one staff member being required per eight children over the age of three, whereas one staff member is required for every three children under the age of three. Alarmingly, this limits the capacity of childcare facilities to accommodate younger children. Reports on this crisis in childcare facilities for younger children have highlighted the lack of access for parents, thereby delaying their return to work.[108] The challenges of both the availability and cost of childcare facilities have been highlighted in research undertaken with Irish Families. The TCD report *"Work life Balance and Social Inclusion"* found that "finding suitable childcare arrangements and dealing with the long commute every day are the two main problems faced by Working Parents and Carers interviewed, and it is often for one of these reasons that people in this group changed their working hours or the way their working hours were organised."[109]

A 2025 report from the recruitment organisation Indeed exposed the detrimental impact of the childcare crisis in Ireland, reporting that more than 70% of respondent parents identifying the lack of childcare options as a significant barrier to work, and 66% having to rely at times on family or friends for childcare support. This rises to

[106] *Ibid.*

[107] Eurodyce, *Early Childhood Education Centre*, 7 July 2025, available at: https://eurydice.eacea.ec.europa.eu/eurypedia/ireland/early-childhood-education-and-care (accessed 20 May 2026).

[108] Katherine Donnelly, "New crisis in childcare as crèches turn babies away", *Irish Independent*, 20 May 2019, available at: https://www.independent.ie/irish-news/new-crisis-in-childcare-as-creches-turn-babies-away/a/140493486.html.

[109] Margret Fine-Davis, Marcy McCarthy, Ciara O'Dwyer et. al., "The Effects of Flexible Working on Work-Life Balance and Social Inclusion" (2005), available at: https://www.tara.tcd.ie/bitstream/handle/2262/67763/The%20Effects%20of%20Flexible%20Working%20on%20Work-Life%20Balance%20and%20Social%20Inclusion.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y.

75% for one parent families.[110] 24% of the respondent parents had cut their working hours because of childcare needs, with such challenges causing 9% to change jobs and 5% leaving the workforce. In terms of gendered impact, women were much more likely to work reduced hours because of childcare responsibilities, 31% of women compared to 15% of men.

8. Conclusion

Though significant strides have been made in Ireland in respect of providing both support and opportunities for parents in the workplace, childcare responsibilities often serve to hamper their ability to engage fully in the workplace and/or maintain a healthy work-life balance. The financial implications of being a parent of young children are particularly challenging and require a shift in both governmental policy and budgetary allocations to enhance the rate and range of available supports. Ireland's long-standing elevation of the status of families within Irish society and its express deference to the role of care within the family should serve as a strong impetus to secure parents with an equal opportunity to workplace engagement.

[110] Dominic Coyle, "Lack of affordable childcare options considered significant barrier to work for parents", *The Irish Times*, 27 August 2025, availalable at: https://www.irishtimes.com/business/work/2025/08/27/lack-of-affordable-childcare-options-considered-significant-barrier-to-work-for-parents/.

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Balancing work and family care in Italy: current challenges and perspectives

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Abstract

The contribution will present the challenges in reconciling childcare with work in the Italian context. It will present the labour market situation, focusing on employment of men and women and the impact of having children, as well as the leave system, cash benefits for parents, and early childcare provision, aimed at giving a brief overview of the reconciliation measures available. The multidimensionality of the issue will then be addressed by discussing the relevant contribution of companies and employers in supporting parents' work-life balance (such as company measures and policies like working from home and flexible working hours), the recognition and support of fathers' involvement in childcare, and the implementation of family policies and interventions within local communities to enhance parental skills and well-being. Thus, specific guidelines and suggestions will be provided to support a positive integration of childcare responsibilities and work for working mothers and fathers.

Keywords: employment of parents; work-life balance; labour law protection; social protection; childcare systems

1. General context

The transformations that have gradually affected families and the daily lives of men and women have highlighted an even closer interconnection between life domains (work, family, education, economy, and policies). This contribution will reflect on the current challenges in reconciling childcare with work in the Italian context, taking into account the ongoing debate on this issue from a sociological and gender perspective.

Italian demographic indicators confirm a decline in the birth rate, which reached an all-time low in 2022 with 393 thousand births. The fertility rate (the average number of children per woman), after a slight increase between 2020 and 2021, was 1.18 in 2024, lower than in 2023 (1.20) and lower than the previous historical minimum of 1.19 children per woman recorded in 1995. The decline in fertility particularly affects the North and the South. This confirms a downward trend in the birth rate, alongside an increase in the average age at childbirth, which was 32.6 years in 2024. The postponement of childbirth has a significant impact on the overall reduction in

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fertility, since the delay of motherhood reduces the time frame available to potential mothers for realizing their family plans. The increase in the average age at childbirth is recorded throughout the country, with the North and Centre continuing to record the highest values: 32.7 and 33.0 years, respectively, compared to 32.3 years in the South (Istat 2024)[2].

This picture, which is certainly not encouraging, tells us that in Italian people are having fewer children and at a later stage in life, a trend which has persisted for a long time and is common across the European Union as well. In this context, does it still make sense to discuss the reconciliation of work and family life?

The low birth rate, however, contrasts with the desired number of children, which for Italy is 2 (on average)[3]. Italy, among the European countries, has the largest gap between the desired number of children and the number of children women actually have. It would therefore appear that parenthood is a less practised – but no less desired – choice for Italians. Factors that influence the decision to have children in Italy include economic factors (29%) and labour market instability (30%), as well as concerns about the future (19%), which is above average compared to other countries[4].

Although the government keeps the issue of work-life balance on the agenda as a priority, reconciliation measures are not sufficient to support parents, especially in the early stages of their children's lives, where informal help from grandparents and parental networks seems to be very important in Italy. Moreover, it is interesting to point out that the aging population, coupled with changes in the labour market, result in a considerable presence of an ageing workforce still managing the balance between family and work responsibilities. In fact, family-work reconciliation, which has long been viewed as a major issue for parents with young children (0-3 years), is now beginning to be seen as a life-long challenge, that concerns different family transitions (young children, school-age children, teenagers) and connects generations. The Italian government has always given great importance to the issue of work-life balance, addressing it mainly as a female issue related to childcare and promoting policies to support female employment; however, signs of change include growing attention also to the involvement of fathers in childcare and domestic activities, as a current challenge is to integrate childcare with work for both men and women.

[2] Istituto Nazionale di Statistica, Istat 2024. Available at: https://www.istat.it/wp-content/uploads/2025/03/Indicatori_demografici_2024.pdf

[3] Testa, 2012. Available at: https://www.neodemos.info/2012/06/05/fecondit-effettiva-e-desiderata-litalia-nel-quadro-internazionale/ Boehm, Schröder, Kunze 2013.

[4] www.unfpa.org/sites/default/files/pub-pdf/swp25-layout-en-v250609-web.pdf

2. Reconciliation measures available in Italy

2.1. Labour market situation

In Italy, in July 2025, the employment rate (for ages 15–64) was 62.8% (+ 0.4% compared to July 2024), and the unemployment rate was 6.0% (-0.5% compared to July 2024), constantly decreasing since 2013. Compared with July 2024, the number of employed persons increased by 0.9% (+218,000); the growth affected both sexes and those in the 25-34 and 50+ age groups, while employment decreased in the other age groups. Over the year, the employment rate showed a rise of 0.4 p.p. Employment also increased due to the rise in permanent employees (+351,000) and self-employed workers (+55,000) and the decline in fixed-term employees (-188,000). However, the gender gap in employment is still high: for men it is 71.8%, while for women it drops to 53,7%[5] . Concerning age groups, the employment rate in the last year rose for people aged 35–49 (+ 0,1%) and 18–24 (+ 1,7 %), while it decreased for the other age groups.

Parenthood has a strong impact on work-life balance: the employment rate of parents between 25 and 49, with one or more children, was 71% in 2022 (increased in last years), falling to 58% for women, compared to 90% for men[6]. Maternal employment increases with the age of the youngest child: in most OECD countries (including Italy) employment rates are lower for mothers whose youngest child is under 2 years, than for mothers whose youngest child is aged 3-5 years and especially 6-14 years, this means that motherhood leads to an exit from the labour market that lasts at least for the first 3 to 5 years, and then continues when the child reaches compulsory school age (it is 6 years in Italy).

Another factor affecting maternal employment is education: mothers are much more likely to be employed if they have a high level of education than those with a medium or low level of education. Certainly, the precariousness of employment and the low flexibility of the labour market are structural factors affecting the reproductive choices of families. However, these choices are also influenced by cultural factors linked to the upbringing of the new generations, which today is considered an extremely complex and risky task. Additionally, the reduction of parental networks (less help from grandparents) and the increasing isolation of parents who have no formal and informal support networks further contribute to this situation.

Alongside structural factors, linked to the labour market, that do not encourage fertility, there is also a difficulty for adults in planning their future, in situations of uncertainty. The reconciliation of family life and work is certainly not a new issue, but it is becoming increasingly relevant in the face of complex social, family and work transformations; even if it initially had a predominantly female dimension – being seen as a 'problem' of women and mothers – over time it has taken on a broader and more complex connotation, also including fathers or the care of elderly people. The

[5] Istituto Nazionale di Statistica, Istat 2024, available at: https://www.istat.it/en/press-release/employment-and-unemployment-provisional-estimates-july-2025/

[6] https://www.oecd.org/els/family/database.htm

shift in the significance of the issue is also reflected in the terminological debate: initially, the term "work–family balance" was used, where the concept of '*balance'* was central, emphasizing the ability of people to remain active in both spheres through solutions and tools that favour professional performance and the family well-being. Subsequently, the concept of 'reconciliation' or 'integration' was introduced, which focused on the possibility to align private and family needs with work, finding a suitable way to integrate time and spaces, according to family or professional needs. In this context, work is conceived as a central aspect of people's life that needs to be integrated with personal life, through organisational interventions as well as promoting people's ability to adapt and find solutions. Over time, however, both of these positions have shown some limitations: on the one hand, the concept of balance seems to refer to a perfect division between time, space and resources which is difficult to achieve; on the other hand, the idea of integration is perhaps too broad and generic, leaving several questions open, such as when and under which conditions a good integration between work and personal life can be achieved. Good for whom — the worker, the company and/or family members?

Recent theorisations[7] rely on a relational vision which also contributes to overcoming the idea of reconciliation – understood as the need to 'hold together' the two spheres in a more or less balanced way – in favour of a broader perspective based on the 'intertwining' of family and work, drawing attention to a more complex articulation where family, private life and work are interwoven in different ways, which may even change over time.

2.2. Labour law protection of and employment incentives for parents with young children

The fundamental legal text in matters of paternity and maternity is Legislative Decree No. 151 of 26 March 2001[8]. It contains rules concerning motherhood and fatherhood for employees and self-employed professionals. In addition, in 2013 the first paternity leave was established in Italy.

The transposition of Directive 2019/1158/EU on work-life balance for parents and carers[9], which had an implementation deadline of 2 August 2022,was also impacted by the COVID-19 health crisis. In the context of the law currently in force in Italy, the effect of the transposition of the Directive will probably relate to the custody rights of fathers. In addition, during the first wave of the pandemic (March 2020 – July 2020) working from home was introduced in many economic sectors and it was extended until the end of 2020 for at least 50% of public employees. At the same time, the right to work from home was granted to parents of children under 14, or who had at least one child with a severe disability, or family members with severe disabilities or chronic

[7] Manzi, Mazzucchelli 2020.

[8] Legislative provisions on assistance to mothers and fathers under article 15 of Law No. 53 of 8 March 2000.

[9] Directive (EU) 2019/1158 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 20 June 2019 on work-life balance for parents and carers and repealing Council Directive 2010/18/EU, OJ L 188, 12.7.2019, p. 79–93.

illnesses. Remote working has still remained widespread in many sectors, based on specific agreements with workers, alternating working days in the offices with remote work. The consequences of working from home on family-work reconciliation are controversial and ambiguous: in some cases, it has facilitated the care of small children and dependent family members, especially for mothers; in other cases, workers have experienced great interference in their work (with frequent interruptions and lack of concentration)[10].

The current (last updated in April 2025) Italian leave system provides for different types of leave:[11]

- 5 months maternity leave, generally paid at 80% of the salary (in some cases at 100% depending on the employment contract), the mother can decide whether to take one or two months before the birth and the rest after, or – with medical consent – she can work until the day of the birth and take the full period of leave after the childbirth. This leave is specific to the mother (individual right), it is compulsory and not transferable, except in certain circumstances provided by the legislation: the mother may transfer one day of her maternity leave to the father, who supplements it with paternity leave, or – in special cases – she may transfer a longer period to the father if conditions are preventing the mother from taking the leave. Self-employed women are entitled to an allowance of 80 per cent of their average salary for 5 months. Unlike employees, self-employed women are free to continue working.
- 10 (working) days of paternity leave, paid at 100% of the salary (to which 1 optional day can be added if the mother transfers it from her maternity leave). The leave is compulsory and non-transferable, it can be used from 2 months before the expected date of birth, until 5 months afterward, and it can be divided into separate days (but cannot be taken on an hourly basis). This leave is not available to same-sex couples. Paternity leave was introduced in Italy in 2013 – later than in other European countries where such leave already existed – and at that time it provided for only one mandatory and two optional days.
- 6 months of parental leave for each parent, intended as an individual and nontransferable right, up to a maximum of 10 months per family (with an extra month bonus for the father if he takes at least 3 months of leave). The first 3 months are paid at 80% of the previous year's income (2024)[12], for the remaining months, leave for a child under the age of 6 are paid at 30%, and is unpaid thereafter; it may be taken on a full-time or part-time basis and until the child reaches 12 years of age. Public sector employees are paid 100% of their earnings for the first 30 days of the leave. Parental leave is optional and may also be taken by both parents simultaneously. It was introduced in Italy

[10] Mazzucchelli, Bosoni, Medina 2020.

[11] Information avalable at:
https://www.leavenetwork.org/fileadmin/user_upload/k_leavenetwork/annual_reviews/2025/Italy.pdf

[12] Further expansion is planned under the 2026 Budget Law.

in 2000 to encourage the equal sharing of caregiving responsibilities between parents and to encourage ethe use of leave by the fathers as well (this is why there is an extra month bonus for fathers). Parental leave is also available to same-sex couples.

These leaves also apply in the case of adoption or fostering. There are also other types of leave for caring for family members in cases of illness or disability. For example, employees are entitled to two years' leave over their entire working life in the event of a serious need like disability of a child or another relative, even if they do not cohabit. These types of leave are generally unpaid, unless there is a specific agreement in the employment contract. There are also specific leaves, which can be fractioned into hours or days on an annual basis (such as sick leave for a child up to 8 years old or breastfeeding leave on an hourly or daily basis).

Looking at the data on the use of leave with a gender perspective, we see that, although paternity leave has been taken by an increasing number of fathers (private sector employees) since its introduction, the majority of fathers do not take this leave (in particular self-employed); furthermore, parental leave is used mainly by mothers. Despite the changes introduced over the years to foster greater gender equity like the introduction of parental leave in 2000 and paternity leave in 2013, a gap still persists whereby these measures are mainly used by women, which reinforces the idea that the mother is the primary caregiver and the father takes on a secondary role.

There are also various financial supports for parents to help them in returning to work, particularly for mothers, such as cash benefits for the birth of a child and family allowances from 2024 for minor children which are based on income. Examining the evolution of the leave system over time, it seems that the initial focus of sharing care within the family – which inspired the introduction of parental leave in 2000 aimed at sharing care responsibilities between the parents – has shifted towards a matrifocal and work-oriented approach. This change aims to facilitate the return of women to the labour market by outsourcing the caregiving tasks to providers outside of the family (such as services or babysitters), with still little emphasis on the involvement of fathers. Escobedo and Wall (2015)[13] define the Italian leave model as 'short leave modified male-breadwinner model', where the leaves are not particularly long – especially compared to other countries – yet well paid. These leaves aim at promoting mothers' return to work while the male breadwinner ideal still remains strongly rooted.

3. Social protection of parents with young children

Over the years, the Italian government has introduced cash benefits to support the reconciliation of family life and work, especially for mothers, to help them in returning to work. A particular benefit is the Bonus bebè, a one-off cash payment given to the mother at the birth of the child, and vouchers to purchase care goods and services (also to pay baby-sitters or to use it in educational services). However, these are minor financial interventions, not particularly generous ones.

[13] Escobedo,Wall 2015.

From 2024 these cash benefits have been replaced by the General Family Allowance, which is paid to all families with children on the basis of indicators linked to household composition and income, and which covers large groups of families that were previously excluded from full benefits[14]. The 2025 budget law introduced further changes and increased the economic support: the una-tantum bonus for childbirth is €1,000 per child (based on the ISEE indicator), increased access to childcare subsidies or home support for children up to 3 years old, increase in the deduction for school attendance expenses in private educational institutions (from €800 in previous years to a maximum of €1,000, up to secondary school, and increase in the fund available for families who are unable to pay the fees required for the use of school meal services in primary schools). In general, it should be emphasised that financial aids for children are income-related, thus supporting the most fragile groups of the population, but providing progressively less support to the middle and upper classes. This creates an ambiguous system in which the State does not abandon individuals in need – yet inadvertently increases dependency. Meanwhile, the middle classes of the population receive inadequate support, they tend to heavily rely on private child services to achieve a more flexible reconciliation of family and work. As a result, the cost of raising children is almost entirely borne by working parents.

The interventions that the Italian government has so far proposed to promote greater reconciliation between childcare and work, while well-intentioned, are unbalanced and focus on structural factors such as promoting female employment, providing financial aids and leaves for fathers. Although these aspects are certainly important, they do not address the underlying causal relationship. Although the structural factors strongly influence people's choices regarding work–life reconciliation, it must be noted that cultural factors (the importance of bringing up children, for example) are crucial, since they refer to the symbolic and meaningful dimensions that ultimately underpin human action. This is relevant for countries facing the demographic crisis, as they are mainly resorting to policies that aim at mitigating the effects of structural factors (such as financial aid for families with children, promotion of female and maternal employment, reconciliation policies and measures, etc.). However, such interventions should be supported by cultural actions that enable parents in the different stages of this transition to feel supported.

There are several critical issues regarding the impact that these Italian strategic economic incentives, linked to different governments, have on families' attitudes towards the future. Planning a family requires a long-term perspective and a perception of stability. Public measures, on the other hand, are fragmented and based on the logic of temporary provisions, with limited resources and changing criteria. This fragmentation and precariousness of economic measures do not really help families in making fertility decisions and tend to affect most the middle class. In addition to national measures, there is a constellation of resources linked to short regional and municipal notices: resources that are certainly useful but limited, which run out in

[14] Dalla-Zuanna, McDonald 2023.

a few hours, often accessible via digital tools, and therefore only to those who are quickest or best informed. The result is fragmentation that penalises certain areas of the country and exacerbates inequalities, creating the impression that support for families is left to chance rather than being based on a strategy.

4. Early childhood education and childcare systems

Early childhood services are facilities for children in the 0-6 age group, in the preschool period, included in the Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC). In Italy there is no ECEC entitlement, as it's not mandatory to use these pre-school services.[15] In Italy, early childhood services are divided into:

- nurseries, which welcome children under 3 years of age, usually from 6 to 9 months, but some facilities also welcome younger children (infants); these facilities take great care in the organisation of care so that they can meet the needs of babies, with very qualified staff;
- kindergartens, for children aged 3 to school age (6 years in Italy); in this case as well, the organisation of care, facilities and the educational agenda must comply with precise standards and guidelines, to support both the child's psychophysical development and education.

The Italian childcare system was established in the post-industrial phase, following the entry of women into the labour market, to facilitate the integration of childcare tasks and parental work. In this context, services represented the first and foremost places where children could stay in the absence of their parents, with a strong assistential and custodial meaning (less focused on education)[16].

The current set-up of the service system is the result of a long and complex regulatory process, which has increased awareness of the relevance of the education system, resulting in the introduction of the so-called Integrated System in 2017. During this time, the concept of the child is also transformed: no longer considered as a passive subject to be trained in the social world, children are considered active and proactive subjects, not only receptive to learning but capable of discovering, knowing and engaging with the world competently[17]. It also puts a different focus on pre-school facilities, and on early childhood in general, based on the peculiar way in which children, especially in the 0-3 age group, interact with adults and with peers, in different places, inside and outside the family. From the perspective of parents, children have the opportunity to develop relationships and bonds in childcare services, that are relevant to their growth. Thus, childcare is conceived not only in a "custodial" sense (ensuring children's safety when they cannot be with their parents) but as an educationally relevant experience, involving relational, playful and autonomy-developing aspects. Care and attention must be aimed at promoting autonomy and not at creating dependency.

[15] Melhuish, Petrogiannis 2006.

[16] Sabatinelli, 2016.

[17] Bosoni, 2024.

As shown above, Italy has a twofold system (crèches and kindergartens). With respect to the 0-3 year olds, the share of places available in 2022 was 31% (55,8% of which were private institutions with high costs for families), in the 3-6-year-old group the share of places available, mainly in public facilities, was 94%[18].
Alongside public services, private services (managed by private or third sector organisations) are also becoming more widespread, especially in the 0-3 group, which differ from public ones in being more flexible and more capable in answering families' specific needs. For example, family-crèches (or Tagesmutter) are innovative services, managed by third-sector or private organizations, alternative to the public crèche, characterised by a domestic and family dimension (they are usually located in real flats) with the possibility of accommodating a limited number of children, up to 5, between 0 and 3 years of age, and with a more customised and flexible service.
There are also supplementary services, which partially replace the above-mentioned facilities and provide for non-continuous attendance (a few hours during the day). These are playgrounds, recreational centres, and mother-child spaces, often organised by the private or third sector, which may also envisage the collaboration and participation of families, to encourage the socialisation of children and parents.
The most recent legislation concerning the ECEC system is Law No. 65 of 2017, which moves towards a more unified perspective of the education system in the early years, aligning it with the systems already in place in many European countries, where pre-school services are part of the Early Childhood Education and Care System. In particular, Law No. 65 of 2017 established the Integrated System of Education (called 'Integrated 0-6 years system'), which provides an educational pathway from birth to 6 years as a fundamental tool for the enhancement of childhood and the prevention of educational poverty.[19] The purpose of the reform is to guarantee all children equal opportunities to access services and to develop their social, cognitive, emotional, affective and relational potential in a high-quality environment, with adequately trained and qualified professionals. The integrated 0-6 years system promotes, according to a logic of educational continuity, the integration of crèches, pre-schools and other educational services (playgrounds, recreational centres, mother-child spaces), which may also be located close to each other. The creation of such an integrated system is aimed at networking services that have previously worked separately or mainly through informal collaborations. The expansion of places in childcare services helps to reduce social disadvantage, offering children contexts for developing their skills, but also a concrete help for parents in bringing up their children. The promotion of quality childcare services, characterised by excellent educational practices and qualified staff, is therefore a challenge in which Italy is investing.
The expansion of early childhood education services is one of the elements that can help to promote families' use of such services, which is also strongly influenced by the economic aspect, the costs of services, but both the leave system (described above) and

[18] www.istat.it/wp-content/uploads/2025/05/report_infanzia_2023_2024.pdf

[19] Sabatinelli, Pavolini 2021.

the cultural beliefs and expectations associated with child-rearing must be taken into account. With regard to cultural beliefs, in particular, a culture oriented towards home-based care is particularly evident in Italy, whereby many families do not enrol their children in a daycare centre because it is believed that the child develops better at home with parents or grandparents. Moreover, the cost of the services is also a very important variable in the family's choice: as mentioned before, in the Italian context, most of the places in the 0-2 age group are in private facilities, which, although they offer a service that is often more flexible, they also have higher costs.

The reform introduced in 2017 is part of a policy intervention to decrease the initial socio-economic disparity in access to early childhood education, supporting equal opportunities for inclusion in formal education. Another fundamental aspect recalled by the legislator is the collaboration with families, which is also mentioned in the law, calling for the need to foster the participation of children and their families in educational processes, giving an important boost to the logic of participation and co-production in services. Alongside a broadening of services offered, however, the capacity of the early childcare system to be an interlocutor for families and the local communities, promoting virtuous and generative educational alliances, appears increasingly important.[20]

The Next Generation EU programme represented an extraordinary funding opportunity, with a special focus on strengthening educational services for children aged 0-3, with an unprecedented investment. The National Recovery and Resilience Plan, launched in Italy after the pandemic, linked to Next Generation EU, is a turning point both in terms of the amount of funding provided and because it introduces strong central control, aimed at reducing territorial gaps in early childcare provision. The demand for childcare services has grown in all areas, despite the decline in births, with an increase in demand that exceeds the increase in supply. The growing demand for early childhood education services has raised significant questions about the accessibility of these services for all population groups. Despite the general pressure on childcare facilities, it has emerged that the attendance of children with disabilities and children without Italian citizenship remains a crucial issue in ensuring inclusion.

5. Future challenges

Moving from an institutional welfare perspective to a plural welfare, which characterises the Italian model, the political system and the private system are called upon to work together to support family choice, in a partnership logic context. Future challenges are related to:

1. the contribution of companies and employers in supporting parents' reconciliation such as company measures and policies like working from home, flexible working hours,
2. the recognition and support of fathers' involvement in family care,
3. the implementation of family policies and interventions in the local communities to support parental skills and well-being.

[20] Bosoni, 2024, Boccacin, 2017.

The role and contribution of companies and employers

Reconciliation is an issue that concerns not only women and mothers, but involves a plurality of actors, including institutions, families (mothers, fathers and parental networks) and private companies, according to a plural welfare perspective[21]. The contribution of companies in reconciliation is fundamental and is part of the Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR), according to which the relationship between business and economic activities and the social environmental context where companies operate is becoming increasingly important. Within this context, the company shows how it's positively rooted in the local community and able to operate responsibly not only for itself but also for society in general. The concept of CSR takes on a particular dimension in the Italian context, where it is associated not only with environment protection but also with the well-being of workers and their families. Companies that embrace CSR demonstrate a commitment to make a contribution to society that is not limited to economic development, but which promotes social advancement and shows increasing attention to the living conditions of people, often exceeding the limits set by law. The company's commitment to support, using appropriate ad hoc measures and tools, the possibility to reconcile work with family's needs, should therefore not be understood as a philanthropic or welfarist choice, but should rather be framed within a win-win approach, that allows to generate benefits both for workers and their families and for the company (i.e. to achieve business objectives, reducing absenteeism rates or increasing worker motivation and satisfaction). CSR is, therefore, a factor of innovation and competitiveness for companies.

Enhancing a culture of active fatherhood in the workplace

Transformations related to maternal and paternal identity highlight, on the one hand, a greater presence of mothers in the labour market and, on the other hand, a desire of fathers to be more involved in raising and caring for their children. These changes reveal how family and work reconciliation is a relevant issue also from the fathers' perspective. Recent studies in particular have highlighted how this challenges cultural ideas about parental identity and gender roles (the breadwinner model is still very strong in Italy). The role of companies also appears crucial with respect to fatherhood, as the work context strongly influences fathers' practices and strategies to balance work and family care.

A qualitative research conducted in the Italian context with some companies highlights the fundamental contribution of companies in this sense[22]. The propensity of companies to favour reconciliation in general, through family-friendly policies and the availability of supports for employees (such as company creches, permits and leave beyond legal obligations, part-time work, and training opportunities for parents), is also a promotional factor that promotes fathers' involvement.

[21] Boccacin, 2005, 2023.

[22] Bosoni, 2013.

Promoting family policies and interventions

Demographic transformation and the ageing of the population, associated with changes in the labour market (extension of careers following pension reforms) determine, on the professional side, a considerable presence of an ageing workforce and an unprecedented coexistence of different generations. Senior workers are usually people over 50, who, while not engaged in childcare, may have other work-life reconciliation needs (the care of young people, teenagers or elderly family members). Workers over 50 years represent the so-called sandwich generation, middle-aged women and men who simultaneously take care of both their children (who are no longer young but still require care) and elderly family members who are no longer in good health. The impact of this caregiving burden on personal well-being is significant: sandwich generation women have higher stress due to the pressures they receive on several fronts (caring for their children ageing parents and work).

The reconciliation needs that emerge after the age of 50 point towards a renewed understanding of work-life balance, which thus appears to be a life-long task, linked to the family life cycle and broadly concerning the exchange of care between generations. In this sense, there is a need for integrated and wide-ranging family policies, taking into account the needs of all family members and their changes over time.

As highlighted above, Italy's current approach suffers from a short-sighted vision. Instead, an effective perspective can be based on the family lens, which oversees the interconnections between different measures and their impact on long-term decision-making processes. This reflection is the core of a family-focused approach to policies and interventions in order to generate family well-being. In this sense the recent introduction of study and research based on the FamIlens indicates that structural measures and interventions are needed, with a stable and long-term time span instead of short-term contingent measures.

The FamILens represents a model for assessing the impact of policies and interventions on family wellbeing, inspired by American experiences[23], introduced in 2018 in Italy by a group of researchers from the Catholic University of Milan[24]. In addition to the United States, other countries have implemented family impact analyses[25]. This model emphasizes the urgent need to move from an individual-focused approach to one that centers on families in policymaking, services, and interventions. The persistent focus on individuals and specific sectors must be replaced by a family-centered perspective. This transition is crucial because public policies, typically aimed at individuals, inevitably affect family dynamics, directly or indirectly. Recognising and addressing these impacts is essential for the effectiveness of policies and the well-being of families and communities.

[23] Bogenschneider et al 2012.

[24] Carrà, 2024.

[25] Wong, 2010.

The model assumes that family relationships are the foundation of every social bond, the intersection of subjective and intersubjective rights, and the generator of a relational common good[26].

The impact on family well-being is evaluated according to 6 principles, through which the impact on family well-being is assessed. In practice, as indicated in the name, these six principles are the *lens* through which we can assess whether it generates well-being for the whole family:

- *Family responsibility*: policies, services, and interventions should aim to support the family capacity to play their social functions, avoiding to replace families in their basic functions, unless it is necessary. However, the support should not be conceived as delegating to the family, but rather – in line with the principle of subsidiarity – as the allocation of the resources needed to adequately fulfil the functions they perform for the society. The mutual responsibility of the members towards each other and a fair division of tasks should also be supported to avoid overburdening women and widening the gender gap.
- *Family stability*: policies, services, and interventions should actively encourage and strengthen couple, marital, parental, and family commitment and stability, mainly when children are involved. This is especially crucial during critical normative and non-normative events that could destabilise previously achieved balances and compromise the solidity of relationships.
- *Family relationships*: policies, services, and interventions should acknowledge the strength and persistence of family ties, positive as well as negative, and strive to foster positive couple and intergenerational relationships, promoting communication skills, conflict resolution strategies, and problem-solving skills. In this sense positive relationships can generate well-being that benefits the families themselves and the entire community.
- *Family diversity*: policies, services, and interventions should reduce social inequalities and provide personalised solutions that respect individual circumstances, in line with cultural, ethnic, and religious affiliation, economic situation, family structure, geographical context, and stage of life. Standardised solutions could have different effects (if not perverse effects) on various types of families and increase inequalities.
- *Family engagement*: families should be actively involved in policy design and implementation by including family representatives in planning tables at the national and local levels. Collaboration between professionals and families should be encouraged, with relational and participatory practices that enable families to contribute their experiential knowledge to identify solutions that are better aligned with their cultural context and family structure and with the expectations of the different members.
- *Family networking*: policies, services, and interventions should recognise the positive function of social support networks in promoting a sense of belonging,

[26] Donati, 2010.

and increasing resilience and agency. Therefore, the creation of links between families, both informal and formal, such as family associations, should be actively promoted.

Research studies were launched in Italy and the model was applied and tested, encompassing both action and participatory research, involving various stakeholders (policy makers, professionals and operators as well as academics).

The principles are translated into questions and specific checklists are created in order to assess the impact of policy and intervention on family well-being. The studies conducted in Italy on different issues (early childhood services, family policies in some Italian Regions, Company policies to promote work and family balance, elderly home care services etc.) have highlighted the importance of considering families not only as beneficiaries but as active participants in the process of policy development and implementation. These findings led to concrete results, such as improved co-planning with families, promoting an educational alliance between families and services, and redesigning social and health services from a family perspective.

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Family and work balance in Lithuania

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Abstract

The article explores the legal framework and practical aspects of balancing family responsibilities and work in Lithuania. It provides an overview of the protections offered under Lithuanian labour law, including rights to childbirth and maternity leave, paternity leave, childcare leave, flexible working arrangements and teleworking options. It also outlines specific provisions regarding entitlements for additional rest days, flexible working hours and other adjustments for parents and caregivers. Recent changes in Lithuanian labour laws, influenced by EU directives, are highlighted, particularly regarding non-transferable parental leave months. The publication further reviews statistical data on how childcare responsibilities affect employment in Lithuania and underlines the necessity for more consistent measures to support employees in balancing work and family life.

Keywords: employment of parents; work-life balance; labour law protection; social protection; childcare services

1. General context

The State Labour Inspectorate of Lithuania indicated that after conducting the analysis, it is observed that both Lithuanian and foreign companies are increasingly concerned with employees' psychological health, which ensures job satisfaction and personal life balance, ultimately leading to higher employee productivity.

It is noted that companies in foreign countries are paying more attention to the importance of balancing work and family life and identify several aspects that reflect this principle:

- Balance of time dedicated to work and family;
- Balance of psychological engagement in both family and work;
- Balance of satisfaction in both areas.

Evaluating these aspects, it is observed that employees who spend significantly more time at work, think about work issues after hours, and dedicate less time to family, and over time become increasingly dissatisfied with their job. This deterioration in psychological health leads to decreased productivity and worsened work outcomes.[2]

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[2] State Labour Inspectorate of the Republic of Lithuania, 'Informacija darbdaviams' (Information to the employers) 2024, < https://www.vdi.lt/Seima_ir_darbas/darbdaviams2.aspx>

2. Labour law protection

Employees with family commitments are entitled to certain additional guarantees and the employer must take steps to support them in fulfilling their family commitments. The Labour Code of Lithuania (hereinafter – LC)[3] regulates the right to unpaid family leave, part-time work, teleworking, flexible and individual working time arrangements, and a variety of employment contracts, such as job-sharing agreements. Article 28 of the LC regulates the obligation of the employee to respect the family responsibilities of the employee. It states that the employer must take measures to assist the employee in fulfilling their family responsibilities; in cases specified in the LC, furthermore employee requests related to the fulfilment of family responsibilities must be considered by the employer and responded to in writing with a reasoned decision. The employee's conduct and actions at work must be assessed by the employer with the aim of practically and comprehensively implementing the principle of work-family balance. Firstly, it should be noted that in the context of the abovementioned principle of work-family balance, the current LC contains the concept of "family members," but the LC does not provide a clarification as to who is considered a family member. A systematic analysis of the individual provisions of the LC leads to the conclusion that family members include spouses, children (adopted children), mother (stepmother), father (stepfather), grandmother, grandfather, other relatives who are actually raising a child or a person appointed as the child's guardian, partners raising children, a single parent raising children, persons with elderly/disabled relatives, etc. In other words, these are people facing problems reconciling family and work.[4]

Furthermore, Article 1 of the International Labour Organization (ILO) Convention No. 156 "Concerning Equal Opportunities and Treatment for Men and Women Employees with Family Responsibilities"[5] states that this convention applies to female and male employees who have responsibilities for their dependent children or who have responsibilities for other close relatives who are in obvious need of care and support. Therefore, it can be concluded that under ILO legal regulation, the family is understood not only as spouses and their children but also as close relatives.

Neither Article 28 nor any other articles of the LC define what constitutes the employee's family responsibilities, so both parental responsibilities towards children or a spouse (e.g., the ability to care for a sick child or attend their event at kindergarten or school) and responsibilities towards other close relatives (e.g., the need to care for elderly sick parents or take care of another close relative living together) should be understood as the employee's family responsibilities.[6]

[3] Lietuvos Respublikos darbo kodeksas (Labour Code of the Republic of Lithuania), TAR, 2016-09-19, No. XII-2603, Article 28.

[4] State Labour Inspectorate (Information to the employers) 2024.

[5] Convention concerning Equal Opportunities and Equal Treatment for Men and Women Workers: Workers with Family Responsibilities (Entry into force: 11 Aug 1983, No. 156), Article 1.

[6] State Labour Inspectorate (Information to the employers) 2024.

2.1. Different types of leaves in the Lithuanian system

Pregnancy and childbirth leave

A woman who is pregnant is entitled to pregnancy and childbirth leave, which is 70 calendar days before birth and 56 days after birth[7]. They are calculated together, and the total amount of days is granted, no matter how many actual days were used before giving birth. To receive the payment for the leave, a woman must have coverage of maternity insurance for 12 months out of the last 24 months. The maternity insurance covers employees, persons working on individual basis and a certain number of other categories of persons who carry out a certain type of economic activity.[8] Employees who are appointed as guardians of newborn babies shall be granted leave for the period from the date the guardianship is established until the baby reaches 70 days.[9] The benefit paid by the state, after taxes, amounts to about 90% of the former salary.

Paternity leave

Furthermore, fathers are entitled to paternity leave of 30 calendar days after the birth of a child, which may be divided into up to two parts. This leave shall be granted at any time from the birth of the child until the child reaches the age of one year[10]. The benefit, after taxes, amounts to about 90% of the former salary.

Childcare leave

The family may choose the paid childcare leave of 18 or 24 months, and the total length of childcare leave in Lithuania is 36 months[11]. This leave can be taken all at once, in instalments or in shifts. After the end of pregnancy and childbirth leave, during the first 18 or 24 months of child's life, the father and mother are given two non-transferable months each. Each parent or guardian can take their non-transferable two-month parental leave either all at once or in parts, alternating with the other parent or guardian. The non-transferable two-month leave cannot be taken by both parents or guardians simultaneously. The benefit during those two non-transferable months, after taxes, amounts to about 90% of the former salary (78 percent of wage before taxes).[12]

Other months of childcare leave (besides the non-transferable ones) may be granted to the mother (stepmother), father (stepfather), grandmother, grandfather or other relatives who are actually taking care of the child, as well as to the employee appointed

[7] Article 132 of the Labour Code.

[8] Lietuvos Respublikos valstybinio socialinio draudimo įstatymas (Law on State Social Insurance of the Republic of Lithuania), Lietuvos aidas, 1991-05-31, Nr. 107-0.

[9] Article 132 of the Labour Code.

[10] Article 133 of the Labour Code.

[11] Article 134 of the Labour Code.

[12] Lietuvos Respublikos ligos ir motinystės socialinio draudimo įstatymas (Law on Sickness and Maternity Social Insurance of the Republic of Lithuania), Valstybės žinios, 2000-12-29, Nr. 111-3574.

as the child's guardian. Based on Law on Sickness and Maternity Social Insurance, if the family chooses the leave of 18 months, the benefit is 60% of the salary before taxes. If the family chooses the leave of 24 months, the benefit is 45% of the wage before taxes in the first year of care and 30% in the second.[13]

Starting from 1 January 2023, significant changes to parental leave and childcare benefits have been implemented in Lithuania while implementing Directive (EU) 2019/1158 on work-life balance for parents and carers[14][15][4]. Two key changes are:

1. Non-transferable months: each parent (mother, father, adoptive parent, or guardian) is required to take at least two non-transferable months (60 calendar days) of parental leave. These non-transferable months can be taken flexibly, either all at once or in parts. If one parent does not use their non-transferable months, the other parent cannot use them. The allowance during these months is higher (78% of the parent's compensatory income) compared to the remaining period.
2. Duration and amount of benefits: Parents can choose to receive childcare benefits until the child is either 18 or 24 months old (earlier it was 12 or 24 months). If opting for 18 months, the benefit is 60% of the compensatory income. If choosing 24 months, the benefit is 45% of the compensatory income for the first 12 months and 30% for the remaining 12 months. Additionally, parents can alternate receiving the benefits, but the other parent must stop their benefit period when the switch occurs[16].

Distance work

Pregnant employees, those who have recently given birth or are breastfeeding, employees with children under eight, single parents of children under 14 or disabled children under 18, and employees who need teleworking due to medical conditions, disabilities, or caring for a family member or cohabitant, based on a healthcare

[13] Law on Sickness and Maternity Social Insurance: "Article 24. Amount of childcare allowance

[14] 1. If the insured person chooses to receive the childcare benefit until the child reaches the age of 18 months, the childcare benefit shall be granted and paid to the insured person until the child reaches the age of 18 months, except for the case provided for in Article 22(3) of this Law, of which the amount of the childcare benefit shall be 78 per cent of the recipient's compensatory earnings during the periods provided for in Article 22(2) and 22(4) of this Law, and 60 per cent of the recipient's compensatory earnings during the remaining periods until the child reaches 18 months.

2. If the insured person chooses to receive the childcare benefit until the child reaches the age of 24 months, the childcare benefit shall be granted and paid to him/her until the child reaches the age of 24 months, except as provided for in Article 22(3) of this Law, of which the amount of the childcare allowance granted and paid to him/her shall be 78 per cent of the amount of the recipient's compensable earnings for the periods specified in Article 22(2) and (4) of this Law, 45 per cent for the remaining months until the child reaches the age of 12 months, and 30 per cent of the recipient's compensable earnings from the age of 12 months until the child reaches the age of 24 months."

[15] Directive (EU) 2019/1158 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 20 June 2019 on work-life balance for parents and carers and repealing Council Directive 2010/18/EU, OJ L 188, 12.7.2019, p. 79–93.

[16] State Social Insurance Fund Board (Sodra), 'Vaiko priežiūros išmokos: kas keičiasi nuo 2023 metų' (Childcare benefits: what changes from 2023) <https://www.sodra.lt/lt/naujienos/vaiko-prieziuros-ismokoskas-keiciasi-nuo-2023-metu?lang=lt> .

institution's report may request to work remotely. The employer must comply with this request unless they can prove it would cause excessive costs due to production needs or work organization.[17]

Annual vacation and additional rest days

Parents with children are given priority to schedule annual vacation in a particular workplace. The LC indicates that "the priority order for annual vacation at the workplace is based on the preferences of the following employees (in order of priority):

1. pregnant employees and employees with at least one child under three years of age;
2. employees with at least one child under the age of 14 or a disabled child under the age of 18;
3. employees with two or more children;
4. employees who have taken less than ten working days' leave in the last calendar year;
5. employees with unused annual leave for the previous working year.[18]

Employees who are single parents of a child under 14 or a child with a disability under 18 are entitled to 25 working days' annual leave (regular length of the annual leave is 20 working days).[19] The employer must grant annual leave to pregnant employees before or after maternity leave; to employees during, before or after the maternity leave of the mother of their child; to employees caring for sick family members and disabled persons.[20]

According to Article 138(3) of the LC, employees with a child with disability under 18 or two children under 12 are entitled to one additional rest day per month (or a reduction in working time by two hours per week), and employees with three or more children under 12 to two rest days per month (or a reduction in working time by four hours per week), at the employee's average wage. Meanwhile, employees who are not entitled to the additional rest days and who have a child up to the age of 14 years and who is enrolled in pre-primary, primary or basic education shall be granted at least one half day of time off from work per year, on the first day of the school year, at the employee's average wage.

Nonpaid leave

The employee must be granted nonpaid leave if he/she is:

1. an employee with a child under 14 years of age - up to 14 calendar days;
2. an employee with disability, or an employee raising a child with disability under the age of 18, or an employee caring for a person with disability who has been assessed as needing permanent nursing care, up to 30 calendar days;

[17] Article 52(2) of the Labour Code.

[18] Article 128(4) of the Labour Code.

[19] Article 126 of the Labour Code.

[20] Article 128 of the Labour Code.

3. during the mother's maternity leave and the father's parental leave, at the father's request (the mother during the father's parental leave), up to 3 months;
4. an employee caring for a sick family member or a person living with him/her, or an employee who has submitted a medical report on his/her state of health to a health care institution, for the period recommended by the health care institution;
5. an employee attending the funeral of a deceased family member, up to 5 calendar days;
6. for the celebration of a marriage - up to 3 calendar days.

During the working day (shift), unpaid time off for the employee's personal needs shall be granted at the employee's request, subject to the employer's agreement. The employer shall be obliged to grant unpaid time off to the employee if the employee's request is related to a family emergency in the event of sickness or an accident in which the employee is required to be directly present. In such a case, the parties to the contract of employment may agree to postpone the working time to another working day.

2.2. Provisions regarding working hours

Reduced working hours

Since 2023, parents of children under 3 working in Lithuanian state institutions and state-owned enterprises, including the Bank of Lithuania, are granted a reduced workweek of 32 hours (down from 40 hours). This is granted to one of the parents.[21] This legal regulation was adopted to encourage employees to return to work earlier, without losing their qualifications and connection to the workplace, while also allowing them to effectively care for their young child.

Breaks for breastfeeding

Article 37(9) of the Law on Safety and Health of the Republic of Lithuania stipulates that a breastfeeding employee shall, in addition to the general rest and meal break, be given a break of at least half an hour for breastfeeding at least every three hours.[22] At the request of the employee, breastfeeding breaks may be combined with or added to the rest and meal break, or moved to the end of the working day, with a corresponding reduction in the working day. Breastfeeding breaks shall be paid at the employee's rate of pay.

If a person's working time is calculated in the way of cumulative working time accounting, persons raising a child up to three years old have the right to choose their shift within two working days of notification, and persons raising a child up to seven years old have this right if it is feasible.[23]

[21] Article 112 of the Labour Code.

[22] Lietuvos Respublikos darbuotojų saugos ir sveikatos įstatymas (Law of the Republic of Lithuania on Safety and Health at Work), Valstybės žinios, 2003-07-16, Nr. 70-3170, Article 37(9).

[23] Article 115(3) of the Labour Code.

Opportunity to work part-time

The employees who have the need to care for or look after a family member or a person living with the employee, as well as if the request is made by a pregnant employee, an employee who has recently given birth or is breastfeeding, an employee with a child under eight years of age, or an employee who is a single parent of a child under fourteen years of age or a disabled child under eighteen years of age may request to work part time (other persons may make such request only after three years of working for a particular employer[24]). The LC indicates that an employer can only refuse an employee's request for temporary part-time work for important reasons. These employees may return to full-time work by giving two weeks' written notice to the employer, unless the employer agrees to waive this time limit.

Children's rooms

According to the amendments to the Law on the Framework Law on the Protection of the Rights of the Child, as of 1 January 2023, the state and other institutions where 100 or more civil servants or employees working under employment contracts are employed and where these civil servants or employees work in one or more adjacent buildings will have to set up children's rooms for short-term childcare.[25] Children's rooms must be located within the premises of the establishments and comply with the accessibility requirements for people with disabilities. Children's rooms must contain toys, games, books, magazines, drawing materials or other educational materials for children of all ages. Toys and other equipment shall not pose a health risk to children (due to the risk of ingestion, inhalation or injury to skin, mucous membranes or eyes). Children's rooms shall have furniture suitable for children of different ages and designed for children. Equipment, furniture, toys and other items in the rooms shall be kept clean, maintained, tidy and cleaned. Children's rooms shall be located on the same floor as the sanitary facilities and shall have facilities adapted to the height of the children.

The State Labour Inspectorate stresses that "Employees with young children often face difficulties balancing work and family commitments when it is not possible to send their children to pre-school, including during the summer when they are not attending pre-school or primary education, and often have nowhere to leave their children. To address this issue, the State Labour Inspectorate recommends, among other things, that a children's room be set up in the workplace that meets the hygiene requirements for such rooms, where employees can leave their children if they need to, and where they can visit their child at any time during working hours. This would allow parents on childcare leave to return to work more quickly and to fit it in with their family commitments."[26]

[24] Article 40(5) of the Labour Code.

[25] Lietuvos Respublikos vaiko teisių apsaugos pagrindų įstatymas (Law on the Framework for the Protection of the Rights of the Child of the Republic of Lithuania), Valstybės žinios, 1996-04-12, Nr. 33-807, Article 18.

[26] Ministry of Social Security and Labour of the Republic of Lithuania, 'Šeima ir darbas'2024, (Family and work) <https://socmin.lrv.lt/lt/veiklos-sritys/darbo-rinka-uzimtumas/darbo-teise/seima-ir-darbas/> [26] Official Statistics Portal, '18–64 aged persons, made use of child care leave provisions' <https://osp.stat.gov. lt/statistiniu-rodikliu-analize?hash=03dfa230-b24b-4dc8-9279-33175f76e84e#/>

3. Statistics regarding work – family balance

The Statistics Department has data from 2018 regarding the influence of childcare to work activities. According to these, 70% of women and 14% of men aged 18-64 have used childcare leave together with pregnancy and childbirth leave or paternity leave, alternatively[26], and 11% of women and 1% of men were at childcare leave or other leave due to family reasons at the time of survey in 2018[27]. 7% of women and 1% of men have had reduced work hours due to childcare responsibilities. 4% of women and 2% of men have changed employers due to childcare responsibilities. 5% of women and 7% of men have enacted changes in order to earn more money for the family.[28] About 30% of men and women aged 18-64 state that they had difficulties in reconciling their family and work life (due to long working hours, unpredictable or difficult work schedule, long travel time to work, demanding and tiring job, lack of support from employee or colleagues, and other reasons).[28]

4. The good practice in Lithuanian enterprises and suggestions for improvement of family-work balance

The study concluded in 2022 by the associations "Lyderė" and "Personalo valdymo profesionalai" titled "Reconciling family and career: practices and recommendations" has summarized the examples of good practices by enterprises and provided suggestions to the employers on how to reduce the conflict between family and work life.[29] The authors of the study have stresses that "Family-friendly initiatives in the workplace reduce stress for employees, avoid conflicts in balancing the challenges of different areas of life, increase employee engagement and productivity, and directly feed back to the organisation in financial terms. Studies have shown that the practical implementation of such recommendations brings positive financial benefits to organisations, such as increased return on investment, reduced costs or increased revenues."

The recommendations are structured around the timeline of the child's age, starting with pregnancy. It also includes recommendations on good practices in periods of taking care of adult relatives and in cases of loss. Regarding the period of pregnancy, the guidelines encourage the positive attitude towards pregnancy – to congratulate

[27] Official Statistics Portal, '18–64 aged persons whose employment was affected by child care responsibilities' <https://osp.stat.gov.lt/statistiniu-rodikliu-analize?hash=03dfa230-b24b-4dc8-9279-33175f76e84e#/>. [28] Official Statistics Portal, '18–64 aged persons whose employment was affected by child care responsibilities' <https://osp.stat.gov.lt/statistiniu-rodikliu-analize?hash=03dfa230-b24b-4dc8-9279-33175f76e84e#/>.

[28] Official Statistics Portal, '18–64 aged persons having difficulties to reconcile the main job and care responsibilities' <https://osp.stat.gov.lt/statistiniu-rodikliu-analize?hash=03dfa230-b24b-4dc89279-33175f76e84e#/>

[29] 'Karjeros ir šeimos derinimas – nauda darbuotojams ir darbdaviams' (Reconciling career and family – a win-win for employees and employers), BNS.lt, Press Release <https://sc.bns.lt/view/item/449267> [31] Božena Petikonis- Šabanienė, 'Šeimos ir karjeros derinimas: praktikos ir rekomendacijos' (Reconciling family and career: practices and recommendations) 2022, p. 8 <https://mukis.lt/uploads/documents/files/Patarimai%20ir%20rekomendacijos%20mokiniams/%C5%A1eimos%20ir%20karjeros%20derinimas.pdf>

the employee announcing the pregnancy, to form customs and traditions around the announcement of pregnancy in a particular workplace. During pregnancy it is important to give career opportunities for the pregnant employee, include them in training, or give additional free time if the employee needs it.[31]

During childcare leave, the study encourages the employers to congratulate the employee on becoming a parent and agree on further communication. During childcare leave, the study encourages employers to maintain contact with the employee, according to his/her choice, to allow the employee to keep his/her working tools, including company ID account and email address, to ensure that the employee can participate in various training and development programmes, to involve the employee in the talent pool by providing internal career opportunities, and to invite the employee to company events and celebrations. Employers are also encouraged to maintain as many of the employee's benefits as possible throughout the period of parental leave and ensure that the employee's remuneration is kept under review in accordance with the overall salary and benefits policy.[30]

When the employee returns from childcare leave, employers are encouraged to welcome the returning employee, provide clear information to him/her, introduce the return-to-work plan, designate a colleague to assist. Regarding the reintegration after parental leave, it is important to ensure that the employee has access to all the necessary equipment, and to provide all the relevant information on the changes, as well as to provide additional training.[31]

Regarding preschool children, the study encourages the establishment of a separate room for mothers and children, as well as a place for employees to change nappies, to allow workers to use the company's catering facilities to feed their children and provide a playroom. Another possibility is to set up a kindergarten or cooperate with a nearby kindergarten.[32] Furthermore, employers are encouraged to allow employees to plan their own agenda individually; provide flexibility in terms of the start and end time of the working day; offer performance-based employee evaluation; offer to work remotely if there is a need or request; provide an environment of trust[33].

In case of illness of the child, it is recommended to notify all staff that parents do not have to provide details; provide supplementary health insurance; allow children to participate in video interviews. Further possibilities include allowing a few days off and allowing staff to work from home.[34]

Speaking about children in school, employers are encouraged to allow older children to come to the office after school; to provide a playroom or other type of facilities; to organise after-school clubs when the company hires a childcare provider; to offer children of employees the opportunity to attend summer camps or summer school;

[30] Ibid, p. 9.

[31] Ibid, p. 9.

[32] Ibid, p. 11.

[33] Ibid, p. 13. Figure 8. Daily childcare and working.

[34] Ibid, p. 12.

and to provide all the services available to children at the site, taking into account the age restrictions.[35] Similar suggestions are provided for summertime[36], and in general for everyday parenting.[37]

Speaking about adult relative care, the study noted that they could not find a real case of employee caring for an adult, but this might be due to the unwillingness of people to share this information with their employer. The main initiative in this category is to inform employees that they can contact their supervisor or an HR professional in cases where they need help or additional opportunities to take care not only of their children but also of their elderly family members.[40]

In case of loss, the employers are encouraged to express condolences; to ask the employee when he/she would like to return to work; to offer additional or paid time off; to reimburse counselling; to provide financial support to the employee; to provide the employee with accident insurance.[38]

5. Early childhood care system in Lithuania

An important factor in work-life balance is the system and availability of early childhood education and pre-school education. According to the Law on Education[39], "the Lithuanian education system comprises: 1) formal education (primary, lower secondary, upper secondary education, formal vocational education and training and higher education studies); 2) non-formal education (preschool education, pre-primary education, other non-formal children's education (including supplementary education complementing formal education) and adult education." Preschool education takes place in the family and, at the request of parents (guardians), may also be provided under a preschool education programme in a preschool care institution. For children exposed to social risk, compulsory education under the preschool education programme is assigned as foreseen in legal acts[40]. For other children, compulsory education under the preschool education programme may be assigned in accordance with the criteria and procedure foreseen in legal acts. Preschool education is provided to children from birth until they start pre-school education. Education under the preschool education program is universal from the age of 2.[41] Universal does not mean that preschool education is compulsory for children aged 2–4. However, if parents (guardians) wish

[35] Ibid, p. 14.

[36] Ibid, p. 14-15.

[37] Ibid, p. 15. [40] Ibid, p. 16.

[38] Ibid, p. 16-17.

[39] Lietuvos Respublikos švietimo įstatymas (Law on Education of the Republic of Lithuania), TAR, 20030716, Nr. IX1672.

[40] Lietuvos Respublikos švietimo ir mokslo ministro įsakymas „Dėl privalomo ikimokyklinio ugdymo nustatymo ir skyrimo tvarkos aprašo patvirtinimo" (Order of the Minister of Education and Science of the Republic of Lithuania on Approval of the Description of the Procedure for Establishing and Granting Compulsory PreSchool Education), TAR, 20120426, Nr. V735/A1208,

[41] Article 7 of the Law on Education.

to send their children to preschool institutions, the state or municipalities must ensure that places are available.[42]

The purpose of pre-primary education is to help children prepare for successful learning in the primary education program[43]. Pre-primary education begins when a child reaches the age of 5 by April 30 of that calendar year. In accordance with the procedure established by the Minister of Education, Science and Sport, after assessing the child's educational and learning needs and progress, pre-primary education may be provided when the child reaches the age of 5 by September 1 of that calendar year. Pre-primary education may be provided later at the discretion of the parents (guardians), but no later than when the child reaches the age of 6 in that calendar year. If pre-primary education started when the child turned 5 years old in that calendar year, pre-primary education may last for two years, after the child's educational and learning needs and progress have been assessed in accordance with the procedure established by the Minister of Education, Science and Sport.

Preschool education is provided by state and municipal kindergartens, private early childhood education and care providers. A one-year pre-primary education programme is carried out by preschool, general education schools or other education providers.

The state data agency indicated that „at the beginning of the academic year 2022–2023, there were 715 preschool establishments operating in the country (of which 621 in urban, 94 in rural areas), 426 general schools had preschool and pre-primary education groups integrated. 125.2 thousand children attended preschool establishments, 10.5 thousand – preschool and pre-primary groups in general schools. In total, 82.7 per cent of children aged 1–6 participated in preschool and pre-primary education. Preschool establishments were attended by 26.5 thousand (54 per cent) children aged 1–2. Childcare groups of nursery schools were attended by 106 children under one year of age (in 2021, 58 percent)".[44]

[42] Ministry of Education, Science and Sport of the Republic of Lithuania, „Vaikų priėmimas" (Children's Admission), Ministry of Education, Science and Sport, https://smsm.lrv.lt/lt/veiklos-sritys-1/smm-svietimas/svietimo-sistema-ikimokyklinis-ugdymas/vaiku-priemimas-ikimokyklinis-ugdymas/

[43] Article 8 of the Law on Education.

[44] Statistics Lithuania, *Education and Culture in Lithuania (edition 2023)*, p. 15, Official Statistics Portal, https://osp.stat.gov.lt/documents/10180/12017393/Education+and+Culture+in+Lithuania+%28edition+2023%29.pdf/e5e26ef6-2a2a-44af-beec-96a406a240b3

Table No. 1. Number of preschool and pre-primary education institutions

		Number of preschool and pre-primary education institutions		
		2022	2023	2024
Total by education programmes	Urban and rural areas	1,278	1,276	1,245
	Urban areas	926	920	898
	Rural areas	354	356	347
Preschool education	Urban and rural areas	1,167	1,163	1,137
	Urban areas	832	826	809
	Rural areas	337	337	328
Pre-primary education	Urban and rural areas	1,107	1,106	1,099
	Urban areas	802	803	801
	Rural areas	306	303	298

Statistics show a decline in the number of preschool and pre-primary education units between 2022-2024, most likely due to demographic crisis.

Lithuanian government plans to allocate more than €78 million in EU funds to strengthen the development, accessibility, and quality of preschool education by 2027. Almost half of this amount is earmarked for the inclusion of socially disadvantaged families and children with special needs in pre-school education institutions, so that they have equal opportunities to learn alongside their peers. Between 2022 and 2027, Lithuanian municipalities plan to build 19 new kindergartens and expand access to preschool education in approximately 144 existing educational institutions.[45]

Education in state or municipal kindergartens is funded by the state (at least 20 hours per week). Parents (or guardians) pay for their child's meals. Some municipalities have an additional fee for the purchase of educational materials or a monthly subscription fee. On average, families pay €50-60 per month for kindergarten (per child). In some municipalities, the fee may be reduced depending on the family's income, social situation or similar factors. To apply for a reduction in the fee, parents must contact the municipality or the kindergarten itself.[46]

Each municipality has its own approved procedure for admission to kindergartens. Usually, the child's parents or guardians write a request to the kindergarten director. They also submit a copy of the child's identity document and a health certificate. If

[45] Ministry of Education, Science and Sport of the Republic of Lithuania, 'J. Šiugždinienė: keli tūkstančiai Lietuvos vaikų dar laukia galimybės lankyti darželius, valstybė tam pasiekti skirs 78 mln. eurų" (J. Šiugždinienė: thousands of Lithuanian children are still waiting for the opportunity to attend kindergartens, the state will allocate €78 million to achieve this), Ministry of Education, Science and Sport, https://smsm.lrv.lt/lt/naujienos-1/pranesimai-ziniasklaidai-1/j-siugzdiniene-keli-tukstanciai-lietuvos-vaiku-dar-laukia-galimybes-lankyti-darzelius-valstybe-tam-pasiekti-skirs-78-mln-euru/

[46] Globali Lietuva (Department of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Lithuania), „Ikimokyklinis ugdymas (0–5 metai)" (Preschool Education (0–5 years)), Globali Lietuva, https://globalilietuva.urm.lt/griztu.lt/ugdymas-ir-svietimas/ikimokyklinis-ugdymas-0-5-metai/55

priority is given (for example, based on place of residence, number of children in the family, another child in the family attending the same educational institution), documents confirming this must be submitted.
The educational program is adapted for children with special educational needs. If a child is diagnosed with moderate, severe, or very severe special needs, a preschool teacher works in the group together with a teacher's assistant. [47]
Some of the municipalities offer compensation for those who did not get a place in municipal kindergarten, that can be used for paying part of the fee of private kindergarten.
The childcare compensatory benefit is granted and paid to one of the child's parents (or the sole parent) or to a guardian where guardianship is established in the family, for each pre-school age child who is not enrolled in early childhood education in a public (state/municipal) or non-state institution (kindergarten) and who is cared for remuneration by an individual childcare provider (a nanny). The benefit amounts to €384.80 per month. It may be paid until the end of the childcare agreement or employment contract concluded between the parent/guardian and the nanny (if the contract is fixed-term), but in any case no longer than until the date when the child begins pre-primary education; where the contract is open-ended, payment is likewise limited to the start of pre-primary education. The benefit is granted if the nanny provides childcare either under an individual activity certificate or an employment contract (and, in the case of individual activity, the parents/guardian must conclude a childcare agreement with the nanny); if the cohabiting adults raising/guarding the child are employed or self-employed, with the exception of working-age persons with 0–25% participation (disability) level; and if the parent/guardian and child meet at least one eligibility condition under the Law on Benefits for Children (e.g., Lithuanian citizenship). The benefit is not granted where the nanny is caring for their own child or the child of a cohabiting spouse/partner, or where the same nanny already receives this benefit for five other children, except where all children are from the same family.[48]

5. Conclusions

The legal framework in Lithuania regarding work-family balance has undergone changes in recent years, reflecting both national priorities and European Union directives. A key development is the introduction of non-transferable parental leave months for both parents, which aims to encourage shared responsibility in childrearing. This policy, alongside relatively long parental leaves of up to 36 months, offers families

[47] Ministry of Education, Science and Sport of the Republic of Lithuania, „Vaikų priėmimas" (Children's Admission), Ministry of Education, Science and Sport, https://smsm.lrv.lt/lt/veiklos-sritys-1/smm-svietimas/svietimo-sistema-ikimokyklinis-ugdymas/vaiku-priemimas-ikimokyklinis-ugdymas/

[48] Ministry of Social Security and Labour of the Republic of Lithuania, „Vaiko priežiūros kompensacinė išmoka" (Childcare Compensation Benefit), Ministry of Social Security and Labour, https://socmin.lrv.lt/lt/veiklos-sritys/socialine-parama-kas-man-priklauso/auginu-vaika-naujas/ismokos/vaiko-prieziuros-kompensacine-ismoka/

greater flexibility and support during early childhood, with benefits structured to incentivize a more balanced approach between professional and family life.

The Lithuanian Labour Code includes several other family-friendly provisions to support employees with caregiving responsibilities. Parents of children under three who work in state institutions can now work a reduced 32-hour week, helping them balance professional and childcare duties. Breastfeeding employees are entitled to paid breaks every three hours, which can be adjusted to suit their schedule. Additionally, employees with caregiving responsibilities, including parents of young children or those caring for disabled family members, can request part-time work, with employers obligated to accommodate these requests unless there are significant reasons not to. These measures aim to promote a better work-life balance while maintaining professional continuity. In addition, Lithuania has introduced innovative measures, such as the establishment of children's rooms in workplaces with 100 or more employees. This initiative provides short-term childcare solutions, helping parents manage their professional responsibilities while ensuring that their children are cared for in a safe and accessible environment.

Furthermore, various good practices have emerged in Lithuanian enterprises. These practices include flexible working hours, the possibility of teleworking, and priority for parents in scheduling annual leave. Employers are encouraged to foster a family friendly environment, recognizing the benefits of such initiatives for employee wellbeing and productivity. Together, these legal changes and workplace innovations mark an important step forward in improving the work-life balance for families in Lithuania.

The Lithuanian preschool education system is very important in achieving a work-life balance by ensuring accessible and high-quality education for children from birth to six years of age. The system is inclusive, providing specialized programs and additional support for children with special educational needs, as well as social support or compensation for families who are unable to attend municipal kindergartens. Government investments, including EU funding, are important for expanding access and improving quality, with a particular focus on socially disadvantaged families. Such measures, together with flexible childcare options and public services, help parents to balance their professional and family responsibilities.

Gerrard C. Boot[1]

Promoting labour market participation of parents with young children – situation in the Netherlands

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Abstract

Paid work by young families is an important theme in the Netherlands. Taking care of children and performing household tasks is of course also work, but my topic concerns external, paid work. The theme is important because there is a major labour shortage in the Netherlands. With a working population of more than 10 million people, there have been more than 450,000 unfilled vacancies for a long time. This not only has adverse effect for the economy, it also hinders the well-being of the population, when it comes to unfilled vacancies in, for example, education, healthcare and childcare. There is also still a difference in the distribution of household, care and child-rearing tasks between men and women. On the one hand, women's labour participation has been steadily increasing for many years, on the other hand, it is mainly women who work part-time, even if they do not yet have children.

Keywords: work-life balance; part-time work; labour law protection; social protection; childcare systems

1. General context, history

At the beginning of the twentieth century, the breadwinner model was popular in the Netherlands: only 25% of all women and 10% of married women worked.[2] Women were seen as guardians of family life. The policy actively monitored these expectations: in the public sector (government and education) married women were prohibited from working until 1955. Despite the lifting of this ban, this morality remained dominant for a long time. For example, in the second half of the twentieth century there was no activation policy to employ women. There were also few or no facilities for outsourcing care for children. In the 1950s and 1960s, there was a greater need for female workers, but the work should not have been at the expense of their 'primary task': caring for the children and the household. For this purpose, employers created part-time jobs especially for women. However, the number of working women lagged behind compared to surrounding countries. In addition, social norms were also shifting – between the 1960s and 1990s it became increasingly accepted for married women and mothers to work outside the home, even if this was combined with the use of some form of childcare. During this

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[2] Social and Cultural Planning Office (2023). Are you participating?! Perspectives on 'meaningful' participation.

period, the (part-time) labour participation of women increased steadily. Given the need for more childcare places, the government encouraged the creation of more daycare centres and after-school care. From the 1990s onwards, childcare was mainly seen as an instrument to increase women's participation in the labour market. An increase in women's labour participation required a redistribution of care tasks at home. Concrete instruments were limited to the expansion of partner leave in 2019 and the introduction of additional maternity leave in 2020, which was enforced by European Law.
In practice, parents do not have an equal division of their tasks at home. More than 40% of parents would like to divide paid work and childcare equally, but in practice only 10% do so.[3] An important precondition for making choices is the financial consideration. Part of this is, for example, the question of whether someone finds childcare too expensive or affordable. The costs of childcare are often compared with the mother's possible income. If that income is small compared to the childcare costs, the mother sacrifices paid work. In practice, there is a clear difference (around 10%) between the income of women and men, even for equivalent work.[4] This means that women are even more likely to work less and perform care tasks.
Childcare is often looked at as an important solution for increasing labour participation, especially among women. The idea is that if this is improved and becomes more accessible, labour participation will increase. At the same time, there is already a shortage of workers in childcare, so if childcare is expanded, who will work there and who will take care of the children of those working in the childcare system? How can the profession of creche worker be made more attractive? This then touches on problems such as the lack of affordable housing in the big cities.

2. Labour market situation

The Netherlands has approximately 18 million inhabitants, with the working population between 15 and 75 years comprising 10.25 million people in 2025.[5] The remaining 8 million inhabitants are younger than 15 or older than 75, or between the ages of 15 and 75 and are ill or in full-time study. Of this working population of 10.25 million, 9.8 million are employed and 390,000 are unemployed who are often difficult to employ, as they are long-term unemployed people. Of the 9.8 million employed, 5.0 million work full-time, more than 35 hours per week, and 4.8 million work part-time. This ratio fluctuates somewhat due to seasonal influences: for example, there is more work to be done in the catering industry in the summer, and that work is usually done part-time.

Despite a growing attention to more full-time work, the number of part-timers is increasing. In the first quarter of 2013, the number of full-time employees was 4,495,000 (53.1%) and the number of part-time employees was 3,968,000. In the first quarter of 2024 these numbers were 5,088,000 (51.9%) and 4,713,000.[6]

[3] Emancipatiemonitor 2022, Centraal Bureau voor de Statistiek.

[4] Emancipatiemonitor 2022, Centraal Bureau voor de Statistiek.

[5] www.cbs.nl/nl-nl/visualisaties/dashboard-beroepsbevolking/bevolking-15-tot-75-jaar

[6] Emancipatiemonitor 2022, Centraal Bureau voor de Statistiek.

The reasons for working part-time do not only have to do with caring for children. Research by CBS in 2024 shows that 47% of the women, 34% of the man indicate 'care for the (grand)children' as the main reason for working part-time, but a very large group also cites other reasons, such as 'time for yourself' (80% of the women, 75% of the men).[7] Part-time working has therefore become 'normal' in the Netherlands. The large-scale part-time work in the Netherlands instead of full-time work is often cited as an important cause of the labour shortage.[8] At the same time, young parents in particular experience a lot of work pressure. Burnout is an important cause of absenteeism due to illness.[9] And even without burnout, young parents often feel heavily burdened.

The lower labour participation of women compared to men is also related to educational level. To determine the highest level of education achieved, the highest level at which a diploma has been obtained is considered, or the highest level of education fully completed (if no diploma is awarded for the course). If a course has not been completed, the level required to enroll in that course is taken into account. Of mothers with children living at home, 83.5% work outside the home at least 1 hour per week, compared to 94.3% of fathers. However, only 60% of poorly educated mothers work (if the youngest child is younger than 6 years old their share amounts to 55.1%), while for highly educated mothers this is 90% (even if the youngest child is younger than 6 years old).[10] The reason for this could be the earning capacity of these mothers compared to the costs of childcare: if a poorly educated mother has a low income, it does not 'pay' to work compared to the costs of childcare. The situation is different for well-paid mothers with a high level of education.
In Table 1. relevant data regarding employment and educational attainment is summarised.

Table 1. Net labour participation of (married) cohabiting women with children living at home by educational level, 2022 (excluding those following education) in percentages

Education level	Youngest child 0 till 6 years	Youngest child 6 till 12 years	Youngest child 12 till 18 years	Youngest child 18 years or older
Low	55,1	60,1	60,3	66,1
Middle	80,6	84,1	89,2	84,1
High	89,1	90	92,5	83,2

Source: CBS (Enquête Beroepsbevolking)

[7] Emancipatiemonitor 2024 | Centraal Bureau voor de Statistiek

[8] Portegijs, W. (2022). Eens deeltijd, altijd deeltijd. Waarom vrouwen in deeltijd blijven werken als ze 'uit' de kleine kinderen zijn. Den Haag: Sociaal en Cultureel Planbureau.

[9] Bakel, H. van, M. van Engen en P. Peters (2018). Validity of the parental burnout inventory among Dutch employees. In: Frontiers in Psychology, Available at:
https://www.frontiersin.org/journals/psychology/articles/10.3389/fpsyg.2018.00697/full

[10] Information available at:
www.ocwincijfers.nl/sectoren/emancipatie/arbeid/netto-arbeidsparticipatie-van-vrouwen-met-kinderen

Net labour force participation is defined as the share of the employed labour force within the population (working and non-working population). This definition relates to persons living in the Netherlands.

There may also be a cultural reason too that less-educated mothers think more 'traditionally' (and regard childcare as a task for the mother) than highly educated mothers.[11] This is reflected in a difference in ambition level. Table 2. shows net labour force participation by age groups and sex.

Table 2. Net labour force participation by age group and sex, first quarter 2024 (%)

	Men, 2024 Q1	Men, 2023 Q1	Women, 2024 Q1	Women, 2023 Q1
Total (15 till 75 years)	77,1	76,7	68,9	68,6
15 till 25 years	75,1	76,0	75,4	74,5
25 till 35 years	89,9	89,3	84,6	84,8
35 till 45 years	91,5	92,1	82,6	83,5
45 till 55 years	88,6	90,1	83,3	82,6
55 till 65 years	82,2	81,1	68,4	67,6
65 till 75 years	27,0	22,9	12,5	11,8

Source: Published in the CMS: December 20, 2023

The net labour participation rate was 73.0% in the first quarter of 2024. In the same quarter a year earlier, the share of workers was 0.3 percentage points lower, namely 72.7%, so labour participation is growing. In all age groups except young people, women work less than men. The biggest difference can be seen among people over 55. A larger proportion of men work than women. In the first quarter of 2024, the net labour participation rate among women was 68.9%, and among men it was 77.1%. The difference in labour participation between men and women varies per age group. Among young people under the age of 25, labour participation among men is 0.3 percentage points lower. Above that age, women's labour participation lags behind that of men.

A relatively large proportion of women do not work due to caring responsibilities for their family or household. The difference was greatest among people over 55. Between the first quarter of 2023 and the first quarter of 2024, labour participation among men increased slightly more than among women (0.4 versus 0.3 percentage points). Labour participation among 35 to 54 year olds decreased. That difference is so small that it cannot be concluded that rise in women's labour participation is stagnating. Net labour participation increased among men and women in all age groups in the period 2013-2023, but most strongly among 55 to 64-year-old women: from 49.3% in 2013 to 68.3% in 2023 (+19.0 percentage points). There was also a significant increase among men in that age group (+14.1 percentage points). In 2020 – the first year of corona – labour

[11] SCP/Netherlands Institute for Social research, Is everyone participating? Parents and childcare, September 2023.

participation fell among both men and women, but especially among young men and women up to the age of 25. In the following years, labour participation rose again.
Net labour participation increased among men and women in all age groups in the period 2013-2023, but most strongly among 55 to 64-year-old women: from 49.3% in 2013 to 68.3% in 2023 (+19.0 percentage points). There was also a significant increase among men in that age group (+14.1 percentage points). In 2020 – the first year of corona – labour participation fell among both men and women, but especially among young men and women up to the age of 25. In the following years, labour participation rose again.
Research about the population between 15 and 65 years (instead of 15 and 75 as explained above) learned that the labour participation of women raised from 70,1% (2014) until 78,8% (2022) and 79,5% (2023). For men these numbers were 82,6% (2014), 88% (2022) and 88,4% (2023). So labour participation is still growing.

2.1. Once part-time, always part-time?

In the 1980s, the government began to embrace part-time employment as a tool to increase women's participation in the labour market.[12] These efforts have proved successful. The labour participation rate of women rose rapidly and is now higher than in most other EU countries.[13] However, this increase has resulted almost exclusively from a rise in part-time employment. Part-time employment, which was once seen and promoted as an ideal solution for working mothers with young children, has become the norm in our country for women in all stages of life. The proportion of women with a full-time job (35 hours or more per week) is barely higher than it was fifty years ago. It also became clear that working part-time is not limited to women with young children, despite this association commonly being made. Even before they have children, young women often start working part-time.[14] But the largest group of women who work part-time consists of older women who are not raising children any more. These mothers frequently still work as much as, or only slightly more than they did when their children were young: once part-time, always part-time. These norms and habits mean that women (more so than men) experience the freedom to only work as much as they like and have time for other activities[15]. So part-time employment has become the standard working pattern for women. The average number of working hours per week for women was 27,5 in 2014 and 30,1 in 2023; for men these numbers

[12] Merens, A. (2008). Vijftig jaar deeltijdwerk in Nederland: ontstaan en ontwikkeling van deeltijdbanen. In: W. Portegijs, M. Cloïn, S. Keuzenkamp, A. Merens en E. Steenvoorden (red.), Verdeelde tijd: waarom vrouwen in deeltijd werken. Den Haag: Sociaal en Cultureel Planbureau, pp. 22-41.

[13] Brakel, M. van den, W. Portegijs en B. Hermans, (2020). Emancipatiemonitor 2020. Den Haag: Centraal Bureau voor de Statistiek en Sociaal en Cultureel Planbureau.

[14] Merens, A. en F. Bucx (2018). Werk aan de start; jonge vrouwen en mannen op de arbeidsmarkt. Den Haag: Sociaal en Cultureel Planbureau.

[15] Portegijs, W (2018). Ons geld; vrouwen en mannen over het belang van inkomen en economische zelfstandigheid van vrouwen. Den Haag: Sociaal en Cultureel Planbureau.

were 38,9 (in 2014) and 39,4 (in 2023).[16] Women's modest working hours are actually affecting the Dutch economy negatively.[17] If the Netherlands wishes to break free of the part-time trap, a further expansion of paid parental leave would be desirable.[18]

2.2. Income differences between men and women

The Wage Differences Monitor 2022[19] shows that the unadjusted hourly wage of women in the business community is on average 16.4% lower than that of men. In 2014 this difference was 19.2%. In government jobs the differences are smaller, but still to the disadvantage of women. In 2022, women earned on average 5.1% less than men. A halving of the difference in hourly wages compared to 2014. The corrected wage differences (corrected on the basis of comparable jobs and comparable characteristics such as age and education level) are lower. Yet women still earn on average 6.9% less in business and 1.8% less in government jobs than men with comparable background characteristics and jobs.

Government policy is aimed at reducing or even eliminating these differences.[20] This is done, among other things, by encouraging women to continue working after having children (because stopping paid work afterwards causes a permanent income gap) and encouraging men to take on more care responsibilities, including by expanding care leave for fathers. Although the Minister of Social Affairs and Employment wrote to the House of Representatives on 7 December 2023 that she was committed to the creation of the EU Pay Transparency Directive and that work is underway to implement this directive, little progress has been made on this topic. The Dutch Ministry of Social Affairs and Employment even formally announced that implementation of the EU Pay Transparency Directive will be postponed until January 2027, instead of the original deadline of June 2026. The European Commission answered on 18 December 2026 that a delay in the implementation will not be accepted.

2.3. Unemployment

In the first quarter of 2024, 373 thousand people were unemployed, 3.7% of the labour force (seasonally adjusted). These numbers were increased in September 2025, to 409.000, which is 4,0% of the labour force.[21] The number of unemployed increased compared to the previous quarter (+13 thousand). The unemployed labour

[16] Werken - Emancipatiemonitor 2024 | CBS

[17] Kingma, A. en A. Vandeplas (2022). Genderkloof schaadt Nederlandse economie. ESB, 8 maart 2022.

[18] Portegijs, W. (2022). Eens deeltijd, altijd deeltijd. Waarom vrouwen in deeltijd blijven werken als ze 'uit' de kleine kinderen zijn. Den Haag: Sociaal en Cultureel Planbureau.

[19] Rik van der Vliet, Femke Bosman, Bram Hogendoorn, Jeanine van Wissen-Floris, Jochem Zweerink (Wage Differences Monitor 2022) ('Monitor Loonverschillen 2022'), available at: www.cbs.nl/nl-nl/longread/aanvullende-statistische-diensten/2023/monitor-loonverschillen-mannen-en-vrouwen-2022

[20] T. van der Valk, ESB, 6 March 2024 with reference to: Goldin, C. (2014). A grand gender convergence: Its last chapter. *The American Economic Review* 104(4), pp. 1091–1119.

[21] www.cbs.nl/nl-nl/nieuws/2025/42/werkloosheid-gestegen-naar-4-0-procent-in-september

force consists of all 15 to 75 year olds who live in the Netherlands and do not have paid work, but have recently looked for work and are immediately available for it. The number of unemployed increased in 2025. Previously, this number increased sharply by 141 thousand in the second and third quarters of 2020 – at the start of the corona crisis – to 528 thousand. Thereafter, the number of unemployed fell almost every quarter to 350 thousand (3.5%) in the second quarter of 2023. As in the third quarter of 2022, unemployment increased in the third quarter of 2023. Unemployment fell in the fourth quarter of 2023, only to rise again a quarter later.

3. Labour law protection

Until 2020, the Netherlands had a limited scheme regarding parental and other care leave. As a result of Directive 2019/1158 on work-life balance,[22] which contains a number of measures to better enable parents and informal caregivers combine work and care, these arrangements have been extended. The Paid Parental Leave Act was introduced on 1 August 2022.

The most drastic measure for the Netherlands is that every parent is entitled to at least four months of parental leave, two months of which are paid. The Directive further establishes minimum requirements for family-related leave (paternity leave, parental leave and care leave) and flexible working arrangements. The aim is greater participation of women in the labour market and a better division of care tasks between men and women. Before the introduction of the Directive, the Work and Care Act (Wazo)[23], the Flexible Working Act (Wfw)[24] and a number of other laws were amended.

Recently both the social partners as the Ministry of Social Affairs agreed (10 April 2024)[25] that the regulations regarding taking leave are too complicated: there are too many regulations that are not transparent. They therefore proposed to simplify the arrangements. According to the government there are 10 different statutory leave schemes that contribute to a good balance between work and care for children or other loved ones. However, people do not always know what they can use, because the leave system has become complex and unclear over the years. The statutory leave system has been increasingly expanded in recent years. The expansions have led to a confusing leave system. Furthermore, current arrangements are complex and funding is uneven. Bottlenecks are also experienced when taking leave, in particular around taking parental leave. The government therefore proposes to reduce the various regulations to 3 types of leave for: 1) care for children, 2) care for loved ones and

[22] Directive (EU) 2019/1158 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 20 June 2019 on work-life balance for parents and carers and repealing Council Directive 2010/18/EU, OJ L 188, 12.7.2019, pp. 79–93.

[23] Wet van 16 november 2001 tot vaststelling van regels voor het tot stand brengen van een nieuw evenwicht tussen arbeid en zorg in de ruimste zin (Wet arbeid en zorg), Stb. 2021, 627. Available at: https://wetten. overheid.nl/BWBR0013008/2020-01-01/

[24] Wet van 19 februari 2000, houdende regels inzake het recht op aanpassing van de arbeidsduur (Wet aanpassing arbeidsduur), thans genaamd Wet flexibel werken, Stb. 2015, p. 464. Available at: https://wetten. overheid.nl/BWBR0011173/2022-08-02.

[25] Minister of Social Affairs, 10 April 2023, ref. 2024-0000094136.

3) care for personal situations. Care for children includes maternity leave, paternity leave, parental leave and adoption and foster care leave. Care for loved ones concerns the current arrangements for short-term and long-term care leave, and also offers options for taking leave for informal care. Due to the aging population, more and more workers will be required to provide informal care tasks. It is proposed to merge the current short-term and long-term care leave also to include informal care. This creates one leave right for the necessary care for ‚loved ones' in the event of illness or in need of care. Because of the fall of the government, first in the summer of 2024 and afterwards in the summer of 2025, with no new government established in January 2026, no progress has been made in this field.

When caring for children, the question is how long that leave should be and how high the benefit should be. The policy variants are ranging from an amount of the benefit of 70% to 100% of the last earned salary and a duration from 19 weeks to 25 weeks. The question is also whether this should apply equally to both parents. These arrangements can be deviated from in a collective labour agreement in favour of the employee.

Working from home has become very common in many sectors in the Netherlands, especially after the COVID-19 pandemic. In 2023, more than 5 million people worked from home sometimes or most of the time, 52% of all workers. This percentage is not higher in any EU Member State. Most people who work from home do so for part of their working time, i.e. at most half of their usual working hours.

4. Social protection

Parents receive different types of compensation related to the costs of having children. All parents are entitled to child benefit. € 3.6 billion is spent to cover these benefits. A parent receives per child (depending on the age of the child) € 220 to 320 per quarter. 1.8 million families receive this and it concerns 3.3 million children. Families with a low or middle income are also eligible for an allowance under the Child Budget Act (WKB). 2.7 billion € is spent on this. This concerns 1 million households and 2 million children. For the first child the parent receives an extra € 1,200 per year, for the second child € 1,000 per year and for the following children € 300 per year. A single parent receives an extra € 3,200 per year.

Furthermore, reimbursement is made for students and for school costs. When it comes to children up to the age of 18, this is effectuated by local municipalities.

5. Early childhood education

In practice, an important obstacle for young parents is the uncertainty about finding a childcare place. That childcare place is sometimes only found after the birth of the child and when parental leave is almost over, and parents face challenges because the law requires that the employee informs the employer much earlier how many hours of leave the employee wants to take and on which days.

Compulsory education for children exists from the age of 4. There is increasing attention for preschool education, i.e. for children aged 2.5 to 4 years. This is especially important for children who would otherwise fall behind in their learning, for example because the families where they live read little and the Dutch language is not spoken well. The early childhood programs vary per community. In Amsterdam for example, the program is as follows. Children between 2 and 4 years of age often attend a playgroup (half day care) or full day care centre. If the parents wish, or if they have been advised that their child would benefit from extra developmental help, their child can attend a special playgroup or day care centre that offers play-based education. This is known as preschool. Preschool is intended to prepare children for primary school, which begins at age 4 (group 1), and to help children with a risk of language delays to catch up to their peers. Some children receive extra language education when they begin primary school at age 4 (group 1). This is known as early childhood education (vroegschoolse educatie).

From age 5 (group 2), children are required to attend school. During the child's 14-month check-up, the Parent and Child team may recommend that the parents enrol their child into preschool if they believe that their child is at risk of language delays or developmental delays. This advice is known as a preschool advice (voorschooladvies). All Amsterdam children between the ages of 2 and 4 are entitled to 16 hours per week of preschool. Parents are required to pay an income-dependent contribution. They can apply for childcare allowance. If the parents are not entitled to childcare allowance, the City will pay the compensation next to their income-dependent contribution.

6. Future challenges

Intensive discussions are taking place about the future of the labour market in the Netherlands. It is feared that there will be a continued shortage of workers in some sectors, such as healthcare and education. This is a reason to encourage everyone, including women, to work more. There is also a discussion about what kind of economy the Netherlands should have. There is still room for some sectors, such as intensive agriculture, which often employ low-skilled workers. This discussion is also being held in the context of migration.

Recently, a law that allowed steel workers to work even more at the times and places they wanted was rejected by parliament. This means that employees can submit a request to their employer to work less or more than initially agreed, or to work from home instead of in the employer's company, but the employer may refuse that request. At the same time, collective labour agreements are concluded that give employees in those companies that extra freedom. For example, the collective labour agreement of one of the four largest banks in the Netherlands stipulates that employees are completely free to work from home.

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Supporting synergy between parenthood and labour market activity as a challenge for public policies in Poland[3]

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Abstract

Poland – undergoing intensive socio-economic transformation since 1989 – has achieved extraordinary economic growth, but at the same time, its demographic situation has gradually been worsening since at least the 1990s. In 2024, the fertility rate in Poland has dropped to a historic low of 1.099, with 90 of 380 districts recording fewer than one child per woman[4]. It is mainly caused by changes in marriage and family attitudes, especially the decrease in the number of marriages, increase in divorces and family breakdowns, accompanied by growing childlessness. Polish authorities have started to address these challenges in 2016 and initiated the development of a complex family policy, including measures in the area of parents' labour market activity. Between 2016 and 2023 numerous measures and instruments have been implemented to help parents reconcile family life with professional activity. During the years 2024-25, only limited modifications were introduced in demographic and family policy. The article presents measures and instruments of Polish family and social policy which address parents in the labour market.

General context

Poland started its socio-economic transformation in 1989 after partly free elections which radically changed the political situation established after the end of the Second World War in 1945. Since that time, Poland has been included in the group of satellite countries under the control and influence of the Soviet Union. Until 1989, the topic of family or demographic policy had not been regularly stressed or signalled, and the family-work relations within the framework of the socialist economy and society were

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[3] This study was prepared largely on the basis of information available in publications of the government administration and public institutions. This chapter is the updated version of the article *Promoting labour market participation of parents with young children in Poland* published in 2024 in the first edition of this project.

[4] Polish Radio https://www.polskieradio.pl/395/7789/artykul/3627504,polands-fertility-rate-falls-to-record-low-with-90-districts-below-10 (last access 13.01.2026).

organised similarly to other countries of the communist bloc. Due to the centrally controlled command-and-distribution economic system and the so-called "full-employment" policy, the pressure for effectiveness and competition was almost absent. In the context of households and private life in general, this period can be described as an involuntary existence in conditions of permanent crisis and strongly limited freedom by the repressive regime. In the context of the labour market, it translated into a lack of economic freedom on both sides of the work contract – employer and employee. It resulted, e.g. in the level of wages being rather standardised and controlled by state authorities than connected with effectiveness and quality of outcomes. During this period, marked by chronic deficits of numerous first necessities, Polish families functioned as buffering institutions and mitigating the effects of the economic crisis.

The years after 1989 were the scene of rapid economic growth and improvement in the general standard of living, though not distributed equally. It means that there have been social and professional groups which experienced a decrease in stability and standard of living. The consequences of the profound multidimensional changes which started in 1989 were also visible in the demographic statistics. The dynamics of the demographic growth have decreased – the average number of child births each year reached 700,000 in the 1980s, while at the turn of the second and third decades of the 21st century, it was below 400 thousand. This is why in the period of 1989-2018, Polish society has grown only by 400 thousand (from 38 million to 38,4 million). Negative population growth has been recorded between 2002-2005, and since 2013. This has been caused by a decline in fertility, a decrease in the subpopulation of women of reproductive age and a growing number of deaths, which is a symptom of the population's ageing[5]. At the same time, the marriage rate started to fall, and the divorce statistics began to grow. The age of first marriage has increased, as has the age of first childbirth. Accordingly, there has been a five-fold increase in the percentage of out-of-wedlock births – from approximately 5% in the 1980s to over 25% at the turn of the second and third decades of the 21st century. Single parenthood, related to an increase in the number of divorces, becomes more common and refers to approximately 25% of Polish families.

During the last 30 years, life expectancy in Poland has increased and currently stands at approximately 80 years for women and 74 for men. At the same time, mainly due to the decrease in fertility, the size of households has also decreased, which means that most households in Poland have at most one child, and families without children account for approximately 25% of all households in Poland[6]. The demographic landscape, also in terms of the economic context of family formation,

[5] Panek T., (ed.) *Statystyka społeczna. Procesy społeczne, źródła danych i metody analizy (Social statistics. Social processes, data sources and analysis methods)*, Polskie Wydawnictwo Ekonomiczne, Warszawa, 2020, p. 124.

[6] Michalski, M. A., (ed.) *Nieodpłatna praca domowa – niedostrzegane źródło dobrobytu i rozwoju społeczno-gospodarczego (Unpaid domestic work – an overlooked source of prosperity and socio-economic development)*, Fundacja Edukacja do Wartości, Warszawa, 2023, p. 38-39.

having children and combining family and work, has been influenced by growing (and previously unknown) unemployment, which peaked at 20,6% in 2003 and 2004. An unemployment rate above 10% persisted for almost 25 years, from 1992 to 2016[7].

2. Labour market situation

2. 1. General characteristics

One of the biggest problems of Poland after 1989, the beginning of political and economic transformation, has been unemployment, which has been effectively reduced after 2016. Since that time, unemployment has gradually fallen from 10.2% in 2016 through 8.5% in 2017, 6.8% in 2018, 6.1% in 2019, 5.5% in 2020, 6.5% in 2021, 5.9% in 2022, 5.5% in 2023 and to 5.4% in 2024[8]. This means that for about three decades, since 1989, unemployment has been one of the most serious social problems and challenges shaping the context in which people were making decisions about starting a family and becoming a parent.

In the third quarter of 2025, economically active people accounted for 59% of the 15–89 age group, of whom 57.2% were employed and 1.8% were unemployed. The economically inactive population in this age group amounted to 41%. The proportion of economically active people increased by 0.7 percentage points compared to the same period of the previous year (an overall increase of 3 percentage points in the last decade). This indicator was higher for men than for women in Q3 2025: 65.8% compared to 52.8%. The equivalent figures for the working-age population were 82.5% and 84.8% for men and 79.9% for women. The corresponding rates for urban and rural residents were 59.4% and 58.5%, respectively, which is related to the fact that cities have a larger population than rural areas (3/5 and 2/5, respectively).[9]

More than half of the economically inactive population in the analysed age group were women, who accounted for 60.0% of this group. Economically inactive women accounted for 47.2% of all women aged 15–89, while the corresponding figure for men was 34.2%. Among economically inactive people of working age (women aged 18–59 and men aged 18–64), the most common reasons for inactivity were learning and improving qualifications (30.8%), illness and disability (24.9%), and family responsibilities (18.2%). 8.7% of people of working age cited retirement as the

[7] Statistics Poland, Główny Urząd Statystyczny (GUS), Labour force survey in Poland – quarter 4/2023, available at:
https://stat.gov.pl/en/topics/labour-market/registered-unemployment/unemployment-rate-1990-2024,3,1.html

[8] GUS, Labour force survey in Poland – quarter 4/2023.

[9] GUS, Labour force survey in Poland – quarter 3/2025.

reason for their passivity in the labour market, while 1.1% were discouraged by the ineffectiveness of looking for a job[10].

In the coming years, Poland will face a growing labour force deficit due to population ageing, which has very specific consequences for labour market resources. The changing age structure in favour of post-working age individuals in the coming years means that by 2050, the European Union will face a deficit of working-age people of 50 million[11]. At the same time, Poland, one of the fastest-ageing EU countries[12], will face a shortage of between 4 and 5 million workers in the labour market[13]. This will only increase the pressure to recruit and retain employees and to look for solutions – also in terms of employer policies – aimed at better integrating family and professional life[14]. What's more, in 2024, the rising costs of energy, pressure for implementing the EU "Green Deal", and uneasy geopolitical situation gave grounds to expect an increase in unemployment.

2.2. The situation of parents on the labour market

Alongside the general increase in employment in Poland over the last decade, there was also an increase in parental employment: by 7 and 9 percentage points (pp) among mothers of one or two children, and by 3 and 5 pp among fathers[15]. Also, there was a 6-percentage-point increase in the employment rate among mothers of children under six. While around 90% of childless men and women (aged 26–30) are active on the labour market, this number falls to 62% for women and rises to 98% for men who are parents of children under three[16]. 77% of economically inactive mothers are not looking for a job due to childcare responsibilities. However, the economic activity rate of mothers increases with the age of the child, reaching 84% when the child is aged 13–14. In general, the most common family model in Poland is the dual-earner model: 68% of families with children aged 1–9 have two working parents.

[10] GUS, Labour force survey in Poland – quarter 3/2025.

[11] https://www.robert-schuman.eu/en/european-issues/0462-europe-2050-demographic-suicide

[12] G. Uścińska, *Systemy emerytalne a sytuacja demograficzna*, w: G. Uścińska, Z. Wiśniewski (red.), *Zmiany demograficzne a rynek pracy i ubezpieczenia społeczne,* Materiały z III Kongresu Demograficznego. Część 4, Rządowa Rada Ludnościowa, Główny Urząd Statystyczny, Warsaw 2022, s. 97-113. https://kd.stat.gov.pl/images/publikacje/04_kd_zmiany_demograficzne_a_rynek_pracy_i_ubezpieczenia_spoleczne.pdf

[13] J. Oczki, *Demograficzne uwarunkowania rynku pracy w Polsce*, w: G. Uścińska, Z. Wiśniewski (red.), *Zmiany demograficzne a rynek pracy i ubezpieczenia społeczne*, Materiały z III Kongresu Demograficznego. Część 4, Rządowa Rada Ludnościowa, Główny Urząd Statystyczny, Warszawa 2022, s. 60-74. https://kd.stat.gov.pl/images/publikacje/04_kd_zmiany_demograficzne_a_rynek_pracy_i_ubezpieczenia_spoleczne.pdf

[14] Michalski, M.A., Blicharz, G., Szwarc, K., Kałamucka, A.J., Kawko, M., Wiśniewski, B., *Rozwiązania prorodzinne w firmach prywatnych w Polsce*. Fundacja ProjektPL, 2021

[15] Eurostat, Employment rate by number of children for 2015-2024, https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/databrowser/view/lfst_hheredch/default/table?lang=en

[16] Kiełczewska, A., Kukołowicz, P., & Wincewicz, A. Praca a dom. Wyzwania dla rodziców i ich konsekwencje, Polish Economic Institute, Warsaw 2022

Poland stands out as an example where the vast majority of workers are in full-time employment.[17] The proportion of part-time employment in the total employment rate for people aged 25–54 is 1–2% for childless men and fathers, and around 5% for women without children and 9% for mothers. These conditions are characteristic of Central and Eastern Europe. By contrast, in countries such as Austria, the Netherlands and Germany, the percentage of mothers working part-time is usually around 70%[18]. However, it seems that working full-time is not a preference, but rather a necessity. More than a third of parents who work full-time would like to reduce their working hours, even if it meant a smaller salary. Also, 63% of mothers considering returning to work would prefer to work below full-time hours[19].

The working conditions of parents in Poland are still rather rigid. The majority of working mothers and fathers of young children (around 67%) have little or no control over their working hours[20], which is below the European average.[21] This is a common characteristic in our region, where flexible working schedules with employee control are rare, especially among less educated couples[22]. However, supervisors are generally supportive of employees who have to take care of a sick child or leave work in an urgent situation[23]. Conversely, most employed men expect an unfavourable reaction from their supervisor if they request parental leave.

3. Labour law protection of and employment incentives for parents with young children

Polish labour law contains the following solutions and regulations connected with parenthood:

3.1. Leave for employed parents

After the birth of a child, parents can take advantage of maternity, paternity, parental and childcare leave options. However, it is worth mentioning that only employees hired under an employment contract are entitled to leave options, but not those hired

[17] Eurostat, Share of persons working part time inf total employment in 2024 https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/databrowser/view/lfsa_eppga/default/table?lang=en

[18] Eurostat, Share of persons working part time inf total employment in 2024 https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/databrowser/view/lfsa_eppga/default/table?lang=en

[19] Kiełczewska, A., Kukołowicz, P., & Wincewicz, A. Praca a dom. Wyzwania dla rodziców i ich konsekwencje, Polish Economic Institute, Warsaw 2022

[20] Kiełczewska, A., Kukołowicz, P., & Wincewicz, A. Praca a dom. Wyzwania dla rodziców i ich konsekwencje, Polish Economic Institute, Warsaw 2022

[21] Eurostat, Labour Force Survey ad hoc module 2019, https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/databrowser/view/lfso_19fxwt03/default/table?lang=en

[22] Kałamucka, A., Matysiak, A., & Osiewalska, B. Working-time flexibility among European couples. Community, Work & Family, 2025, 1-23.

[23] Kiełczewska, A., Kukołowicz, P., & Wincewicz, A. Praca a dom. Wyzwania dla rodziców i ich konsekwencje, Polish Economic Institute, Warsaw 2022.

under a contract for specific work or fee-for-task agreement, which is sometimes offered by employers as the only option. Self-employed persons who are insured with the Social Insurance Institution (ZUS) and pay contributions for this purpose may also take advantage of this option (non-mandatory).

3.1.1. Maternity leave

This is a compulsory leave to which every female employee is entitled to after giving birth, regardless of the type of her employment contract[24]. Its length depends on the number of children born at one delivery and amounts to 20 weeks - in case of one child at one delivery, 31 weeks - in case of two children at one delivery, 33 weeks - in case of three children at one delivery, 35 weeks - in case of four children at one delivery and 37 weeks in case of five or more children at one delivery (a week of maternity leave corresponds to 7 days counted from the first day of the leave). An employee may use no more than 6 weeks of maternity leave before the expected date of childbirth. If she did not take it before giving birth, her maternity leave begins on the day of giving birth. After giving birth, the mother must take at least 14 weeks (out of the whole period she is entitled to) of leave to be with the child. She may resign from the remaining 6 weeks of leave (out of the basic 20 weeks leave) and return to work, provided that the remaining part of the leave is used by the employed father of the child, or for a period corresponding to the period remaining until the end of the maternity leave, the child will be personally cared for by the insured person - the child's father, who interrupted earning activity to provide this care.

The regulations also assume job protection of pregnant women as well as women who have given birth. During pregnancy and maternity leave, and from the date on which the employee submits an application for maternity leave or part thereof until the end of this leave, the employer may not: (1) prepare to terminate without notice; or (2) terminate the employment relationship with this employee, unless there are reasons to justify termination of the contract without notice due to the employee's fault and the trade union representing the employee has consented to the termination of the contract. If the employee applies for maternity leave, earlier than the deadlines specified in the provisions of the labour law, the protection of the employment relationship comes into force 14 days before the commencement of the use of part of the maternity leave[25]. After the end of maternity leave, the employer shall allow the employee to work in the same position, in case it is not possible, in a position equivalent to the one held before the start of the leave, on terms and conditions no less favourable than those that would apply if the employee did not take the leave.

[24] Ustawa z dnia 26 czerwca 1974 r. - Kodeks pracy (Dz. U. z 2023 r. poz. 1465), art. 180-182 (Act of 26 June 1974 - Labour Code (Journal of Laws of 2023, item 1465), art. 180-182.

[25] Ministry of Family, Labour and Social Policy, 2024a, available at: https://www.gov.pl/web/rodzina/urlop-macierzynski

3.1.2. Paternity leave

Paternity leave is used by the employed father until the child reaches 12 months of age. The duration of paternity leave is 2 weeks and can be taken as a single period or in two one-week instalments. The father of an adopted child may take paternity leave within 12 months from the date the decision on the adoption of the child becomes legally binding, but no longer than until the child turns 14 years old[26].

3.1.3. Parental leave

Employed parents are entitled to parental leave to care for a child, as a rule, for 41 weeks (in the case of the birth of one child) or 43 weeks (in the case of the birth of multiple births). After the end of parental leave, the employer shall allow the employee to return to the same position, or, if this is not possible, to an equivalent position held before the start of the leave, on terms and conditions no less favourable than those that would have applied had the employee not taken the leave[27]. In special situations, such as severe and irreversible disability or incurable life-threatening disease that occurred during the prenatal period of the child's development or during delivery, the length of parental leave is 65 weeks, if there is only one child, and 67 weeks in case of multiple births.

Both parents are entitled to parental leave in the amounts specified above. The child's parents may also take parental leave at the same time. Parents may take parental leave as a single period or in up to five separate periods, provided it is taken by the end of the calendar year in which the child turns six. Each parent may exercise their exclusive right to nine weeks of parental leave. This right cannot be transferred to the other parent (it is non-transferable).[28]

The employed parent may combine paternity leave with work for the employer granting the leave, provided that the working time does not exceed half of full-time hours. In such cases, the duration of parental leave is extended in proportion to the working time performed by the employee while taking the leave or part of it, but no longer than 82 weeks – in case of the birth of one child at one delivery, and 86 weeks – in the case of simultaneous birth of more than one child in one delivery. For employees who have adopted a child or who care for the child, while having applied for the guardianship court to initiate proceedings regarding the adoption of the child, have similar rights: they are entitled to parental leave only until the child turns 14[29].

[26] Government of Poland, *Urlopy i świadczenia związane z macierzyństwem i rodzicielstwem* (*Leaves and benefits related to maternity and parenthood*), 2024, available at https://www.biznes.gov.pl/pl/portal/00136#9

[27] Ministry of Family, Labour and Social Policy, 2024, available at: https://www.gov.pl/web/rodzina/urlop-rodzicielski

[28] Ministry of Family, Labour and Social Policy, 2024b.

[29] Ministry of Family, Labour and Social Policy, 2024b.

3.1.4. Maternal benefit during maternity, paternity and parental leave

An employee may choose the amount of maternity benefit to receive during maternity and parental leave[30]: (1) 100% of the allowance for the entire maternity leave period, in which case both parents are entitled to 70% of the allowance for the parental leave period; or (2) 81.5% of the allowance for the maternity and parental leave period. In this case, the father of the child is entitled to 70% of the allowance basis for the 9-week non-transferable part of this leave. A mother may share the 81.5% allowance with the father of her child during parental leave, but he will receive 70% of the allowance for the first 9-week non-transferable period. During paternity leave (12 weeks) a father is entitled to maternity benefit (100% of the allowance) for the duration of the leave.

3.1.5. Upbringing leave

Upbringing leave lasts up to 36 months in total and is generally unpaid. Only low-income employees may receive a benefit in the form of parental allowance during the upbringing leave. This leave is granted to an employee with at least 6 months of employment, which also includes the period of receiving unemployment benefit. This leave can be used until the end of the calendar year in which the child turns 6.

3.1.6. Care allowance

A care allowance is a cash benefit paid to an employee who is exempt from working due to caring responsibilities. The number of days of care entitlement depends on the type of illness or circumstances that give rise to the need for care. It is payable only to one of the parents or the guardian in situations when there is no other family member who could take care of the sick child. The employed parent is entitled also to be released from the obligation to work if he or she takes care of another family member: spouse, parent, parent of his or her child, stepfather, stepmother, parents-in-law, grandparents, grandchildren, siblings and children who are over 14 years old, if during the time of care they live in a shared household. The amount of the care allowance is 80% of the calculation basis (i.e., as a rule, the employee's remuneration calculated in the same way as sick pay)[31].

3.2. Flexible working time schedules

An employee raising a child up to the age of 8 is entitled to apply for flexible working arrangements. The application has to be submitted no later than 21 days before the planned start of using this option. Flexible working arrangements include, for example, reduced working hours, remote work, or a weekend work system[32] and

[30] Government information and service portal for entrepreneurs available at: https://www.biznes.gov.pl/pl/portal/00136

[31] Ministry of Family, Labour and Social Policy, 2024.

[32] It is regulated by Article 144 of the Labour Code: "At the employee's written request, a working time system may be applied to him, in which work is performed only on Fridays, Saturdays, Sundays and holidays. In this system, it is permissible to extend the daily working time, but not more than to 12 hours, in a settlement period not exceeding 1 month".

should accommodate the employee's needs. An employee requesting this option is entitled to apply for returning to the previous working arrangement at any time. The work contract with an employee who has requested a flexible working arrangement cannot be terminated or dissolved without notice[33]. The employment contract with an employee cannot be terminated or dissolved, nor can preparations for the employee's dismissal be made, during pregnancy, during maternity leave, and from the date of submission of the application for granting maternity leave, parental leave or part thereof, until the date of completion. Termination of an employment contract by notice during pregnancy, maternity leave, leave under the terms of maternity leave, paternity leave, or parental leave may only occur in case of bankruptcy or liquidation of the employer[34].

One of the main challenges of adjusting the working conditions to meet family obligations is the low accessibility of part-time contracts, with Poland serving as an example of a country where the majority of employees work full-time,[35] even though it is more of a necessity than a choice[36].
It also includes availability of flexible working conditions (see also chapter 2.2.)

3.3. Active Parent Initiative

On 12 June 2024, the Act on supporting parents in professional activity in the labour market and raising children ('Active Parent') was introduced.[37] The Act offers three new benefits for parents raising small children who are entitled to apply for the benefits from 1 October 2024: 'Active Parents at Work' benefit, 'Actively in the Nursery' benefit and 'Actively at Home' benefit. The parent will have the chance to choose one of the three benefits, assuming that only one of the benefits can be given for the same child in a given month. The option of changing the benefits multiple times will also be available – provided that in a given month the family will receive only one of the benefits for a given child. On the 1st October 2024 the 'Actively at Home' benefit (as

[33] Government of Poland, 2024.

[34] Government of Poland, 2024.

[35] Eurostat, Share of persons working part time inf total employment in 2024 https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/databrowser/view/lfsa_eppga/default/table?lang=en

[36] Kiełczewska, A., Kukołowicz, P., & Wincewicz, A. Praca a dom. Wyzwania dla rodziców i ich konsekwencje, Polish Economic Institute, Warsaw 2022

[37] Ministry of Family, Labour and Social Policy, 2024c, Active Parent, available at: https://www.gov.pl/web/family/dziemianowicz-bak-family-and-work---they-go-hand-in-hand-applications-for-benefits-under-the-active-parent-scheme-may-be-submitted-starting-from-1-october

a part of 'Active Parent' program) replaced the 'Family Care Capital' (FCC)[38] program (Act of 17 November 2021 on Family Care Capital)[39], while maintaining acquired rights, i.e. guaranteed the parent the right to retain the previously granted Family Care Capital with the possibility of choosing and switching to a new benefit only if it is more beneficial. The final date for applying for FCC was 30th September 2024.

The 'Active Parent at Work' benefit is addressed to professionally active parents of a child aged between 12 to 35 months. This benefit amounts to € 349 per month[40] for a period of 24 months from the 12th to the 35th month of the child's age. In the case of disabled children with the need for permanent or long-term care or assistance from another person, the benefit will be increased to € 440 per month.

The 'Actively in the Nursery' benefit is supposed to replace the currently existing co-financing for reducing the fee for a child's stay in a nursery, children's club or day care provider, which is available in the amount of up to a maximum of € 93 per month. It is available for parents of children attending institutions caring for children up to 3 years of age – i.e. a nursery, children's club or day care provider. The amount of the benefit is up to € 349 per child per month and up to € 440 per month for a disabled child. The amount cannot be higher than the fee that is paid by parents for the child's stay in a care institution.

The 'Actively at Home' benefit is eligible for each child in the family aged 12 to 35 months and is paid in the amount of € 116 per month for 24 months. This benefit is addressed to those parents of children aged 12 to 35 months who are not entitled or will not voluntarily decide to use the 'Active Parents at Work' or 'Actively in the Nursery' benefit, because of their inactive professional status or because their child is not attending a care institution[41].

[38] "Family Care Capital" ("Rodzinny Kapitał Opiekuńczy") program was a benefit for parents for the second and subsequent children in the family, payable from the month in which the child turned 12 months old until the end of the month in which the child turned 35 months old. The maximum amount of capital available was as much as € 2,790 per child. This benefit offered additional support for combining family life with professional activity, as well as to encourage decisions to enlarge the family and improve fertility rates. It was also expected to facilitate reduction of poverty among families with children. It has been designed as an investment in the family and a tool for strengthening social/human capital. The program offered two options for paying this benefit monthly - either a payment of € 116 for a period of 2 years or € 232 for a year - for parents to decide which option they prefer. See:
https://www.gov.pl/web/rodzina/rodzinny-kapital-opiekunczy-pytania-i-odpowiedzi

[39] https://www.zus.pl/baza-wiedzy/rodzinny-kapital-opiekunczy

[40] Exchange rate 1 € = PLN 4,3 based on the Narodowy Bank Polski (Polish National Bank).

[41] Ministry of Family, Labour and Social Policy, 2024c.

3.4. Parental supplementary benefit - "Mama 4+" program

This benefit is a special non-contributory benefit, financed from the state budget, intended to provide income to people who have given up employment or have not taken up employment due to raising children in large families, and for this reason, they have not acquired the right to a pension or their pension is lower than the minimum pension. It is intended for parents who have raised at least four children, and when retired, they are not entitled to benefits even at the minimum level. This benefit provides these persons with basic means of living. This benefit may be granted to a mother who gave birth and raised or brought up at least four children, and in the event of the death of the child's mother or the mother abandoning the children or cessation of raising them for a long time, to the father who raised at least four children[42].

4. Social protection of parents with young children

Generally, the family is at the centre of the social policy of the government. It is the main potential necessary for the development of the country. That is why the Ministry undertakes numerous activities in the field of state policy for children and families[43].

In Poland, the following forms of care for children under the age of 3 are laid down in social policy regulations:[44]

1. Nursery
2. Kids' club
3. Daycare provider
4. Nanny

Parents are entitled to apply for supplementary financing which reduces for them the cost of the fee for a child's stay in a nursery, children's club or day caretaker. The subsidy is available to parents for a child attending a nursery, a children's club or is under the care of a day care provider and who does not benefit from the 'Family Care Capital'[45] program. The subsidy is transferred to the bank account of the entity running a nursery, children's club, employing a day care provider or to the bank account of a self-employed day care provider, intended to reduce the parent's fee for the child's stay[46].

[42] Ministry of Family, Labour and Social Policy, 2024d, Mama 4+ program, available at: https://www.gov.pl/web/rodzina/program-mama-4-krok-po-kroku and https://www.gov.pl/web/rodzina/mama-4-plus-rodzicielskie-swiadczenie-uzupelniajace

[43] Cf. https://www.gov.pl/web/rodzina/co-robimy-wsparcie-dla-rodzin-z-dziecmi

[44] Regulated by the "Act on care for children under the age of 3" published on of 4th February 2011. Available at: https://www.gov.pl/web/family/care-for-children-under-the-age-of-3

[45] Cf. https://www.zus.pl/baza-wiedzy/rodzinny-kapital-opiekunczy

[46] Cf. https://www.gov.pl/web/rodzina/dofinansowanie-pobytu-w-zlobku

There are strict standards for the care of children up to 3 years of age which are defined in the Act on care for children under the age of 3, including

1. working with a child;
2. children's safety;
3. organization of work, development and safety of staff employed in a nursery or children's club or a day care provider, respectively;
4. monitoring and evaluation;
5. cooperation of persons providing care with parents[47].

In Poland the following policies are available in the field of social protection:

"Family 800+" ("Rodzina 800+") program

The program (initially introduced as "Family 500+" in 2016) is dedicated to support families in compensating the expenses related to raising a child, including caring for the child and meeting his or her life needs. Families with children are entitled to this benefit for each child up to the age of 18. From 1 January 2024, the amount of the parental benefit has been increased from € 116 to € 186 per month per child[48].

"Good Start" („Dobry Start") program

This program is an investment into the education and human capital of Polish children and offers € 70 of one-time support for all pupils starting the school year. Families receive the benefit regardless of their income and it is granted once a year for a child attending school until the child turns 20. In case of disability of the child studying at school the benefit is available until the child turns 24[49].

"Toddler+" program

The „Toddler+" ("Maluch+") program – initiated in 2011 – supports the creation and development of care institutions for children up to 3 years of age, such as nurseries, children's clubs and day care providers. The recipients of the funding may receive financing for the creation and operation of care places. The latest version of the program will cover the years 2022-2029[50].

Large Family Card (KDR)

This is a system of discounts and additional entitlements for numerous families with three kids and more (3+). The Large Family Card ("Karta Dużej Rodziny") – initiated in 2014 – operates both in public institutions and private companies. Families – participants of the program – have the opportunity to use cheaper offers from entities

[47] Cf. https://www.gov.pl/web/rodzina/standardy-opieki-sprawowanej-nad-dziecmi-w-wieku-do-lat-3

[48] Cf. https://www.gov.pl/web/rodzina/rodzina-500-plus

[49] Cf. https://www.gov.pl/web/rodzina/dobry-start

[50] Cf. https://www.gov.pl/web/rodzina/wsparcie-program-maluch

including: food, fuel, public transport, banking, services and recreational industries. KDR supports the budgets of large families and facilitates access to various goods and services[51].

Family benefits

These benefits include family allowance and supplements to family allowance, care benefits (care allowance, care benefit), one-off allowance for the birth of a child (so-called "cradle" ("becikowe") baby allowance), parental benefit, the right to which is acquired in the manner specified in the Act of 28 November 2003 on family benefits[52].

A parent entitled to family allowance (depending on, among other things, on the income criterion) may apply for the following supplements:

- Child birth allowance
- Child care allowance during parental leave
- Allowance for raising a child alone
- Allowance for raising a child in a large family
- Allowance for education and rehabilitation of a disabled child
- Allowance for the child's studies at school outside the place of residence
- Allowance for the beginning of the school year

Alimony fund

Benefits from the alimony fund are granted under the conditions specified in the Act of 7 September 2007 on assistance to persons entitled to alimony. The fund ensures material support to persons entitled to alimony who do not receive it due to the ineffectiveness of the execution process. This support is provided by granting benefits from the alimony fund to people who meet statutory criteria (e.g. income criterion)[53].

Support for a family experiencing difficulties in fulfilling care and educational functions

A family experiencing difficulties in fulfilling care and educational functions is provided with support by the local government unit. The support for the family can be offered through the activities of institutions and entities acting for the child and family, day care centres or supporting families. The actions provided by local authorities may be oriented towards strengthening the role and functions of the family, developing care and upbringing skills, increasing awareness of family planning and functioning, assisting in family integration, counteracting marginalisation and social degradation of the family and striving for family reintegration[54].

[51] Cf. https://www.gov.pl/web/rodzina/karta-duzej-rodziny-ogolne

[52] Cf. https://www.gov.pl/web/rodzina/rodzaje-i-wysokosc-swiadczen-rodzinnych-kryteria-uzyskania

[53] Cf. https://www.gov.pl/web/rodzina/wiadczenia-z-funduszu-alimentacyjnego

[54] Government of Poland, available at:
https://www.gov.pl/web/rodzina/wsparcie-rodziny-przezywajacej-trudnosci-w-wypelnianiu-funkcji-opiekunczo-wychowawczych-podstawowe-informacje

5. Early childhood education and childcare systems

Early childhood education, partly organised in childcare institutions, is an important area for preparing young generations to function in social groups and assume different social roles. It creates conditions for children's development and their activity in family and institutional environment, it supports satisfying their basic needs, through early interventions it reduces or eliminates risk factors and equalises development/ educational opportunities and strengthens the child's resources[55].

The early childhood education and childcare system in Poland is not uniform. It consists of two subsystems: the care system supervised by the Ministry of Family, Labour and Social Policy and the education system subordinated to the Ministry of National Education. Early care and education in Poland is divided into two stages:
1. for children aged 0-3 in a nursery, and from 2011 also in a children's club (in-centre care), and care may also be provided by day carers and nannies (home care),
2. for children aged 3-6/7 years in kindergarten, in kindergarten sections in primary schools and other forms of pre-school education, i.e. pre-school education complex and pre-school centres (care only in the facility).

Care in the nursery, as well as by day carers and nannies, is provided to children from the age of 20 weeks, and in the children's club to children from the age of 1 year. Preschool education is available to children from the beginning of the school year in the calendar year in which the child turns 3, until the end of the school year in the calendar year in which the child turns 7. In particularly justified cases, children over 2.5 years of age may also benefit from preschool education. According to the Act of 14 December 2016, Education Law, a child aged 6 is obliged to undergo one year of pre-school preparation. Children aged 3 and older have the right to pre-school education guaranteed by law[56]. The right to a place in kindergarten is available to all willing 4- and 5-year-olds (from 2017 also to 3-year-olds). Actual legal regulations, along with the increasing number of available places in institutions and the decreasing number of children in different age groups, promote the gradual dissemination of pre-school education.

According to the SDG Report by GUS, in Poland, parents are increasingly choosing to use available forms of institutional care for young children. In 2023, 36% of children aged 1-2 years received care other than that provided by their immediate family (compared to only 4% in 2011). A significantly higher percentage of children in

[55] M. Czub, A.I. Brzezińska, T. Czub, K. Appelt, *Wczesna edukacja i opieka nad dzieckiem jako wyzwanie dla polityki społecznej i oświatowej* (*Early childhood education and care as a challenge for social and educational policy*) „Polityka Społeczna", nr 1/2012, p. 21.

[56] *Polska na drodze zrównoważonego rozwoju Raport 2020* (*Poland on the path to sustainable development Report 2020*)
https://eurydice.eacea.ec.europa.eu/pl/national-education-systems/poland/wczesna-edukacja-i-opieka-ecec

institutional care are in cities than in rural areas; in 2023, over half of children in this age group in cities were in institutional care, compared to 15% in rural areas. Fewer and fewer women are choosing not to return to work after giving birth; their number per 10,000 women fell from 48 in 2010 to 31 in 2023. Simultaneously, the employment rate for women with a youngest child under 5 years of age increased during this period (from 66% in 2010 to 74% in 2023)[57].

According to data from 2020, 93% of children over 4 years of age are covered (slightly less than the EU average), while in 2010 it was 76%. The participation of the youngest eligible group of children in preschool education, aged 3, also increased significantly. Taking into account this group, the level of participation in early education and care among children below the starting age of compulsory schooling is currently 88% (in 2013 it was 76%), compared to 93% in the EU[58].

Tasks related to the care of children up to 3 years of age fall within the local community's own responsibility. In Poland, the legislation does not guarantee a place in an institution for children under 3 years of age. The aim of the changes introduced in 2011 in the care of children up to 3 years of age was to create conditions for the development of various forms of care and to improve their standards[59]. Since 2011, the government program "Maluch" ("Toddler", later renamed to "Toddler+") has been implemented in the country to provide financial support to entities willing to create institutional forms of care for children up to 3 years of age (nurseries, children's clubs and day care providers)[60].

During recent years, the number of small childcare facilities has significantly increased, although the COVID-19 pandemic has halted this growth. Interest in institutional care for children up to 3 years of age has decreased. That is why in 2021, the number of children staying in nurseries, children's clubs and nursery departments decreased by 58.6 thousand compared to 2020. In 2021, there were 170.5 thousand kids in care facilities for children under 3 years of age, including 1.3 thousand disabled children. Similarly, compared to 2020, in 2021 the number of early care facilities increased by only 6%. For example, in 2021, nurseries run by municipalities accounted for only 25% of all nurseries (an increase of 1 percentage point compared to 2020). The rest are private nurseries (75%). Municipalities also run only 17% of all children's clubs (an

[57] GUS, *Raport SDG 2024: Dzieci w kontekście zrównoważonego rozwoju* [*SDG 2024 Report: Children in the Context of Sustainable Development*], https://raportsdg.stat.gov.pl/2024/Raport_SDG_2024.pdf, p.19.

[58] Cf. https://raportsdg.stat.gov.pl/2020/cel4.html

[59] Eurydice, available at:
https://eurydice.eacea.ec.europa.eu/pl/national-education-systems/poland/dostepnosc-placowek

[60] E. Subocz, Wczesna edukacja i opieka nad dzieckiem jako wyzwanie dla polityki społecznej z perspektywy Unii Europejskiej (Early childhood education and care as a challenge for social policy from the perspective of the European Union), "Problemy Wczesnej Edukacji" / "Issues in Early Education" 1 (44) / 2019, available at: https://doi.org/10.26881/pwe.2019.44.10, p. 110.

increase of 4 percentage points compared to 2020) – 83% are non-public institutions[61]. In the end of 2022, 177.1 thousand children used nurseries and children's clubs – the vast majority of whom (almost 92%) were in nurseries[62].

Regarding institutional care for small children, it is useful to present some findings from the report published in 2023 by the Polish Generations Institute (Instytut Pokolenia). According to the report: "many parents decide to use institutional care for small children after the end of paid parental leave. In 2022, nationwide, 18% of children under three were covered by such care. Therefore, we asked parents about the advantages and disadvantages of their children's stay in the nursery. The most frequently mentioned advantages were the ability for both parents to work (49.0%), and in terms of benefits for the child's development – the opportunity to learn independence (43.6%) and development of communication skills (42.6%). However, the most common disadvantages were the need to take care of a sick child, who, among peers are more likely to get sick (57.7%), high costs of nursery fees (53%) and the stress of the child who experiences separation from his or her parents (45.9%)."[63]

In the 2022/2023 school year, the popularisation rate of preschool education for children aged 3-5 was 90.2%, and it was an increase by 0.5% compared to 2021/2022. In 2022, the number of children receiving pre-school education increased to 1,533.4 thousand, compared to 2021, an increase of 61.7 thousand children. When it comes to the difference between cities and villages, more children aged 3-5 years old (97.8%) attend kindergartens in cities than in rural areas (80.8%). The difference – and relatively low rate of popularisation of pre-school education in rural areas is due to, among others, the fact that some children living in rural areas commute and use pre-school education facilities located in cities[64].

6. Future challenges

In Poland, there are still some challenges regarding combining parenthood and labour market activity. In the context of society, it seems to be some kind of balancing between being active on the labour market and increasing current GDP, or devoting time and energy to parenting which is necessary to create human and social capital for the next generations – and future GDP – in the long run. Even though it seems obvious that it is important to take care of both, as a society, Poles seem to value current labour market activity more, which is visible in the alarming family and fertility statistics.

[61] Eurydice, available at: https://eurydice.eacea.ec.europa.eu/pl/national-education-systems/poland/dostepnosc-placowek

[62] GUS, *Żłobki i kluby dziecięce w 2022 r.* [*Nurseries and children's clubs in 2022*], available at: https://stat.gov.pl/files/gfx/portalinformacyjny/pl/defaultaktualnosci/6000/3/10/1/zlobki_i_kluby_dzieciece_w_2022_r..pdf (published 31.05.2023), p. 2.

[63] Instytut Pokolenia (Generations Institute), *Rodzice wobec wyzwań opieki nad małymi dziećmi* [*Parents facing the challenges of caring for young children*], Warszawa 2023, p. 12.

[64] Ibidem.

There seems to be a lack of balance and justice within society, which means that the burden of costs seems to be bigger for parents than for those who do not choose family and parenthood[65]. That is why there is space for improvement within the tax system, pension solutions and other areas of social and economic policy, even though, since 2016, some important improvements and programs have been implemented.

One of the challenges is sharing care and work within households. According to a report which analyses the problems of combining family life with labour market activity, there is an unequal division of responsibilities between mothers and fathers: "In as much as 68% of families with small children aged 1-9, where both parents work, it is mothers who perform the majority of caregiving responsibilities. The opposite situation, in which mainly the working father takes care of the children, concerns only 11% of families. Similar proportions occur in relation to all household chores and care – in 55% of families,the mother performs the majority of the work, while in only 10% the father does. Similarly, when a child is sick, it is primarily those who work who stay with him – mothers (50%), and much less often fathers (14%)"[66].

Other challenges in Poland cover: flexible forms of work for mothers with childcare responsibilities, and employer-provided facilities for mothers and fathers, parents' expectations of employers regarding the reconciliation of professional work with motherhood, employers' behaviour towards women during pregnancy and motherhood, women's dilemmas related to returning to work after giving birth, consequences of an imbalance between work and motherhood, professional development of women and men during motherhood, factors facilitating or hindering parent's professional development during parenthood, discrimination against parents by employers.

When it comes to stakeholders and areas of intervention, which can be identified in terms of positive impact on the labour market participation of parents of young children, it is certainly the state as the source of regulations, local governments, employers, as well as civil society organisations.

As a summary of the current situation, opinions and preferences of parents in Poland, it is useful to refer to another report dealing with the problems and challenges parents are facing when caring for young children. According to the report, "the issue of caring for small children has always been a challenge for parents, but especially today, with the low fertility rate and all its causes, the concern for creating favourable conditions for families to care for and raise children seems to be particularly important. As never

[65] M.A. Michalski, *Family policy and social justice – or why invest in human capital?*, "Scientific Papers of Silesian University of Technology. Organization and Management Series", no. 164, 2022, p. 299-309.

[66] Polski Instytut Ekonomiczny (Polish Economic Institute), Komunikat prasowy nt. raportu *Praca a dom. Wyzwania dla rodziców i ich konsekwencje* [Press release of the report *Work and home. Challenges for parents and their consequences*], available at
https://pie.net.pl/38-proc-matek-dzieci-w-wieku-1-3-lata-jest-nieaktywnych-zawodowo/, p. 1.

before, achieving the reproductive goals of women and men encounters many obstacles, so it is important to look for space and propose solutions that will help achieve these goals. One of such spaces is support for families – institutional, social and familial – in caring for children, especially those up to three years of age."[67]

The conclusions drawn from the conducted research include that the surveyed parents:
- would prefer, particularly mothers, to continue providing direct care for their young children until the age of two or, less frequently, three, which exceeds the duration of currently available paid childcare leave;- in the first place, they would like grandparents to take care of children up to the age of three, in the second place, they would choose institutional care – public nurseries;
- declare that returning to work after maternity or parental leave is very rarely connected with a loss of job or demotion, which gives an increasing sense of security when planning children;
- state that women give up work to care for children much more often than men;
- the majority, women and men equally, declare their readiness to resign from work in situations where the husband/partner or wife/partner provides support for the family, but women are more often ready to agree to reduced working hours;
- most of them are satisfied with the involvement of grandparents in the care of their grandchildren, and their insufficient involvement in the care of their children is explained by objective circumstances, such as long distances from the grandparents, employment obligations or poor health.

Generally speaking, we see many different challenges in Poland in this area, but besides legal or institutional solutions there also seem to be important cultural issues which should be addressed. The first one of them is the perspective accepted in social and economic policy: too much stress seems to be put on equality and not enough on justice. This leads us to the second issue, which is connected to a deficit in valuing care and household work performed every day by parents, which most often is invisible for economists and for the public opinion, yet produces goods and services amounting to even 50% of the GDP. The third issue is that the social and cultural image and perception of parenthood do not seem to reflect the real and full picture. The way parenthood is often perceived is too often one-sided – reduced to tiredness, stress and busyness, and still not enough is being said and discussed about the positive aspects and impacts of parenthood – not only on children – but on society, and parents themselves. In the report of the Institute for Family and Society Studies, based on a survey of Polish parents, one can find a lot of interesting findings, such as these:
- the vast majority of respondents say that parenthood is a positive experience for them;
- children make life better. The arrival of a child has the most positive impact on improving the lives of respondents in terms of the sense of meaning in life (70%) and life in general (69%), only 3% notice deterioration;

[67] Instytut Pokolenia, *Rodzice wobec wyzwań opieki nad małymi dziećmi* (*Parents facing the challenges of caring for young children*), Warszawa 2023, s. 29.

- children give their parents a lot of joy. 83% of surveyed parents spend a nice time with their children. Only 2% expressed the opposite opinion;
- parenting does not cause poverty. Most parents claim that parenthood does not worsen their financial situation – 53% of respondents say that it had no impact on their wealth, and 23% declare that this impact was positive. Only 21% said the impact was "somewhat negative" and 2% said it was "definitely negative." The older the parents are, the more often they claim that the birth of the child had no impact on their economic situation;
- parenthood does not harm the career. 82% of respondents state that parenthood does not have a negative impact on their career development. With age, parents increasingly state that the appearance of a child had no impact on their career – from 38% of parents aged 18-24, through 54% for the group 25-24, over 60% in the group 35-44 and 45-54 years, up to 70% for those aged 55 and over;
- parenthood does not negatively affect health. The vast majority of parents (90%) claim that the arrival of a child has not changed their health in any way, and has even improved it;
- parenthood increases the sense of security for the future. This is indicated by the high degree of acceptance (over 70% of positive responses) of the statement relating to parents' sense of security – "parenthood makes me look into the future with a greater sense of security";
- parents experience personal development through children – according to 84% of respondents, parenting promotes the development of competences and skills in organising time, distinguishing important from unimportant matters (81%), greater sensitivity to the needs of other people (79%), and better financial management (79%)[68].

It seems that exploring the topic of parenthood and its different dimensions – including the relationship between having children and being active on the labour market – combined with the dissemination of good quality knowledge, should be seen as an urgent and necessary task to be done in order to create the best possible climate, regulations and solutions which would foster win-win synergy between parenthood and professional activity. The labour market is important, but it has no future without the fundamental work and effort that parents perform every day within their families.

The recent drastic decline in the birth rate observed in Poland indicates, among other things, the need for effective solutions that, on the one hand, support the reconciliation of family life with professional activity, and, on the other hand, recognize the role of unpaid housework[69] and care work – not recorded by economic statistics – for the potential of the entire labour market and economy in the long term.

[68] Cf. D. Gizicka, M. A. Michalski, K. Szwarc, *Plusy Rodzicielstwa. Doświadczenia polskich rodziców* [*Advantages of Parenthood. Experiences of Polish Parents*], Instytut Wiedzy o Rodzinie i Społeczeństwie (Institute for Family and Society Studies), Poznań 2024, available at: https://iworis.pl/raport-plusy-rodzicielstwa

[69] M.A. Michalski (ed.), *Nieodpłatna Praca Domowa – Niedostrzegane Źródło Dobrobytu i Rozwoju Społeczno-Gospodarczego* [*Unpaid Domestic Work – An Unseen Source of Prosperity and Socio-Economic Development*], , 2nd edition, Fundacja Edukacja do Wartości, Warszawa 2023, https://collegiumintermarium.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/10/Raport-Nieodplatna-praca-domowa-2023.pdf

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Promoting labour market participation of parents with young children – the labour market challenges for families with young children, especially for parents who wish to return to work in Portugal

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Abstract

This report analyses the Portuguese regime *vis-à-vis* the reconciliation of parenthood with employees' participation in the labour market, focusing specifically on measures aimed at facilitating the return to work of parents of young children. It provides an overview of the most recent political discourse on this domain, the general characteristics of the Portuguese social and labour fabric, as well as the labour and social security framework and the available childcare options. As it is explained, despite recent advances and the tools that have been created towards this end, there are still several difficulties regarding such reconciliation, which can be traced to the persisting sociological gender inequalities present to this day within the Portuguese society.

1. General context

In Portugal, work-life balance is a constitutional imperative (Articles 59-1-b, 67-2-h, and 68[2] of the Portuguese Constitution). Consequently, the national legal order enshrines several mechanisms to promote this goal (as well as more gender equality *regarding* childcare), some of which were recently tuned into the latest reform of the Portuguese Labour Code (PLC) by Act No. 13/2023, of 3 April 2023, known as the 'Decent work agenda'. The transposition of Directive 2019/1158 on work-life balance for parents and carers began with Act No. 83/2021 (which introduced Article 166-A regarding the right to telework), but it was concluded only with Act No. 13/2023[3]. A significant part of the rights enshrined in the Directive were already present in the Portuguese legislation which, in several domains, goes beyond the EU minimum legal standards

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[2] Portugal has also ratified the ILO Convention No. 183, on Maternity Protection (2000), through Resolution of the Assembly of the Republic No. 108/2012, of 8 June, and Decree of the President of the Republic No. 137/2012, of 8 August.

[3] Article 1-b of Act No. 13/2023, of 3 April.

(namely regarding parental leaves and protection against contract termination)[4]. After the legislative elections of 18 May 2025, the XXV Constitutional Government took office and in July 2025 a draft reform of labour legislation, designated as "Work XXI" (*Trabalho XXI*), was presented. The draft legislation was until very recently under discussion with the social partners on the Standing Committee for Social Dialogue *(Comissão Permanente de Concertação Social) but no agreement was reached.* Among other issues, the envisaged amendments regarding parenthood protection and work-life balance have caused social opposition, since it might be considered that they reduce the level of protection given by the previous 2023 reform[5].

Unsurprisingly, this matter remains present in the recent political discourse, which is visible not only by the abovementioned draft reform and the subsequent social debate, but also by the latest measures concerning nurseries and kindergartens. Despite some recovery[6] (heavily influenced by the waves of immigration), Portugal still has low birth rates and an ageing population (in 2024, there was an average of 1.44 births per woman)[7]. This means that, aside from the constitutional requirement, there are also economic and demographic incentives regarding action in this domain.

Although it would be simplistic to blame work-life difficulties and childcare challenges as the sole drivers of the low Portuguese fertility rates, their impact should not be underestimated[8]. The instability and the persisting inequalities present in the Portuguese labour market are also highly relevant. Furthermore, there are persistent gender inequalities in terms of culture and society. According to a 2019 Statistics Portugal survey, women are the ones predominantly responsible for domestic tasks, such as laundry (77.8%), food preparation (65%), and cleaning (59.3%)[9]. This means that while Portugal presents the highest rate of female employment in southern Europe[10], care responsibilities within the family are shared in an imbalanced way between male and female employees and the traditional gender role model remains prevalent.

[4] Catarina Carvalho (2023), p. 199.

[5] *V.g.*, https://eco.sapo.pt/2026/01/15/afinal-o-que-pode-mesmo-mudar-para-os-pais-que-trabalham-da-amamentacao-a-jornada-continua/.

[6] Available at: https://pt.euronews.com/2026/01/15/portugal-registou-em-2025-o-maior-numero-de-nascimentos-da-ultima-decada.

[7] See https://www.pordata.pt/pt/estatisticas/populacao/nascimentos-e-fecundidade/indice-sintetico-de-fecundidade.

[8] A study has ascertained that the barriers faced by younger employees, regarding stable employment, as well as the gender pay gap are among the main reasons behind this phenomenon – Januário *et al.* (2023), p. 67.

[9] Statistics Portugal, Inquérito à Fecundidade – 2019. Available at: https://www.ine.pt/xportal/xmain?xpid=INE&xpgid=ine_publicacoes&PUBLICACOESpub_boui=6358344&PUBLICACOESmodo=2. In Portugal, as of 2016, women invested 55 minutes more in care work and 1 hour and 12 minutes more in household chores, on a daily basis. The average total unpaid time, on a daily basis, for women stood at 4 hours and 23 minutes, while for men it stood at 2 hours and 38 minutes; in sum, 1 hour and 45 minutes less – see Heloísa Perista *et al.* (2016), p. 61. A new survey on the use of time of men and women is going to be launched.

[10] Eurofound (2015), p. 34.

2. Labour market situation

Despite its growing attraction regarding migrants, the Portuguese labour market presents many imbalances and inequalities. Namely, there are gender inequalities, visible in several indicators, and despite their decreasing trend, unemployment rates are always higher when it comes to women (6.9% in 2023, against 6.1% for men)[11]. The rates of employment are higher among men (60.3%, against 52.7% for women in 2023)[12], even though Portugal boasts a high participation of women in the labour market. Still, it should be noticed that this high labour force participation rate for women might be explained by the often-practised low salaries[13]. And even though Portugal presents low rates of part-time work (in comparison with other EU countries), the number of women in this kind of contractual arrangement is double that of men (10% against 4.5% in 2023)[14]. Part-time work tends to position women in peripheral labour-market segments, perpetuating segregation. Furthermore, while women are in the majority among unskilled workers (76.2%), personal, protection and security service workers and salespeople (72.1%), and administrative staff (63.2%), they only represent 36.9% of members of legislative and executive organs, administrators, and directors[15]. Despite efforts to reduce the gender pay gap, median and basic remuneration levels are higher for men, irrespective of qualification levels and seniority, and across professional groups[16]. Persistent vertical and horizontal occupational gender segregation has, in fact, been highlighted by the Committee of Experts on the Application of Conventions and Recommendations (ILO)[17].

This scenario is aggravated by cultural and social dynamics at play that create a scenario in which most women still sustain the lion's share of household work, despite their full participation in the labour market[18]. This does not increase the risk of psychosocial issues such as burnout and stress, but it may also create a boomerang effect – leading to a lower productivity of women, since they might refuse to invest either time or economic resources in their own professional development if they realize that the financial return will not be compensatory[19].

Another feature of the Portuguese labour market is its high level of segmentation[20]. This leads to a separation between stable and precarious workers, since while the

[11] Comissão para a cidadania e igualdade de género (2024), p. 28.

[12] Comissão para a cidadania e igualdade de género (2024), p. 31.

[13] Eurofound (2015), p. 34.

[14] Comissão para a cidadania e igualdade de género (2024), p. 32.

[15] Comissão para a cidadania e igualdade de género (2024), p. 37.

[16] Comissão para a cidadania e igualdade de género (2024), p. 44.

[17] See, *v.g.*, Direct Request (CEACR) – adopted in 2021, published at the 110th ILC session (2022). Available at: https://normlex.ilo.org/dyn/nrmlx_en/f?p=NORMLEXPUB:13101:0::NO:
:P13101_COMMENT_ID:4120592.

[18] The pandemic was quite telling regarding this reality – see Catarina Carvalho (2022), pp. 21-22.

[19] Milena Rouxinol/Ana Teresa Ribeiro (2022), pp. 137-138.

[20] Organização Internacional do Trabalho (ILO) (2018), p. 20.

former will be able to fully have access to the protection conferred by labour law, while the latter will not, despite often having employment contracts. For instance, when employees are subject to fixed term contracts, this places them in a precarious position and prevents them from invoking and enjoying their employment rights due to the fear of nonrenewal of the contract[21]. Temporary and precarious contracts affect both sexes almost equally but concentrate among the youth and within certain occupations where women are overrepresented (Eurostat, 2024). This contributes to earnings volatility and weaker career progression.

The phenomenon of in-work poverty also deserves attention. In fact, 9.2% of Portuguese workers were at risk of poverty in 2024[22]. This risk was three times higher for workers with precarious contracts than for those with permanent contracts)[23]. INE (ICOR)[24] data revealed that in 2024, women faced a higher at-risk-of-poverty rate (after social transfers) than men (16.3% compared to 14.5%), as well as a higher in-work poverty rate (9%, compared to 8.2%). The same survey revealed that, although the overall risk of poverty declined for most household types from 2023 to 2024, it increased for single-adult households with at least one child and for two-adult households with two children. In fact, single-adult households with at least one child are the group with the highest propensity for poverty and, according to the latest population census (2021), around 85% of these households were headed by women, which underscores the strong gender dimension of income inequality and poverty.

Another source of inequality in the Portuguese labour market stems from the difficulties faced by younger workers. Younger workers are subject to higher unemployment rates (in 2024, 21.6% of persons aged 16 and 24 were unemployed)[25] and are often relegated to precarious employment contracts and low salaries (despite possessing, in many cases, high qualifications) – a scenario that has turned many younger persons towards emigration[26].

Finally, regarding the participation of parents of children in the labour market, according to Eurostat[27], overall, in the EU (in 2020), 72.2% of women and 90.0% of men with children aged 25-54 were employed. For the same age category, but for

[21] Ilona Kovács/Maria da Conceição Cerdeira (2021), Desigualdades no mercado de trabalho: segmentação, polarização e precarização. Available at: https://www.publico.pt/2021/07/29/opiniao/opiniao/desigualdades-mercado-trabalho-segmentacao-polarizacao-precarizacao-1972162.

[22] See Eurostat (2025), p. 42.

[23] Susana Peralta *et al.* (2023), p. 4.

[24] See https://www.ine.pt/xportal/xmain?xpid=INE&xpgid=ine_pesquisa&frm_accao=PESQUISAR&frm_show_page_num=1&frm_modo_pesquisa=PESQUISA_SIMPLES&frm_texto=risco+de+pobreza&frm_modo_texto=MODO_TEXTO_ALL&frm_data_ini=&frm_data_fim=&frm_tema=QUALQUER_TEMA&frm_area=o_ine_area_Destaques&xlang=pt.

[25] Statistics Portugal, Estatísticas do Emprego. Available at: https://www.ine.pt/xportal/xmain?xpid=INE&xpgid=ine_destaques&DESTAQUESdest_boui=645506474&DESTAQUESmodo=2

[26] Margarida Rodrigues *et al.* (2022), pp. 11-14.

[27] EUROSTAT, available at: https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/web/products-eurostat-news/-/ddn-20210809-1.

people without children, the employment rate was higher for women (76.8%), than for men (80.9%). However, Portugal contradicts this trend, displaying the third highest share (83%) of employed women with children in the EU, after Slovenia (86.2%) and Sweden (83.5%)[28].

3. Labour law protection and employment incentives for parents with young children

3.1. Legal regime

The PLC[29] regulates several legal mechanisms that allow employees to be absent from work for reasons relating to work-life balance – such as leave and time off for various reasons (*dispensas, faltas*) – as well as flexible working arrangements[30], as illustrated below.

3.1.1. Leaves

A major amendment to the labour regime to protect parenthood took place in 2009, leading to the adoption of gender-neutral language. The idea was to promote the sharing of parental responsibilities through the creation of a common "initial parental leave" (*licença parental inicial*), which can be shared between the mother and the father (or their equivalents[31]), thus eliminating the previously titled "maternity leave", a designation that attributes the primal childcare role to women. Therefore, several types of leave concerning childbirth and care of young children are now called 'parental leave' (including maternity leave). However, this modification has led to some frequent confusion in the identification of the different national leaves, since their designation does not correspond to the EU one.

Initial parental leave is applicable to working mothers and fathers following the birth of a child. It consists of 120 or 150[32] consecutive days, which may be shared (in observance of the mother's initial exclusive parental leave, of 42 days)[33] (Articles 40-1 and 41-1). Both parents may enjoy this leave simultaneously between the 120

[28] In addition, the lowest gender gaps for people with children were found in Lithuania (6.8 pp), Slovenia (8.8 pp) and Portugal (9.3 pp). For people without children, Portugal (0.1 pp), Belgium (0.8 pp) and Germany (1.0 pp) recorded the lowest employment gender gaps – EUROSTAT, available at: https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/web/products-eurostat-news/-/ddn-20210809-1.

[29] All the provisions mentioned without the identification of the respective legal instrument, belong to the PLC. These provisions are also applicable to employees with a public employment relationship – see Article 4-1-f of Act No. 35/2015, of 20 June.

[30] Any discrimination stemming from the exercise of parental rights is forbidden – see Article 35-A.

[31] Not only parents and candidates for adoption benefit from the leaves and time-off rights, but also legal guardians and people who have legal or administrative guardianship and their spouses or common-law partners, as long as they live with the child (Article 64). Furthermore, such rights also benefit couples of the same sex (Article 33-A).

[32] The concrete amount depends on the employee's choice – see Catarina Carvalho (2023), p. 205.

[33] This leave is integrated in the initial parental leave, and its aim is to ensure the mother's physical and psychological recovery (hence its exclusive enjoyment by the mother).

and 150 days (Article 40-2). It will be increased[34] by 30 days if each of the parents takes a consecutive period of 30 days, or two periods of 15 consecutive days (Article 40-3) – to promote a shared enjoyment of the leave and a more equitable division of childcare[35]. Introduced in the 2009 PLC, it has had a significant impact as it is shown by the data: in 2009, only 10.1% of the fathers shared the leave[36]. This figure increased to 25% in 2011, to 32.3 % in 2015, to 47.5% in 2021, and to 49.6% in 2024[37]. In the cases enshrined in Articles 40-1 and 3, parents may cumulate the remaining days of leave with part-time work after enjoying the 120-day period (Article 40-4)[38].The previously mentioned draft bill sets out the maximum duration of the leave, but changes are foreseen regarding its nature: it is expected that the first 120 days of leave will be mandatory, unlike the current situation. Fathers also have a mandatory exclusive leave period of 28 days, which can be taken consecutively or in separate periods of at least seven days, within the 42 days following the child's birth. The compulsory nature of this mechanism can be considered a positive action to promote the role of fathers in the care of young children[39]. In addition, fathers will be entitled to a non-compulsory leave of seven days, consecutively or separately enjoyed, insofar its uptake occurs during the mother's exclusive initial parental leave (Article 43-2).

In the case of adoption[40] of a child under 15 years of age, the regime is similar to that of biological parenthood. Therefore, the applicants shall enjoy the previously analysed initial parental leave, as well as the father's exclusive leave (Articles 44-1 and 2).

Additionally, after taking the mentioned birth-related leave, parents (and their equivalents) may also take a complementary parental leave[41] (Article 51-1) to care for a child (biological or adopted) under six years of age[42]. This leave has five different modalities[43]:

[34] The initial leave can be extended in several situations, such as multiple births, premature birth with health complications for the child or in the case of the hospitalisation of the child.

[35] Catarina Carvalho (2023), p. 206.

[36] This percentage is considered in relation to the total leaves taken by women.

[37] Comissão para a Igualdade no Trabalho e no Emprego (2025), p. 92.

[38] This allows a softer return to work, preventing an abrupt interruption of the employee's caring responsibilities and facilitating their adjustment to their new and more demanding personal circumstances – see Catarina Carvalho (2023), p. 207 and Luísa Gonçalves (2023), p. 291.

[39] Júlio Gomes/Catarina Carvalho (2011), p. 25; Rosário Ramalho *et al.* (2015), p. 11. Seven days shall be enjoyed immediately after the birth (Article 43-1).

[40] This leave also applies to foster families (Article 44/14).

[41] This leave corresponds to the one enshrined in Article 5 of Directive 2019/1158.

[42] The Directive allowed this mechanism to reach the child's eighth birthday, and such solution would have been more in line with the promotion of parenthood and the sharing of parenting responsibilities – see Catarina Carvalho (2023), p. 209.

[43] Which meets the goal enshrined in Directive 2019/1158 of allowing flexible ways of enjoying this mechanism – see Catarina Carvalho (2023), p. 210.

- Extended parental leave, for three months (the national regime does not comply with Article 5 of the Work Life Balance Directive, since the standard complementary parental leave does not reach the four months imposed therein[44]);
- Part-time work for 12 months, with a daily working period equal to half of the comparable full-time situation;
- Part-time work for three months, with a daily working period equal to half of the full-time, insofar the leave is totally enjoyed by each of the working parents;
- Interspersed periods of extended parental leave and of part-time work, in which the total duration of the absence and the reduction of working time is equal to the working time periods of three months;
- And interspersed absences to work of equal duration to the working time periods of three months, as long as enshrined in collective agreements.

All of these modalities are personal and non-transferable and can be taken consecutively or in up to three interspersed periods (Article 51-2). Once this leave is exhausted, employees are entitled to unpaid leave to care a child, which can be taken either consecutively or interspersed, for up two years (Article 52-1). There is also a similar leave for the care of a disabled child, a child with a chronic disease or cancer, which may be taken for a period up to six months (renewable up to four years) (Article 53-1)[45].

3.1.2. Flexible working arrangements

Upon returning from parental leave, employees can request several changes to their working hours and/or patterns for the purpose of work life balance: reduced working hours, a flexible work schedule or telework.

Working parents (or their equivalents) with children up to 12 years of age or, irrespective of age, with disabilities or chronic disease, who live in the same household, are entitled to work part-time (Article 55-1). This right may be enjoyed by either parent, or by both, in consecutive periods, after the complementary parental leave (Article 55-2). And it may be renewed up to two years, or, in the case of a third child, up to three years, or, even still, in the case of a child with disability or chronic disease, up to four years (Article 55-4). Part-time work is subsidiary to the complementary parental leave, since it is one of the modalities of the latter, as mentioned above, and its regime is more favourable to the employee. Additionally, the request is only admissible if both parents are in professional employment[46].

An alternative to part-time work is the flexible working schedule, to which employees are entitled to under the same circumstances that allow them to request part-time work (Article 56). This means that employees will be able, within certain limits, to choose the hours in which their daily working period begins and ends (Article 56-2), as well as

[44] For further developments, see Catarina Carvalho (2023), pp. 202-203.

[45] It may be renewed up to six years when there is such need, attested by a medical report (Article 52-6). And this limit shall not be applicable to terminal cases, attested by a medical report (Article 52-7).

[46] Or, alternatively, if the other is barred or totally inhibited from exercising parental rights.

their rest days, according to some case law[47]. However, this situation may be eliminated by the draft bill to amend the PLC[48]. The only differences in relation to part-time work concern the elimination of some of its requirements: there is no maximum limit for the flexible working schedule besides the age of the child; the other parent may or may not have a professional activity. Both parents may also benefit from it simultaneously. The flexible working schedule is, however, more popular. It corresponds to 88.6% of the opinions (see below) demanded to the Commission for Equality in Labour and Employment (*Comissão para a Igualdade no Trabalho e no Emprego* – CITE), and is mostly used by women (in 2024, 1064 women requested it compared with 200 men)[49]. Given Portugal's lowest average salaries in the EU[50] and increasing cost of living, many employees do not request part time work[51], as the significant income loss would have severe negative effects on their households.

The employer can only refuse the employee's part-time or flexible working schedule request on the grounds of compelling operational reasons or on the impossibility of replacing the employee. Moreover, this justification must be considered valid by the entity in charge of promoting equal opportunities between men and women (the CITE). For this purpose, the employer wishing to refuse the request shall submit the procedure to the CITE and this entity must issue a written opinion. If the CITE does not agree with the refuse's motives, the employer must challenge the decision before the court in order to obtain a ruling recognizing the justification for the refusal of the employee's request (Article 57).

[47] There are several decisions of the Courts of Appeal in relation to flexible work schedule. The courts have been called upon to decide on what constitutes a flexible schedule for the purposes of Article 56. In particular, the question has arisen of how to exercise the right to flexible working hours when it comes to work in establishments that operate seven days a week, with rotating shifts, and with rotating weekly rest. Employees have requested flexible working hours on the grounds that their hours do not allow them to carry out parental responsibilities in relation to their minor children (such as picking them up from kindergarten and providing them with care at weekends). In their applications, employees indicate their desired hours (e.g. a fixed schedule from Monday to Friday with weekly rest on Saturday and Sunday), and sometimes this indication ends up preventing the employer from making any determination. Jurisprudence has not been unanimous in responding to this problem. Some courts have ruled that such requests do not qualify as flexible working hours, as they involve the employee imposing fixed start and end times on the employer (e.g., ECLI:PT:TRL:2021:423.20.9T8BRR.L1.4.44, judgment of 30 June 2021). Conversely, other decisions interpret these requests as permissible, emphasizing that the law views flexible working arrangements as those enabling work-family reconciliation for parents of children under 12, even if the proposed hours are fixed (e.g., ECLI:PT:TRP:2023:2649.22.1T8MAI.A.P1.1E, Judgment of 23 January 2023). Ultimately, the Supreme Court endorsed the second interpretation (e.g., ECLI:PT:STJ:2022:3425.19.4T8VLG.P1.S2.12, Judgment of 22 June 2022; ECLI:PT:STJ:2022:423.20.9T8BRR.L1.S1.AB, Judgement of 12 October 2022), a position likely to shape future appellate rulings. For further developments, see Joana Vicente (2023), pp. 7 ff.

[48] See See Catarina Carvalho, Joana Vicente e Luísa Gonçalves (2025).

[49] Comissão para a Igualdade no Trabalho e no Emprego (2025), p. 99.

[50] See https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/web/products-eurostat-news/w/ddn-20251112-1 (accessed on 21 January 2026). In fact, as of 2024, Portugal is positioned as the tenth country with the lowest annual average wage (€ 24.818 against the EU average of €39.800).

[51] According to the CITE's data, in 2024, were issued 46 opinions on this regard, 40 in relation to requesting women and only 6 to men. See Comissão para a Igualdade no Trabalho e no Emprego (2025), p. 99.

In addition, employees with children up to three years or, irrespective of age, with disability, chronic disease, or cancer, who live in the same household, have the right to telework[52], insofar it is compatible with the work performed and the employer possesses the necessary resources and means for that effect (Article 166-A-2). As pointed out by legal literature[53], it is not complicated for the employer to invoke that they cannot provide the necessary means to make that change possible in order to refuse it. This right may be extended up until when the child is eight years old, provided that both parents are able to telework, insofar both do it in successive periods of equal duration in a maximum reference period of 12 months[54]. This provision intents to promote a more balanced sharing of parental responsibilities[55]. In fact, despite recognizing that the growth in flexible working from home can improve work opportunities for women with care responsibilities, legislators should be aware that "these arrangements may also strengthen traditional gender roles in households, increasing women's unpaid care and housework if care services are not enhanced, and reducing their visibility and career perspectives in the labour market"[56]. These risks are confirmed by the recent '*Livro Branco*' produced under project "SGS3-D1 – PT-WORKLIFE-0035 – HomeWork – des/igualdades de género na conciliação de teletrabalho e coabitação"[57]. According to the data from the study, no gender differences were observed in the amount of time spent on paid work among people who are teleworking. However, gender differences were observed in the amount of time dedicated to household chores, childcare and careing for dependent adults, since women dedicate more time to these activities while men dedicate more time to leisure activities[58]. Additionally, more women choose to telework, especially for work-life balance, which entails risks of increased invisibility of female workers and the creation of additional barriers to their full professional development, thus contributing to the reinforcement of structural gender inequalities[59]. This concern is the reasoning behind the additional requirement demanding that, whenever both parents meet the conditions for teleworking, such right be exercised by both in successive periods of equal duration, increasing incentives for men to take up parental entitlements. Although this requirement is not mentioned in the Work Life Balance Directive, it seems to be in line with the aim of the Directive to promote gender equality and work-life balance.

[52] Catarina Carvalho (2022), pp. 19 and ff.

[53] Maria do Rosário Palma Ramalho (2018), p. 116.

[54] Or in the case of single parents or when it is established that only one of the parents gathers the necessary conditions for this kind of work (Article 166-A-3-a) and b)).

[55] See Catarina Carvalho (2023), p. 198.

[56] Manuela Samek Lodovici *et al.* (2021), p. 67.

[57] AAVV. (2024), p. 54.

[58] *Idem*, pp. 54-55.

[59] *Idem*, p. 94.

3.1.3. Time off

Following ILO Convention No. 183, working mothers who breastfeed are entitled to time off for that effect (while it lasts) (Article 47-1). The abovementioned draft reform of the PLC (*Trabalho XXI*) proposes limiting this right to children up to the age of two, which has been causing controversy[60]. When breastfeeding is not an option and both parents work, either of them or both are entitled to time off for nursing, until the child is one year old (Article 47-2). Time off for breastfeeding or nursing does not result in the loss of any rights and is considered as an effective provision of labour (Article 65-2). In addition, employees are entitled to time off work to provide unavoidable and indispensable assistance, in case of illness or accident, to a child under 12 years of age or, irrespective of age, to a child with a disability or chronic disease, up until 30 days per year or during the whole time of hospitalization (Article 49). Employees are also entitled up to 15 days off work per year to provide unavoidable and indispensable assistance, in case of illness or accident, to a child aged 12 or above (provided they belong to their household) (Article 49-2)[61].

3.1.4. Work exemptions

Employees who have recently given birth or who are breastfeeding have the right to be exempt from certain working regimes deemed to be more burdensome (adaptability, bank of hours, and concentrated schedule). This right shall also be applicable to parents who are nursing, when such regimes affect its regularity (Article 58-1 and 2). Furthermore, employees with children under 12 months of age are not obliged to work overtime. An employee who is breastfeeding is not, during this period, obliged to do overtime work when it is necessary for her health or that of the child (Article 59-2).

3.2. Collective bargaining

Regarding the scope of collective bargaining in this domain, Article 3-3-b) states that legal provisions on parenthood may only be derogated *in mellius*. In 2023, out of a total of 299 collective agreements, 101 (either new or revised) referred to work-life balance[62]. This figure has slightly increased in 2024 to 106 collective agreements out of 293[63]. There is a clear concern with working time, given the impact it has in this domain. While, in some subjects, collective agreements either repeat or refer to the legal regime, without innovating, in others they go beyond the legal regime, conferring

[60] E.g., https://www.publico.pt/2025/07/29/sociedade/noticia/governo-quer-limitar-licenca-amamentacao-verdadeiro-2142169#.

[61] These absences cannot be simultaneously enjoyed by both parents (Article 49-4). Furthermore, grandparents can avail themselves of this time off when the parents cannot (Article 50-3).

[62] Whereas, in 2022, there had been 86. See Centro de Relações Laborais (2024), p. 199. Available at: https://www.crlaborais.pt/documents/10182/502143/RNC_2023_18_10_2024/a8a6a526-ed7c-4c0d-b0b3-b59bdeaf9a43.

[63] Centro de Relações Laborais (2025), p. 194. Available at: www.crlaborais.pt/documents/10182/505360/RNC_2024/889dba36-2fea-49bd-9e0c-644f09ecf60a.

extra rights (namely monetary, such as birth allowances) or enshrining new regimes[64] (e.g., unpaid leave for up to one year after giving birth; time-off for up to two days each month, without loss of rights, within 12 months after birth; time-off on their children's birthday day).

4. Social protection of parents with young children

Decree-law (DL) No. 91/2009, of 9 April, enshrines the legal framework for the social security protection of parenthood, for both to employees and to independent workers[65] (Article 4-1 DL No. 91/2009)[66]. As noted by literature, this regime holds crucial importance regarding work-life balance. Firstly, a replacement income is vital to ensure the efficacy of the abovementioned rights (since they often lead to loss of the employee's salary). Furthermore, given that such balance presupposes the sharing of responsibilities, the social security system may prove to be an important tool towards the promotion of said goal[67].

Specifically aiming at the post-birth scenario, this Decree-law enshrines several benefits (Article 7-1 DL 91/2009):

- the parental allowance,
- the extended parental allowance,
- the adoption allowance,
- the allowance for assistance to a child,
- the allowance for assistance to a child with disability, chronic disease, or cancer.

The parental allowance encompasses four modalities (Article 11 DL No. 91/2009):

- the initial parental allowance,
- the mother's initial exclusive parental allowance,
- the initial parental allowance attributed to a parent in the case of inability of the other,
- the father's initial exclusive allowance.

The initial parental allowance is a benefit is provided during the periods encompassed in the (aforementioned) initial parental leave, enshrined in Article 40 of the PLC

[64] Centro de Relações Laborais (2024), pp. 203-205, and Centro de Relações Laborais (2025), pp. 202-203.

[65] In order to enjoy from these benefits, beneficiaries must present a record of six civil months of salaries, consecutive or interspersed. However, regarding the exclusive initial parental allowances (for the mother and the father), they must present a record of one month's salary, in the six months prior to the fact that determines the benefit – Article 25-1 and 2 DL 91/2009.

[66] Most of the employees with a public employment relationship prior to 1 January 2006 benefit from the regime provided for in DL No. 89/2009, of 9 April 2009.

[67] Luísa Gonçalves (2023), p. 287.

(Article 12 of DL No. 91/2009). However, the amounts vary. The daily amount of this allowance (Article 30-1 and 2 of DL No. 91/2009)[68]:

- in the case of the 120 days' initial parental leave, corresponds to 100% of the employee's salary;
- in the case of the 150 days' initial parental leave, corresponds to 80% of the employee's salary;
- in the case of the 150 days' initial parental leave, when both parents enjoy, at least, 30 consecutive days, or two periods of 15 consecutive days, corresponds to 100% of the employee's salary;
- in the case of the 180 days' initial parental allowance, when both parents enjoy, at least, 30 consecutive days, or two periods of 15 consecutive days, corresponds to 83% of the employee's salary;
- in the case of the 180 days' initial parental allowance, when the father enjoys, at least, a period of 60 consecutive days, or two periods of 30 consecutive days (from the total amount of 180 days, beyond the father's initial exclusive parental leave), corresponds to 90% of the employee's salary – the intent behind this regime is to promote the sharing of this leave by both parents and, consequently, more gender equality[69]; and
- when working parents cumulate the initial parental allowance with part-time work, corresponds to half of the previously analysed amounts.

In the draft bill to amend the PLC, further changes are foreseen regarding the conditions for extending the leave through sharing and incentives for sharing between parents. Parents will be able to take up to 180 days of subsidized leave with at a rate of 100%, as long as, in the last 60 days of the leave, 30 days are taken by the father. This option eliminates the incentives for sharing the mandatory parental leave period (120 days) and backtracks on encouraging each parent to take at least 60 days of the leave, which cannot be considered a positive evolution towards promoting gender equality in the labour market[70]. The mother's initial exclusive parental allowance is paid for 42 consecutive days after childbirth (which are integrated in the period of concession of the initial parental allowance) (Article 13 DL No. 91/2009). While the father's initial exclusive parental allowance is paid during the periods encompassed by the father's initial exclusive parental leave (Article 15 DL No. 91/2009). In both cases, the amounts correspond to 100% of the employee's salary (Article 31 DL No. 91/2009). There is also the allowance for adoption, which corresponds *mutatis mutandis* to the initial parental allowance, the father's initial exclusive parental allowance, and the extended parental allowance (Article 17-1 DL No. 91/2009).

[68] The salary reference for this effect is determined by the following formula: R/180. R represents the total amount of salaries pertaining to the first six civil months that precede the second month before the event that triggers the benefit – Article 28-1 DL No. 91/2009.

[69] Luísa Gonçalves (2023), pp. 292-293.

[70] See Catarina Carvalho, Joana Vicente e Luísa Gonçalves (2025).

Furthermore, it should be stressed that, until recently, the complementary parental allowance (Article 16 DL No. 91/2009) was only awarded in situations of extended parental leave for three months, and even then, only if the leave was taken immediately after the initial parental leave or the other parent's additional parental leave. This allowance would not be provided when the leave was not taken at such chronological moments, or to those who opted for a part-time work leave. Furthermore, the rate was only of 25%.

This panorama was changed with the regulation of Act No. 13/2023 (which, as previously noted, transposed Directive 2019/1158 into the Portuguese legislation), operated by DL No. 53/2023 of 5 July 2023[71] which made the necessary adjustments to fully implement the Directive within in the scope of the social security system. Consequently, for cases of extended parental leave, the rate is now variable rate depending on the uptake modality. The rate is 30% if only one parent takes the leave, or even if both parents take it, but not in full (Article 33-1 DL No. 91/2009). However,it increases to 40% if each parent takes the entire extended parental leave (Article 33-2 DL No. 91/2009). On the other hand, if the complementary parental leave is taken as part-time work for three months, with a working time period equal to half the full-time period, provided that the leave is taken in full by each parent (Article 51 PLC), the employees will be entitled to social benefits with a 20% replacement rate (Article 33-3 DL No. 91/2009), unlike what happens with the 12 months part-time arrangement, which lacks any social benefit[72]. This solution aims to promote the sharing of parental responsibilities and achieve a better work-life balance. Once the enjoyment of the part-time additional parental leave is accompanied by social benefits, there is an impetus towards sharing parental responsibilities, since the enjoyment of this type of leave implies its use, in full, by both parents[73]. Additionally, the option for interspersed periods of extended parental leave and part-time work also entitles parents with a social benefit (with a 30% replacement rate).

Articles 5 and 8(3) of Directive 2019/1158 determine that each employee is entitled to four months of parental leave, at least two of which cannot be transferred to the other parent. The payment or allowance for this (non-transferable) period must be set in a way as to facilitate the take-up of parental leave by both parents. However, it is doubtful that the rate of 30%, or even 40%, in the Portuguese reality, is considered enough to satisfy that purpose[74], which may raise problems of compliance with the Directive.

In turn, the allowance for assistance to a child is granted when there is an impediment to the performance of work deriving from the need to provide unavoidable and indispensable assistance to a child, in the cases where this allows for time off work

[71] DL No. 53/2023, of 5 July 2023, came into force on 6 July 2023 but took effect on 1 May 2023.

[72] The difference between these modalities can only be understood when examined in conjunction with the social protection regime introduced by DL No. 53/2023.

[73] Luísa Gonçalves (2023), p. 289.

[74] Luísa Gonçalves (2023), p. 294.

to provide assistance to a child (Article 49 PLC)[75]. In this case, the amount of the allowance corresponds to 100% of the employee's salary (Article 35 DL No. 91/2009). There is also an allowance for assisting a child with a disability, chronic disease, or cancer (Article 20 DL No. 91/2009), which applies to the abovementioned cases of leave for assistance to a child with disability, chronic disease, or cancer. The daily amount corresponds to 65% of the employee's remuneration (with a maximum monthly amount of twice the social index support amount (*indexante dos apoios sociais*)[76]. However, no similar allowance is provided for leave to assist a child. For employees in the public sector, the subsidies and the associated amounts are the same, despite being enshrined in a different legal instrument (DL No. 89/2009, of 9 April). Due to their amounts and duration, it is unlikely that the Portuguese benefits create a scenario of welfare trap.

5. Early childhood education and childcare systems

In Portugal, the early childhood education and childcare system is divided into two phases: children under three years old and those of three and more years of age.
Regarding the first segment, their education and care are not part of the education system. This means that Portugal does not have a state-provided nursery system. Therefore, until children reach three years of age[77] (when they become eligible to be enrolled in kindergartens – of which there is a public system, aside from private ones), parents must turn to the social, solidarity, and private systems (such as nurseries from private institutions of social solidarity, nurseries from the Santa Casa da Misericórdia, private for-profit bodies, among others), which can be expensive and are also insufficient to accommodate all children.
For this effect, there are three different kinds of structures:

- "*Creches*" (Ordinance No. 262/2011, of 31 August, and Ordinance No. 411/2012, of 14 December), that is, nurseries;
- "*Amas*" (Childminders), a social service (DL No. 115/2015, of 22 June) provided by a person duly licensed by the Institute for Social Security, I.P. (*Instituto da Segurança Social, I. P. – ISS, I.P.*), who is paid to take care of children up to three years of age at his/her place of residence;
- "*Creche familiar*" (family nursery) (Ordinance No. 232/2015, of 6 August), that consists of a group of no fewer than four childminders, who work within an institution like Santa Casa da Misericórdia de Lisboa or in private social

[75] This regime is applicable only in case of sickness or accident, for children until the age of 12, or irrespective of age in case of disability or chronic illness. In these scenarios, the employee is entitled to 30 days per year or to all the hospitalization period if the child remains at the hospital. When the child reaches 12 years of age, the employee is only entitled to 15 days per year.

[76] In 2024, the amount of the social index support is of €502,26 – see Ordinance No. 421/2023, of 11 December.

[77] Article 3-1 Act No. 5/97, of 10 February
(available at: https://diariodarepublica.pt/dr/detalhe/ lei/5-1997-561219)

solidarity institutions (IPSS) or legally equivalent institutions. These places are designed to care for children aged up to three years old[78].

Since 2020, the state has been progressively implementing free access (free of costs) to nurseries (Article 146 of Act No. 2/2020), a program that, in the meantime, has been dubbed as "Creche Feliz"[79]. Its goal is to promote a better work-life balance, to answer the demographic challenge, and to fight child poverty.[80]
Initially, it aimed only children already benefiting from state aid and it only applied to "*creches*" and "*creches familiares*" from the private social solidarity system, with a cooperation agreement with the state (Article 2-1 of Ordinance No. 271/2020, of 24 November). In the meantime, due to severe vacancy constraints[81], this benefit has been progressively extended. Currently, it applies to children born after 1 September 2021, irrespective of their socio-economic background[82], and can also be invoked for private nurseries and those belonging to public entities (such as local councils, higher education institutions, among others), when there are no vacancies in the private social solidarity system, with a cooperation agreement with the state, located in the city of residence, the city where parents work, or neighbouring cities (Article 2 of Ordinance No. 305/2022, of 22 December). These gradual extensions were required due to the program's growing demand and the inability for the nurseries from the private social solidarity system to provide a sufficient answer. Nevertheless, there are still news reports concerning the shortcomings of these measures and the difficulties faced by parents to try and find vacancies for their children (difficulties that have now spread to the kindergarten system, since the demand, also here, has consequently increased)[83].
Regarding kindergartens, children aged three and over are covered by the (optional) pre-primary education (before moving on to compulsory schooling, when they reach six years of age), which is the first stage of basic education in the lifelong learning process (Act No. 5/97, of 10 February 1997). In this case, there is a public network, complemented by a private one.

[78] More information is available at:
https://eurydice.eacea.ec.europa.eu/national-education-systems/ portugal/
early-childhood-education-and-care

[79] See https://www.seg-social.pt/rede-de-creches-gratuitas.

[80] See the preamble of Ordinance No. 271/2020, of 24 November.

[81] The number of insufficient vacancies has been a problem since the beginning of the program. Information available at:
https://expresso.pt/sociedade/ensino/2023-09-05-Nao-ha-vagas-nas-creches-e-pais-ja-equacionam-despedirse-para-ficar-com-filhos-7d51356c.

[82] Nevertheless, there are preference criteria to accede to this benefit and, for this purpose, the socioeconomic conditions of the household (among other elements are considered) – see the Annex of Ordinance No. 198/2020.

[83] See https://expresso.pt/sociedade/2025-06-05-pais-desesperam-com-falta-de-vagas-em-creches-e-em-jardins-de-infancia-ha-criancas-a-voltar-para-casa-quando-acaba-a-creche-gratuita-64b6075c and https://www.jn.pt/nacional/artigo/criancas-em-colegios-privados-sem-acesso-a-vagas-gratuitas/17757158.

There is, of course, a very clear connection between childcare and the possibility of parents returning to work. As previously noted, the standard duration of the initial parental leave (usually referred to as maternity leave) is 120 days. After that, parents must return to work and, consequently, find a place to leave their children. Hence, without comprehensive measures provided by the state, the lack of appropriate answers is an overwhelming challenge. This is particularly the case nowadays due to the changes in society, with the consequent disintegration of family networks, many parents see themselves without a support network for raising their children. It is common for grandparents to still be working, when their grandchildren are born (which prevents them from helping), or to live far away (again, preventing them from helping in child-rearing). This means that it mostly falls to the parents, by themselves, to ensure their children's care. The lack of public responses can be daunting and expensive.

6. Future challenges

True reconciliation between parental responsibilities and work (and, therefore, the positive participation of parents of young children in the labour market) requires a balanced approach from a gender perspective. As mentioned above, since 2009, the Portuguese legislator has been developing efforts in that sense. This was visible, for example, in the adoption of a gender-neutral nomenclature and the equal consecration, regarding men and women, of rights that are not biologically connected. It was also evident in the promotion of a greater sharing of leave, through social security incentives[84].

However, there is still work to be done, since, both in households and regarding parental rights, women are still perceived as playing the predominant role[85]. This circumstance (along the difficulties regarding adequate childcare) hinders an adequate work-life balance. Namely, the social security incentives could be extended to other leaves and time off work, to try and make this sharing more appealing[86]. Naturally, there are also social and cultural dynamics at stake. However, this is one situation in which legal incentives can contribute to changing perceptions and promoting evolution.

The draft bill aiming to amend the PLC introduces a significant set of changes to the legal framework for parental protection. Some of these changes promote greater legal certainty by filling gaps in the current labour legislation. However, with greater or lesser practical impact, the visible trend of the proposed reform of the parental protection regime translates into a rebalancing of power between employee and employer to the benefit of the latter and, above all – this being, in our opinion, the most criticizable

[84] Luísa Gonçalves (2023), pp. 291-293. And the effects of these measures have been largely positive. In fact, while in 2009, the number of men who shared the initial parental leave was of 8.593, in 2022, it was of 38.233 – see Comissão para a Igualdade no Trabalho e no Emprego (2023), p. 77.

[85] The effects of this inequality were particularly visible during the COVID-19 pandemic, which affected men and women differently. Available at: https://ces.uc.pt/publicacoes/palavras-pandemia/?lang=1&id=30082.

[86] In the sense, despite commending the recent advances in this sense, brought by the Decent work agenda, Luísa Gonçalves (2023, p. 303) believes the Legislator could have been more ambitious.

aspect –, an incomprehensible change regarding the promotion of shared parental responsibilities, with an impact in terms of gender equality. Nevertheless, this matter is still not closed, and the draft is open to amendments by the Parliament.

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Promoting labour market participation of parents with young children. The Romanian case.

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Abstract

In the article the employment situation of parents raising children in the context of the Romanian labour market and regulatory framework is analysed. As a preliminary statement it should be noted that although the legal framework is favourable, parents with children face several other factors that make it difficult for them to participate in the labour market. The situation of women, and especially women with children, is also made more difficult by the fact that traditionally in Romania they are the ones who do most of the invisible work and childcare. In this paper, we outline the situation of the labour market and the labour law instruments for the protection of parents raising children, the early childhood education and childcare system, and finally the social protection of the parents with young children, in our attempt to give the most comprehensive picture of the labour market participation of parents with young children in Romania.

Keywords: employment of parents; work-life balance; labour law protection; social protection; childcare systems

1. The general context of the labour market situation for parents with young children in Romania

Based on the current development trends of labour law, it should be noted that the keyword of Romanian labour law in the last one or two decades has clearly been flexibility, the objective of labour law to move beyond the traditional boundaries of very strict mandatory norms, and thus better meet the needs of the 21st century labour market. The underlying assumption was, of course, that it was useful and necessary for both the employer and the employee to have a more flexible framework for the employment relationship between them, and to give the parties a greater role in the drafting of the employment contract. In this context, the narrative that more flexible working arrangements are a priority for women and families with (young) children is not unfamiliar. Taking the Romanian labour law background as a starting point, the need for a shift towards more flexible regulation is also explained by the fact

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that a relatively rigid, traditional approach and regulation of labour law is in force in Romania, despite the clear legislative focus on the implementation of more flexible regulation following the 2011 amendment of the Labour Code.

The need for and the shift toward flexible working arrangements must necessarily be analysed within a broader context, considering labour market realities, development trends and demographic data that have an impact on the labour market situation. The phenomenon of an aging society is a general problem in many countries, including Romania. The demographic situation in our country is further complicated by the fact that it has one of the lowest life expectancy indicators in the EU[2], and the demographic crisis is exacerbated by the process of emigration, which primarily affects the working-age population[3].

The participation of parents in the labour market should be examined within this context, and its thematization by public decision-making should be framed accordingly, as it is a fundamental interest for the functioning of the economy and the sustainability of the social care system. The Romanian legal framework is in many respects supportive of parental labour market participation, but at the same time, especially for women, there are various other factors that counteract this participation. As the literature suggests, "The factors that have an influence on the work-family balance are related to the personal characteristics and priorities of the individual, the organization, social status as well as the support of those around him. (...) Therefore, in the context of demographic aging in Romania, the full participation of the available labour force has become an economic necessity, imposing measures to support parents and caregivers to enter the labour market, by supporting their ties with their children or relatives in a state of need due to serious illnesses, allowing parents and people with caring responsibilities to reconcile professional life with family life. In our country, women continue to be the main ones responsible for family and household care activities, given that the social services dedicated to the care of children and dependent people are not sufficient to meet the needs, in terms of achieving a balance between professional and family life."[4]

As a preliminary statement it should be noted that although the legal framework is favourable, parents with children face several other factors that make it difficult for them to participate in the labour market.

[2] Eurostat (2024), available at:
https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/databrowser/view/demo_mlexpec/ default/table?lang=en

[3] National Institute of Statistics: 2023 Romanian Statistical Yearbook, București, 2024, p. 82. Available at: https://insse.ro/cms/sites/default/files/field/publicatii/anuarul_statistic_al_romaniei_carte_ed_2023.pdf)

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2. The situation of the labour market in Romania

Recent researches on the Romanian labour market have repeatedly pointed out many imbalances that jeopardise its proper functioning. While the COVID-19 pandemic has undoubtedly had a negative impact on the labour market situation, the reported problems extend beyond the extreme crisis situation caused by the pandemic.

Most authors compare the situation of the Romanian labour market with the situation in other EU countries. Romania became a Member State of the EU in 2007. The first decade after the accession was characterised by the following: "activity and employment rates in Romania are lower than the EU28 average for both women and men. In the last ten years, especially after the economic crisis, it appears that the gap between the values recorded for these indicators in Romania toward the average EU28, increased for women, while for men fell. This is explained by the fact that activity and employment rates of women in Romania had a slightly decreasing trend, while in the EU28 had an upward trend, which led to the widening gap as against EU28 average. Also, in the period under review, the gender gap for the same indicators increased in the case of Romania, while for EU28 fell."[5] Another study analysed the causes of the outlined crisis of the Romanian labour market and emphasized that "Among the causes of the emergence and persistence of the labour shortages are the unfavourable demographic trends, the massive external migration of the skilled and highly skilled labour force, the low level of the participation rate and the high inactivity rate, the limited internal geographical mobility, the size of undeclared work that continues to distort the labour market, the fact that the minimum wage is set in a discretionary manner, the lack of cooperation between employers and institutions with responsibilities in the field of employment and training. Many studies and reports of prestigious authors and international institutions have drawn attention to the serious challenges facing Romania's labour market, which represent obstacles to potential growth and competitiveness improvement, as evidenced by the increase in the unit cost of labour on the account of faster increase in wages compared to labour productivity. The poor performance of the education system was also highlighted, which contributed to major discrepancies and inequalities in employment opportunities.[6]

Regarding the current situation, however, we believe that labour market data and trends in Romania are in many respects catching up with those in the EU.

Since the regime change in 1989, Romania's population has been on a steady downward and aging trend. According to official figures for 2022, Romania's current population

[5] Pasnicu, Daniela: Comparative Statistical Analysis of Gender Equality on the Labour Markets of Romania and EU28 (15 June 2015). Available at: https://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=2682449 [6] Chivu, Luminița – Georgescu, George – Bratiloveanu, Alina – Băncescu, Irina: Under Pressure: Romania`s Labour Market Review. Landmarks of Labour Shortages. Working Paper. Romanian Academy, National Institute of Economic Research, București, 2020, p. 40.

was just over 19 million (of which 51.5% were women and 48.5% men[6]), compared with over 23 million in the period of regime change.[7] Life expectancy is relatively low, at 78.03 years for women and 70.76 years for men, although there is a slight upward trend[9]. From a contextual point of view, it is also important to note that the average age of mothers at first birth has remained relatively high for the period from 2017 to 2022, ranging from 27.3 to 27.8 years.[8]

During the same period, the average number of employees has shown a steady slight increase, with the only exception being 2020, which should be seen as a particular crisis year due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Compared to 4,945,868 employees in 2017[9] their number rose to 6,6856,000 in the second trimester of 2025.[10] The registered unemployment rate in the second trimester of 2025 was 6%. By gender, the gap between the two unemployment rates was 0.1 percentage points (6.0% for men, compared to 5.9% for women), and by residential environment, 6.4 percentage points (9.4% in rural areas, compared to 3.0% in urban areas). By age group, the unemployment rate was highest (22.9%) among young people (aged 15-24).[11]

This relatively positive picture is overshadowed by the worrying phenomenon of labour market inequalities, which is clearly reflected in the employment rate in terms of the participation of women and men in the labour market. The employment rate, calculated for the working-age population (15-64 years) shows a significant difference between women and men. The employment rate of the working-age population (15-64 years) was 63.3% in the second quarter of 2025, up 0.6 percentage points from the first quarter of 2025. The employment rate was higher among men (71.6%, compared to 54.8% among women) and among people living in urban areas (69.3% compared to 57.1% in rural areas). The employment rate among young people (aged 15-24) was 18.7%.[12]

Although the phenomenon of significantly lower labour market participation compared to men is fundamentally the same, there are variations in the employment rates of women based on their place of residence and level of education. Looking at education, the data for 2022 show that 23.5% of women with low education, 55% of women with medium education and 87.8% of women with tertiary education have participated in the labour market. A recent analysis has concluded that "the availability of childcare

[6] National Institute of Statistics: 2023 Romanian Statistical Yearbook, Fig. 2.G2. Usually resident population, by sex and area, București, 2024, p. 46. Available at: https://insse.ro/cms/sites/default/files/field/publicatii/ anuarul_statistic_al_romaniei_carte_ed_2023.pdf)

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[9] Idem. Fig. 2.G5, p. 48.

[8] Idem. Fig. 2.G6, p. 49.

[9] Idem. Fig. 3.G4, p. 100. [12] Idem. Fig. 3.G5,p. 100.

[10] National Institute of Statistics, Comunicat de presă nr. 232/15. septembrie 2025. Available at: https://insse.ro/cms/sites/default/files/com_presa/com_pdf/somaj_tr2r_25.pdf

[11] Idem.

[12] Idem.

could be a major factor contributing to Romania's low labour force participation of women. The percentage of children from age 3 to school entry in formal childcare is low in Romania (...).[13] While private provision of (formal) childcare services can be expected to respond to rising demand, their higher price – when compared to public services – would alter the cost-benefit calculation of working for mothers. Women with higher education – and hence higher earnings potential – may still opt to work, while the net benefit of working for women with lower earnings potential is reduced. Indeed, there is some evidence suggesting that the labour force participation of women with tertiary education is not correlated with the proportion of young children cared for solely at home, while that of women with lower education levels is correlated with this factor."[14]

As regards the distribution by place of residence, there is a difference of a few hundredths of a percentage point for all data, indicating that labour market participation is higher in urban areas than in rural areas.[15]

However, the analysis of women's participation in the labour market also includes a factor that points to a very positive situation in the Romanian labour market. The so-called gender pay gap, which shows the difference between the average gross hourly earnings of men and women expressed as a percentage of the average gross hourly earnings of men, is particularly low in Romania, being only 2,4% in comparison with the EU average of 13%.[16]

Although there is relatively little official data on the share of parents with young children in Romania in the labour market, the National Employment Strategy for 2021-2027, prepared by the Government of Romania, provides some significant data: "although women's participation in the labour market is supported in Romania, they continue to be primarily responsible for family and household care activities, while social services dedicated to child and dependent care are not sufficient to meet the needs, and about 12% of women were inactive due to family responsibilities in 2018. Gender disparity in employment among people with a child under six years was 29 percentage points in 2018."[17]

[13] European Institute for Gender Equality, "Survey on gender gaps in unpaid care, individual and social activities (CARE)", available at https://eige.europa.eu/gender-statistics/dgs/browse/eige/eige_gap

[14] Misch, Florian – Pitt, Alexander: Labour Force Participation in Romania. International Monetary Fund, *Selected Issues Papers, 2023* (062), p. 7. Available at: https://www.elibrary.imf.org/view/journals/018/2023/062/article-A001-en.xml

[15] Idem. Fig. 3.2, p. 103.

[16] Eurostat (2022), available at: https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/web/products-eurostat-news/-/edn-20220307-2 and https://ec.europa.eu/ eurostat/databrowser/view/sdg_05_20/default/table?lang=en&category=t_labour.t_earn

[17] Government Decision No. 558/2021 of 19 May 2021 on the approval of the National Employment Strategy 2021 – 2027 and the Action Plan for the period 2021 – 2027 for the implementation of the National Employment Strategy 2021 – 2027. Available at: https://mmuncii.ro/j33/index.php/ro/minister-2019/strategii-politici-programe/6333-sn-ocupare-forta-munca-2021-2027

3. Labour law protection of and employment incentives for parents with young children in Romania[18]

In Romania, even before the implementation of Directive 2019/1158 on work-life balance,[19] there were numerous provisions in the Labour Code[22] that were important for mothers and parents in general. Examples include the regulation of working hours and rest periods, the prohibition of night work for pregnant or breastfeeding women and, thanks to the recent amendment on 3 June 2024, for parents raising a child alone, or even the possibility of switching to reduced working hours. The provisions of the Labour Code are supplemented by various separate legal acts, on the one hand, in relation to certain atypical forms of employment (such as teleworking, day work or domestic work), and on the other hand, in relation to employment protection rules, collective labour law provisions or social allowances, which also contain specific provisions for parents raising a child.

The transposition of the provisions of Directive 2019/1158 into Romanian law has been effectuated by amending and supplementing several laws: the Labour Code, the Law on public administration (No. 57/2019), the Law on paternity leave (No. 210/1999), the Law on equal opportunities and equal treatment between women and men (No. 202/2002) and Government Emergency Decree No. 111/2010 on childcare. In addition, Emergency Government Decree No. 158/2005 on health insurance benefits has been adopted, which introduced a benefit for the carer of a patient with oncological disease. From the point of view of parents with young children, the implementation of Directive 2019/1158 into Romanian law has, apart from the introduction of some few new institutions, resulted in rather parametric changes to the existing protection instruments. A new instrument is the introduction of carers' leave. According to Article 152fl of the Labour Code[20], the employer, upon written request of the employee, is obliged to grant the employee 5 working days of carer's leave per calendar year in order to provide care or personal assistance to a relative or a person living in the same household who needs care or assistance due to a serious health problem. A longer period of carer's leave may be introduced by a separate law or agreed by the parties through a collective agreement. Carer's leave is not included in annual rest leave. Employees on carers' leave are considered to be insured under the health insurance scheme for that period, but they are not obliged to make contributions during that period.[21] A similar provision existed previously in Romanian legislation and has continued to exist in parallel. Articles 26-30 of the above-mentioned Government Emergency Decree No.

[18] The findings in this chapter are based partly on the results of a research funded by the Domus Programme of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences.

[19] Directive (EU) 2019/1158 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 20 June 2019 on work-life balance for parents and carers and repealing Council Directive 2010/18/EU, OJ L 188, 12.7.2019, p. 79–93. [22] Law No. 53/2003, the Labour Code. Available at:
https://www.codulmuncii.ro/integral.php

[20] Available at: https://www.codulmuncii.ro/titlul_3/capitolul_3/sectiunea_1/art_152.1_1.html

[21] Oprescu, Elena Daniela: Concediul de îngrijitor și problemele determinate de reglementarea necorespunzătoare a acestuia, Revista Română de Dreptul Muncii 2023/3, pp. 69-85.

158/2005 state that every parent with sufficient length of service is entitled to sickness benefit if they have to care for a sick child under the age of 12. In the case of a disabled child, this benefit may be claimed up to the age of 18. The maximum number of days of leave for caring for a sick child per calendar year, calculated separately for each child, is 45 days. Longer leave may be taken for illnesses and medical interventions as defined by law.

Another novelty for parents is the addition of Article 152fj into the Labour Code listing the cases of absence from work for which it is possible to request time off. These are unforeseeable cases of family emergencies due to illness or accident, which require the immediate presence of the employee. If such a situation arises, the employee has the right to be absent from work, subject to prior notification to the employer and full compensation in accordance with the normal work schedule.

The extension of flexible working arrangements is also important for the long-term goal of reconciling work and private life. As a result of the addition of Article 118 into the Labour Code, the employer is now obliged to state the reasons for refusing an employee's request to change to an individual working pattern. The employer must give reasons in writing within 5 working days of receipt of the request. Where the individual work programme is for a fixed period, the legislation in force gives the employee the right to return to the original work schedule after the fixed period. However, the employee also has the right to return to the original work schedule before the end of the fixed period if the circumstances that triggered the introduction of the individual work programme have changed.

Among the forms of work classified as atypical, the Labour Code contains provisions on fixed-term and part-time contracts, temporary agency work and working from home. Separate legislation addresses teleworking, day work and domestic workers[22] out of which part-time work, working from home and teleworking are the most relevant for our topic.

A clearly stated advantage of part-time employment is that it can be particularly suitable for workers with young children, especially women. At the same time, preamble 35 of Directive 2019/1158 itself points out that this type of employment relationship also has disadvantages: "While working part-time has been shown to be useful in allowing some women to remain in the labour market after having children or caring for relatives with care or support needs, long periods of reduced working hours can lead to lower social security contributions and thus reduced or non-existing pension entitlements."

The Romanian Labour Code contains few provisions on part-time work that could be specifically linked to the promotion of employment for parents with young children, but it is clear that more flexible organization of working hours and work schedules can provide an opportunity to achieve a work-life balance.[23] According to Article 105 of the

[22] Law 81/2018 on the regulation of teleworking activity, Law no. 52/2011 on the exercise of occasional activities carried out by day laborers, Law no. 111/2022 on the regulation of the activity of the domestic worker.

[23] Sántha Ágnes: Work-Family Balance in the Active Age Ethnic Hungarian Population in Romania, Social Sciences 8 (2), 59. Available at: https://www.mdpi.com/2076-0760/8/2/59)

Labour Code, part-time employment contracts must include provisions on working hours and the organization of working time and the conditions for modifying the work programme. Similarly, a provision on the prohibition of overtime is a mandatory element of such employment contracts.

The scheduling of working time is essentially at the discretion of the employer in the case of part-time contracts. Part-time employment has never been particularly widespread in Romania, moreover, initially it was more widespread among men than among women, who are traditionally more engaged in parenting. At EU level women with childcare responsibilities tend to work more frequently part-time (38%) than men (19%), which can have long-term implications for their careers and financial prospects.[24] In the case of Romania the proportion of part-time workers in total employment was relatively low regardless of the presence of children and was lower than 10% for employed men or employed women, with or without children.[25] As a whole, 283.1 thousand persons, representing 3.6% of total employment, worked part-time in 2022 in Romania. Most of the part-time workers were working in agriculture (73.6%).[26]

The low uptake of part-time work is primarily due to financial and legal constraints. Starting from August 2022, under Government Decree No. 16/2022, employers are obliged to pay the employee social contributions for part-time employment contracts, based on the minimum wage rather than in proportion to the actual income earned by the employee. As a single exception, the tax legislation has established that this over taxation of part-time employment does not apply when the employee has multiple employment contracts and the total income from all these contracts is at least equal to or exceeds the amount of one minimum wage in the economy. In such cases it is still allowed to pay contributions based on the employee's actual income from each of the part-time contracts. In these circumstances, part-time employment is clearly not an attractive alternative for both employees and employers. According to official figures of the Ministry of Labour and Social Solidarity, in 2023 only 446,177 employees were working part-time, and 241,672 of these were women.[27]

The Labour Code provides more opportunities in terms of work-life balance for parents with children in the area of working from home. Under Article 118(2) of the Labour Code, employees who work from home determine their own working hours to carry out their duties at work, although the employer has the right to monitor this work under the conditions laid down in the employment contract. Telework is regulated

[24] European Institute for Gender Equality: A Better Work–Life Balance: Bridging the gender care gap, available at https://eige.europa.eu/publications-resources/publications/better-work-life-balance-bridging-gender-caregap?language_content_entity=en

[25] Eurostat: Part-time and full-time employment. Statistics. Available at: https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php?title=Part-time_and_full-time_employment_-_statistics#Part-time_ employment_and_children)

[26] National Institute of Statistics, https://insse.ro/cms/sites/default/files/com_presa/com_pdf/somaj_2022e.pdf

[27] Ministry of Labour and Social Solidarity (2023), available at: https://www.mmuncii.ro/j33/images/ buletin_statistic/Pensii_2023.pdf

by Law No. 81/2018. In the case of teleworking, the employee does not have the legal possibility to determine his/her own work programme, but it is organised jointly with the employer in accordance with the provisions of the individual employment contract, internal regulations and/or the applicable collective employment agreement. In this sense, working from home as regulated by the Labour Code may be more in the interests of parents with young children. However, these two types of work are fundamentally different as teleworking requires the use of communication technology, the legal regulation of home working does not require this condition, and it is therefore more applicable to some form of simple physical work or other office work.

Collective bargaining and agreements are not a prominent feature of the Romanian system. Employers are obliged to ensure the rights of the employees, such as flexible working arrangements or other rights provided for by the legislation. Nevertheless, the employer of course plays a key role in creating and ensuring a working environment that aligns the interests of parents in terms of work-life balance.

A new legislative initiative, jointly submitted by representatives of several parliamentary groups and currently undergoing parliamentary proceedings, aims to support the labour market placement of women raising at least three children, single-parent families and young people.[28] This draft would not supplement the provisions of the Labour Code, but rather the Law No. 76/2002 on the unemployment insurance system and the promotion of employment. The draft would provide financial support to employees in specific situations defined by law, on the one hand, and to employers who undertake to employ such persons, on the other. According to the draft law, employers who hire unemployed persons over the age of 50, unemployed persons who are single parents supporting single-parent families, long-term unemployed persons, NEETs, mothers with at least three children aged under the age of 18, would receive a monthly amount of 2,250 RON (€440) for each person employed in these categories for a period of 12 months, with the obligation to maintain the employment or service relationship for at least 18 months.

An additional form of support is planned for young people, the so-called *stability bonus*. According to the draft law, young NEETs registered with county employment agencies or the Bucharest municipal employment agency who are entering the workforce for the first time, on a full-time and permanent basis, would be eligible for a non-taxable stability bonus from the unemployment insurance budget, paid monthly for a period of 24 months from the date of employment, of 1,000 RON (€200) per month for the first 12 months from the date of employment and 1,250 RON (€245) per month for the following 12 consecutive months. However, this benefit would not apply in the case of employment with a budgetary institution. NEETs who receive the stability bonus are entitled to continue receiving the bonus even if, within 24 months of starting work, their employment with their first employer ends and they start working within 60 days, if the employment with the second employer is under the same conditions, i.e., full-time, for an indefinite period.

[28] Available at: https://mmuncii.gov.ro/wp-content/uploads/2025/11/Lege-modif-L76-07-11.pdf

The above measures are currently only in draft form, and it will become clear at the end of the parliamentary process whether they will be adopted or not, and if so, in what form. One thing is certain: several critical comments have already been made about the draft, primarily objecting to the low effectiveness of the measures. In the case of mothers with three children, critics point out that the measure is not effective in reality because the problem is not caused by wages, but by the lack of nurseries, kindergartens, and childcare facilities. In this sense, the situation of young people and mothers with families could be improved by predictable economic and social policies.

4. Social protection of parents with young children

The legal framework for parental participation in the labour market and access to social benefits in Romania is quite developed and extensive. The system includes different leaves and benefits for maternity, paternity, childcare, sick childcare and even maternity risk. What's more, the Romanian Labour Code also grants days off to women participating in artificial insemination programs, thereby supporting childbearing. According to Article 147ˆ1 employees undergoing an "in vitro" fertilization procedure shall benefit annually from an additional paid leave of three days, which shall be granted in two parts, one day on the date of the ovarian puncture and two 2 days starting from the date of embryo transfer. The request for the granting of additional leave must always be accompanied by the medical letter issued by the specialist doctor, in accordance with the law.

Entitlement to the social benefits is subject to preliminary insurance periods but given that in such cases the child's best interests are at stake, in addition to the rights of the parents, some benefits may be claimed even without prior insurance. Under Government Emergency Decree No. 96/2003, maternity risk leave may be granted to pregnant or nursing women who are not on maternity leave and whose employer is unable to provide them with working conditions without risk to their health or that of their child. The maternity risk benefit is 75% of the mother's average monthly income in the 10 months preceding the claim, and it is payable for a maximum of 120 days.

Maternity care is regulated by Government Emergency Decree No. 158/2005. Insured persons are entitled to maternity leave and benefit for a period of 126 days. The same entitlement also applies to women who, for reasons beyond their control, are no longer insured, if they give birth within 9 months of losing their insurance. Maternity leave is compulsory for 42 days after childbirth. The gross monthly amount of the maternity benefit is 85% of the average of the gross monthly earnings of the last 6 months of the 12 months of the insurance period. Maternity benefit is paid in whole from the budget of the National Health Insurance Fund.

In parallel with maternity benefits, Romanian law also regulates paternity leave. Law No. 210/1999 on paternity leave has seen only minimal changes following the implementation of the Directive on work-life balance. However, Article 1 now literally states that the aim of the law is to create a better work-life balance for fathers. Men who are insured in the state social security system are entitled, based on a request to this

end, to a paternity leave of 10 days or, if they graduate a childcare course, of 15 days within the first eight weeks following the birth of their child.

According to Article 7 of the Methodological Norms of 10 April 2000 for the application of the Parental Leave Law No. 210/1999, the childcare course consists of the presentation of basic theoretical and practical notions necessary for the care of the small child, in order to enable the father to effectively participate in the care of his own newborn child. The childcare courses may be held during the mother's pregnancy or after the birth of the child in the father's family doctor's surgery or in health establishments or other establishments organizing such courses. Following a check of the knowledge acquired, the family doctor or, where appropriate, the specialized staff of the health units or other specialist units will issue a certificate of completion of the childcare course. If the father has specialized studies, i.e. he is a doctor or a nurse, it is no longer necessary to complete the childcare course, but only to obtain the certificate under the conditions provided by law.

What in our view has a very positive effect is that the amount of paternity leave allowance, paid from the employer's salary fund, is equal to the salary for the period in question and the employer cannot refuse the employee's request for this leave.

Parental leave is regulated by Government Emergency Decree No. 111/2010. In the Romanian system, men and women have equal rights to parental leave and benefits. Article 2. specifies that "persons who, in the two years preceding the date of the child's birth, have earned for at least 12 months income from wages and salaries, income from self-employment, income from intellectual property rights, income from agricultural, forestry and fish farming activities, subject to income tax, are entitled to parental leave for children up to the age of 2 years, or 3 years in the case of disabled children, and a monthly allowance". The amount of the monthly allowance is 85% of the average net income in the last 12 months of the last 2 years before the child's birth. The minimum amount of the monthly allowance may not be less than the amount resulting from the application of a multiplication coefficient of 2.5 to the value of the social reference indicator[29], and the maximum amount may not exceed 8,500 RON.

However, Law No. 141/2025 on certain fiscal and budgetary measures recently negatively affected the system of allowances received by parents. From August 1, 2025, regardless of the type of medical leave, whether it is maternity risk or for caring for a sick child, categories that were exempt in the past, the 10% health insurance contribution will be deducted from the allowance.

The regulation of the so called "insertion bonus" is of particular importance for the labour market participation of parents. According to Article 7 of Government Emergency Decree No. 111/2010, persons who, during the period in which they are entitled to parental leave, earn taxable income are entitled to an insertion bonus. The

[29] The Social Assistance Law No. 292/2011 defines the social reference indicator as the unit expressed in RON at the level of which the social assistance benefits, paid from the state budget, granted both to ensure the protection of persons within the social assistance system and to stimulate the beneficiaries of the social assistance system to take up employment, are reported. At present the social reference indicator has a value of RON 500.

amount is 1,500 RON, if the entitled persons obtain income before the child reaches the age of 6 months, or 1 year in the case of a disabled child. The monthly amount is 1,500 RON until the child reaches the age of 2 years or 3 years in the case of a child with disabilities; the amount is 650 RON if the entitled person earns income after the child reaches the age of 6 months or 1 year in the case of a disabled child. Moreover, if the parent chooses to return to work after the child turns 2, the amount of the bonus is 650 RON until the child reaches 3 years old. The insertion bonus can be received simultaneously with the state child allowance, the amount of which varies according to age and specific conditions of the child. According to the most recent statistics published in April 2024 by the National Agency for Payments and Social Inspection of the Ministry of Labour and Social Solidarity, the number of beneficiaries receiving the insertion bonus reached 84,943, representing a total amount of 65,787,056 RON.[30]
Literature does not present a unified view on the effectiveness of all these social benefits in stimulating the labour market participation of parents, especially women with young children. As stated for instance "The policy's impact on mothers' participation in the labour force is ambiguous because it affects two categories of women who participate in the labour force. The first category consists of women who would have continued to work but are incentivized by the policy to stay at home longer (or possibly permanently). In the second category are women who would quit but maternity leave incentivizes them to return to work."[31] Another article states that "More than one third of mothers return to work before the end of the maximum parental leave period. This is partly due to the payment of the insertion incentive (...), but also to labour flexibility policies (...). A return to work by mothers before the end of parental leave period takes place especially in big cities, where there is a demand for work in the services sector and in work related to new technologies."[32] Another very recent study concludes that the combination of short but well-paid paternity leave and considerably longer, non-parent-specific child care leave is very common among EU countries, but "typically, mothers have been using the long child care leave, and the introduction of the other parent's share was hardly a game-changer."[33]
Regardless of how the present framework of parents' social protection is perceived by some authors, I believe that the Romanian system, which is relatively generous both in terms of the amount and duration of benefits, can be assessed positively, if we take into consideration the need for work-life balance. The fact that parents do not intend to return to the labour market or do not do so too soon is not necessarily due to the welfare trap, but rather points to systemic problems such as those we will

[30] Ministry of Labour and Social Solidarity (2024). Available at https://www.mmanpis.ro/wp-content/ uploads/2024/05/STIM_Aprilie_2024.pdf

[31] Hiriscau, Andra: The Effect of Paid Maternity Leave on Fertility and Mothers' Labor Force Participation. Journal of Labor Research, 2024. 10.1007/s12122-024-09361-0.

[32] Şoitu, Daniela – Şoitu, Conțiu Tiberiu: Romania. IN: Áine Ni Léime et ali, eds.: Extended Working Life Policies. International Gender and Health Perspectives, Springer Open, 2020.

[33] Dohotariu, Anca – Geambașu Réka – Rață Cristina: *Between Supporting and Equal Parenting: Exploring Middle Class Fathering in Romania Today*, Social Inclusion, Vol. 14/2025, https://doi.org/10.17645/si.10874

address in the next subsection. Examples of such barriers to re-entering the labour market include the lack of an adequate network of childcare facilities, or even the fact that grandparents who traditionally provide assistance are often unavailable, either because of the distance from their place of living or because of their working age. However, the regulation of the social care system described above and the introduction of more flexible working arrangements could assist parents with young children who wish to re-enter the labour market.

5. Labour and social law protection provisions for single-parent families in Romania[34]

The issue of labour law and social support for single-parent families has recently come to the fore in Romanian legislation, but also in public discourse. It is worth noting the basic findings of the Swedish Institute for Social Research's study on the situation of single-parent families, cited by Nieuwenhuis, as a starting point. "The nuclear family consisting of a woman, a man, and their children as the dominant form of family has long been outdated. Families are diverse and constantly changing. This is true for individuals' life paths and for society as a whole. (...) Although most single parents and their families are doing well according to commonly used indicators of economic well-being, they are more likely to be at risk of poverty or exclusion, or to experience material deprivation, than two-parent families. This is a cause for concern, as it not only undermines their current well-being, but also jeopardizes their children's future opportunities."[35]

However, the definition of a single-parent family is not uniform across the countries of the European Union. Single parenthood typically results from separation, divorce, or the death of a parent. Other factors include the prolonged absence of a parent (e.g., due to migration), unintended pregnancy, or raising a child alone. Defining single-parent families as a social category poses multiple challenges, as family structures change over time. Definitions vary from country to country, and not all separated parents fall into the single-parent category, depending on their relationship status and family structure.[36] In addition, many definitions of single parent status do not recognize situations of "de facto single parent status," such as when a parent is seriously ill or living abroad.[37] The OECD's definition of a single parent is significantly narrower than

[34] The research used in this chapter was supported by the Domus Hungarica scholarship program of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences.

[35] Nieuwenhuis, Rense: *The situation of single parents in the EU*, Brussels, Policy Department for Citizens' Rights and Constitutional Affairs, European Parliament, 2020, p. 10., https://www.europarl.europa.eu/committees/en/supporting-analyses (accessed on 15 December 2024)

[36] Victoria Jordan, Katherine Stewart and Barbara Janta: *Mechanisms supporting single parents across the EU*, Luxembourg: Publications Office of the European Union, 2019, p. 2.

[37] Bernardi, L. & Mortelmans, D.: *Supporting Lone Parents and their Children in Europe*, Population Europe, 2018, https://www.population-europe.eu/policy-brief/ supporting-lone-parents-and-their-children-europe

the above, stating that *a single parent is a person who is raising one or more children and who lives in a household without a partner.*[38]

Given that the number of single-parent families is growing, it stands to reason that the labour market presence of parents raising children alone is also on the rise. According to Nieuwenhuis's study, this increase rose from 69% to 74% among single women with children and from 83% to 86% among single men with children by 2020. However, the above data also show that the employment rate of single mothers with children lags significantly behind that of single fathers with children.[39] Support for single-parent families is therefore certainly justified in order to enable them to participate in the labour market to a greater extent.

In Romania, until 2024, the Labour Code did not contain any provisions specifically relating to single-parent families. In 2023, the first bill aimed at providing greater labour law protection for single-parent families was introduced, resulting in an amendment to the Labour Code in 2024. The amendment supplements Article 128(2) by stipulating that a parent raising a child alone cannot be assigned to night work. The provision must be interpreted as meaning that such a parent cannot be assigned to night shifts even in the case of shift work.

In the area of social benefits, the most significant Romanian legal source is Law 196 of 2016 on the minimum integration income, which, however, only entered into force in 2024. On this basis, low-income single-parent families are also entitled to supplementary benefits based on their per capita income, the payment of which is conditional on the child/children attending school regularly.

In addition to the various uniformly defined forms of assistance, some local authorities may also provide specific support to single-parent families through local council decisions. The most prominent example of this in Romania is the support system developed and operated by the Bucharest local authorities. Based on Bucharest Council Decision 516/2018, single-parent families whose per capita income does not exceed the income level specified in the Decision are eligible for a fixed monthly allowance.[40] To be eligible for support, single-parents must have had a permanent or temporary residence in Bucharest for at least six months prior to submitting their application and must not have any outstanding debts to the local budget.

6. Early childhood education and childcare systems

The institutions of early childhood education and childcare systems are firmly linked to the presence of parents with young children in the labour market. In this respect, Romanian legislation has room for improvement to better facilitate the employment of parents with young children. The recognition that early childcare and parents',

[38] Thévenon, Olivier, et al.: *Child Poverty in the OECD: Trends, Determinants and Policies to Tackle it*, OECD Social, Employment and Migration Working Papers, No 218, 2018, https://doi.org/10.1787/c69de229-en

[39] Nieuwenhuis, R., 2020, p. 28.

[40] https://www.dgas.ro/wp-content/uploads/2024/05/INFORMARE-conditii-acordare-ajutor-social-comunitar-pt-familie-monoparentala.pdf (accessed on 15 December 2024)

especially women's', decisions to work are closely linked is not new and is not specific to Romania: "The state plays a key role in the protection and promotion of its citizens' economic and social well-being and, particularly, in mediating the demands of family and caregiving responsibilities. Family policies focused on care and education of young children have become more relevant in Europe since the increase in women's employment. One of them is public investment in childcare services, as it has a positive impact on female participation and even fertility rates. Consequently, and following the European Commission guidelines, all EU countries have undertaken initiatives to increase the availability – and quality – of these services. However, the configuration of social policies differs across countries in the extent and form to which these care services are provided, as do the patterns of socio-economic and labour market outcomes."[41] The same study points out that to promote female labour participation, the European Union has fostered the expansion of public childcare provision. In 2002, the Barcelona European Council set objectives for the availability of formal and informal child care: 'The Member States should remove disincentives to female labour force participation, taking into account the demand for child care facilities and in line with national patterns of provision, to provide childcare by 2010 to at least 90% of children between three years old and the mandatory school age and at least 33% of children younger than three years old.[42]

With this objective in mind, it is worth considering the data published by the Romanian National Institute of Statistics for 2023. The data on enrolment of school-age children are as follows. For the 0-2 age group, the enrolment rate is 8.8%, and for the 3-5 years age group the rate is 76.2%. Looked at another way, based on Table 8.5 showing the school population by level of education and type of school, children in early childhood education represent 0.8% and children in pre-primary education represent 15% of the total of children enrolled in the educational system. These figures represent about 27,000 children in early childhood education and 521,826 kindergarten children.[43]

The lack of an adequate nursery network is a persistent problem in Romania. The extent of the shortage is illustrated by the justification for the draft law that has been submitted to Parliament in 2021 to regulate the childminder profession. The draft has not been adopted in the end.[44] The explanatory memorandum to the draft law pointed out that: "While the statistics for kindergartens are normal, Romania is one of the worst countries in the EU in terms of nurseries, with only 350 nurseries in Romania's large cities. They serve 22,000 children out of a total population of 550,000 children aged

[41] Inmaculada Cebrián, María A. Davia, Nuria Legazpe, Gloria Moreno: Mothers' employment and childcare choices across the European Union, Social Science Research, Volume 80/2019, p. 68.

[42] Presidency Conclusions: Barcelona European Council 15 and 16 March 2002. Available at: https:// ec.europa.eu/invest-in-research/pdf/download_en/barcelona_european_council.pdf

[43] National Institute of Statistics: 2023 Romanian Statistical Yearbook. Available at: https://insse.ro/cms/ sites/default/files/field/publicatii/anuarul_statistic_al_romaniei_carte_ed_2023.pdf

[44] Available at: https://senat.ro/legis/PDF/2022/22L032EM.pdf?nocache=true

0-3. The remaining more than 90% (10% of 2–3-year-olds go to kindergarten) of children keep their parents or grandparents at home, with no early education. (...)"[45]
The situation for nursery places is similarly poor, according to other official documents[46], and a report published by the Ministry of Education in 2022.[47] It is important to highlight two data that characterize the situation in Romania in terms of early childhood education. On the one hand, the report shows that two thirds of the participants in nursery education are children over 2 years old, meaning that they start early childhood education after the end of parental leave. On the other hand, the number of children attending nursery school in rural areas is practically negligible, accounting for only 3.2% of all children in nursery school. The main reason for this is most probably the lack of nurseries.
However, it is worth looking behind the dry statistics and comparing them with the regulatory framework, because although the return to work of parents, and usually mothers, is ultimately an individual decision, these individual decisions are made in the light of their options and their rights. On the one hand, as it has been shown above, in Romania parental care is available up to the age of two years (3 years for children with disabilities). The allowance is relatively high, amounting to 85% of previous earnings. Thus, there is no major financial constraint to return to work. On the other hand, it should also be noted that, according to the Law No. 198/2023 on pre-university education, compulsory education starts at the age of 3 years, with pre-primary education, whereas under the previous law it was compulsory only from the age of 4. Enrolment in early childhood education can start at the age of 3 month, but is not compulsory, therefore it is entirely at the discretion of the parents. But at the same time, in Romania the parents' access to early childcare is extremely limited, and this obviously has an impact on the return to work.
In this context, the introduction of the so-called „nursery vouchers" could be an incentive for parents to return to the labour market. According to Law No. 165/2018, the nursery vouchers are value tickets granted monthly to employees who do not receive parental leave and allowance for children up to 2 years of age, or up to 3 years of age in the case of disabled children. Whether or not to grant these vouchers is left to the employer's discretion, as it is not an obligation, only a possibility. Nursery vouchers can only be used to pay fees at the nursery where the child is enrolled. The maximum amount of nursery vouchers may not exceed 600 RON per month for each child in nursery. An impediment to the use of these vouchers is that they can only be used at nurseries that have a contract with the issuer of these vouchers, and ultimately, even if the employer is willing to grant such benefits to the employee, there should be

[45] Expunere de motive. Available at: https://senat.ro/legis/PDF/2022/22L032EM.pdf?nocache=true

[46] Pop, Luana Miruna: Investing in Children: Breaking the cycle of disadvantage. A Study of National Policies. Country Report – Romania. European Commission, 2014, pp. 28-30. Available at: https://ec.europa.eu/social/main.jsp?catId=89&langId=en&newsId=2061&moreDocuments=yes&tableName=news)

[47] Ministerul Educației: Raport privind starea învățământului preuniversitar din România, București, 2022, pp.13-16. Available at: https://www.edu.ro/sites/default/files/_fi%C8%99iere/Minister/2022/Transparenta/Starea_invatamantului/Raport-Starea-invatamantului-preuniversitar-2021-2022.pdf)

a sufficient number of nurseries for all those who want them, which is not the case at the moment. However, the regulation of nursery vouchers should, in our view, be noted as a positive development.

The availability of childcare within the framework of institutional education has a clear impact on women's return to the labour market. In 2012, Romania introduced compulsory preparatory classes for children aged 6 and above. As a result, there was a demonstrable increase in the labour market presence of women raising children. What is more, it was also clear that, since preparatory classes were only held in the morning, a higher proportion of the mothers were returning to part-time employment.[48]

7. School dropout in Romania, its impact on employment, and social policy measures to reduce it

Early school dropout is a serious problem in Romania, and despite numerous measures, it has been difficult to reduce its prevalence.[49] Romania has one of the highest early school leaving rates in the European Union—16.6% in 2023. Rural areas are particularly affected, with a rate of 27.5%, much higher than the rate in urban areas, highlighting the vulnerability of students in rural areas. The main causes include financial problems, unstable family dynamics, poor conditions in rural areas, and a lack of adequate educational resources. Lack of motivation and educational support contribute significantly to dropout.[50] The report edited by Iliescu links low participation in pre-school education with high school dropout rates, one of the main causes of which, as indicated in the study, is the lack of appropriate institutions. This is outlined also by the fact that "[A]mong children enrolled in preschool, there are significant disparities between urban areas (94.1% of all enrolled children) and rural areas (5.9% of all enrolled children), largely explained by the absence of dedicated institutions."[51] On the other hand the analysis of the Report „reveals a moderate positive correlation (0.55) between early school leaving and the inactivity rate among young people aged 15-34 who are not in education. These are young people who are not active in the labour market and are not registered as unemployed. With a high rate of early school leaving, the rate of inactive young people at the country level is also

[48] Robayo-Abril, Monica – Rude Britta: *Preparatory School Years and Maternal Employment in Romania*, World Bank Group Policy Research Working Paper 10638/2023. Available at: https://thedocs.worldbank.org/en/doc/9fe224595c1ecfe9e508d7f3be205a8d-0080012025/related/D1-5-ROBAYO-11-40.pdf

[49] Bonea, Virginia Georgiana: *Abandonul școlar*. Revista Calitatea Vieții, XXX, no. 4, 2019, pp. 387–403, Available at; https://mail.revistacalitateavietii.ro/journal/article/view/123/97, Cămănaru, Magdalena; Grama, Gabriela; Țiță, Rozica: *Abandonul școlar și combaterea sărăciei în mediul rural*. Journal of Social Economy, 2016, Vol 6, Issue 1.

[50] Iliescu, Dragoș (ed.): *Impactul economic al abandonului școlar în România*. Universitatea din București și Laboratorul de Studii Educaționale pe Scară Largă, 2024. Available at: https://www.researchgate.net/publication/386333476_Impactul_economic_al_abandonului_scolar_in_Romania.

[51] Idem.

higher. This correlation indicates the difficulties that young people with a low level of education face in acquiring occupational status."[52]
In our view the problem of early school leaving is clearly closely linked to the extremely high proportion of NEETs in Romania and, ultimately, to the issue of the labour market situation of parents who will soon be raising young children.

Numerous other studies confirm the link between early school leaving and lower labour market participation. "People who drop out of school are usually limited to get lower-paying, unstable jobs that are more sensitive to changes brought about by economic recessions and automation."[53] "Education is an important factor for participation in the labour market. Individuals with low levels of education, as well as those who drop out of school, face difficulties in finding employment, which increases the likelihood that these individuals will join the ranks of the economically inactive population."[54]
Given the scale of the problem, Romania has introduced several legislative measures aimed at reducing early school leaving. This intention is also reflected in the provision analyzed above, which makes social assistance conditional on the school attendance of dependent children. Two other forms of support fit into the same line of thinking, which concern support for disadvantaged children in the education system, in some cases specifically those from single-parent families.
The first form of benefit is a fixed amount of support for disadvantaged preschool or school children, which can be claimed under Emergency Government Decree No. 133 of 2020. Those eligible for the support are preschool children in state education who come from families entitled to family support benefits as well as children attending state primary and secondary education who are dependents of families whose average monthly net income per family member in July of the respective year does not exceed 50% of the minimum gross basic wage applicable in the country. The allowance for one school year can be used for one year from the date of receipt, exclusively on the basis of the identity card of the beneficiary or their parents. However, the provision also contains certain restrictions. For example, vouchers for the purchase of school supplies and clothing can only be used in certain stores, i.e., stores that sell school supplies and are included in the list of entities issuing electronic social vouchers for educational support. Naturally, the support can only be used to purchase school supplies and clothing needed for school and kindergarten.
Children from single-parent families are also eligible for social scholarships, based on Ministerial Decree No. 5870 of 2021. Applications for scholarships are organized by educational institutions, which also monitor compliance with the conditions for disbursement. These include the requirement that students receiving the allowance may not have more than ten unexcused absences per month. However, the social

[52] Idem.

[53] Pompei, F. - Selezneva, E.: *Unemployment and education mismatch in the EU before and after the financial crisis*. Journal of Policy Modeling, 43(2)/2021, pp. 448–473. https://doi. org/10.1016/j.jpolmod.2019.09.009

[54] Jeż, R.: *Education vs. economically active and inactive individuals on the labour market in European countries*. Economy and Sociology: Theoretical and Scientific Journal, 2(2)/2015, pp. 19-23.

scholarship can be combined with any form of academic scholarship and, unlike those, is also available to eligible people during vacations.
The program launched by the Ministry of Education and Research, called "Second Chance," is also of particular importance. According to the methodology approved by Ministerial Order 3.062/25.01.2022, there is no upper age limit for those who wish to enroll in this program. The only condition is that they must be at least four years older than the age corresponding to the class in which they are enrolling. The program is structured on two levels. At the primary education level, individuals can enroll who have not participated in formal schooling at all, who were enrolled but dropped out of primary education, regardless of the timing and reasons for dropping out, or who have not completed primary education by the age of 14, are eligible to enroll.
At the lower secondary level, the program also includes a vocational training component. Those who have completed compulsory primary education (including in the Second Chance system) but have not continued their education or have completed part of the classes corresponding to lower secondary education (V, VI, or VII) but dropped out of school during this cycle of education, regardless of when and why they dropped out.

8. Future challenges

The presence of parents with young children in the labour market is in the fundamental economic and social interest of the state, while for the worker, achieving work-life balance is one of the most important objectives. Romania has an adequate and extensive legal framework to allow parents to return to the labour market after the birth of a child or children, based on their own choice. The types of leaves and benefits currently available are quite extensive, both in terms of value and duration. Paternity leave is generously regulated. The Romanian system also regulates some unique institutions to promote fathers' involvement in the family, such as the childcare course, which entitles applicants to longer paternity leave.
Labour law protection of parents is extensive, and the regulatory context has been further finetuned through the transposition of Directive 2019/1158 on work-life balance into Romanian law. The employers' attitude to the employee's need for flexible working arrangement is also of particular importance in which field the growing usage of part-time work and the recently introduced 'nursery vouchers' can be mentioned as incentivization measures.
This does not mean, however, that there are no challenges which, if eliminated, could significantly impact the return to work of parents, especially mothers. As presented earlier in our study, this relatively positive picture is overshadowed by the worrying phenomenon of labour market inequalities, which is clearly reflected in the employment rates of women and men in terms of labour market participation. One of the possible and probable reasons for this is that child-rearing, housekeeping and caregiving for elderly family members are predominantly performed by women in Romania, as the literature has consistently emphasised.
The primary constraint remains the inadequate coverage of early childhood education. In this respect public policy decision-makers have an important role to play. Private

institutions place a financial burden on parents and are therefore not an option for many. Public action in this area is therefore urgent and desirable. This is particularly true given that scientific research has shown a clear correlation between high school dropout rates and negative effects on employment later in life.

From another perspective, however, supporting individual decision-making is in the best interest of parents raising young children. The social reality in Romania is that child-rearing is traditionally the responsibility of mothers, and this mentality does not change easily, especially in rural areas. The sharing of family responsibilities between mother and father varies. From this point of view, paternity care and the possibility of equal access to parental care for both parents is important and can stimulate this process. The low employment rate among women is particularly worrying in Romania, and future developments in social and labour law should be directed towards addressing this issue. Without going into detail, I would like to mention two examples that illustrate this point. One is the extremely worrying rate and situation of underage mothers in Romania. Approximately 45% of girls under the age of 15 who become mothers in European Union countries come from Romania, 30% of underage mothers (under 18) in the European Union come from our country, and one in ten newborns in Romania has a teenage mother.[55] Their situations deserve greater attention because they are supposed to become employed from a background of multiple disadvantages. Another factor that hinders employment generally in the case of women, and particularly young mothers with small children, which I would like to highlight briefly, is the phenomenon of menstrual poverty. Without going into detail on this topic in this study, I believe that this issue requires further action, and there are numerous examples of good practice in other EU Member States that could serve as inspiration for Romanian legislators.[56]

[55] Alexandrescu, Gabriela (ed.): Studiu privind mamele minore și gravidele minore din România. Raport de cercetare. Save the Children Romania, 2024. Avaialble at: https://www.salvaticopiii.ro/sites/ro/files/2024-04/studiu-privind-mamele-minore.pdf

[56] Solymosi-Szekeres Bernadett: *Menstruáció és munkajog, a reprodukciós egészség és a nemek közötti egyenlőség viszonyában*, Bíbor Kiadó, Miskolc, 2025.

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Parenthood and labour Market Equality in Slovakia

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Abstract

This article examines the position of parents in the Slovak labour market, with a particular focus on single parents and the growing reliance on atypical forms of work. Drawing on recent legislative developments, demographic trends and labour market data, it highlights how single parents face disproportionate barriers, including limited access to stable employment, inflexible working time arrangements, and persistent wage disparities. The analysis further considers the expansion of part-time work, work from home and temporary work, assessing their mixed impact on work–life balance. Although recent amendments to the Labour Code, especially those adopted in 2022, have aligned national legislation with European standards and strengthened parents' rights to flexible working arrangements, practical implementation continues to lag behind the legal framework. The use of flexible employment remains limited in Slovakia, contributing to prolonged labour market absences, particularly among mothers. The article identifies key barriers to wider uptake, including conservative organizational cultures, persistent gender stereotypes, insufficient childcare capacity and legal indeterminacy in the application of "serious operational reasons". It argues that greater enforcement of existing rights, cultural change and supportive public policies are necessary to ensure that flexible employment becomes a functional component of a sustainable and inclusive labour market.

Keywords: labour law, work-life balance, equality, parental employment, atypical work, single parents

1. General context

Recent developments in the organization of work have exposed long-standing structural gaps in the protection of vulnerable groups of employees in Slovakia. In this context, it is necessary to examine the specific position of single parents, who carry the sole responsibility for childcare while participating in the labour market, as well as workers with family obligations who rely on flexible or atypical forms of employment. According to the Slovak non-profit organization *Jeden rodič*, in Slovakia there are more

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than 360,000 single parents, of whom approximately 170,000 are at risk of poverty, with women representing nearly 90% of this group.[3] Given the predominance of women within this demographic, this analysis focuses on the employment position of single mothers while also addressing the broader regulatory framework for flexible work in the Slovak Republic. The life circumstances of single parents significantly influence their ability to perform paid work, to access secure employment, and to reconcile work and care responsibilities. Slovak labour legislation traditionally adopts a universalist approach, with limited sensitivity to special groups, including single-parent workers.

A central challenge remains the limited availability and inconsistent application of flexible working arrangements. Although Slovak law provides for home office, telework, adjusted working hours, part-time work, and job-sharing, their practical implementation is uneven. (Home office usually refers to occasional or temporary work from home, as opposed to regular telework formally agreed in the employment contract.) Many employees face employer reluctance, undefined operational conditions, or limited enforceability of the right to request flexibility. Home office, in particular, exposes disparities in access to adequate digital equipment, stable internet, and employer-provided organizational support. Factors that disproportionately affect single parents with constrained financial means. At the same time, flexible work can offer meaningful opportunities for better work–life balance when accompanied by sufficient legal guarantees and employer cooperation. This analysis examines the current legal protection of parents, single parents and the regulation of flexible forms of work within Slovak labour law, situating the discussion within the European legal framework.

2. Labour market overview and data

According to data from the most recent population census in the Slovak Republic, there were 1,436,078 family households with children in 2021. Of this number, as many as 640,923 were family households formed by parents or a single parent with dependent children. Overall, households with dependent children accounted for nearly 45% of all households in Slovakia. In 2021, there were 357,199 single-parent households with almost 500,000 children.[4]

In Slovakia, nearly 2.5 million people are economically active of whom 55.25% are men and 44.75% are women. Notably, the most common occupation is that of a shop assistant, with women representing as many as 79.96% of all workers in this position. The second most frequent occupation is that of a specialized administrative worker, where women make up nearly 65% of employees.[5] It must be noted that working as a shop assistant is among the most vulnerable positions in Slovakia in the context of

[3] Jeden rodic, n.o. (online). Available at: www.jendorodic.sk. Accessed at: 05.12.2025.

[4] National analytical study 2021. (online). Available at: www.scitanie.sk Accessed at: 06.12.2025.

[5] Ibid.

advancing digitalization and automatization, and it is also an occupation in which flexible forms of work, such as working from home, cannot be applied.

Of the total population of nearly 5.5 million inhabitants, single parents account for as much as 14.5%, with almost 90% of all single-parent households consisting of women with either one child or multiple children.[6]

In 2023, the Ministry of Labor, Social Affairs and Family of the Slovak Republic conducted a survey among single parents regarding their needs and position in the labour market, carried out through the Institute for Labor and Family Research. A total of 501 respondents participated, 82.4% of whom were women. According to the survey, 86% reported to be caring for their child or children without assistance, 80% stated that they did not have sufficient financial resources, and 78.4% described work–life balance as a non-existent concept in their lives. Among the options that would help them most in achieving better work–life balance (with multiple answers allowed), 52.6% identified home office and 50.7% flexible working hours. Other frequently mentioned measures included additional leave beyond the statutory entitlement, shorter working hours, and greater availability of childcare facilities.[7]

According to the Institute for Labor and Family Research, employment in 2023 reached 72%, with an average gross monthly wage of €1,403. Work flexibility was highest in the IT sector, where the workforce is predominantly male. The use of home office in this sector increased 4.5-fold between 2017 and 2021. In contrast, in the sectors of manufacturing, services and education, which are predominantly female fields, workplace flexibility remained at only around 0.3% in 2022.[8]

It may be concluded that labour market statistics in Slovakia reveal a low rate of utilization of flexible forms of employment, alongside a large proportion of women with children working in service sectors where flexible adjustment of working conditions is not available. The number of single-parent households is also increasing and the current labour law framework does not provide adequate protection for this category of employees.

[6] Ibid.

[7] IVPR. (online). Available at: https://ivpr.gov.sk/aprilove-dialogy-s-ivpr-o-jednorodicovskych-domacnostiach/ Accessed at: 06.12.2025.

[8] IVPR. (online). Available at: https://ivpr.gov.sk/ Accessed at: 06.12.2025.

3. The status of single parents in the labour market

Slovak legislation, drawing on international and European legal standards, contains several provisions aimed at protecting employees, particularly pregnant women, mothers, and persons on parental leave, which are reflected in domestic regulations. [9] The main pillar of anti-discrimination legislation in the Slovak Republic is Act No. 365/2004 Coll. on Equal Treatment in Certain Areas and on Protection against Discrimination and on Amendments to Certain Acts (the "Anti-Discrimination Act"). This Act, together with Act No. 311/2001 Coll., the Labour Code, as amended (the "Labour Code"), form the core of labour law regulation of working parents in the Slovak Republic.

The terms single father and single mother are not legal terms. The Labour Code, in Section 40(1) and (2), defines a "single employee" as follows: *"A single employee is an employee who lives alone and is an unmarried, widowed, or divorced man, or an unmarried, widowed, or divorced woman. A single employee shall also be understood as a single man or woman for other serious reasons."* From a legal perspective, single mothers and fathers can therefore be subsumed under the category of single employees, as they independently provide care for their children. The notion of "single employee for other serious reasons" is not further defined in the Labour Code; however, it may be assumed to refer to a permanent and serious situation in which the employee lives alone or alone with a child or children. This could include, for example, cases where a spouse has permanently moved to another household, even though the marriage has not yet been formally dissolved.

At present, a single employee in the Slovak Republic is protected only on the grounds of pregnancy, motherhood and parenthood, with motherhood understood to include breastfeeding and subsequent childcare. No other grounds are regulated or protected by law, meaning single employees without children are not granted any special rights.[10] Slovak legislation does not provide for menstrual leave, menopausal leave, or an enforceable right to adjust working hours or the place of work for single female employees. Neither does Slovak legislation recognize the term other parent, registered partnership or same-sex marriages.

Enhanced protection for single employees caring for children is provided primarily in Section 164(4) of the Labour Code, which states: *"A pregnant woman, a woman or man who permanently cares for a child younger than three years, or a single woman or single man who permanently cares for a child younger than fifteen years may be employed to work overtime only with their consent. On-call duty may be arranged with them only by*

[9] BARANCOVÁ, H. a kol. *Zákonník práce. Komentár.* Bratislava: C. H. Beck, 2019, pp. 1520.

[10] TREĽOVÁ, S. Reconciling of work and family life of mother with employee status. In *Sustainable economic development and advancing education excellence in the era of global pandemic.* The 36th international business information management association conference (IBIMA). 2020, pp. 9900-9904.

agreement." Furthermore, Section 87(3) of the Labour Code allows uneven scheduling of working time for a single employee caring for a child under fifteen years of age only with that employee's written agreement.

Additional protection for single parents is provided primarily in relation to the termination of employment by the employer. Under Section 64(1)(d) of the Labour Code, single employees caring for a child under the age of three are entitled to a protection period. This provision is intended to support the reconciliation of work and childcare and to motivate parents to return to work earlier, as the employer may not dismiss them unless they commit a serious breach of work discipline. Although, even if a single parent caring for a child under the age of three were to commit such a serious breach, Section 68(3) of the Labour Code stipulates that their employment cannot be terminated with immediate effect; the employer may only give notice with a minimal 1 month notice period. It should be emphasized that, apart from labour law provisions, single parents are not entitled to any additional social advantages, such as priority placement of their child in kindergarten or higher social benefits.

Maternity leave, paternity leave and parental leave are relatively generous in Slovakia and may be taken until the child reaches the age of three, with financial support provided through the social insurance system[11] and the state.[12] However, under Section 166(1) of the Labour Code, a single female employee is entitled to only 37 weeks of maternity leave. Where both parents care for the child, the mother is entitled to 34 weeks of maternity leave and the father to 28 weeks of paternity leave, amounting to a total of 62 weeks of maternity and paternity leave with entitlement to the maternity benefit—unlike a single mother, who is entitled to only 37 weeks.[13] In practice, a single mother who bears full parental and economic responsibility for the child is disadvantaged in comparison to parents who can share childcare responsibilities. The current legal framework does not take into account the absence of the second parent and does not reflect the increased burden faced by single mothers. While two parents may receive financial support through social insurance for up to 62 weeks of maternity and paternity leave combined, a single mother may receive the maternity benefit for only 37 weeks.

According to Council Directive 92/85/EEC on the introduction of measures to encourage improvements in the safety and health at work of pregnant workers who have recently

[11] KRIPPEL, M. Aktuálne otázky v sociálnom poistení. In *Aktuálne výzvy pre sociálne zabezpečenie v 21. storočí*. 1. edit. Bratislava: SAP - Slovak Academic Press, 2018, pp. 34-47.

[12] TREĽOVÁ, S.: Pracovné povinnosti a starostlivosť o rodinu - vybrané otázky . In: S*účasný stav a nové úlohy pracovného práva*. Trnavské právnické dni. Nová Európa - výzvy a očakávania 1. vyd. – Praha (Česko) : Nakladatelství Leges, 2016. pp. 350-364.

[13] TREĽOVÁ, S. : Rovnaké zaobchádzanie so ženami a mužmi : osobitné pracovné podmienky tehotných žien a matiek v pracovnom pomere. - 1. vyd. - Praha : Nakladatelství Leges, 2019. – pp. 229.

given birth, or workers who are breastfeeding, it is sufficient for an employee to inform the employer of her pregnancy orally; a written notification is not required. A woman must submit a written notice together with a medical certificate confirming her pregnancy in order to be regarded as a pregnant employee under the section 40 of the Labour Code. It may therefore be concluded that the process of notifying an employer of pregnancy or breastfeeding in Slovakia is more complicated than necessary.

Despite the fact that the notification of pregnancy and breastfeeding is strictly regulated, the notification of bearing a "single status" is not addressed in the Labour Code. Employers currently determine for themselves when and on the basis of what evidence they will consider an employee to be single. The legal definition of a single employee is very broad and includes individuals who do not have parental responsibilities. Determining the single status of childless employees has no legal significance, as the Labour Code does not grant them any specific rights.

A single status may be proven, for example, by a death certificate, a divorce decree or a written declaration stating that the employee lives alone or shares a household with persons with whom they do not have an emotional and/or economic relationship. According to the decision of the Supreme Court of the Slovak republic R 34/1960, cohabitation in a single household without an emotional or economic relationship is not considered a common household. Employers therefore determine for themselves from whom and in what manner they will require proof of single status, thereby obtaining a wide range of information about the employee's personal life. Such information may allow employers to draw assumptions regarding the employee's private life, relationship status or sexual orientation, which may lead to discrimination.

A national project is currently underway at the Ministry of Labor, Social Affairs and Family of the Slovak Republic aimed at improving the position of working single parents. The planned reforms include the introduction of paid leave and monthly financial contributions of €100–200 for single parents for a period of one year if they participate in a development program provided by the Office of Labor, Social Affairs and Family. We consider it appropriate, within this national program, to revise the definition of a single-parent employee so that it clearly specifies how an employer may request proof of a single status, as well as to refine the criteria determining such status.

4. Atypical work - overview and current context

Under the Slovak Labour Code (Act No. 311/2001 Coll.), standard employment is understood as an employment relationship of indefinite duration with full statutory weekly working hours (typically 40 hours per week). All other forms of employment relationships are referred to as atypical, non-standard or flexible forms of employment.[14] These include, for example, part-time work, fixed-term employment contracts, various types of agreements performed outside a standard employment relationship, home-based work and telework, job sharing and flexible working time arrangements. Their common characteristic is a higher degree of flexibility in the organization of work, which creates opportunities for better reconciliation of work and family life and supports equal opportunities for women and men in the labour market. Parents of young children, particularly mothers constitute one of the groups for whom the availability of flexible forms of employment enables an earlier return to work and the reconciliation of career development with childcare responsibilities.

From a societal perspective, Slovakia belongs to the countries where the application of flexible working arrangements remains more the exception than the norm. Despite existing legal possibilities, the share of part-time employment and work from home has long remained low compared to the EU-average. For example, only approximately 4% of Slovak employees aged 20–64 work part-time, whereas the European Union average is around 17% (nearly 20% in the eurozone).[15] This represents the fourth lowest proportion within the EU-27, with lower figures recorded only in a few countries, such as Bulgaria. In contrast, part-time employment is common in Western European countries, reaching approximately 31% in Austria and more than 38% in the Netherlands. Slovakia therefore retains considerable untapped potential, particularly in improving the labour market participation of mothers following parental leave and in creating conditions conducive to an earlier return of parents to paid employment. The following section therefore presents the individual forms of atypical employment in detail, their legal regulation and application aspects, and subsequently evaluates their significance and limitations in the context of working parents of young children.

[14] TREĽOVÁ, S.: Atypical forms of employment in the Slovak Republic. In: Sustainable economic development and advancing education excellence in the era of global pandemic [elektronický dokument]. Norristown: International business information management association, 2020, S. 11474

[15] EUROSTAT (online). Available at: https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/web/products-eurostat-news/w/ddn-20241111-1. Accessed at 05.01.2026.

5. Analysis of individual forms of atypical employment[16]

The Labour Code places emphasis on the needs of employees who are parents of young children regarding the reduction of working hours. Pregnant women and parents of children under the age of 15 have a statutory right to request reduced working hours or another adjustment of weekly working time, and the employer is obliged to comply with such a request unless serious operational reasons prevent it. Refusal is permitted exceptionally and must be justified by the employer in writing. This provision, strengthened by the 2022 amendment, has significantly improved the position of parents of young children by guaranteeing their entitlement to a flexible working regime, provided that the nature of the work allows it at least to some extent. In practice, however, this right encounter a significant limitation: the legislation does not explicitly define what constitute *„serious operational reason"*. This legal indeterminacy creates broad scope for employer interpretation and, in some cases, leads to formalistic or purposive justifications for refusing requests. In other words, although an employer may reject a request solely on operational grounds, the absence of a precise statutory definition may in practice contribute to misuse of this provision and to the frequent rejection of parents' applications.[17]

Employment for a fixed (pre-agreed) period in accordance with Section 48 of the Labour Code represents another form regarded as "atypical", as the standard form of employment is employment for an indefinite period. The Labour Code permits this form of employment but subjects it to several limitations designed to prevent abuse. The maximum duration of a single fixed-term employment relationship is two years, within which it may be extended or renewed no more than twice (i.e. an employee may be employed for a fixed term for a maximum of two years, and the contract may be extended no more than twice). If an employer wishes to continue the employment relationship with the same employee after the expiry of the two-year period without a six-month interruption, the law provides that such employment is automatically deemed to have been concluded for an indefinite period. Statutory exceptions exist, for example where employment serves as a replacement during another employee's maternity or parental leave. In such cases, the fixed-term employment relationship may exceed two years and last until the return of the replaced employee, as the objective reason for the time limit lies in substituting a parent on leave.

In practice, fixed-term employment relationships involving parents occur primarily in two situations: (i) as a means of hiring a replacement for an employee on maternity or

[16] The law also protects employees against excessive workload. A parent caring for a young child may not be required to perform overtime work or remain on standby without their consent, and overtime or night work may be imposed only by agreement. Part-time employment therefore constitutes a fully-fledged employment relationship with all statutory protections, the purpose of which is to enable employees to combine work and family responsibilities within a reduced time scope.

[17] PICHRT, J., MORÁVEK, J. (eds.) *Slaďování soukromého a pracovního života*. Praha: Wolters Kluwer ČR, 2023, s. 169.

parental leave, whereby the employer temporarily fills the position for the duration of the employee's absence with another worker on a fixed-term contract that terminates upon the employee's return; and (ii) upon a parent's return to work after a prolonged interruption, when some mothers or fathers initially commence work under a fixed-term contract that serves as a practical testing arrangement, allowing the employer to assess the employee's performance and reintegration before offering a contract of indefinite duration. This practice does not necessarily involve a statutory probation period but reflects the employer's preference for a time-limited engagement as a risk-management tool. An advantage of fixed-term employment may be a certain degree of flexibility, as the employee does not assume a long-term commitment, which may be suitable if, for example, a further maternity leave is planned. On the other hand, it entails the disadvantage of uncertainty, as continuation of employment is not guaranteed after the agreed period, which represents a financial risk for parents of young children. If an employee has already been employed for a fixed term with one employer for two years (with two renewals), any subsequent contract must be concluded for an indefinite period. It is therefore important for parents to be aware of these rights, as an employee may seek judicial recognition of an employment relationship for an indefinite period if an employer unlawfully extends short-term contracts.

Home-based work is defined by the Labour Code (Section 52) as work performed by an employee for an employer at the employee's home or at another agreed location outside the employer's premises. Telework constitutes a specific form of home-based work in which information and communication technologies are used—typically remote work carried out via a computer with electronic connectivity to the employer. In current practice, the term *home office* is also frequently used, although it is not explicitly recognized in Slovak legislation. *Home office* usually refers to occasional or temporary work from home, as opposed to regular telework formally agreed in the employment contract.[18]

In response to the COVID-19 pandemic, an exceptional provision was incorporated into the Labour Code in 2021, allowing employers, during a declared emergency, to unilaterally order home-based work where the nature of the work permitted, while simultaneously introducing the employee's right to request work from home if their work could be performed in this manner and no serious reasons existed on the employer's side. Although this measure was originally intended as a temporary "pandemic" arrangement, several of its elements were subsequently incorporated into permanent legislation. At present, therefore, if the nature of the work allows, employers should comply with employees' requests for occasional work from home unless they have serious operational reasons to insist on work being performed at the workplace.

[18] BENKO, M., MORAVČÍKOVÁ, K., PIROŠÍKOVÁ, M.: Pracovné právo. C. H. Beck, Bratislava, 2022, s. 203–206.

Regular home-based work or telework must be agreed in the employment contract (or by an amendment thereto), and the law requires the contract to regulate specific elements, such as the method of recording working time, communication with the employer, wage payment, and possible compensation for increased expenses incurred by the employee when working from home. Home-based employees are subject to a different regime in certain respects: where employees independently schedule their working time, they are not entitled to remuneration for downtime, overtime compensation, or certain wage supplements, as they organize their work themselves. Provisions on minimum daily and weekly rest periods also do not apply, since employees working from home may arrange their working time individually. On the other hand, employers remain obliged to ensure occupational health and safety in remote work, including assessing the suitability of work equipment, providing training on the safe use of display screen equipment, and informing employees about potential risks. In 2022, the law also introduced the employer's obligation to reimburse increased costs associated with regular telework (e.g. electricity and internet expenses) and to provide meal allowances (either in the form of financial contributions or meal vouchers) to employees working from home. These changes eliminated previous legal uncertainty and inconsistencies in practice related to telework, and it is now established that home-based workers should, in principle, enjoy working conditions comparable to those of on-site employees, including meal provision.

Job sharing is a relatively new institution introduced into the Labour Code with effect from 1 January 2020. Pursuant to Section 48a of the Labour Code, a shared job represents a form of work organization in which two or more part-time employees jointly share one job position and its associated tasks. This is based on the statutory definition of "a job position in which employees in part-time employment relationships mutually arrange their working time and the work tasks associated with that position." In practice, job sharing operates by the employer designating a single job position (e.g. an administrative or reception role) and filling it with two or more part-time employees. These employees mutually agree on the division of work and working time, for example, one employee may work in the morning and the other in the afternoon, or they may alternate by days or weeks. Each employee has their own part-time employment contract and, in addition, signs a written agreement with the employer regarding placement in the shared job position. This agreement must be in writing, and the employer must specify all working conditions applicable to the shared position either in the agreement itself or by separate written notice. All employees sharing one position should perform the same type of work, have the same place of work, and generally comparable wage conditions to ensure mutual substitutability and fairness.

If the employees sharing the position fail to agree on the allocation of working time or tasks, the employer determines the schedule. Where one of the shared employees is temporarily unable to perform work (e.g. due to illness or another obstacle), the law

assumes that the remaining employees will substitute for them to the extent possible. This places emphasis on teamwork: if one employee is absent, the other temporarily covers the full workload, provided that no serious reasons prevents them from doing so. Regarding termination of the job-sharing arrangement, the law allows either the employer or the employees to terminate the agreement on placement in a shared job position with one month's notice. Upon expiry of the notice period, the agreement ceases to apply and the employee is no longer assigned to the shared position, although the underlying part-time employment relationship may continue outside the job-sharing regime. If the shared job position itself is abolished while the job content remains unchanged, the employee previously assigned to that position has the right to be reassigned to full-time employment for that work (or, in the case of multiple employees, proportionally according to their working hours). The significance of job-sharing lies in its ability to formally combine several part-time positions into a single job position and thereby ensure continuous coverage of work tasks as if performed by one full-time employee. At the same time, it enables two individuals - typically parents of young children, students or older workers - to work part-time and share responsibilities. The employer does not lose work capacity, as the position remains fully staffed despite being occupied by two individuals. For parents (and others), job sharing represents an innovative means of remaining economically active on a reduced working basis without diminishing the scope of work coverage for the employer.

Alongside part-time employment, flexible working time arrangements represent a highly effective instrument for reconciling work and family life. The institution of flexible working time (*flexitime*) allows employees, to a certain extent, to determine the beginning and end of their working day according to their needs.[19] The Labour Code defines flexible working time in Section 88 as a method of either even or uneven distribution of working time, which may be introduced by the employer through an internal regulation or by agreement with employee representatives. Typically, a flexible working time regime consists of a core period during which the employee must be present at the workplace (e.g. 9:00–14:00) and a flexible period during which the employee completes the remaining daily working hours at their own discretion (e.g. arriving at any time between 6:00–9:00 and leaving at any time after 14:00, provided that the total daily working time is fulfilled). Flexible working time arrangements may be applied on a daily, weekly, or other reference period basis; the essential feature is that the employee enjoys a certain degree of autonomy in scheduling working hours, although the total number of hours required per week or month must still be worked in full. For parents of young children, flexible working hours are particularly valuable. It enables them, for example, to take children to kindergarten or school in the morning and arrive at work later, or conversely to leave work earlier in the afternoon to collect children, with the remaining hours worked in the evening or on another day.

[19] FREEL, L., LIGASOVÁ, Z. Práca na úkor rodiny: nevyhnutnosť alebo možnosť? In *Naděje právní vědy 2017: Právní věda v praxi*. Plzeň: Západočeská univerzita, 2017, s. 99.

Modern companies increasingly offer flexible working hours as an employee benefit, even though the law does not explicitly require it. At the same time, flexible working time arrangements also entail certain disadvantages, particularly regarding wage compensation for obstacles to work on the employee's side. In most cases, employers are required to provide wage compensation for obstacles at work only to the extent that such obstacles occur during the core working time.[20]

In addition to adjustments to working time and the duration of employment, other measures also exist. Employers are required to take parents' needs into account when scheduling shifts, and parents of young children should not be assigned to night or irregular shifts unless this is unavoidable. The law explicitly imposes an obligation on employers to consider the needs of pregnant women and employees caring for children when planning work schedules. This means, for example, that a single parent should not be systematically assigned to work shifts that are incompatible with childcare responsibilities, such as night shifts, without their consent. Another beneficial measure to parents is the introduction of extended annual leave: from 2020, any employee who permanently cares for a child[21] is entitled to at least five weeks of paid annual leave per year, instead of four weeks. This entitlement aims to motivate economically active parents and compensate them for the time devoted to family responsibilities, for instance, a young employee under the age of 33 who cares for a young child is entitled to the same amount of annual leave (five weeks) as an older colleague aged over 33. This measure was also adopted as part of a broader legislative package aimed at promoting the reconciliation of work and family life.

6. Significance of atypical forms of employment for parents of young children

Flexible forms of employment are of key importance for parents caring for young children, as they enable a better reconciliation of professional obligations with family life. In Slovakia, it remains common for mothers to stay at home for two to three years following childbirth while receiving parental allowance, often followed by another period of parental leave in the case of subsequent children. However, this situation is not always the result of personal choice alone but also reflects the limited availability of part-time or flexible employment opportunities. Many women would be willing to return to work earlier, at least on a part-time basis, if the labour market allowed it. Flexible working arrangements therefore help prevent complete career interruption. Through part-time employment, mothers or fathers can maintain professional

[20] BARANCOVÁ, H. a kol. *Zákonník práce. Komentár.* 3. vydanie. Bratislava: C. H. Beck, 2022, s. 920.

[21] For the purposes of Section 103(2) of the Labor Code, a "child" is understood to mean a dependent child within the meaning of specific legislation, that is, generally a child until the completion of compulsory schooling, and at the latest until the age of 25 if the child is continuously preparing for a profession (e.g. through study).

skills, remain connected to the working environment, and secure a certain level of income, which facilitates a smoother and more sustainable return to full employment at a later stage.

From the perspective of gender equality, it is essential that flexible forms of employment are not perceived as a "concession for women" but are utilized by both parents. A positive development in this regard is the introduction of paternity leave, which encourages fathers to take on caregiving responsibilities shortly after the birth of a child and helps to dismantle stereotypes according to which only mothers stay at home. More generally, the greater the involvement of fathers in taking parental leave or requesting reduced working hours, the more balanced women's opportunities in the labour market become. At the EU level, women are significantly more likely to work part-time due to caregiving responsibilities, which has negative implications for their career progression, earnings and future pension entitlements. European policies, including Directive (EU) 2019/1158, therefore aim to promote the uptake of flexible working arrangements by men as well, to distribute caregiving responsibilities more evenly and prevent women from being pushed into disadvantaged positions in the labour market.

For parents of young children, atypical forms of employment provide a practical means of reconciling work with parenthood without excessive strain. For example, the possibility of working from home allows parents to save time otherwise spent commuting and to respond flexibly to unexpected situations, such as caring for a sick child while continuing to work, at least partially, from home. During the COVID-19 pandemic, remote work expanded rapidly and demonstrated that, for many positions, it can be equally effective. Many parents, particularly mothers returning from parental leave, valued the opportunity to re-enter employment earlier through home office arrangements or part-time work without neglecting childcare responsibilities. Flexible working hours are likewise highly beneficial, allowing parents to adapt their working schedules to school or kindergarten routines and thereby reducing stress and improving overall family well-being.

Job sharing was introduced with the explicit aim of creating more part-time positions suitable for parents who do not wish, or are unable, to work full-time. For such parents—often mothers returning from maternity leave—the possibility of sharing a single position is advantageous, as it allows them to work reduced hours while jointly covering the full working week with a colleague. In this way, they do not bear the full burden of a full-time position alone and remain integrated in the work process. Similarly, work performed under agreements outside standard employment during maternity or parental leave provides parents with an opportunity to earn additional income and maintain professional qualifications without losing entitlement to state benefits. Many employees welcome this option, as it allows them to perform a limited amount of work alongside childcare, offering not only financial benefits

but also psychological advantages through continued contact with the professional environment. This, in turn, facilitates an easier return to the original position after parental leave, as parents do not become completely detached from work routines.

The availability of flexible forms of employment also has a positive impact on family life and child development. Parents who can work reduced hours or under more flexible arrangements experience lower levels of exhaustion and can devote more quality time to their children. At the same time, they remain economically active, which benefits household finances and reduces the risk that parenthood leads to poverty or financial dependence of one partner on the other. At the societal level, increased participation of mothers in the labour market particularly through part-time employment contributes to higher overall employment rates and reduces the waste of women's skills and qualifications. It also supports the gradual reduction of gender inequalities: once it becomes common for fathers to adjust their working hours for family reasons, flexibility ceases to be perceived as a "benefit for mothers" and instead becomes a standard feature of modern working life. Finally, younger generations entering the labour market (often referred to as Generation Z) place greater emphasis on work–life balance and expect a certain degree of flexibility from employers. It can therefore be assumed that pressure for flexible working arrangements will continue to increase, ultimately benefiting parents as well in the long term.

Among the main barriers to the use of flexible working arrangements are conservative organizational cultures and persistent stereotypes, particularly the belief that employees must be physically present at the workplace, and that parents, especially mothers, will not perform at full capacity or will frequently be absent due to caregiving responsibilities. As a result, employers often refrain from offering flexibility despite the supportive legal framework, frequently relying on the possibility of rejecting requests on the grounds of "serious operational reasons", the assessment of which remains largely at the employer's discretion. These difficulties are particularly pronounced in sectors with continuous operations and shift-based work, where adapting working time arrangements is organizationally challenging and disproportionately affects single parents. Even where part-time work or home office arrangements exist, parents therefore encounter practical constraints. Although the COVID-19 pandemic accelerated the spread of remote and hybrid work models, their implementation remains uneven, with some organizations returning to requirements of full on-site presence. Finally, flexible working arrangements are predominantly utilized by women, reflecting traditional gender role divisions. This may result in indirect disadvantages for women, including lower earnings and slower career progression. It is therefore essential to support greater uptake of flexible work arrangements by fathers and to strengthen societal awareness of the importance of shared caregiving responsibilities.

7. Conclusion

Atypical and flexible forms of employment represent an important instrument of work–life balance policy and play a significant role in supporting the employment of parents of young children. The Slovak legal framework currently offers a wide range of flexible working arrangements, including part-time employment, work from home, flexible working time, job sharing and extended parental entitlements, including the introduction of paternity leave. Amendments to the Labour Code adopted in 2022 aligned national legislation with European standards and created formal conditions for a higher degree of labour market flexibility.

Slovak legislation also seeks to prevent the so-called chaining of short-term fixed-term contracts through the limits of two years and a maximum of two renewals. In comparison with certain neighbouring jurisdictions, this represents a forward-looking regulatory solution. For example, in Hungary, the effective limitation on successive fixed-term contracts applies only after five years, allowing prolonged reliance on temporary arrangements. The Slovak model could therefore serve as a good practice example for strengthening employment stability and reducing precarious work.

Despite these legislative changes, practical implementation in Slovakia continues to lag the legal framework. The use of non-standard forms of employment remains limited, and flexible job opportunities are still the exception rather than the rule in the labour market. As a result, many parents remain absent from paid employment for extended periods following childbirth, a situation that is not always the outcome of personal preference but often reflects the insufficient availability of flexible work opportunities.

Looking ahead, it is therefore essential to systematically remove barriers that hinder the broader application of flexible working arrangements. At the level of public policy, continued targeted support for employers who create part-time positions or employ parents returning from parental leave is desirable. Without adequate structural and institutional support, flexible working arrangements remain, for many parents, merely a formal option without practical usability. Equally important is the promotion of modern approaches to human resource management. Employers should be encouraged to assess work performance based on achieved results rather than physical presence at the workplace, and to make greater use of hybrid work models, job sharing, and flexible working time arrangements. Evidence from practice and international research suggests that labour market flexibility can contribute to higher employee satisfaction, loyalty, and workforce stability, ultimately producing positive outcomes for employers as well.

A key prerequisite for the effective functioning of atypical forms of employment is cultural change. Flexible working arrangements should not be perceived as exceptions, concessions, or indicators of lower work commitment, but rather as legitimate tools for

retaining qualified employees at different life stages. Particular attention should also be paid to the consistent enforcement of labour law provisions and the prevention of discrimination against employees who exercise parental and flexible working rights, including scrutiny of employers' justifications for refusing flexibility requests.

The analysis demonstrates that single parents represent a structurally vulnerable group within the Slovak labour market, facing cumulative disadvantages arising from the interaction of caregiving responsibilities, limited labour market flexibility and insufficiently tailored legal protection. Despite their significant representation in the population and labour force, Slovak labour law continues to approach single-parent employment primarily through a universal framework that inadequately reflects the absence of a second caregiver and income earner. Existing protective measures focus narrowly on pregnancy and early motherhood, while broader issues, such as enforceable access to flexible working arrangements, income security and predictable working conditions, remain largely unaddressed. As a result, single parents, particularly single mothers concentrated in low-flexibility service sectors, are disproportionately exposed to economic insecurity and constrained work–life balance.

From a normative and policy perspective, the current regulatory framework does not sufficiently align with the practical realities of single-parent households. While atypical and flexible forms of employment hold substantial potential to facilitate labour market participation for single parents, their limited availability, uneven implementation, and weak enforceability significantly reduce their effectiveness. Without clearer legal entitlements, transparent criteria for employer decision-making, and safeguards against discrimination, flexibility risks remain a formal rather than substantive right. Addressing these shortcomings requires a more differentiated labour law approach that explicitly recognizes single parents as a distinct category of workers, integrates flexibility with adequate social protection, and ensures that reconciliation of work and care does not come at the expense of economic stability or long-term labour market inclusion.

In the long run, further development toward increased labour market flexibility can be expected in the context of demographic change, population ageing and evolving expectations of younger generations entering the labour market. Creating a working environment that enables the reconciliation of parenthood and employment without negative consequences for career progression or families' economic stability is in the interest of parents, employers, and society. Labor market flexibility is thus increasingly becoming an indispensable component of a sustainable and inclusive labour market.

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Balancing Work and Care: Labour and Social Protection for Parents with Young Children in Slovenia

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Abstract

Slovenia is an example of a country that has already successfully implemented measures in different areas to promote labour market participation of parents with young children. This is reflected in the fact that Slovenia has the highest employment rate of parents with young children among EU Member States. Its public childcare system, together with a well-developed social security system for families, including a long parental leave policy, has played a central role in supporting the high labour market participation of parents with children. The dual career family model prevails. However, despite the relatively positive data and the good labour and social security framework, parents with young children still face several problems. In practice, discrimination, especially against young women, when entering the labour market, unequal sharing of care responsibilities and domestic tasks between men and women, and the attitude (of employers and society as a whole) towards fathers taking on more care responsibilities are perceived as the main problems. This shows that there is still room for improvement and that additional measures are needed to ensure that good legislation is translated into practice and that equality before the law reflects into equality in society.

1. Introduction – general context

Slovenia's public childcare system together with a well-developed social security system for families, including long parental leave policies,[2] have played a central role in supporting the high labour market participation of parents with children. The dual career family model has predominated, with a high proportion of women in

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[2] In the 1970s, the leave policy in Slovenia followed the Swedish model of short maternity leave and long parental leave, with the possibility of leave being shared between partners (Korintus & Stropnik (2009); Humer & Hrženjak, 2016). Slovenia was also the first European country to introduce one-year long parental leave in 1986 with 100% compensation benefit (Resolution on the Family Policy 2018-2028 "A Family Friendly Society for All" (ReDP18-28).

full-time employment since the 1960s.[3] It is therefore not surprising that Slovenia has the highest employment rate of parents with young children among EU Member States.[4] Furthermore, work-life balance in its broadest sense has been attracting a lot of attention in Slovenia for a long time now. It has been a long-standing issue on the policy agenda, both from the perspective of promoting employment and from the broader perspective of gender equality, which play an important role in its development.[5]
However, although official figures may not show it,[6] parents with young children report that they are still disadvantaged on the labour market because of their care responsibilities, as they represent "less desirable" workers.[7] We could assume, that the problem is (at least partly) reflected in the falling birth rate[8] and the fact that young people are choosing to start families later in their lives.[9] Furthermore, although discrimination on the grounds of parenthood in employment is prohibited, it is mainly young women who have problems entering the labour market, maintaining their employment status, and motherhood makes it more difficult for them to progress in their careers. In practice, several cases have been reported of young women being asked in a job interview if they are planning to have a baby soon, or even being told that they will not be hired or will be hired on temporary basis because they have young children. Moreover, although paternity leave is well established and taken by the vast majority of fathers who are entitled to it, employers are not supportive to fathers who take part of their parental leave.[10] Gender inequalities in the division of domestic tasks also persist, with research showing that childcare responsibilities and tasks such as cleaning, tidying up and cooking remain mainly the domain of women.[11] In 2025, Slovenia scored 58.0 points out of 100 on the Gender Equality Index and

[3] These policies originated in the socialist period of the former Yugoslavia and aimed to enable women to enter the labour market to offset the shortage of working men after the Second World War under conditions of rising industrialization, but they were also motivated by an ideology of women's economic emancipation, independence, and gender equality (Humer & Hrženjak, 2016).

[4] In 2024 the average employment rate of adults aged 25-49 with resident children in the EU countries was 82.6%. Slovenia (92.2%) ranked first, before Sweden (91.3%); (Eurostat, Households statistics - LFS series, Employment by household composition, Employment rate by educational attainment level and household composition).

[5] See Kresal & Zbyszewska (2017), Bagari (2020).

[6] In Slovenia, the employment rate for people with children is even higher than for people without children, as shown in the next chapter.

[7] Delo (2014); Resolution on the Family Policy 2018-2028 "A Family Friendly Society for All" (ReDP18-28).

[8] According to preliminary data from the Statistical Office, 16 800 children were born in Slovenia in 2023, a decrease of 5% compared to the previous year and the fewest since data collection began in 1922. The natural increase, which has been continuously negative since 2017, was negative for all months of the year for the first time last year. Available at: https://www.stat.si/StatWeb/en/News/Index/11673.

[9] On average, women gave birth at the age of 31.1 years in 2022. Those who gave birth for the first time last year were 29.6 years old.

[10] Findings from the project »Fathers and Employers in Action« from 2015 showed that fathers often did not take both paternity and parental leave because their employer was reluctant to do so, and even more often because their jobs would suffer. Available at:
https://www.mirovni-institut.si/enakopraven-oce/.

[11] Möller-Slawinski & Calmbach (2016).

ranked 18th among Member States.[12] Yet Slovenia's progress towards gender equality is slower compared to other Member States of the EU.[13]

This shows that legal frameworks and family-oriented policies, while adequate, may not be totally effective in practice. In this respect, all stakeholders need to ensure that the legal frameworks designed to provide special labour and social protection for parents with children, together with other family-oriented policies, are effective in practice and that different measures promote not only the employment of parents with young children, but also gender equality in terms of labour market position and working conditions.

2. Labour market situation

In 2024, Slovenia reached a record of 944,008 persons in employment, the highest number since 1991 and slightly more than in 2023, when 941,300 people were employed. This represents a 19% increase compared to ten years earlier, when there were around 791,300 employed persons. The workforce continues to age: the average age of employed persons rose from 42.0 years in 2013 to 43.6 years in 2023, with both the group of men and women experiencing increases (1.3 years for men and 2.0 years for women). The average age of working women remains older, largely due to longer education and later entry into the labour market. The 2012 pension reform also contributed to gradual gender parity by raising the retirement age to 65 and introducing bonuses for staying in work beyond the minimum retirement age. The educational structure of the workforce has shifted significantly over the past decade. In 2023, 54.2% of employed persons had completed upper secondary education, 9.3% had only basic education or less, while 36.5% had attained tertiary education. More pronounced changes occurred among women: almost half (48.4%) had completed tertiary education, an increase of 8.8 percentage points compared to 2013, while the share with upper secondary education fell to 44.2% and the share with basic education or less to 7.4%.[14]

With 3.7% in 2014 (the same as in 2023), the unemployment rate was the lowest in the last decade (10.1% in 2013).[15] The employment rate for people aged 20-64 years was 78.3%. While the employment rate for men stood at 81.1%, the employment rate for women was 75.1%, resulting in a gender employment gap of 6 percentage points.[16] The data on the employment rate of adults with and without children is interesting. The employment rate for people aged 25-49[17] without children in Slovenia was 87.1%

[12] Available at: https://eige.europa.eu/gender-equality-index/2025/country/SI.

[13] Human Rights Ombudsman of the Republic of Slovenia (2023).

[14] Statistical Office of the Republic of Slovenia (SURS) (2025a).

[15] Eurostat (2025), Employment and unemployment (LFS), Unemployment – LFS adjusted series, Total unemployment rate.

[16] Eurostat (2025), Employment and unemployment (LFS), LFS main indicators, Employment and activity – LFS adjusted series.

[17] This group has been chosen because it includes people at an age when they are more likely to have young children.

in 2024, and even higher for people aged 25-49 with children (92.2%). The employment rate for people aged 25-49 with children has increased from 86.6% in 2014 to 90.9% in 2018 and has remained stable (with minor changes) since then (91.5% in 2019, 90.5% in 2020, 91.2% in 2021, 92% in 2022, 91.7% in 2023).[18] Additionally, the share of children aged 0-17 living in households where no one is working in Slovenia is the lowest in the EU (2.7% in Slovenia, 8.0% in the EU-27 in 2023).[19] However, looking at the gender employment gap, men with children have a significantly higher employment rate than women with children. While the employment rate for men aged 25-49 with children stood at 96.5% in 2024, the employment rate for women aged 25-49 with children was 88.3%, resulting in a gender employment gap of 8.2 percentage points.

The share of persons employed part-time in Slovenia in 2024 (8.8%) was much lower than the EU average (17.7%). Among these 8.5%, a significantly higher number of women work part-time: 12.5% of women aged 15-64, compared to just 5.7% of men in the same age group.[20] While 17.2% of women worked part-time because of caring for disabled adults or children as the main reason, this was the main reason for only 3.7% of men in 2021.[21] This points to the problem of unequal gendered caring responsibilities which has traditionally existed in Slovenia.

Furthermore, although a few years ago it could be argued that gender equality in Slovenia, especially in the area of work, was one of the best in Europe, trends are not that promising. Data show that in Slovenia, the situation regarding equal pay has significantly deteriorated over the past decades, with large fluctuations and a failure to establish a stable and lasting reduction of the gender pay gap. The unadjusted pay gap, which was among the lowest in the EU (0.9% in 2010), has generally increased over the past ten years (even up to 9.3% in 2018, 6.8% in 2023, 5.4% in 2024). This confirms the seriousness of structural problems and points to the necessity of effective measures for pay transparency, job evaluation, and the elimination of discrimination.[22] Moreover, in 2019, Slovenia was found to be in breach of the right to equal pay for equal work or work of equal value without discrimination on grounds of sex, as guaranteed by the revised European Social Charter.[23]

[18] Eurostat (2025), Employment rate by educational attainment level and household composition.

[19] Eurostat (2025), Employment and unemployment (LFS), Population, activity and inactivity- LFS Adjusted series, Jobless households – children.

[20] Eurostat (2025), LFS main indicators, Employment and activity – LFS adjusted series, Part-time employment and temporary contracts - annual data.

[21] Eurostat (2025), Main reason for part-time employment – Distributions by sex and age (%). 2021 is the last year for which data are available for both sexes regarding caring for adults with disabilities or children as the main reason for part-time work.

[22] Eurostat (2025), Gender pay gap in unadjusted form.

[23] Kresal (2021), pp. 190-192.

3. Labour law protection of and employment incentives for parents with young children

Protection of parents with young children in Slovenian legislation can be divided into two groups of rights. The first group consists of rights arising from the employment relationship, which are usually guaranteed only to workers in employment relationship (employees). The second group includes rights derived from the Slovenian social security system, which is based on compulsory public social insurance schemes for different social risks (one of which is parental protection insurance), supplemented by social assistance and family benefits schemes.[24] Labour protection rights (first group) are regulated by the Employment Relationship Act 2013 (*Zakon o delovnih razmerjih*; hereinafter: ZDR-1)[25], and social security rights that address parenthood are regulated by the Parental Protection and Family Benefits Act (*Zakon o starševskem varstvu in družinskih prejemkih*; hereinafter: ZSDP-1)[24] and, with regard to child benefit, partly also by the Act on the Exercise of Rights from Public Funds (*Zakon o uveljavljanju pravic iz javnih sredstev*; hereinafter: ZUPJS).[25]

3.1 General rules that protect and promote employment of parents with young children

ZDR-1 recognises parents as a protected category. According to ZDR-1, workers have the right to special protection in an employment relationship (and even before, in the process of concluding an employment contract)[26] due to pregnancy and parenthood (Article 182(1) of ZDR-1). In case of a dispute regarding the exercise of special protection due to these circumstances, the burden of proof lies with the employer (Article 182(2) of ZDR-1). The general right to special protection is further reflected in various rights. Firstly, the employers are obliged to enable employees to easily reconcile their family and employment responsibilities (Article 182(3) of ZDR-1) and may not request or seek any information on the employee's pregnancy unless the employee concerned allows this in order to exercise her rights during pregnancy (Article 183 of ZDR-1). Another view of labour law protection of parents with young children protection is the prohibition of carrying out particular working tasks (Article 184 of ZDR-1) and working overtime or at night (Article 185(2) of ZDR-1). Both apply to employed mothers during pregnancy and breastfeeding period if the risk assessment of such work indicates risk to her and her child's health. Furthermore, a worker caring for a child under three years of age and a single-parent worker who is caring for a child under seven years

[24] Bagari & Sagmeister (2022).

[25] Official Gazette RS, No. 21/13 with amendments.

[24] Official Gazette RS, No. 26/14 with amendments.

[25] Official Gazette RS, No. 62/10 with amendments.

[26] When concluding an employment contract, the employer may not require applicants to provide information on their family and/or marital status, pregnancy, family planning or other information unless it is directly related to the employment relationship. Furthermore, the employer may not make the conclusion of an employment contract conditional on obtaining this information or on additional conditions relating to the prohibition of pregnancy or postponement of maternity (Article 28 (2)(3) of ZDR-1).

of age or a seriously ill child or a child in need of special care and protection may be required to work overtime or at night only with his or her prior written consent (Article 185(1)(3) of ZDR-1).

Upon completion of parental leave,[27] the employer must enable the worker to start performing work under the conditions of the employment contract and grant him or her the rights that have improved during the worker's absence from work due to parental leave including raises in wages (Article 186 of ZDR-1).[28] Moreover, special protection of pregnant women and parents applies to the protection against dismissal. An employer may not terminate the employment contract with an employee during the period of pregnancy, breastfeeding, nor in the period of uninterrupted parental leave in the form of full absence from work and for one month after the end of such leave (Article 115 of ZDR-1).[29]

Furthermore, a worker has the right to paid absence from work of up to seven working days in an individual calendar year due to personal circumstances, which are specifically listed (Article 165 of ZDR-1). The right to accompany a child to school on the first school day was introduced with the amendment of the ZDR-1 in December 2019 as one of the personal circumstances that entitles workers to a paid absence.

3.2 Atypical employment and flexible working arrangements

Atypical employment and flexible working arrangements are one of the most important measures to facilitate work-life balance, which is a key prerequisite for employees' wellbeing. Research shows that the potential impact of flexible working arrangements on work-life balance depends on the extent to which employees can choose when and where to work, their level of autonomy at work, self-management skills, workload, and workplace attitudes and support.

In Slovenia, the most widely used flexible working arrangements in practise, designed to facilitate the reconciliation of work and private life, are part-time work and telework. Part-time employment for the purposes of work-life balance may be based on the interest and will of the employee and the employer, or on a right of the employee arising from the ZSDP-1.[30] The legal basis for part-time work also determines the employee's legal position. If one parent exercises the right to work part-time on grounds of ZSDP-1 due to childcare, the employer has to guarantee the right to a wage according to the actual working time, and the budget of the Republic of Slovenia guarantees the payment of

[27] Parental leave is used in ZDR-1 as an umbrella term for all three; maternity, paternity and parental leave.

[28] The provision has been included in the ZDR-1 under the influence of EU law, as it implements requirements arising from EU directives. See, for example, Article 15 of the Directive 2006/54 on the implementation of the principle of equal opportunities and equal treatment of men and women in matters of employment and occupation and Article 10 of the Directive 2019/1158 on work-life balance for parents and carers.

[29] The protection is not absolute, as the law provides for exceptions to the prohibition on dismissal, whereby protected workers (pregnant workers, workers who are breastfeeding and workers on maternity, paternity or parental leave and for one month after the expiry of such leave) may be dismissed by their employer, but these exceptions are very limited and strict.

[30] The right to work part-time due to childcare and payment of social security contributions is described in Chapter 4 – Social protection of parents with young children.

social security contributions to the employee up to his full working time. This means that the worker in this case has social security rights as if he were working full-time (since he also has contributions paid for full-time insurance) and is closer to full-time employment in terms of labour law rights. However, part-time employment can also be based on the interest and on the will of the contracting parties (the employee and the employer). In this case, the worker does not have the right to part-time employment nor is he or she entitled to the payment of social security contributions for the hours he or she is not working (Article 65 of ZSDP-1), but he may propose to the employer to conclude a contract of part-time employment for the purposes of reconciling his or her professional and private life. The employer must respond to the employee's proposal and give reasons for its decision in writing within 15 days.

Furthermore, under Slovenian law, telework is not an absolute right of the worker, but the worker may, at any time during the employment relationship, request telework for the purposes of reconciling work and private life, and the employer must give the employer reasons for its decision in writing within 15 days at the latest. Articles 68 to 72 of ZDR-1 regulate telework as a special form of employment contract where the worker and the employer agree that the worker will perform work (partly or wholly) at the worker's home or at a place of the worker's choice outside the employer's business premises. Slovenia is also a signatory to the Framework Agreement on the application of Article 16 (1) of Regulation (EC) No. 883/2004 in cases of habitual cross-border telework,[31] which can be beneficial for parents working across borders.[32]

3.3 Implementation of Directive (EU) 2019/1158 (WLB Directive)

Although the Slovenian legal framework was already in accordance with Directive (EU) 2019/1158 on work-life balance for parents and carers[33], its implementation has brought some novelties. The amendment to the Employment Relations Act (ZDR-1D, Official Gazette of the Republic of Slovenia, No. 114/2023) implementing Directive (EU) 2019/1152 on transparent and predictable working conditions[34] and Directive (EU) 2019/1158 entered into force on 16 November 2023. Among others, it introduces the right of workers to request[35] part-time work (Article 65a of ZDR-1) and telework (Article 68(5) of ZDR-1) for reasons of work-life balance. Although it has to be noted that this right already existed before, since under Article 148(3) of ZDR-1, an employee may propose a different working time arrangement at any time for reasons of work-life

[31] Available at: https://socialsecurity.belgium.be/en/internationally-active/cross-border-telework-eu-eea-and-switzerland.

[32] The framework agreement facilitates between the signatory states the conclusion of individual derogations in the interest of a category of employed teleworkers and their employer(s), provided that certain conditions are met.

[33] Directive (EU) 2019/1158 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 20 June 2019 on work-life balance for parents and carers and repealing Council Directive 2010/18/EU, OJ L 188, 12.7.2019.

[34] Directive (EU) 2019/1152 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 20 June 2019 on transparent and predictable working conditions in the European Union, OJ L 186., 11.7.2019.

[35] It would be more correct to use the term "propose", as it is not an absolute right of the worker. Bagari (2020).

balance, and the employer must justify its decision in writing, taking into account the needs of the work process. The novelty of Article 65a of ZDR-1 is therefore, in particular, the fifteen-day time limit within which the employer must respond to the employee's proposal.

3.4 The role of collective agreements

Although collective bargaining in Slovenia has a long history and collective agreements are traditionally an important legal source for the regulation of relationships between employees and employers,[36] collective agreements in Slovenia are rather reluctant to include measures to facilitate the reconciliation of work and family commitments. There is no systematic inclusion of this topic into collective agreements. While some measures to adjust working time to family commitments and measures to facilitate work-family reconciliation related to place of work, annual leave and absences from work due to family commitments can be found in certain collective agreements, the topic of special measures for parents with young children is more or less overlooked.[37] An example of good practice can be found in the collective agreement for Slovenia's trade sector, which prohibits night work, work on Sundays and public holidays for parents of young children, unless the parent agrees to different working arrangements. Furthermore, according to the collective agreement for police officers, parents enjoying special parental protection may be ordered to work only until 15:30, unless the parent agrees in writing to a different working arrangement.[38]

4. Social protection of parents with young children

In addition to labour law protection rights, social security rights that address social risks of maternity, paternity and parenthood can be recognised in the compulsory social insurance scheme for parental protection, like parental protection insurance and family benefits schemes, which are regulated in ZSDP-1. Furthermore, the rights to health services required for the purpose of pregnancy, preparation for childbirth, childbirth and postnatal care are guaranteed under the compulsory health insurance, which also covers sickness cash benefit, paid for nursing sick children. In case of absence from work due to care for sick immediate family members,[39] workers are entitled to a sickness cash benefit that amounts to 80% of the average basis for the payment of contributions in the previous calendar year. During this period, the person is fully covered by all social insurance schemes. The right to absence from work may not last longer than ten working days in each case (20 days for children up to seven years of

[36] Senčur Peček (2019).

[37] Kresal Šoltes & Kresal (2015); Kresal et al. (2016).

[38] For details, see European Trade Union Confederation, Rebalance – final report, Trade unions' strategies and good practices to promote work-life balance (2019), pp. 58-63.

[39] Immediate family members include the insured's partner and their children (the insured's children and the children of the partner for whom the insured is responsible, as well as children placed with the family for adoption or foster care).

age or older children with severe disabilities), but for medical reasons the competent health commission may extend this duration. There is no yearly upper limit of how many times the parent can exercise the right to absence. This right is particularly important in the case of young children who cannot go to childcare centres when they are ill and cannot stay at home alone.

For an unemployed person living alone in a household with a child up to the age of 15, the conditions for the obligation to accept suitable or appropriate employment are somewhat relaxed. According to the Labour Market Regulation Act (*Zakon o urejanju trga dela*; ZUTD),[40] suitable and appropriate employment for such persons is employment that does not exceed a total travelling time of two hours from the worker's place of residence and back by public transport or by transport organised by the employer.

With numerous and generous rights, the Slovenian social security system for families can be described as well-developed and therefore plays an important role in promoting the labour market participation of parents with young children. Recent amendments to the ZSDP-1 have further improved the legal position of parents and, by making part of parental leave non-transferable (as a result of the implementation of the WLB Directive), encourage a more equal sharing of care responsibilities between parents.[41]

4.1 Parental protection insurance

Regarding parental protection insurance, parents have the right to three types of leave: maternity leave, paternity leave and parental leave. All leaves are paid during the entire period. The entitled person receives a salary compensation in the amount of 100% of the average salary received over twelve months prior to leave. The ceiling, the maximum amount of this compensation, may not exceed 2.5 times the average salary in Slovenia for paternity and parental leave compensation benefit, while the compensation benefit during maternity leave is not limited. The number of people entitled to parental leave compensation benefit is linked to the number of births in the current year, as well as the proportion of young parents who are employed and self-employed (insured for parental care). The share of beneficiaries is more or less constant at 88% of all births.[42]

Maternity leave lasts 105 calendar days (15 weeks), of which 28 days have to be used before the expected date of delivery and the rest (77 days) after the expected date of delivery. Only 15 days of maternity leave are obligatory (Article 19 of ZSDP-1).

Paternity leave was first introduced into the Slovenian legal order by the Parental Protection and Family Benefits Act in 2001 according to which a father had the right to paternity leave in the amount of up to 90 days, but only 15 out of those 90 days were fully compensated. The Parental Protection and Family Benefits Act from 2014 has substantially changed the legal regime of paternity leave: instead of 90 days of

[40] Official Gazette RS, No. 21/13 with amendments.

[41] Before that, only the mother had 30 days of non-transferable leave.

[42] Social Protection Institute of the Republic of Slovenia (2017), p. 31.

paternity leave (of which only 15 days were compensated and 75 were not), the new Act introduced the right to a fully paid paternity leave in the duration of 30 days. Take-up of paternity leave in Slovenia is relatively stable, with around 80% of fathers taking the first 15 days of leave. There are several reasons why some fathers choose not to take paternity leave (especially the further 15 days) and why most fathers choose not to take parental leave at all. One is the lack of information available to fathers about their rights following the birth of their child. Another is a lack of understanding from employers, supervisors and colleagues about the use of leave. There is also a lack of understanding of the meaning and objectives of paternity and parental leave on the part of parents themselves. A survey of Slovenians' views on family issues and family needs found that fathers would be most encouraged to take paternity leave if employers were more supportive.[43] Since April 2023, as a result of the implementation of the WLB Directive, the paternity leave lasts 15 days and is an individual non-transferrable right of the father or the second parent and it is fully compensated (Article 25 of ZSDP-1).

In the past, parental leave in Slovenia was the mother's right that was transferable to the father. This arrangement changed and became a family entitlement, meaning that parents had to agree in writing on how to take it (from 2002 to 2014).[44] Since 2014 and until 2023, parental leave was an individual right of each parent in the duration of 130 calendar days. The mother could transfer 100 days to the father, while 30 days were non-transferable. The father could transfer his entire leave, all 130 days, to the mother. Although in practice fathers usually transferred all their parental leave to mothers, the proportion of fathers taking part of the leave is (slowly but still) increasing.[45] Slovenian research literature suggests that the reason for low take-up rates of parental leave by fathers reflects the traditional division of tasks within the family, attitude in society, a rather negative perception of fathers taking over more family responsibilities, and employers' expectations of their male employees. As fathers generally take only part of the leave (if any), women's careers continue to be affected by their absence from the workplace as a direct result of taking parental leave.[46] From April 2023, as a result of the implementation of the WLB Directive, each parent had an individual right to parental leave in the duration of 160 calendar days, of which 60 days are nontransferable by either of the parents or entitled persons (Article 29 of ZSDP-1).

Furthermore, one of the parents is entitled to work part-time if he/she cares for a child younger than 3 years of age. If a parent cares for a child with severe disabilities, this right to work part-time due to childcare is prolonged until the child reaches the age of 18. In the case of two (or more) children, the right to work part-time due to childcare is prolonged until the younger child reaches 8 years. If one parent exercises the right to work part-time on grounds of ZSDP-1 due to parenthood, the employer guarantees the

[43] Resolution on the Family Policy 2018-2028 "A Family Friendly Society for All" (ReDP18-28).

[44] Stropnik (2018).

[45] According to the data provided by the Ministry of Labour, Family, Social Affairs and Equal Opportunities in 2020, of 25,628 people who took parental leave in 2019, only 1,261 (4.9%) were fathers.

[46] Stropnik (2020).

right to a wage according to the actual working time, and the budget of the Republic of Slovenia guarantees the payment of social security contributions to the employee up to his full working time. This is a right of the employee which cannot be denied by the employer, but the employer is not obliged to comply with the employee's request regarding the allocation of working time. However, according to the case law of the Slovenian Supreme Court, it is not sufficient for an employer to provide a formal justification for its decision on the working time arrangements of employees exercising their right to part-time work on grounds of parental care. The employer must make its decision by weighing the needs of the work process against the needs (family needs) of the employee, with the protection of the employee's parental rights being the initial priority.[47]

The original regulation in the ZSDP-1, according to which the contributions for the time when a worker (parent) did not work were calculated on the basis of the minimum wage, was inappropriate, as it resulted in significantly lower income replacement benefits (sickness cash benefits, unemployment benefits, pension), since being calculated on the basis of the social security contributions paid. Furthermore, given that the right to part-time work is still mainly taken up by women, these rights could lead to indirect discrimination on the grounds of gender.[48] This was changed by the important amendment to the ZSDP-1C, which entered into force in 2020. The new regime provides that the worker is guaranteed social security contributions on a pro rata share of his or her past salary until the end of his or her full-time employment (Article 43(1) of ZSDP-1). If parents care for four or more children, one of them has a right to cease working (voluntary termination of employment or voluntary termination of the status of unemployed person) due to childcare; in this case, the state covers the cost of social security contributions until the youngest child reaches 8 years.

Furthermore, a worker who is breastfeeding a child under 18 months of age and who works full-time is entitled to a breastfeeding break during working hours of at least one hour a day and has the right to compensation and payment of the social security contributions during the breastfeeding break. This measure has not proved to be important in Slovenia, as only a small number of beneficiaries take advantage of it (less than 10 per year). This is probably due to the length of parental leave, which is mostly taken by mothers.[49]

Parents are entitled to these rights if they are employed or self-employed (or have certain status equivalent to it) and thus insured on the basis of their work or employment or another equivalent status. There is no qualifying period required to be eligible for paid maternity, paternity and parental leave; a person must be covered by parental protection insurance prior to the beginning of the leave. If the insured person has been covered by parental protection insurance for a shorter period than twelve months (average salary received over twelve months prior to leave represents a basis for the

[47] Supreme Court Decisions No. VIII Ips 86/2019, 30. 6. 2020.

[48] Bagari (2020).

[49] Resolution on the Family Policy 2018-2028 "A Family Friendly Society for All" (ReDP18-28).

assessment of the benefit), the sum of the adjusted amount of the basic amount of the minimum income as provided for by the law governing social security benefits and the law governing the coordination of transfers to individuals and households in the Republic of Slovenia shall be taken into account as the insured person's base for the missing months. From 1 April 2025, the basic amount of the minimum income amounts to €494.09 net. Furthermore, even if a person is no longer insured on the day before the first day of leave, he or she is entitled to compensation for the duration of maternity, paternity or parental leave, if he or she has been insured for parental protection for at least 12 months within the last three years (Article 41(2) of ZSDP-1).

4.2 Family benefits

In addition to rights under parental insurance, parents may be entitled to different family benefits financed from the state budget (tax-funded). Parents are entitled to them regardless of their employment status. Firstly, if parents do not qualify for a compensation benefit during leaves related to parenthood, a parental allowance (*starševski dodatek*) is granted to them. These are parents who are not covered by the parental insurance since they are not employed, self-employed or in certain similar status which is the basis for the affiliation to the compulsory social insurance scheme for parental protection, i.e., are unemployed who are not eligible for unemployment benefits or students and others. Parental allowance is paid for 365 days after the birth of a child. The parent is entitled to the parental allowance only if the parent (for the first seventy-seven days the mother, for the rest of it the parent who is exercising the right) and the child have a permanent residence in Slovenia, and they are actually living in Slovenia. The amount of the parental allowance is around €494.09 monthly (in 2025). Secondly, every mother or father is entitled to a birth grant upon the child's birth (*pomoč ob rojstvu otroka*) if she or he has permanent residence in Slovenia and actually lives in Slovenia, whereby the nationality of the parents or the child plays no role. The amount of a birth grant amounts (in 2025) to €429.99 and is adjusted periodically. It is not a means-tested benefit; meaning that the income of the family is not important (Articles 68 and 69 of ZSDP-1).

Child benefit (*otroški dodatek*) is a supplementary means-tested benefit of the parents for the maintenance, upbringing and education of the child. The amount of child benefit is determined by the family's income bracket, which brackets are set in nominal limits. Depending on the number of children, the total amount of the child benefit is determined for all children entitled to child benefit by adding together the individual amounts of child benefit for each child (Article 70-76 of ZSDP-1). Child benefit is paid to families whose average monthly income per family member is less than €1,293.36 and amounts (in 2025) from €28.79 to €172.58 per child (depending on the income level of the family). The higher the income, the lower the child benefit will be. Nevertheless, the amount of the benefit itself is not so high to stop parents from working. In 2024, there were 324,812 children entitled to child benefit.[50]

[50] Child benefit is the social transfer with the highest government expenditure (around €270.2 M in 2023).

Large family allowance (*dodatek za veliko družino*) is a universal non-means-tested benefit that is granted to all families with three or more children and that amounts (in 2025) to €496.93 per year for families with three children and to €603.86 per year for families with four or more children.
Another family benefit is special childcare allowance (*dodatek za nego otroka*) for children requiring special care and treatment to help cover the increased living expenses which the family faces due to the child's condition. The allowance can be claimed with a medical certificate. It is paid for the period during which the child is granted special care due to medical reasons, but not longer than until the child reaches 18 years of age or, after that age, if they have the status of an apprentice, a pupil or a student, but no longer than until the child reaches the age of 26. The special childcare allowance amounts (in 2025) to €125.81 per month and is increased to €251.61 per month for children with severe mental or physical disabilities or illness. The amount of the special childcare allowance has to be adjusted regularly (Article 79-82 of ZSDP-1).
Additionally, the partial compensation for the loss of income for children requiring special care (*delno plačilo za izgubljeni dohodek*) is a personal income paid to one of the parents who has terminated his or her employment or has started to work part-time to be able to provide nursing and care for a child with severe mental or physical disabilities. The amount of the partial compensation is 1.2 times the monthly gross minimum wage. If one of the parents works part-time instead of full-time, he or she is entitled to a proportional part of the partial payment for the lost income and if he or she cares for and looks after two or more children, the amount of the partial payment for loss of income is increased by 30% (Article 83-86 of ZSDP-1).

5. Labour and social protection of self-employed parents

Labour-related parental protection for self-employed parents in Slovenia is granted only to economically dependent self-employed persons, and even then, it remains very limited. This reflects the fact that labour law is primarily designed to protect employees in subordinate employment relationships. By contrast, the social security framework for self-employed parents is largely comparable to that of employees.
The concept of the economically dependent person was introduced in Slovenia through the Employment Relationship Act of 2013 (ZDR1), which recognizes economic dependence as a basis for granting limited labour law protection to selfemployed individuals. According to Article 213 of ZDR1, an economically dependent person is defined as a selfemployed individual who, under a civil law contract, personally and independently performs work for remuneration over a longer period of time in circumstances of economic dependence, without employing other workers. Economic dependency is defined as a situation in which an individual derives at least 80% of their annual income from a single contracting entity or client, while still being permitted to obtain a limited share of income (up to 20%) from other clients. To qualify for the corresponding limited labour protection, economically dependent self-employed workers must, at the end of each year, formally notify the client on whom they depend. This notification must include all relevant evidence and information

necessary to verify the existence of economic dependence.[51] The administrative complexity of these requirements effectively renders the provision inoperative in practice, as it results in a very low rate of actual uptake and, consequently, minimal practical application (if any).

The self-employed in Slovenia are subject to compulsory insurance in all five existing social insurance schemes, including parental insurance. They are entitled to the full range of rights deriving from parental protection insurance, as explained above, including maternity, paternity and parental leave; compensation benefits during these leaves; the right to work part-time due to parenthood with corresponding social security contributions; coverage of contributions when ceasing work to care for four or more children; and compensation as well as contributions during breastfeeding breaks. However, prolonged absence from work often poses a greater risk for the self-employed, as it may lead to the loss of clients and, consequently, a reduction in income. The self-employed are also entitled to health services required for pregnancy, preparation for childbirth, delivery and postnatal care, which are guaranteed under compulsory health insurance. Moreover, as already noted, family benefits are available to all parents, regardless of their employment status.

6. Early childhood education and childcare systems

The high level of availability, accessibility and affordability of organized childcare represents an important precondition for parents with young children to participate in the labour market. Through organized early childhood education and childcare (ECEC) systems, parents are provided with the conditions whereby they can take employment and still manage to harmonise their work and family obligations. Furthermore, high quality early childhood education and childcare also play an important part in tackling possible social disadvantages of children and offer children an opportunity for socialization, personality development and education outside the family environment. The shortage of childcare facilities may either limit the possibility of having a job outside home or force parents of young children to search for informal childcare.[52]

Slovenia's early childhood education and childcare system can be described as very good.[53] The current ECEC system grew out of three main influences: recognition of the interrelation between care and education, major political change (independence) which stimulated debate about policy reform, and consensus that early childhood services should fall under education.[54] Preschool education is aimed at children aged eleven

[51] Bagari & Sagmeister (2022).

[52] Stropnik (2001). With this in mind, the Barcelona targets on childcare were set by the European Council in 2002 with the aim of increasing female labour-market participation by enhancing the provision of ECEC. See European Commission (2022).

[53] Stropnik points out that Slovenia is an example of a country which has managed to retain most of its former social policy advantages and achievements while, at the same time, it adapted (particularly) childcare services according to principles of the market economy and increased the diversity and quality of its services (Stropnik, 2001).

[54] Kaga, Bennett & Moss (2010).

months to six years or until children start primary education. It is not compulsory, meaning that parents decide whether to enrol their child in a childcare centre (kindergarten) or not. However, although enrolment rates in childcare centres continues to improve and the number of childcare units and places available have increased, not all children are covered. In the school year 2023/2024, 85.5% of all children aged 1–5 years was included in preschool institutions. The share is higher among children aged 3 to 6 years, while informal care is still present among youngest children.[55]

ECEC services in Slovenia are predominantly publicly provided. Publicly provided childcare centres may be organised as independent units or may be attached to primary schools. Childcare centres can also be provided privately and are also eligible for public funding. In 2023/2024, there were 988 childcare centres and units operating in Slovenia with a total of 84,522 children enrolled. Every municipality, except for two (Osilnica and Jezersko), had at least one kindergarten. The largest number of kindergartens was located in municipalities with a high population and in urban centres. For example, the municipality of Ljubljana had 129 childcare centres and units. The childcare centres employ 12,440 preschool teachers and preschool assistant teachers, each caring on average for 7 children.[56]

The preschool programme is usually available for nine hours a day, but centres may operate longer. As working hours are increasingly based on constant availability, with work on Saturdays, Sundays and public holidays, overtime, and shift work, this can be a problem as parents do not have a guarantee that their child will be looked after during (full) working hours. With the exception of a few large cities, there are no childcare centres in Slovenia whose opening hours meet the needs of parents working afternoon shifts, Saturdays, Sundays and public holidays. Furthermore, in cities with a high population density, the lack of places in child care centres is still a pressing problem.

Local authorities are responsible for ensuring adequate provision of preschool places, either through direct provision or providing funding to private providers and subsidising the cost to parents. The ECEC system is financed by the municipalities for the first child, while the difference is covered by the parents depending on their income bracket (from 0% to 77% of the programme price). Fees are set by the childcare centres, but they are set and approved by the municipal councils, so they can vary widely between municipalities. In September 2023, the average fee for enrolling a child in a public childcare centre was €585.37 for the first age group (from 1 to 3 years) and €451.91 for the second age group (from 3 to 6 years) per month.[57] Private childcare centres tend to be even more expensive. Most parents are in income bracket 5 and pay 35% of the regular price for childcare centre.[58] Despite this, the inclusion of a child in a childcare centre represents a significant financial burden for parents, leading them to opt for other forms of childcare (mainly through a network of relatives). In

[55] SURS (2025b), Filipovič Hrast & Rakar (2021).

[56] SURS (2025c).

[57] Governmental information is available at: https://www.gov.si/teme/vpis-otroka-v-vrtec/.

[58] Ministry of Education (2023).

this context, an important measure has been (re)introduced in September 2021: free childcare for the second and subsequent children. If parents have two or more children enrolled in a childcare centre, they are exempt from paying fees for the second and subsequent child. The cost of childcare for the second and subsequent child is covered by the state budget.

7. Conclusion – future challenges

The labour market situation of parents with young children in Slovenia shows that not everything is black and white. On the one hand, the employment rate is very high and the unemployment rate for both parents with young children is very low (especially compared to other EU countries), the work-life balance legislation is seen as generous, the gender pay gap is below the EU average and the enrolment rate in childcare centres is high. On the other hand, parents, both mothers and fathers, still face difficulties in the labour market because of parenthood. Furthermore, there is still a problem of gender inequality, especially with regard to working conditions and the burden of care responsibilities and domestic work.

While we can identify many positive legislative changes that have increased the employment and labour market participation of parents with young children in recent decades and the legislation already provides relatively good opportunities for work-life balance, practice shows that there are problems in exercising some rights, as employers do not take sufficient account of the rights and needs of parents. It is therefore crucial to point out certain areas that require further attention to improve their situation in Slovenia.

Firstly, from a family policy perspective, secure employment is the most important factor in starting and maintaining a family and in the decision to start a family, so it is important that the state and employers ensure not only high employment rates, but also quality and secure employment for both parents. In the long term, secure jobs enable young people to make the decision to start a family and ensure the material and social security of families, while at the same time improve the quality of life of families. Secondly, although the legislation is clear, discrimination on the grounds of parenthood and family responsibilities, as well as violations of labour rights at work on the grounds of parenthood, are still present in the labour market. This requires stricter labour inspections and possibly tougher sanctions for employers who violate employment rights. Furthermore, as regards the unequal take-up of parental leave (as explained above, in practice it is still mothers who take the majority of parental leave) and the use of other rights for caring responsibilities (such as flexible working arrangements or sick leave for childcare), one of the solutions is certainly to raise the level of information among parents. At the same time, it would be useful to work on raising employers' awareness of the importance of work-life balance and respecting labour protection rights related to parenthood. It is important for employers to recognise needs of parents-workers and offer them the possibility of flexibility if they express the need and desire for it. Moreover, despite a generally well-developed public childcare system, there is still room for improvement to achieve an available and

affordable early childhood education and childcare system for all families. It is also important to maintain measures that have proven to be effective, such as exemption from childcare centres fees for the second and subsequent children if more than one child is enrolled in childcare at the same time. Lastly, it is important to ensure that good legislation is being followed in practise and equality before the law is reflected in equality in society.

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Promoting labour market participation of parents with young children – country note for Spain

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Abstract

The following country note reviews how Spain encourages the participation of parents with young children in the labour market while also encouraging their involvement in caregiving responsibilities. The case of Spain is characterized by significant advances in its legal framework aimed at supporting parents both in the workplace and home, along with the development of programs and policy measures, as well as a positive shift in the public discourse around work-family balance. However, important social, cultural, and organizational challenges persist, creating an environment in which not all initiatives can fully flourish. This report suggests the need of an integral approach, including all the stakeholders involved, to facilitate the contemporary needs of working parents with young children. This should consist not only of developing a solid legal framework – which is a necessary condition – but also of creating elements that facilitate family-friendly environments in the workplace and enhanced support for early childhood education.

Keywords: employment of parents; work-life balance; labour law protection; social protection; childcare systems; Spain

1. General context

Work-family balance remains a significant challenge in Spain, especially for parents with young children. Despite recent rankings placing Spain among the top countries for work-family balance[2], the perception of a lack of work-family balance among working parents is prevalent. In the last European Quality of Live Survey, 51% of the Spaniards reported that it is very difficult or rather difficult to combine work and

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[2] For example, the variables included in the Global Life-Work Balance Index 2024 were "statutory annual leave," "minimum statutory sick pay percentage," "paid maternity leave and payment rate," "minimum wage," "healthcare system," "happiness index," "average hours per week per employed person," "LGBTQ+ inclusivity " and "Safety Global peace index ranking." Some of these elements clearly impact the work family balance, while others have a less significant impact. However, there are many nuances that are not covered in such indexes, such as the costs associated with early education, the impact of extended breaks during the workday (e.g. long lunch breaks), and the legitimacy of utilizing the flexible work arrangements offered by organizations (or the lack thereof).

care, compared to 36% of Europeans overall.[3] These findings align with other studies showing that achieving a balance between work and care is a persistent challenge for Spanish working couples (Escriva, Bermúdez Figueroa, & Minguela, 2024; García Faroldi, 2023).

Traditionally, this issue has been particularly pronounced among working mothers (Chinchilla & León, 2005; Tobío Soler, 2005), although an increasing number of working fathers also report difficulties in balancing work and family responsibilities (Martínez-Pastor, Jurado-Guerrero, Fernández-Lozano, & Castellanos-Serrano, 2022; Tanquerel & Grau-Grau, 2020)

This lack of balance, which has important implications on fertility (Bueno, 2020), cannot be attributed to a single cause but rather to a complex combination of structural, organizational and cultural elements. For instance, the work domain continues to be strongly influenced by a culture of presenteeism, where the traditional notion of the "ideal worker" still prevails (Las Heras, Chinchilla, & Grau-Grau, 2019). In such a context, flexible work arrangements are not necessarily rare, but the organizational culture often discourages their use. Additionally, long lunch breaks extend the workday, resulting in difficulties in finding a work-family balance.

Moreover, this situation is exacerbated by a challenging economic context, including a housing market with increasing prices, a persistent – thought declining – informal economy[4], and a strong reliance on the service and tourism sectors[5], which are more vulnerable to economic crisis and offer less standard working hours. Additionally, the prevalence of "dormitory towns" forces many workers into long commutes (Gutiérrez-Domènech, 2008). This situation adds extra time pressures and fatigue to working parents, especially those with young children.

A potential solution to this reality is implementing strong family policies, supported by a comprehensive network of early childhood education systems. However, as we will discuss later, despite some improvements, this system remains insufficiently developed. The current school system is not only marked by a limited public choice for children aged 0-3 but also by significant schedule mismatches – between work and school hours, between primary and secondary schedules and between private and public schools. Such a situation, which is especially complicated during the long summer breaks, forces some working parents to rely on grandparents for childcare, over-schedule their children, readjust their careers, or leave some children unsupervised[6].

[3] Eurofound Survey (2016). Available at: https://www.eurofound.europa.eu/en/data-catalogue/ european-quality-life-survey

[4] According to the European Labour Authority the undeclared work in Spain declined from 8.8% in 2013 to 6.7% in 2019. Source: Factsheet on undeclared work – Spain. March 2023. Available at: https://www.ela.europa.eu/sites/default/files/2024-02/ES-UDW_factsheet-2023-fin.pdf

[5] Only the tourism sector employed 12.6% of the Spanish labour force, resulting in 2.67 million people in 2023. Information available at: https://www.lamoncloa.gob.es/lang/en/gobierno/news/paginas/2024/20240208tourism-employment.aspx

[6] A recent report highlighted that 9.1% of children under 12 are left home alone: https://www.fundacionmapfre.org/publicaciones/todas/informe-accidentes-en-la-poblacion-infantil-espanola/

When care is provided, important gender differences remain in both the time to care and types of activities developed (Gimenez-Nadal, Molina, & Ortega, 2017; Gracia & García-Román, 2018), although the COVID-19 pandemic reduced some of these differences (Farré & González, 2021).

The lack of work-family balance has implications not only for fertility intentions, but also for the quality of couple relationship (Fellows, Chiu, Hill, & Hawkins, 2016), feelings of parental guilt associated with limited time available for children (e.g., mala madre [bad mother]), and various health outcomes (Frone, Russell, & Cooper, 1997), such as sleep quality. These dynamics can also affect the work domain, for example by reducing productivity and efficiency.

To address the challenges faced by working parents in Spain, the government has adopted several laws, royal decrees and political initiatives. Among such laws, the Royal Decree-Law 6/2019[7] has significantly reformed the parental leave system, by equalizing paternal and maternal leave. The main goal is to promote shared parental responsibilities at home and reduce the motherhood penalty in the workplace, understood as the disadvantages that women often face when they become mothers. Additionally, the Royal Decree-Law requires companies with over 50 employees to develop equality plans and maintain detailed salary records.

The Statute of Workers[8] is a fundamental legal framework in Spain that provides the right for parents with children under 12 years old to reduce their working hours by between one-eighth and one-half, facilitating labour market participation, while enabling care for family members. Another important legislative instrument is the recent Royal Decree-Law 28/2020 on remote work,[9] which establishes the right to request remote working arrangements, a measure particularly beneficial for parents with young children. In addition to these political advancements, there has been a positive shift in the public discourse around work-family balance, along with the rise of new associations or local programs from city halls that aim to facilitate a balance between work and family.

2. Labour market situation

This section aims to provide a general overview of the current labour market situation in Spain. It focuses on key statistics related to employment, educational attainment levels, and gender differences, with a particular focus on the specific situation of parents with young children.

[7] Royal Decree-Law 6/2019 of 1 March on urgent measures to guarantee equality of treatment and opportunities between women and men in employment and occupation. Information available at: https:// www.equalitylaw.eu/downloads/4865-spain-spain-approves-the-royal-decree-6-2019-of-01-march-2019of-urgent-measures-to-guarantee-equality-of-treatment-and-opportunities-between-women-and-men-inemployment-and-occupation-pdf-104-kb

[8] Estatuto de los trabajadores, Royal Decree-Law 2/2015 of October 23 on approving the consolidated text of the Statute of Workers' Law. Available at: https://www.boe.es/buscar/act.php?id=BOE-A-2015-11430#ddunica

[9] For further information visit the European Labour Authority, available at: https://www.ela.europa.eu/sites/default/files/2021-09/ES%20-%20Telework%20regulation.pdf and the legal database of Spain, available at: https://www.boe.es/diario_boe/txt.php?id=BOE-A-2020-11043

In 2025, the number of employed persons in Spain reached 21,816,000. As shown in Table 1, the female labour force participation rate was 71.4%, compared to 78.4% for men. Unemployment affects women more significantly (11.3%) than men (8.8%). Women experience levels of involuntary part-time work similar than men (46.0% and 48.2%, respectively). According to recent data, women account for 16.8% of patents registered in Spain. Furthermore, 3.2% of employed women are employers, in contrast to 5.8% of employed men.

Table 1. Labour market situation in Spain

Female labour force participation rate (%)	71.4[1]
Male labour force participation rate (%)	78.4[1]
Unemployment rate for women (%)	11.3[2]
Unemployment rate for men (%)	8.8[2]
Involuntary part-time work among women (%)	46.0[3]
Involuntary part-time work among men (%)	48.3[3]
Percentage of women inventors (%)	16.8[4]
Share of employed who are employers - women (%)	3.2[5]
Share of employed who are employers - men (%)	5.8[5]
Women in managerial positions (%)	34.4[3]
Women on boards of directors	41.3[3]

Source: [1] OECD 2025 Q3, [2] OECD 2025 December, [3]3 Eurostat 2024, [4] OECD 2021, [5]OECD 2022

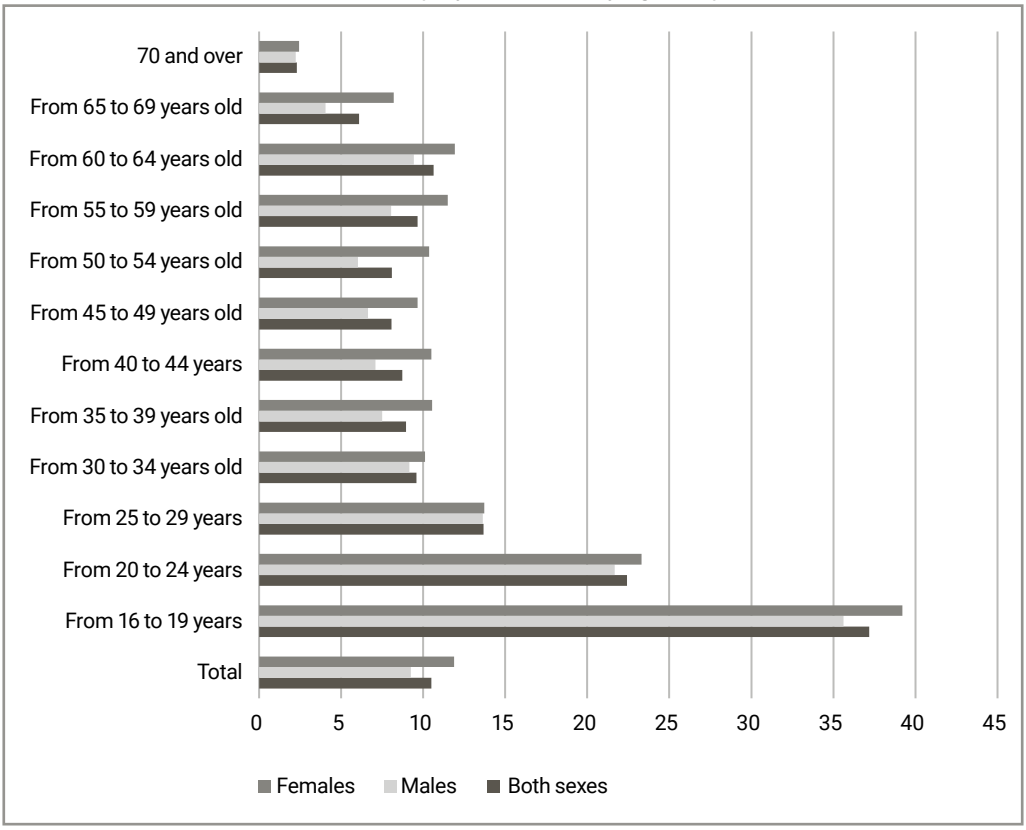
Part of the present labour force, and more predominantly the future one, is highly educated. In 2024, 58.6% of women aged 25 to 34 had a university degree, compared with 47.5% of men of the same age. A similar pattern can be observed in the older cohort, although with slightly lower figures: half of the women aged 35 to 44 had a university degree, compared to 39% of men, as Table 2 shows. At the same time, school dropout remains a challenge within the education system. This situation contrasts with the high levels of university attainment, generating, in some sense, a dual society.

Table 2. Education level by age groups in Spain

Women aged 25 to 34 with university education (%)	58.6
Men aged 25 to 34 with university education (%)	47.5
Women aged 35 to 44 with university education (%)	49.4
Men aged 35 to 44 with university education (%)	39.8

Source: OECD 2024.

Table 3. Unemployment rates by age in Spain

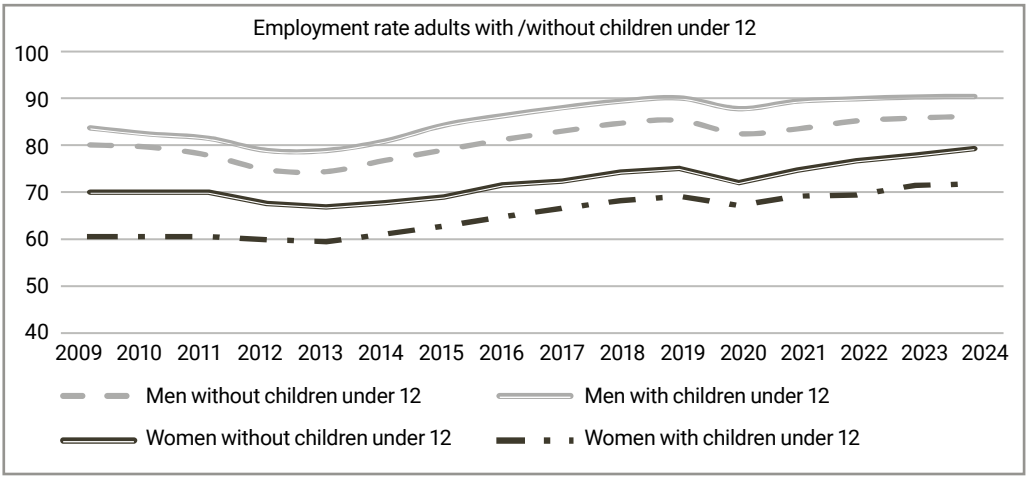


Source: Instituto National de Estadística, (National Institute of Statistics) INE (2025).

Unemployment has always been a critical aspect of the Spanish economy, partially explained by its high reliance on two sectors hit strongly by economic cycles and crises: construction and tourism. As Table 1 shows, the unemployment rate was 11.3% for women and 8.8% for men, higher than the average of the European Union (around 6%). The unemployment rate by age (Table 3) reveals a fundamental problem of the Spanish economy, namely high unemployment rate of young people which has important implications for access to housing, independence from the family and family formation.

Figure 1 illustrates the employment rate of Spanish people aged 25 to 49 with and without children under 12 from 2009 to 2024. A contrasting trend is evident: for men, having children under 12 is associated with a higher employment rate compared to men without children under 12, while for women, the opposite is true, having children under 12 is associated with a lower employment rate. Across all the groups, the effects of the 2008 financial crisis and the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic are noticeable, but the employment rate within each group have remained relatively stable over time.

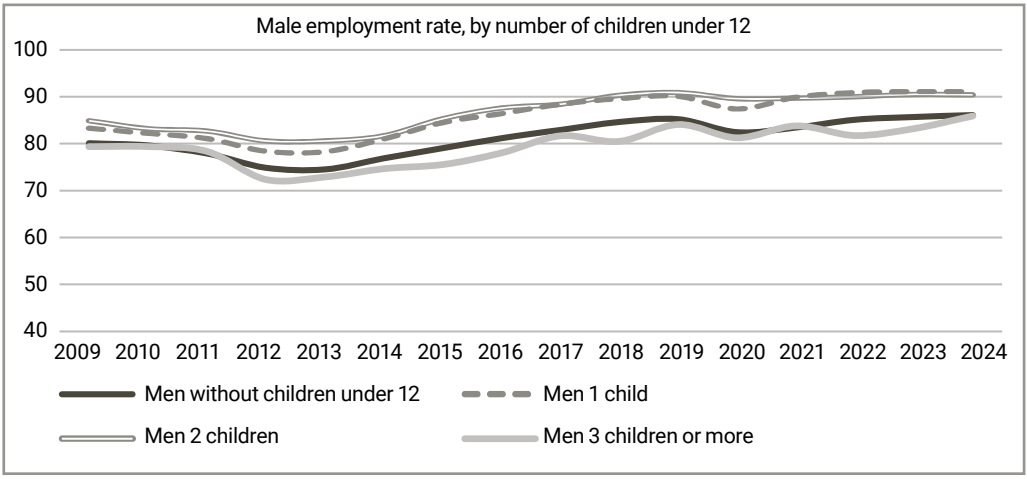
Figure 1. Employment rate of adults with/without children under 12 in Spain



Source: INE (2024).

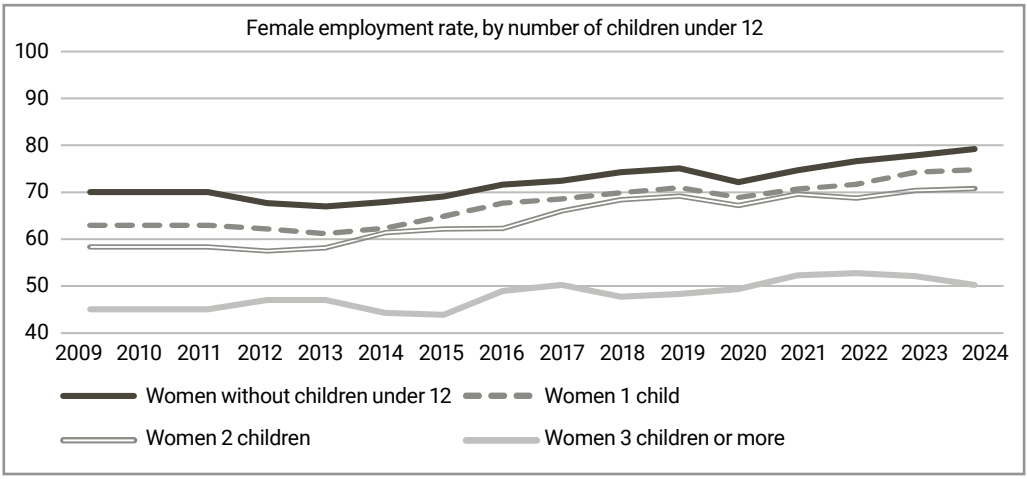
Focusing on men, those with two children traditionally had the highest employment rate. However, in the past three years, men with one child under the age of 12 have the highest employment rate, as illustrated in Figure 2. The group with a lower employment rate consisted of men with three children or more. Generally, male groups have a 10-point difference in employment rates as compared with Figure 3 on women. Also, for women, the data presents a higher disparity based on family size. As shown in Figure 3, women without children under 12 are the group with the highest employment rate, followed by those with one child. In short, more children are associated with a lower employment rate, a trend that does not necessarily apply to men. Moreover, the disparity of women with three children or more with the other three groups is much higher than the differences between male groups.

Figure 2. Male employment rate, by number of children under 12 in Spain



Source: INE (2024).

Figure 3. Female employment rate, by number of children under 12 in Spain



Source: INE (2024).

Table 4. Average number of children by mother's level of education in Spain, 2018.

Autonomous Community	Total	Lower Secondary and Below	Upper Secondary Education and Non-Education	Higher Education
Spain	1,09	1.51	1,03	0.94
Murcia	1.33	1.77	1.13	1.13
Melilla	1.41	2	1.15	1.04
Navarra	1.15	1.74	0.98	1.02
Balearic Islands	1.18	1.52	1.16	1.02
Andalusia	1.12	1.47	0.98	0.98
Valencia Community	1.12	1.45	1.1	0.98
Catalonia	1.1	1.58	1.02	0.96
Madrid	1.08	1.49	1.11	0.96
Basque Country	0.98	1.25	0.86	0.96
Ceuta	1.29	2.02	1.09	0.93
La Rioja	1.09	1.68	1.06	0.93
Extremadura	1.18	1.62	1	0.91
Canary Islands	1.1	1.51	1.1	0.91
Castile-La Mancha	1.16	1.67	1.09	0.9
Aragon	1.1	1.57	1.14	0.89
Galicia	0.99	1.35	0.98	0.83
Cantabria	0.96	1.27	1.03	0.83
Asturias	0.89	1.21	0.8	0.79
Castile and León	0.93	1.5	0.82	0.77

Source: INE (2018) and Fundación BBVA (Esenciales 41: Evolución de la natalidad en las regiones y municipios españoles, evolution of birth rates in Spanish regions and municipalities).

As illustrated above, there is a clear relationship between the number of children and employment levels. Furthermore, Table 4 shows that educational attainment is also linked to family size. In general, higher levels of education are associated with lower fertility. For example, in Spain, mothers with lower secondary education or below have an average of 1.51 children. This figure declines to 1.03 among those with upper secondary and non-tertiary education, and further decreases to 0.94 among mothers with higher education. This trend is consistent across most autonomous communities, although exceptions can be seen in regions like Navarra and the Basque Country.
Gender differences exist not only in participation in the paid labour market but also in earnings. According to Eurostat, there is on average a 11.1% gender pay gap across the EU[9]. In the case of Spain, this gender pay gap is a bit lower (7.3%), with important age differences, as Table 5 shows. Among the youngest workers, the gap is very small and even slightly in favour of women in the 25–34 age group. However, from age 35 onwards the gender pay gap shifts clearly in favour of men and increases steadily across age groups, reaching 32.8% among persons over 65, which reflects the gender pension gap (Chinchilla, Jiménez, & Grau-Grau, 2014).

Table 5. Gender pay gap in unadjusted form by age in Spain

Less than 25 years	1.1
From 25 to 34 years old	-0.5
From 35 to 44 years old	5.8
From 45 to 54 years old	9.3
From 55 to 64 years old	12.0
Over 65	32.8

Source: EUROSTAT (2024).

3. Labour law protection of and employment incentives for parents with young children

The aim of this section is to examine the legal framework, policies and practices designed to protect and promote the employment of parents with young children in Spain. To achieve this, this section is divided between general laws and legal frameworks, the impact of Directive (EU) 2019/1158 on work-life balance[10] on atypical

[9] Unadjusted gender pay gap, defined by Eurostat as "difference between average gross hourly earnings of male and female employees as% of male gross earnings." Available at:
https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/ statistics-explained/index.php?title=Gender_pay_gap_statistics

[10] Directive (EU) 2019/1158 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 20 June 2019 on work-life balance for parents and carers and repealing Council Directive 2010/18/EU, OJ L 188, 12.7.2019, p. 79–93. Spain has failed to comply with this obligation, as it is not compensating the last two weeks of the parental leave. consequently, the country would face different penalties: a fixed fine for the delay, along with an additional daily fine until compliance with the directive's requirement.

employment forms, the role of employers and collective agreements, and good practices and initiatives.

3.1. General laws and legal frameworks

In order to address the rising issues and work-family challenges presented at the beginning of the chapter, the Spanish government, especially moved by the gender equality perspective, approved a new Royal Decree-Law 6/2019 regarding urgent measures to guarantee equal treatment and opportunities between women and men in work and employment.[11] Among others, this Royal Decree-Law requires companies with more than 50 employees to implement an equality plan, together with new articles that require a registry of equality plans. It also modifies the Statute of Workers[12] to give part-time workers the same rights as full-time employees. Another article requires employers to pay the same salary for work of equal value without discrimination based on sex. Additionally, employers must keep records of average salaries, wage supplements, and other extra-salary benefits categorised by sex and professional groups. This Royal Decree-Law introduces an egalitarian "Birth and Childcare leave" (*Permiso y prestación pornacimiento y cuidado del menor*), replacing the former maternity and paternity leave, providing 16 weeks of non-transferable leave paid at 100% of the salary, with six weeks being obligatory immediately after the birth (Meil, Escobedo, Lapuerta, & Romero-Balsas, 2025).

The legal framework was updated by Royal Decree-Law 5/2023[13], which transposed Directive (EU) 2019/1158. It introduces a new 8-week parental leave for children under eight years old and 5-day paid leave for serious illness of relatives and cohabitants. It also established a 4-day "force majeure" leave for urgent family reasons.

The government also aims to protect working parents with other regulations. For example, the Statute of Workers allows working parents with children under 12 years old to reduce their working hours by one-eighth and one-half. Also, the Royal Decree on Social Security Benefits[14] establishes specific social security benefits for parents, such as economic allowance for maternity and paternity leave and subsidies for large families

[11] Real Decreto ley 6/2019, de 1 de marzo, de medidas urgentes para garantía de la igualdad de trato y de oportunidades entre mujeres y hombres en el empleo y la ocupación, available at:
https://www.boe.es/buscar/ act.php?id=BOE-A-2019-3244

[12] Real Decreto Legislativo 2/2015, de 23 de octubre, por el que se aprueba el texto refundido de la Ley del Estatuto de los Trabajadores, available at:
https://www.boe.es/buscar/act.php?id=BOE-A-2015-11430

[13] Real Decreto ley 5/2023, de transposición de Directivas de la Unión Europea en materia de modificaciones estructurales de sociedades mercantiles y conciliación de la vida familiar y la vida profesional de los progenitores y los cuidadores, available at:
https://www.boe.es/buscar/act.php?id=BOE-A-2023-15135

[14] Real Decreto 295/2009, de 6 de marzo, por el que se regulan las prestaciones económicas del sistema de la Seguridad Social por maternidad, paternidad, riesgo durante el embarazo y riesgo durante la lactancia natural. available at:
https://www.boe.es/buscar/act.php?id=BOE-A-2009-4724

and families with disabled children. Ultimately, the Royal Decree-Law 28/2020[15] can be also beneficial for parents with young children as it regulated teleworking.
Finally, the most recent advancement is Royal Decree-Law 9/2025[16], which increases the "Birth and Childcare Leave" to 19 weeks for each progenitor, which are distributed as follows: 6 mandatory weeks after birth, 11 voluntary weeks until the child is 12 months old, and 2 flexible weeks for parental care available until the child reaches eight years. For single-parent families, this leave is extended to 32 weeks.

3.2. Atypical employment forms

Table 6. Teleworking in Spain (%)

	Total number	Have worked remotely	Have not worked remotely although their job would allow it	Have not worked remotely because their job would not allow it
Total National	21.341.779	14.8	16.1	69.1
Andalusia	3.263.942	13.7	13.9	72.4
Aragon	568.944	7.4	17.3	75.3
Principality of Asturias	388.910	12.4	18.4	69.2
Balearic Islands	645.391	10.5	18.8	70.7
Canary Islands	1.041.327	7.6	16.9	75.6
Cantabria	248.277	8.3	14.7	77.0
Castile and León	1.004.470	8.4	13.1	78.4
Castilla-La Mancha	894.783	12.1	14.1	73.7
Catalonia	3.868.683	17.6	16.1	66.2
Valencian Community	2.349.268	12.2	19.3	68.5
Extremadura	419.623	9.6	16.6	73.8
Galicia	1.119.337	12.8	17.4	69.7
Community of Madrid	3.418.918	26.2	13.6	60.2
Region of Murcia	635.975	4.4	18.3	77.3
Community of Navarre	297.353	12.4	21.1	66.5
Basque Country	966.032	12.9	20.9	66.2
La Rioja	145.292	7.4	17.4	75.2
Ceuta	30.210	18.1	11.4	70.5
Melilla	35.042	0.6	32.6	66.8

Source: INE. Survey on equipment and use of information and communication technologies in households 2023.

[15] Real Decreto ley 28/2020, de 22 de septiembre, de trabajo a distancia, available at: https://www.boe.es/ diario_boe/txt.php?id=BOE-A-2020-11043 European Labour Authority (2021), available at: https://www. ela.europa.eu/sites/default/files/2021-09/ES%20-%20Telework%20regulation.pdf
[16] Real Decreto ley 9/2025, de 29 de julio, por el que se amplía el permiso de nacimiento y cuidado, available at: https://boe.es/boe/dias/2025/07/30/pdfs/BOE-A-2025-15741.pdf

Table 7. Employed part-time by the reason for the part-time working day, sex and age group in Spain (2023)

	Total (Thousand persons)	Following educational or training courses	Sickness or incapacity	Care of children or sick adults, disabled or the elderly	Other family or personal obligations	Have not been able to find a full-time job	Does not wish to work full-time	Other reasons	Does not know the reason
Males (age)									
From 16 to 19 years	54,8	66.8%	1.1%			21.2%	4.7%	5.3%	0.7%
From 20 to 24 years	163,4	49.7%		0.5%	2.7%	35.0%	2.3%	8.6%	1.0%
From 25 to 29 years	112,3	26.2%	0.8%	1.4%	4.0%	53.0%	3.7%	10.9%	
From 30 to 34 years	75,2	6.8%	0.3%	6.0%	2.5%	70.9%	4.7%	8.8%	
From 35 to 39 years	53,2	6.8%	0.8%	12.0%	7.3%	52.8%	8.1%	12.4%	
From 40 to 44 years	68,9	0.9%	3.5%	10.7%	11.8%	58.2%	6.5%	8.6%	
From 45 to 49 years	54,9	0.4%	4.7%	6.7%	2.7%	59.6%	9.8%	16.0%	
Females (age)									
From 16 to 19 years	51,7	72.5%			0.8%	16.2%	5.4%	5.0%	
From 20 to 24 years	228, 0	48.0%	0.5%	1.7%	2.5%	39.7%	2.3%	4.9%	0.3%
From 25 to 29 years	203,1	18.0%		5.9%	4.0%	58.7%	4.9%	8.2%	0.3%
From 30 to 34 years	181,6	3.6%	1.4%	25.0%	4.1%	51.2%	7.7%	7.1%	
From 35 to 39 years	232, 0	2.1%	0.3%	35.6%	6.1%	43.4%	6.6%	5.8%	
From 40 to 44 years	265,1	0.9%	0.7%	36.8%	5.3%	43.9%	7.5%	5.0%	
From 45 to 49 years	275,2	0.6%	1.7%	17.6%	8.7%	53.1%	8.5%	9.6%	0.2%

Source: INE, 2023 QIV

Despite the introduction of a new Royal Decree-Law on remote work and the emergence of advanced telecommunication systems, remote work remains limited in the Spanish labour market. According to the INE, only 14.8% of workers reported having worked remotely, with the highest percentages found in Madrid (26.1%). Furthermore, 69.1% of respondents indicated that they had not worked remotely because their jobs did not permit it as Table 6 shows, which considers the self-perceived employment status of the interviewees.

Other studies in Spain found that 36% of the employees teleworked at least one day per week. The prevalence of remote work was higher among high-skilled professionals (54%), those living with a partner (38%) and individuals with dependent children (38%) (Curull & Maynou, 2024).

Part-time work in Spain is a gendered phenomenon, with a higher proportion of+ women than men engaged in this type of employment. Furthermore, there are significantly more women in involuntary part-time positions compared to their male counterparts, as previously mentioned. The reasons for working part-time also differ between genders. For instance, among individuals aged 30 to 44, women report being three times more likely than men to work part-time due to caregiving responsibilities for children, sick adults, individuals with disabilities, or the elderly.

3.3. The role of employers, collective agreements and initiatives

While achieving work-family balance often appears to be a struggle for employees, some employers in Spain are actively working to enhance this balance for their workforce. For instance, there is an organization[16] that certifies companies for their commitment to corporate family responsibility. Fundación Másfamilia is a private, professional, independent, non-profit and charitable organization which is active in developing actions to promote work-life balance.

A recent study compares over 200 collective agreements from Spain and the Netherlands and examines the inclusion and types of flexible working arrangements (Brega, Besamusca, & Yerkes, 2024). The findings revealed that more flexibility clauses are found in Spanish collectives' agreements, probably due to more limited legal provision compared to those in the Netherlands.

Other initiatives, such as the ARHOE, the National Commission for the Rationalization of Spanish Schedules,17 and the Time Agreement at Barcelona City Hall18, serve as excellent examples of active efforts to encourage parents in achieving a better work

16 Fundación Másfamilia, avaiable at: https://masfamilia.org/certificacion-efr/

17 ARHOE available at: https://horariosenespana.com/

18 Barcelona website, available at:
https://ajuntament.barcelona.cat/usosdeltemps/en/time-agreement/ what-time-agreement

family balance. Additionally, resources like Concilia.org19 and El Club de Malas Madres20 provide valuable support for families. Furthermore, several specific companies22 also exemplify effective practices in promoting work-family balance.

4. Social protection of parents with young children

As we presented before, new parents enjoy nowadays 16 weeks of leave which is non-transferable, paid at 100% of the salary, and it is obligatory to take six weeks of leave following the birth (Meil, Escobedo, & Lapuerta, 2024). Additionally, working parents with children under 12 years old to reduce their working hours by one eighth and one-half.

In Spain, working mothers may receive €1,200 per year for the first three years if they continue working21. Additionally, large and single-parent families can benefit from an extra €1200 until the oldest child turns 18 years old22.

In this situation, the welfare trap, understood as the financial disadvantage of returning to work due to the loss of benefits, is not clear, but the hidden costs of childcare during the first infancy may be a form of welfare trap because some parents decide to stay home instead of paying for private nurseries.

5. Early childhood education and child care systems

In 2022, Spain's public expenditure on education was 4.32% of the national GDP, while it was 4.89% in 2021. Education is a regional competence, with 84.6% of funding coming from Autonomous Communities. A significant concern for the Spanish education system is early childhood education, with a limited number of public nurseries, which imposes high costs for families with children under three. However, some critics argue that instead of expanding nursery options, the focus should shift to creating family-oriented spaces that offer limited, flexible hours for parents and children to engage together (de Febrer, 2021)

Table 8 shows the net enrolment rate at the age of 2. The data reveals significant variations in the total percentages over the years from 2012-13 to 2022-22, with an overall increase from 51.9% to 71.2%. Notable improvements are observed in regions such as Andalusia, which rose from 57.6% to 80.3%, and Cantabria, which increased from 59.4% to 80.8%. Conversely, regions like Asturias and Murcia show more modest growth, with percentages of 41.2% and 38.9%, respectively, in 2022-23. The Basque Country consistently maintains the highest percentage, remaining above 90% over

19 Concilia, a territorial project, available at: https://concilia.org/

20 The Community of Women and mothers, available at: https://clubdemalasmadres.com/ 22 https://quinton.es/sobre-nosotros/premios

21 State Tax Administration Agency, available at: https://sede.agenciatributaria.gob.es/Sede/en_gb/ciudadanos-familias-personas-discapacidad/deducciones-relacionadas-hijos-descendientes/ deduccion-maternidad.html

22 State Tax Administration Agency, available at: https://sede.agenciatributaria.gob.es/Sede/en_gb/ciudadanos-familias-personas-discapacidad/deducciones-relacionadas-hijos-descendientes/deduccionfamilia-numerosa/importe-deduccion.html

the same period. Other regions, such as Extremadura and Ceuta, display substantial growth, particularly in Extremadura, where enrolment increased from 23.6% in 2012-13 to 62.9% in 2022-23. Overall, these figures suggest a trend of increasing participation or success rates across many regions, although the pace of improvement varies significantly among them. The increase in enrolment can be more attributed to a combination of factors, including a growing awareness of the importance of early education, the need for parents to secure childcare and work full-time at the same time, and shifts in social norms, than to a proliferation of public centres, despite their increasing number.

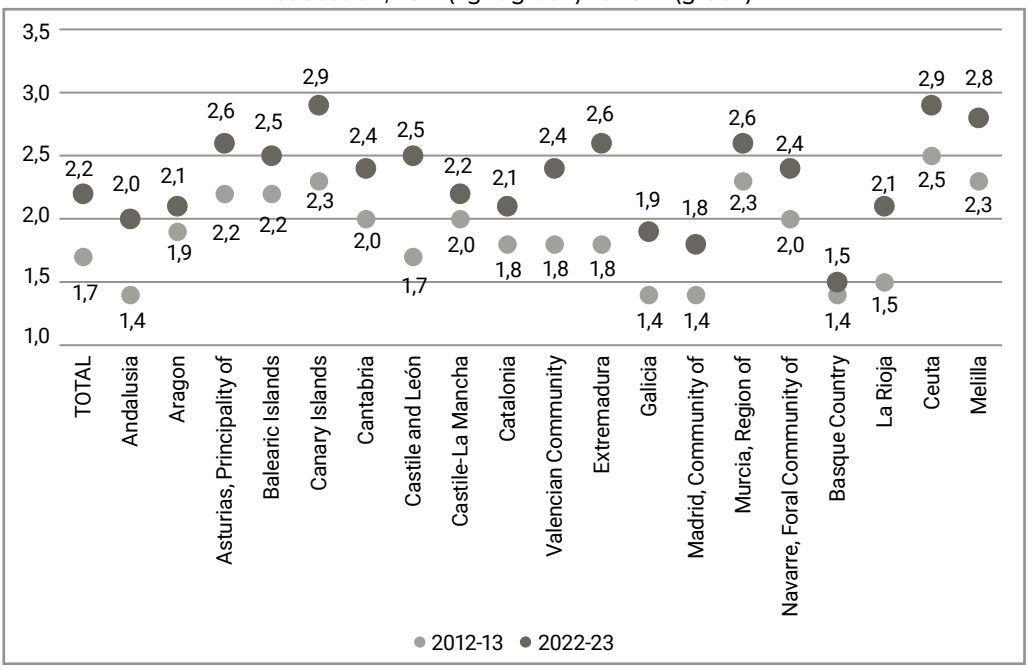
Table 8. Net enrolment rate at the age of 2 in Spain

2012-13		2017-18	2022-23
TOTAL 51,9		60,5	71,2
Andalusia	57,6	68,4	80,3
Aragon	52,5	58,1	60,4
Asturias, Principality of	26,3	33,5	41,2
Balearic Islands	33,6	40,0	52,1
Canary Islands	12,8	33,0	44,8
Cantabria	59,4	71,8	80,8
Castile and León	31,1	35,6	74,3
Castile-La Mancha	52,4	55,9	57,8
Catalonia	55,8	61,4	70,1
Valencian Community	40,9	54,6	73,1
Extremadura	23,6	46,8	62,9
Galicia	62,0	69,7	78,6
Madrid, Community of	67,4	73,4	80,4
Murcia, Region of	29,5	32,3	38,9
Navarre, Foral Community of	16,3	44,8	51,6
Basque Country	92,6	93,7	93,0
La Rioja	50,6	59,4	75,6
Ceuta	15,1	27,6	47,5
Melilla	34,3	41,1	63,5

Source: Las cifras de la educación en España Estadísticas e indicadores Edición 2025.

In the same line, the data on the average age on entry into early childhood education shows an overall decrease from 2.2 years in 2012-13 to 1.7 in 2022-23. Regions like La Rioja or Extremadura experienced significant declines, probably reflecting socioeconomic factors, parental preferences or educational policies.

Figure 4. Average age of entry into early childhood education, 2012 (light green) vs 2022 (green)



Source: Las cifras de la educación en España Estadísticas e indicadores Edición 2025.

Some recent studies in Hungary and Spain show that subsidized childcare increases maternal labour force participation (Lovász & Szabó-Morvai, 2019; Nollenberger & Rodríguez-Planas, 2013). Other research found no effects on mothers with high or low education (Müller & Wrohlich, 2020).

6. Summary and future challenges

Despite the unresolved issue of work-family balance among parents of young children in Spain, there are promising developments aimed at addressing this challenge. For example, the legal framework is evolving to protect parents in the labour market while encouraging greater involvement at home. Additionally, the Spanish government continues to increase the number of early childhood education and care institutions to help parents improve their work and care responsibilities.

In the workplace, there has been a gradual democratization of flexible working arrangements, explained by various reasons, including growing corporate awareness of the importance of talent retention and employee well-being, reinforced significantly by collective agreements. Moreover, private certifications have emerged to support this trend. While these flexible working arrangements are not always fully used due to a culture of presenteeism, they represent a new opportunity for workers.

From a societal perspective, there is a clear shift in favour of improving work-family balance for parents with young children, reflected in the media and supported by

a good number of local initiatives. The challenge is now to ensure that these changes are implemented effectively and consistently across all sectors.

The challenge of addressing social problems lies in developing integral solutions rather than fragmented ones, which sometimes lead to undesired effects, such as welfare traps. Solving this issue implies a commitment between different sectors, areas, and levels of government. For example, the successful family police in Quebec, Canada involved collaboration across multiple ministers, including work and education.

From a political perspective, work-family balance cannot be delegated to a specific minister; it involves multiple areas and ministers, including work, education, families, housing, health, migration and others. Therefore, it would be positive for this challenge to be led by the presidency, in coordination with the respective ministers in Spain. Even in this scenario, work-family balance is an ongoing challenge that will never be fully resolved. Nevertheless, the government should aspire to facilitate a legal framework accompanied by measures and services designed to support families in this new contemporary need. This support must be coordinated with the respective political ministers and various stakeholders, including organizations, academia, media and local institutions. Achieving such coordination would be a significant step.

In this context, we can anticipate the following challenges. Organizations need to change their paradigms to understand the benefits of flexible working arrangements for families and organizations themselves. Collaboration between organizations and academia could provide valuable insights that might help companies recognize the importance of supporting working parents.

Another challenge for Spain is the vulnerability of its economy in critical times, which might destabilize families. At the same time, the high dependence of the Spanish economy on tourism and services, which often employs workers with non-standard hours, adds to the complexity of the issue of work-life balance. It is essential to develop specific and innovative solutions for these workers to address their unique needs.

Furthermore, despite Spain's progress on gender egalitarianism, micromachismos still exists, generating significant gender inequality, especially at home, but also in other contexts. Increasing awareness to reduce such micromachimos is another essential task and challenge.

On a personal and familial level, the lack of balance -though often perceived as a "soft" issue- has hard implications for health and mental well-being. The inability to fully realize one's potential, which is a crucial aspect of life, can lead to anxiety and a pervasive sense of guilt for not being an adequate parent or employee. Therefore, initiatives aimed at addressing this lack of balance are vital.

Finally, Spain's demographic trends are quite clear: the fertility rate remains low, and combined with high life expectancy, results in an increasingly aging society, with some positive implications but also with challenges like the sustainability of the pension system. Additionally, the desired fertility rate is, on average, one child higher than the real fertility rates, reinforcing the need to keep developing an integrative approach towards working parents with young children.

In short, Spain is moving in the right direction to protect parents with young children in the labour market while encouraging their participation in caregiving responsibilities. However, significant challenges remain, making it essential to develop an integrated policy approach involving key stakeholders to keep advancing in this area.

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Promoting labour market participation of parents with young children
National Contribution – Sweden

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1. General Context

1.1. The Ideological Shift and Public Discourse

The reconciliation of childcare and work remains central to the Swedish welfare state, historically rooted in the concept of *folkhemmet* (the 'People's Home'). The ideological transition from a single-breadwinner to a dual-breadwinner model in the 1970s was cemented by critical reforms: the introduction of separate taxation for spouses (1971), the main rule of no maintenance between spouses (1973), the expansion of public childcare during the 1970s, the replacement of 'maternity leave' with gender-neutral 'parental leave' in 1974 and the protection against sex discrimination in employment as the last legislative piece in 1978. This shift was driven by a labour shortage and a strong political desire to achieve gender equality (*jämställdhet*). The concept of *jämställdhet* specifically only denotes equality between the sexes, distinguishing it from *jämlikhet*, which refers to equality in society in all other aspects, such as between classes, or the other protected grounds of ethnicity, religion, sexual orientation, gender identity, disability or age.

1.2. The Double Burden

Despite high female labour force participation (approx. 85% for women and 90% for men aged 20–65),[2] the 'double burden' of paid and unpaid work remains a distinct challenge. However recent data offers a more nuanced picture than historical estimates.

- Unpaid work hours: The latest comparative data (Swedish Central Statistical Bureau (hereinafter SCB) 2025), shows that Swedish women perform approximately 2.5-3 hours of unpaid household and care work per day, compared to around 1 hour for men. Although this is one of the smallest gaps in the EU, it still amounts to women working nearly six extra weeks of unpaid labour per year compared to men.[3]

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[2] See for all these statistics and those noted later in the text with (SCB), Swedish Central Statistical Bureau (SCB), *På tal om kvinnor och män, läthund om jämställdet 2024* (SCB 2025) available at: https://www.scb.se/lathund2024.

[3] OECD, *Pursuing gender equality in a changing world*, (OECD Publishing, Paris 2025), https://doi.org/10.1787/e8d9869a-en

- In terms of annual statistics for 2025 (SCB):
  - The gender wage gap (standard monthly salaries for full-time equivalent work) stood at 10.2%.[4]
  - The gender income gap (*inkomstklyfta*), which accounts for part-time work, capital income, and parental leave, was significantly higher at 20%.
  - The lifetime earnings gap or the pension gap is currently ˜30%.

These discrepancies illustrate that while women may have equal hourly wages for similar work (the 'adjusted' wage gap is only 4.6%), their actual take-home economic power is roughly a fifth lower than men's due to the 'double burden' limiting their paid working hours.

1.3. Occupational Segregation

Sweden continues to have one of the most gender-segregated labour markets in the OECD. This phenomenon often referred to as the 'Nordic paradox'.

- Sectoral split: In 2025, 71% of public sector employees were women, compared to 62% of private sector men employees. Only 17% of men and 23% of women work in 'gender-balanced' occupations (where the gender split is at least 40/60 up to 50/50).
- Part-time work: One in five women, and one in ten men work part-time in Sweden.
- This segregation is reinforced by the flexibility of work life balance in the public sector. Public sector collective agreements often provide generous parental leave top-ups in addition to the public benefit. The public benefit has a ceiling of 80% for up to 360 days. The top-ups then are 10%, guaranteeing 90% of the salary. While some private sector agreements (especially for white-collar workers, *tjänstemän*) have caught up in the use of top-ups, the public sector has uniquely historically offered this financial security alongside a work cultural tolerance of part-time work and flexible hours.

This flexibility comes at a price. The wage differential is structural: the export-oriented private (male-dominated) industry sets the 'wage mark' (*märket*) for the entire economy, effectively capping wage growth in the (female-dominated) public sector. Consequently, women accept family-friendly working conditions in the public sector at the cost of lower lifetime wage growth compared to the male-dominated private sector.

2. Labour Market Situation in Sweden

In 2026, the Swedish labour market comprises approximately 5.8 of 10.6 million people living in Sweden, approximately 55-60% of the total population. In October 2025, the labour force participation rate was 74.9%, with 2.99 million men and 2.73 million women in employment, one of the highest employment rates in Europe. In 2025, the employment rate was 84% for men, compared to 80% for women (SCB).

[4] Swedish National Mediation Office, *Gender pay gap 2024? What does the official statistics say* (mi.se 2024).

2.1. The Swedish Labour Law Model

The Swedish labour market operates under the 'Swedish Labour Law Model,' a system of industrial relations predicated on self-regulation by autonomous and powerful social partners—trade unions and employer organisations—with minimal state interference in wage formation including currently no minimum wage legislation. Organisational density remains exceptionally high by international standards, however, approximately 66% of employees were union members in 2024, down from a peak of 85% in 1993. Employer organisational density is approximately 90% overall. In 2024, collective bargaining coverage stood at 88% of all employees aged 18-68 in 2024 with nearly universal coverage (100%) in the public sector and 83% in the private sector.

In summary, Sweden's industrial relations model is characterised by:

1. High collective bargaining coverage;
2. Coordinated wage-setting following the Industrial Agreement mark;
3. Sectoral and local negotiations with substantial autonomy for social partners;
4. Minimal statutory wage regulation (no statutory minimum wage); and
5. Extension of collective agreement provisions to non-unionised workers in covered firms.

This model grants social partners substantial autonomy and has historically ensured labour peace, competitiveness, and relatively compressed wage structures.

2.2. Employment by Sector and Gender Segregation

Around one-third of all employees work in the public sector, while the remaining two-thirds are employed in the private sector. This distribution is deeply gendered and constitutes one of the most persistent structural features of the Swedish labour market. Among the approximately 2.25 million women in the workforce, around half are employees in the public sector. Women constitute approximately 70% of the public sector workforce but less than a third of private sector employees. Conversely, the vast majority of men are employees in the private sector. Despite decades of gender equality policies, this sectoral divide has remained remarkably stable.[5] The occupational segregation is even more pronounced. According to Statistics Sweden, only 23% of employed women and 17% of employed men worked in gender-balanced occupations (defined as 40-60% of either sex) in 2024 (SCB), with the most segregated female-dominated sectors being in care work.

2.3. Educational Attainment

Sweden's workforce is highly educated, reflecting a substantial expansion of higher education since the 1990s. Women now constitute the majority of those in higher education. Despite women's educational advantages, educational attainment has not translated into wage parity or reduced occupational segregation. In fact,

[5] Ibid. at 9.

female-dominated professions requiring similar educational qualifications, responsibilities, and stress levels as male-dominated occupations faced a persistent 20% pay disparity in 2023.[6]

2.4. The Gender Pay Gap and Structural Wage Formation

In 2024 Sweden's gender pay gap stood at 10.2%, representing a slight increase of 0.2 percentage points from 2023. On average, women earned 37,800 SEK per month compared to 42,000 SEK for men. In absolute terms, women earned 89.8% of what men earned (but the gender pay gap can vary widely by sector). This places Sweden in the middle of the EU Member States, which have an average gender pay gap of 12% (in 2023).[7]

2.5. Parenthood, Part-Time Work, and the Motherhood Penalty

Swedish family policy is internationally lauded for promoting a dual-earner household model through generous paid parental leave (480 days per child) and extensive subsidised childcare. However, labour market statistics reveal a persistent and significant 'motherhood penalty' that undermines women's economic equality.[8]

2.5.1. Part-Time Employment

Around 80% of employed women in Sweden work full-time (defined as 35 hours or more), while 20% work part-time. Among men, around 90% work full-time, with only about 5-10% working part-time. Overall, 17.6% of all employees worked part-time in 2024.

Part-time work is particularly concentrated among mothers of young children. Statistics show that 29% of women work part-time compared to around 5% of men. The proportion of mothers working part-time is 29% when children are aged 1-2 years, this drops to 27% when children are aged 3-5 years and to 23% when children are aged 6-10 years.For fathers, part-time work remains below 10% even when children are young. For mothers with three or more children, part-time employment rate range from 30 to 37% depending on the ages of their children (SCB).[9]

2.5.2. Parental Leave Uptake

Sweden's gender-neutral parental leave system includes 480 days of paid leave per child (with 90 days reserved exclusively for each parent), and the division of parental leave remains highly unequal: Women continue to take between 69% of all paid

[6] Anita Harriman, Lena Johansson, Marie Trollvik, *Highly valued – low pay. The structural wage gap in Sweden* (Lönelotsarna 2025).

[7] Eurostat, *Gender pay gap statistics* (2025) available at www.ec.europa.eu/eurostat

[8] Anton Sundberg, *The child penalty in Sweden: evidence, trends, and child gender* (IFAU 2024:12).

[9] SCB, *Women still work more part-time than men* (SCB.se 2025).

parental leave days, while men take 31%.[10] This represents progress from historical levels—fathers took only 0.5% of parental leave in 1974, rising to approximately 17% by the 1990s.

2.5.3. Economic Impact: Lifetime Earnings and Pension Gaps

The combined effects of extended parental leave and subsequent part-time employment mean that women have substantially lower lifetime earnings and pension wealth compared to men. The gender pension gap in Sweden is significant and increasing. According to a recent Nordic Council study, Sweden has the largest gender pension gap among the Nordic countries, with an average disparity of 28% between men's and women's pensions. This places 17.2% of female pensioners at risk of poverty, compared to just 9% of male pensioners. Furthermore, 43% of women rely on the guaranteed minimum pension designed for those with minimal or no supplementary pension benefits.[11] The pension gap is a direct consequence of the uneven distribution of unpaid care work, reduced working hours, and lower wages in female-dominated sectors throughout women's working lives, along with the so-called motherhood penalty.

2.5.4. Trends in Parental Labour Market Participation

Sweden has a high overall labour force participation rate among parents. The employment rate was 77.4% in 2023, which is approximately 7 percentage points higher than the EU27 average. Female labour force participation was 61.68% in 2024, among the highest globally. The gender gap in labour force participation narrowed to just 4 percentage points in 2024, down from 20.3 percentage points in 1975 (SCB). However, these aggregate statistics mask profound qualitative inequalities in hours worked, earnings, and care responsibilities that have remained largely stagnant since the early 2000s. While women's presence in the workforce is exceptionally high, research characterises the situation as 'stagnant equality' or a 'double burden' where women shoulder disproportionate unpaid care work alongside paid employment. Although men have slowly increased their uptake of parental leave from 0.5% in 1974 to around 30% today, the rate of change is incremental, and progress has plateaued since 2018.

3. Labour Law Protection of and Employment Incentives for Parents with Young Children

The Swedish legal framework regarding parenting and work is based on the dual-earner model ideology, in which both parents are expected to participate in the workforce while sharing unpaid care work. This framework is bifurcated into employment law (the right to leave) and social security law (the right to compensation). Recent reforms in 2024 have introduced unprecedented flexibility to this model by allowing the transfer of leave to third parties to accommodate diverse family structures.

[10] Försäkringskass, *Föräldraförsökringen 50 år* (försäkringskass.se 2025).

[11] Nordic Council of Ministers, *Gender-equal pensions in the Nordics* (norden.org 2024).

3.1. The Right to Leave

The primary statute governing parental rights in the workplace is the Parental Leave Act (*Föräldraledighetslag* 1995:584). This Act provides employees with broad rights to leave, independent of the insurance benefits. Key provisions include:

- Full-time leave: Parents are entitled to full-time leave to care for a child until they are 18 months old. This right is absolute and does not depend on the parent taking out the state parental leave economic benefit.
- Reduced working hours: Parents have a statutory right to reduce their normal working hours by up to 25% (working 75%) until their child turns eight or completes their first year of school. This right to part-time work is a cornerstone of the Swedish strategy to balance work and family life.
- Protection against detriment: The Act prohibits employers from disfavouring job applicants or employees for reasons related to parental leave. This covers hiring, promotion, and termination. If an employee is dismissed solely for reasons connected to parental leave, the dismissal is invalid.

3.2. The Right to Compensation

Financial support in the form of a state parental leave economic benefit is regulated by the Social Insurance Code (*Socialförsäkringsbalk* 2010:110). The parental benefit (*föräldrapenning*) provides 480 paid days per child.

- Compensation levels (2026): 390 days are paid at the sickness benefit level (approximately 80% of the qualifying income up to a statutory cap of 10 times the price base amount for the period of a year). For the year 2026, the price base amount is 59,200 SEK, meaning the income ceiling for calculation is around 49,333 SEK/month. The maximum daily payout is around. 1,259 SEK (before tax). The remaining 90 days are paid at a minimum flat rate of 180 SEK/day.
- Reserved Days: To promote gender equality, 90 of the 480 days are reserved for each parent and cannot be transferred. This 'use it or lose it' policy targets fathers and is referred to as 'daddy months'. Despite this, uptake has stalled; fathers currently take approximately 31% of all parental leave days, a figure that has remained relatively static since 2018.
- Double Days Reform: The number of 'double days' (days where both parents can take leave simultaneously) was doubled as of 2024 from 30 to 60 days and can now be used until the child is 15 months old.
- Transfer of Leave to Third Parties: As of 2024, parents can transfer up to 45 days of their paid leave entitlement to a third party (e.g., a grandparent, close friend, or relative). Single parents can transfer up to 90 days. This reform aims to support diverse family forms and increase flexibility. However, critics argue it may dilute the 'dual-earner' incentive if used primarily by grandmothers.

3.3. Implementation of Directive 2019/1158 (Work-Life Balance Directive)

Sweden implemented the Directive (EU) 2019/1158 on work-life balance through legislative amendments primarily entering into force on 2 August 2022.

- Flexible working arrangements: The Directive's requirement for a right to request flexible working arrangements for parents with children up to eight years old and clarifies the procedures for requesting arrangements like remote working. Employers must now provide reasoned written responses and justifications for refusals within a specific timeframe.
- Carers' leave: Existing provisions on leave for the care of relatives (*närståendepenning*) have been adapted to align with the Directive, ensuring protected rights to leave for workers providing personal care to a relative with a serious medical reason.

3.4. Atypical Employment and Non-Standard Forms

- Part-time work: Working part-time remains a standard career phase for women. Around 30% of women work part-time, often to balance family obligations. While the Act Prohibiting Discrimination of Part-time and Fixed-term Employees mandates equal treatment, the 'part-time trap' continues to fuel the gender pension gap.
- Telework: Following the pandemic, telework is increasingly regulated through collective agreements. The implementation of Directive 2019/1158 has strengthened the individuals' right to request such arrangements, though the Labour Court remains deferential to employer prerogative regarding the place of work.

3.5. Role of Employers and Collective Agreements

The Swedish labour law model relies on social partners to regulate the labour market, resulting in notable differences in parental incentives across sectors.

3.5.1. Supplementary Compensation ('Top-Ups')

Collective agreements often provide *föräldralön* to top up the state benefit with respect to parental leave.

- Public sector: Agreements (e.g., *Villkorsavtalen*) are highly generous, offering 10% top-up on salary up to the ceiling with respect to the parental leave benefit, and often 90% coverage of salary *above* that ceiling. This creates a strong financial incentive for women in the public sector to take the majority of leave.
- Private sector: White-collar agreements (*tjänstemän*) increasingly match public sector generosity to attract talent. Blue-collar agreements (*arbetare*) often have shorter or less generous top-up periods, which reinforces the differences in parental leave uptake between social classes.

3.5.2. Wage Setting

The 'Industry Agreement' sets the norm (*märket*) for wage increases based on the male-dominated export industry. This structural feature is widely criticized for cementing the gender pay gap by capping wage growth in the female-dominated public sector.

3.6. Good Practices

- Reserved days: The 90-day 'daddy quota' has successfully increased uptake by fathers from negligible levels to around. 31%.[12]
- VAB (Care of Sick Children): The temporary parental benefit (*tillfällig föräldrapenning*) allows parents to take paid leave to care for sick children (up to age 12) and is highly flexible, allowing transfer to a neighbour or grandparent.
- Universal childcare: Municipalities are legally obliged to offer affordable childcare from the age of one. Childcare fees are capped ('maximum fee') at 1,857 SEK per month (in 2026), ensuring accessibility regardless of income. This is critical for women's return to the workforce.

3.7. Persistent Gender Equality

Despite statutory provisions for flexible working arrangements and the right to reduce working hours, these policies often reinforce rather than challenge traditional gender roles. Flexibility is frequently used by women to accommodate care responsibilities rather than enabling equal sharing of paid and unpaid work. Recent qualitative research reveals that Swedish parents face significant challenges in managing boundaries. In dual-earner households where both partners work full-time, constant negotiation of work-family life boundaries is required, and the availability of flexibility creates expectations of continuous availability that can be family-unfriendly. Women are more likely to adapt their employment to family needs, while men's careers remain prioritised.[13]

A crucial but underexamined mechanism perpetuating occupational segregation is 'sectoral locking' created by differential parental leave benefits in collective agreements. Public sector collective agreements offer substantially more generous parental leave wage supplements compared to private sector agreements, creating powerful economic incentives that lock parents—specifically mothers—into the public sector.[14] For dual-earner couples, it can become economically rational for the lower-earning partner—statistically the mother, due to the pre-existing gender pay gap—to utilise these generous public sector benefits and remain in public sector employment.

[12] See Ann-Zofie Duvander and Sofie Cedstrand, 'Gender Equal Parental Leave Use in Sweden: The Success of the Reserved Months', in Caroline de la Porte, and others (eds), *Successful Public Policy in the Nordic Countries: Cases, Lessons, Challenges* (Oxford 2022), https://doi.org/10.1093/oso/9780192856296.003.0013

[13] Anne Grönlund and Ida Öun, 'A more equal deal? Employer-employee flexibility, gender and parents' work-family tensions in Sweden' *Work* 2022;73(3):843-856,. doi: 10.3233/WOR-210668.

[14] Jennifer L. Hook, Meiying Li, Eunjong Paek and Brigid Cotter, 'National work-family policies and the occupational segregation of women and mothers in European countries, 1999-2016' *Eur Sociol Rev.* 2022 Oct 10;39(2):280-300, doi: 10.1093/esr/jcac046.

4. Social protection of parents with young children

4.1. National Social Laws

The Swedish social protection system for parents is based on the 'dual-earner' model and is designed to support workforce participation for both parents while ensuring the well-being of the child. The legal framework is divided into employment law (which covers the right to leave) and social security law (which covers the right to compensation).

The primary statute governing compensation is the Social Insurance Code (*Socialförsäkringsbalk 2010:110*), administered by the Swedish Social Insurance Agency (*Försäkringskassan*). The right to take time off work is governed by the Parental Leave Act (*Föräldraledighetslag 1995:584*).

4.2. Cash Benefits

In 2023, the Swedish Social Insurance Agency paid parental benefits to around 844,000 recipients. Men's share of the total days used was roughly 31%, indicating a slow but steady increase in fathers' utilization of the benefit.

- Parental Benefit (*Föräldrapenning):* Paid leave for 480 days per child.
  - 390 days are paid at the sickness benefit level (around 80% of qualifying income).
  - 90 days are paid at the minimum flat rate of180 SEK per day (unchanged in 2025).
  - Parents can transfer up to 45 days of their paid leave to a third party (e.g., a grandparent or close friend). Single parents can transfer up to 90 days.
- Pregnancy Benefit (*Graviditetspenning*): Pregnant women employed in physically strenuous jobs, or jobs involving risks in the work environment, who cannot be reassigned by their employer are entitled to this benefit generally from the 60th day before their expected due date.
- Temporary Parental Benefit (*VAB):* This compensates parents who are caring for a sick child under 12. It is paid at around 80% of qualifying income for up to 120 days per child per year. The income ceiling for the VAB is calculated differently (7.5 times the price base amounts) to that for the regular parental benefit.
- Child Allowance (*Barnbidrag):* A universal, tax-free monthly allowance of 1,259 SEK per month per child (as of 2026), with progressive 'large family supplements' (*flerbarnstillägg*) for the second child onwards.

Eligibility and value

- Eligibility: To qualify for the 80% income-related level, a parent must have established a 'Sickness Benefit Qualifying Income' (*SGI*) by working for at least 240 consecutive days prior to the expected birth. Parents who do not meet this

requirement receive the 'basic level' benefit, which is of 250 SEK per day for the first 180 days.

- Value and ceilings: The income-based benefit is capped at 10 times the price base amount (*prisbasbelopp*).
  - The price base amount for 2026 is 59,200 SEK.
  - Annual income ceiling is 592,000 SEK.
  - Maximum daily payout is around 1,259 SEK before tax. Income earned above this ceiling is not insured by the state but is often covered by collective agreements.
- The 'Daddy Months': 90 days are strictly reserved for each parent on a 'use it or lose it' basis to promote gender equality.

4.3. Role of Collective Agreements

Collective agreements play a crucial role for high wage earners. Since the state benefits are capped at a monthly salary of 59,200 SEK, many agreements (especially those for white-collar workers and in the public sector) provide a 'top-up' (*föräldralön)*. This often covers the difference between the statutory cap and the actual salary, ensuring the parent receives 90% of their total wage, not just the capped amount.

4.4. Co-payment of Benefits with Wages

The system offers high flexibility in combining work and care:

- Partial Leave: Parents can reduce their working hours by 100%, 75%, 50%, 25%, or 12.5% (one hour of an eight-hour day) and receive a corresponding portion of the benefit.
- Double Dipping Prohibition: It is benefit fraud (*bidragsbrott*) to receive parental benefit for time spent working. However, receiving partial salary and partial benefit concurrently is permitted (e.g., working 50% and claiming 50% benefit).
- Double Days: Parents can take 60 days simultaneous leave. These days can be used until the child is 15 months old (previously 12 months).

4.5. The 'Welfare Trap'

The system avoids the classic welfare trap via the 'work line' (*arbetslinjen*):

- Incentive structure: The difference between the basic benefit of 250 SEK per day and the income-related benefit of up to 1,259 SEK per day creates a powerful financial incentive to work and establish an SGI before having children.
- Gendered trap: A nuanced 'trap' remains. As the public sector often offers more generous 'top-ups' (*föräldralön*)—sometimes covering up to 90% of the full salary for up to 360 days—it becomes financially rational for the lower-earning partner (statistically the mother) to take the bulk of the leave. This reinforces the 'golden cage' effect, whereby women remain in the public sector to maximize family income security, potentially at the cost of long-term private sector wage growth.

5. Early Childhood Education and Child Care Systems

5.1. Resources and Services

The Swedish system of early childhood education and care (ECEC) is an integral part of the country's family welfare policy and is designed to support the 'dual-earner' family model. Since the 1970s, the political objective has been to ensure women's economic independence through paid work, facilitated by the extensive provision of childcare facilities.

The provision of childcare is a statutory duty of the municipalities (*kommuner*). Under the Education Act, municipalities are obliged to offer preschool (*förskola*) places to children from the age of one if their parents are working, studying, unemployed, or on parental leave with a younger sibling. This ensures a guaranteed place within a reasonable timeframe (statutorily within four months of application). All children have the right to at least 525 hours daycare per year (about 15 hours per week) regardless of their parents' employment or student status. From the age of 6 compulsory preschool must be available.

5.2. Model and Cost

The Educare model: the Swedish system integrates care and education, often referred to as 'Educare'. Preschools are not merely custodial but follow a national curriculum (*Lpfö 18* revised 2025) that emphasizes democracy, play, and learning, placing them firmly under the auspices of the National Agency for Education (*Skolverket*).

Maximum fee (*Maxtaxa):* To ensure preschools accessibility regardless of income, Sweden employs a 'maximum fee' system. Parents pay a percentage of their income up to a capped ceiling. As of 2026, the income cap is calculated on a monthly household income of 61,560 SEK.

- Child 1: 3% of income (max. 1,847 SEK/month)
- Child 2: 2% of income (max. 1,231 SEK/month)
- Child 3: 1% of income (max. 616 SEK/month)
- Child 4+: No fees.

This structure ensures that childcare costs do not prevent people from entering or remaining in employment, even those on low incomes.

5.3. Daycare and Employment

The availability of affordable, high-quality childcare is the primary infrastructural enabler of the Swedish labour market's high female participation rate.

- Enabling the dual-earner model: The expansion of the public sector and the simultaneous expansion of public childcare in the 1970s allowed women to enter the workforce in record numbers. Recent statistics (2024) indicate that 87% of all children aged 1–5 attend preschool (485,000 children). Attendance

increases with age: while approximately of 50% of one-year-olds are enrolled, compared 95%t of 4- and 5-year-olds attend.[15] This near-universal coverage correlates directly with Sweden's high employment rate for mothers, which is consistently one of the highest in the OECD.

- Mitigating Career Breaks: The seamless transition from paid parental leave (which covers the child's first 12–18 months) to guaranteed preschool allows parents to return to work without prolonged career interruptions. Women experience a 'child penalty' in earnings of around 37% over the 10 years following first childbirth, with the earnings gap relative to fathers still around 25% even 10 years later Research indicates that the 'motherhood penalty' in employment in Sweden is only 6% over 10 years, substantially lower than in most other European countries, largely due to this continuity.[16]

The childcare sector itself is a major employer. As the provision of care is primarily the responsibility of the municipalities, this sector accounts for a significant proportion of public sector employment. However, this has also reinforced occupational segregation; 95-97% of preschool teachers and childcare workers are women, contributing to the gender segregation of the Swedish labour market (SCB).

6. Future Challenges

While the Swedish model has successfully increased women's participation in the labour market, challenges remain regarding the *quality* of that participation, gender equality, and the integration of vulnerable groups. Key stakeholders include the State (as the legislator), local governments (as employers in the care sector), social partners (unions and employer organisations), and civil society.

6.1. The Social Partners and Wage Formation

- Challenge: The gender pay gap has stagnated. In 2024, it stood at 10.2%, virtually unchanged since 2019. This structural inertia is partly driven by the Industry Agreement that sets the wage 'mark' based on the male-dominated export industry (manufacturing). As public sector wage growth is capped by this industrial norm, the female-dominated sectors such as healthcare, education, and childcare—where women's average monthly wage is 39,300 SEK compared to men's 43,800 SEK—are prevented from negotiating valuations that better reflect the value of their work.
- Intervention: Social partners are under increasing pressure to reassess job classifications. The upcoming EU Pay Transparency Directive (implementation by 2026) will force a legal wedge into this self-regulating model, requiring objective gender-neutral job evaluations, which may disrupt the industrial norms.

[15] Skolverket, *Statistik över barn och personal i förskola per den 15 oktober 2024* (skolverket.se 16 april 2025).

[16] See Sundberg.

6.2. The State and Local Government: Integration of Foreign-Born Parents

- Challenge: A profound 'ethnicity gap' persists in the labour market. As of August 2025, the employment rate for women born in Sweden was 84.7%, compared to 66,5% for women born outside of Sweden. Unemployment rates reflect this disparity even more starkly: 3.0% for Swedish-born women versus 13.8% for foreign-born women. This creates a dual-risk scenario in which foreign-born mothers face both social exclusion and economic dependency.
- Intervention: Municipalities are increasingly combining 'Swedish for Immigrants' (SFI) education with vocational childcare training (*barnskötarutbildning*) to tackle two problems at once: the staff shortage in preschools and the unemployment of foreign-born women.

6.3. Access to Justice

- Challenge: The legal enforcement of non-discrimination rights remains arguably the weakest link in the Swedish system. The 'loser pays' rule in civil litigation creates prohibitive financial risks for individuals suing employers. Consequently, private enforcement is rare. The Equality Ombudsman (DO) litigates very few cases per year (fewer than 20), and trade unions—which have the primary right to represent members—are often reluctant to pursue discrimination cases that might conflict with their collective bargaining priorities. This leaves a 'justice gap' whereby parents who have been discriminated against for taking leave often settle for small sums or drop their claims entirely. The implementation of the EU Pay Transparency Directive in 2026 will not only bring about wage transparency but also strengthen access to justice mechanisms with respect to pay and accountability.
- Intervention: Reform of the litigation cost rules in discrimination cases (similar to labour court disputes where costs can be limited) and for unions to adopt a 'duty of fair representation' to compel them to act in discrimination cases.

6.4. Employers and the 'Double Burden'

- Challenge: The 'double burden' is measurable and persistent. Women still take the vast majority of parental leave and are significantly more likely to work part-time. In fact 17.6% of the total workforce works part-time, but this figure is heavily skewed towards women. This, in turn, feeds the gender pension gap.
- Intervention: Employers can implement 'parent-smart' policies. Leading private companies are engaging in 'share the leave' campaigns, topping up salaries for fathers beyond the statutory 90 days to normalize male leave. The 2024 parental leave reform allows the transfer of days to third parties but is also a double-edged sword: while it offers flexibility, transfers for example grandmothers will simply cement the current situation as concerning the sharing of paid and unpaid work between spouses.

Short Biographies of the Authors

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