

CÚRAM

CÚRAM - Closing the Gender Care Gap in Europe's Workplaces

—

Needs Analysis and Mapping:
Transnational Research Report

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1. Executive Summary

The CÚRAM transnational report synthesises the empirical findings and analytical insights from comprehensive national analyses conducted across Bulgaria, Greece, Portugal, the Czech Republic, Italy, and Ireland. It critically examines persistent gender inequalities in unpaid caregiving, exploring how these affect women's access to employment and are shaped by workplace practices and national policies. Although legislative developments aligned with European Union directives have sought to improve work-life balance, progress remains limited due to weak policy enforcement, cultural expectations that caregiving is a woman's role, and inconsistent support from employers.

This research identifies a substantial and persistent gender care gap in all countries studied. Women consistently shoulder a disproportionate share of unpaid care, investing between 4.2 and 5 hours daily, compared to men's significantly lower contribution of approximately 1.5 to 2.1 hours. This disparity highlights deep-seated gender norms, especially prominent in countries such as Greece, Bulgaria, and the Czech Republic, where traditional caregiving roles are reinforced by inadequate public childcare infrastructure and insufficient policy enforcement.

Employment patterns mirror these caregiving inequalities, as evidenced by varying rates of female part-time employment, from a low of 5% in Bulgaria to a high of 31% in Ireland. This variation highlights how women adapt to caregiving demands and limited job flexibility, often by reducing their hours or leaving work altogether, due to inadequate institutional support.

Further disparities emerge in the uptake of paternity leave. Portugal demonstrates a notably high uptake rate, reflecting effective national campaigns and supportive policy frameworks. Conversely, the Czech Republic presents the lowest uptake at just 2%,

illustrating that legal entitlements alone are insufficient to overcome deep-rooted cultural barriers and workplace stigmas surrounding paternal caregiving.

Employer readiness to support working caregivers is uneven across the countries analysed. Portugal and Ireland exhibit structured and proactive HR policies aimed at supporting parents, whereas Bulgaria, Greece, Czech Republic, and Italy predominantly rely on informal arrangements, often dependent on individual managerial discretion. This inconsistent employer engagement significantly undermines policy effectiveness and perpetuates gendered patterns of care.

The report concludes with strategic policy recommendations and best practice insights, highlighting the critical need for coordinated and multi-dimensional responses. Strengthening childcare infrastructures, enhancing employer accountability, and intensifying public awareness initiatives emerge as necessary actions to achieve tangible progress towards closing the gender care gap across the studied countries.

2. Introduction

The CÚRAM project - Closing the Gender Care Gap in Europe's Workplaces is an EU-funded project under the CERV-2024-GE [Gender Equality] programme. It aims to tackle the root causes of gender inequalities related to caregiving responsibilities. Recognising that the unequal distribution of care work between genders hinders professional development, workplace equality, and societal progress, CÚRAM seeks to support employers in adopting equitable dual-career, dual-carer practices aligned with the EU Work-Life Balance Directive.

The project is centred on promoting dual-career, dual-carer models that support a more equal sharing of unpaid care responsibilities between genders. It aims to foster inclusive and flexible workplaces where all employees, regardless of gender or caregiving role, have the opportunity to succeed professionally.

The gender care gap, defined as the unequal distribution of unpaid caregiving responsibilities between women and men, remains one of the most persistent barriers to achieving genuine gender equality within the European Union. Despite widespread recognition of its detrimental effects on women's economic independence, career progression, and overall social equity, this phenomenon continues to profoundly shape gendered experiences in both domestic and professional spheres.

This report presents an integrated transnational analysis drawn from comprehensive national-level data collected in Bulgaria, Greece, Portugal, the Czech Republic, Italy, and Ireland, under the CÚRAM project framework. Employing a robust methodology comprising quantitative surveys, qualitative focus groups, and desk research, the analysis provides an in-depth comparative exploration of the structural, cultural, and institutional factors underpinning the gender care gap.

The primary objectives of this analysis are threefold: first, to provide a nuanced understanding of how unpaid caregiving responsibilities disproportionately affect women's labour market participation and employment trajectories; second, to critically assess the role of organisational cultures and employer practices in either exacerbating or mitigating these inequalities; and third, to evaluate the effectiveness of existing national policies and identify promising transferable practices.

Central to this research is the recognition that legislative frameworks alone are insufficient to ensure gender equality without corresponding cultural and organisational transformations. This report, therefore, emphasises the interplay between policy initiatives, workplace practices, and prevailing cultural attitudes, offering a comprehensive perspective on the multifaceted dimensions of the gender care gap.

Ultimately, the analysis aims not only to highlight existing disparities and their implications but also to provide empirically informed recommendations for policy and organisational change. By doing so, the report seeks to contribute substantively to ongoing academic, policy, and public debates, advocating for holistic and evidence-based approaches to overcoming gender inequalities in caregiving across the European context.

3. Methodology

This transnational report employs a rigorous, mixed-methods research framework designed to provide both breadth and depth in examining the gender care gap and its implications within the specific contexts of Bulgaria, Greece, Portugal, the Czech Republic, Italy, and Ireland. Recognising the complexity and multifaceted nature of the subject matter, the chosen methodology strategically integrates quantitative and qualitative approaches to capture comprehensive, nuanced, and context-sensitive insights.

A critical aspect of the methodological design was ensuring comparability across diverse national contexts. This was achieved through a standardised yet flexible research protocol, collectively developed and agreed upon by the research teams in all participating countries.

Ultimately, the comprehensive methodological approach outlined here provides a strong empirical basis for the comparative analysis presented in this report. By systematically integrating both quantitative and qualitative findings, the research generates actionable insights, facilitating evidence-based policy recommendations and practical interventions aimed at closing the gender care gap across the studied European contexts.

3.1 Desk Research

This section draws upon an extensive desk-based review, systematically examining statistical datasets, legislative texts, policy frameworks, and relevant literature to provide a comprehensive understanding of gender equality and the care gap within the national contexts of Bulgaria, Greece, Portugal, the Czech Republic, Italy, and Ireland. The review was methodologically structured to enable a comparative analysis of key thematic areas, specifically focusing on the intersections between gender roles, employment dynamics, caregiving responsibilities, and corresponding legal and policy frameworks.

The desk research component pursued several interrelated objectives. Firstly, it critically examined national legislative and policy documents to assess the formal institutional frameworks designed to promote gender equality and support work-life balance. Special attention was given to recent policy developments, legislative reforms, and the transposition of relevant EU directives into national laws. Secondly, the research analysed employment patterns to identify structural inequalities, including part-time employment prevalence, gender pay disparities, occupational segregation, and other labour-market factors significantly impacting gendered caregiving roles.

Additionally, the analysis includes an evaluation of the availability and accessibility of critical public infrastructures, such as childcare and eldercare services, which constitute key enabling factors for

achieving gender equality. This aspect of the review specifically aimed to uncover systemic infrastructural deficits or strengths that influence caregiving practices and labour market participation. A substantial dimension of the desk research focused on exploring the role of cultural and social norms to identify and elucidate prevailing cultural attitudes and societal expectations around caregiving, providing context for understanding persistent gender disparities despite progressive legal frameworks.

A diverse array of authoritative sources underpinned the desk research, including national statistical institutes, national and EU-level legislative databases, policy documents from ministries responsible for labour, social policy, and gender equality, as well as respected international data providers such as Eurostat and the European Institute for Gender Equality (EIGE).

3.2 Field Research

The field research comprised two complementary components: (1) online surveys targeting working parents, carers, employers and HR professionals, and (2) structured focus group discussions involving a smaller number of participants, selected to represent a range of perspectives on employment and caregiving.

Each national partner conducted:

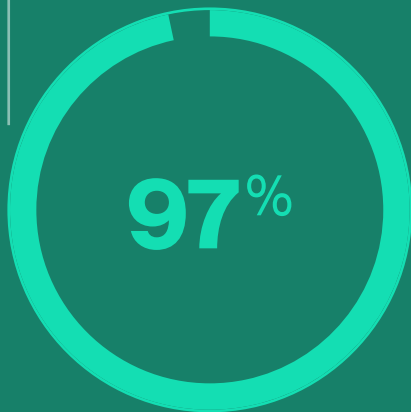
- A survey for working parents and carers
- A survey for employers, managers, and HR professionals
- One or more focus groups with working parents or carers

Across countries, between 100–120 working parents and 20-25 employers participated per country, yielding a robust comparative dataset.

Surveyed Working Parents / Carers by Country

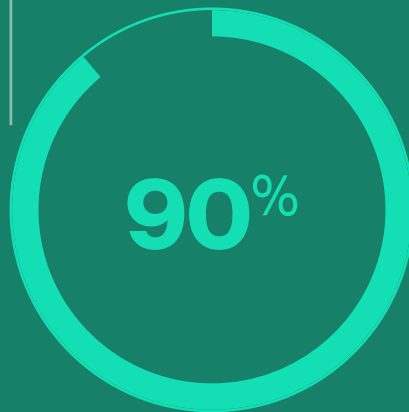
Greece

116/120



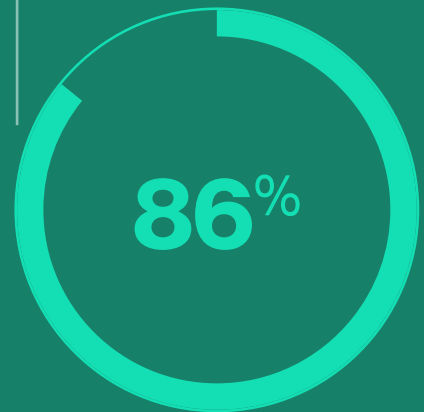
Ireland

107/120



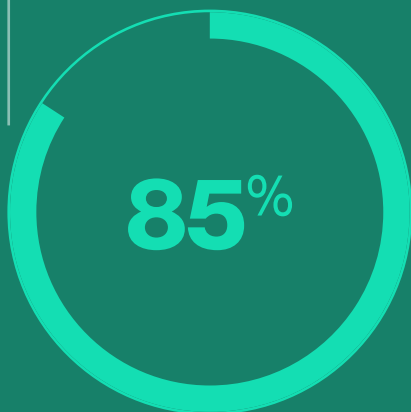
Italy

103/120



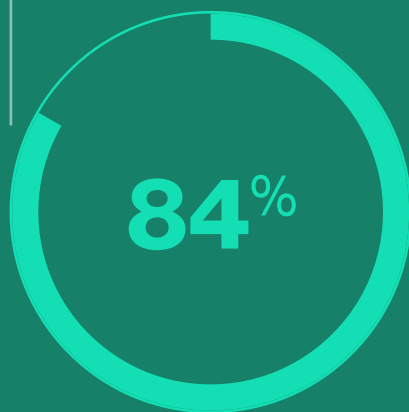
Portugal

101/120



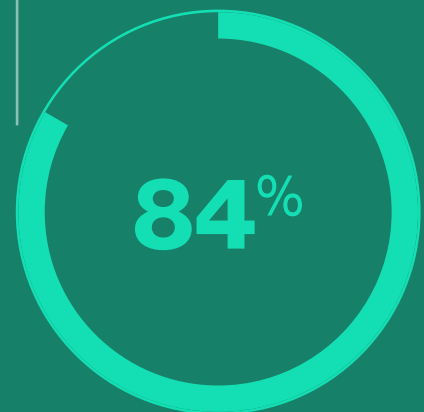
Bulgaria

100/120



Czech Republic

100/120



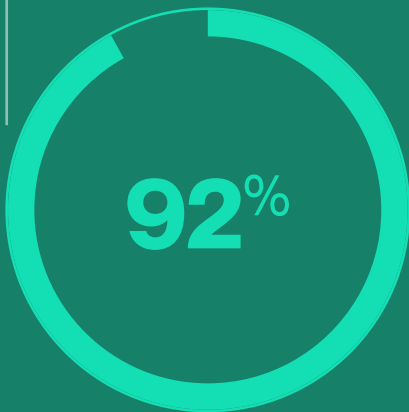
Quantitative data collection was conducted through structured surveys distributed among two carefully defined target groups - working parents and carers, and employers or HR representatives. The parent and caregiver surveys aimed to quantitatively map out caregiving patterns, employment statuses, work-life balance

experiences, and respondents' evaluations of existing policy effectiveness and employer practices. Simultaneously, the employer questionnaire assessed organisational readiness, formal and informal HR policies, awareness and uptake of parental leave entitlements, and other institutional support mechanisms available to

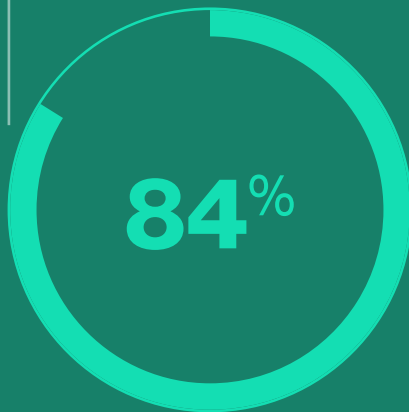
working caregivers. A purposeful sampling approach was adopted to ensure representativeness across different occupational sectors, enterprise sizes, socio-economic backgrounds, and geographic regions within each participating country.

Surveyed Employers / HR Professionals by Country

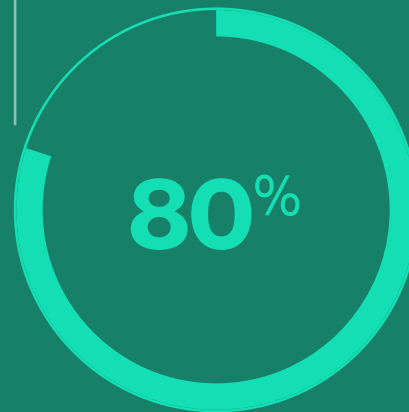
Greece
23/25



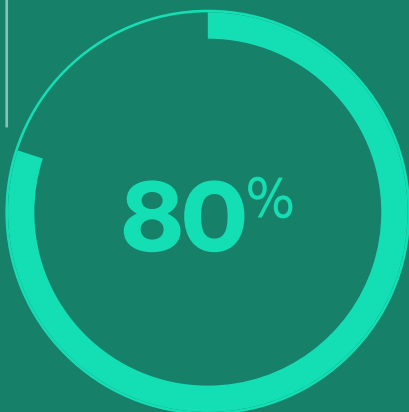
Italy
21/25



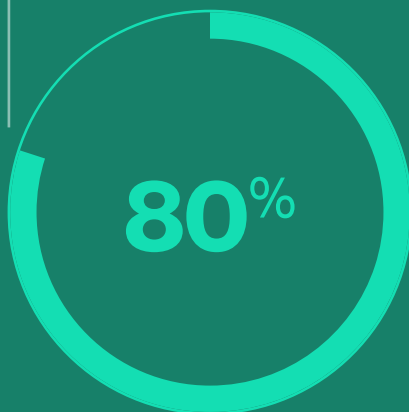
Ireland
20/25



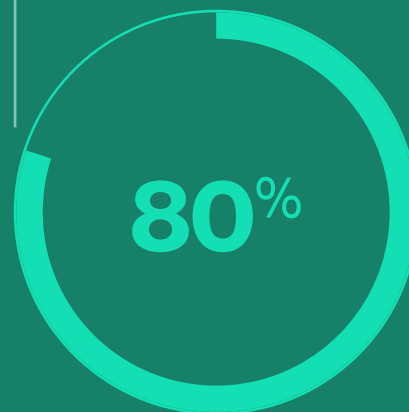
Portugal
20/25



Bulgaria
20/25



Czech Republic
20/25



Complementing these quantitative datasets, qualitative methodologies - specifically, focus groups provided critical layers of interpretative depth. These qualitative methods facilitated the exploration of

complex social attitudes, cultural norms, workplace dynamics, and individual perceptions, thereby enabling a richer understanding of the barriers and enablers shaping the gender care gap. The

thematic analysis of qualitative data offered significant explanatory value, elucidating experiences, attitudes, and behaviours that were not fully captured by quantitative measures alone.

3.3 Limitations

Despite the careful methodological design and coordination efforts among the national research teams, this transnational comparative study inevitably encountered several limitations that warrant consideration when interpreting the results.

A significant limitation relates to the gender imbalance observed among respondents. Across all participating countries, a substantial majority (approximately 70–87%) of surveyed parents and caregivers were women. While this reflects the disproportionate caregiving responsibilities borne by women and aligns with the study's thematic focus, it simultaneously limits the breadth and depth of insights from male respondents, particularly regarding their experiences, perceptions, and challenges related to caregiving roles.

Another notable issue pertains to potential response bias inherent in self-selected participation. Individuals who voluntarily chose to participate in surveys and focus groups may possess heightened awareness of, or more acute experiences with, care-related challenges. As a result, the findings may not fully represent the spectrum of attitudes and experiences among the broader population of working caregivers.

Furthermore, sectoral representation varied significantly, with a noticeable overrepresentation of respondents from public sector institutions, as well as from professional and knowledge-intensive occupations. Conversely, individuals employed in lower-income occupations, precarious or informal work arrangements, or small enterprises were comparatively underrepresented. This uneven sectoral distribution could lead to gaps in understanding the specific caregiving challenges and policy effectiveness within these critical labour-market segments.

Additionally, cross-national comparability may be influenced by inherent cultural variability. Differences in societal perceptions of caregiving, gender roles, and workplace dynamics present methodological challenges when interpreting qualitative data across diverse national contexts. Although standardised methods were utilised, nuanced cultural interpretations of care, employment, and gender equality required careful contextualisation.

Lastly, the comparative analysis faced limitations due to variability in the availability, consistency, and granularity of national statistical data.

To mitigate these limitations, the research approach adopted methods of combining quantitative and qualitative insights and cross-validating findings from multiple data sources. This strategy significantly enhanced the credibility and robustness of the analysis, providing confidence in the study's overarching conclusions and recommendations, despite the acknowledged methodological constraints.

4. Country Snapshots

4.1 Bulgaria

Overview

Bulgaria experiences a substantial and persistent gender care gap, deeply influenced by traditional cultural norms, inadequate childcare infrastructure, and limited employer preparedness. Despite progressive developments in national legislation, including the recent transposition of EU work-life balance directives, significant disparities remain in caregiving responsibilities, disproportionately affecting women's labour market participation and career advancement.

The national field research conducted in Bulgaria encompassed structured surveys of 100 working parents and carers, primarily women (81%), and a separate survey involving 20 employers and HR representatives, predominantly from private-sector organisations. Additionally, qualitative insights were gathered through a focus group comprising working parents, HR professionals, and company representatives from diverse employment sectors.

Key Findings & Challenges

Analysis of the data highlights several interconnected barriers facing Bulgarian working parents, particularly mothers, in navigating work-life balance amidst caregiving demands:

Women continue to bear the overwhelming majority of unpaid caregiving responsibilities. Societal attitudes and institutional inertia reinforce this imbalance, limiting men's involvement in caregiving roles. Men's caregiving participation remains minimal, and fathers who utilise parental leave typically do so for brief periods or not at all.

Availability of formal flexible working arrangements remains scarce and is rarely proactively promoted by employers. Flexible work practices tend to be perceived as informal favours rather than established employee rights, reinforcing workplace inequalities and creating uncertainty among working caregivers.

Awareness and utilisation of parental leave entitlements, especially among fathers, are limited. Although maternity leave is widely recognised, fewer than half of respondents reported familiarity with paternity and parental leave provisions. This knowledge gap substantially reduces uptake and perpetuates gendered caregiving roles.

The inadequacy of childcare infrastructure, including availability, affordability, and quality, remains a critical barrier to employment, particularly for mothers returning to work after childbirth. The lack of sufficient public childcare options forces many women to either exit the labour market or significantly curtail their career ambitions.

Cultural norms further compound caregiving inequalities. Societal expectations strongly dictate that women should assume primary caregiving responsibilities, making shared parenting culturally challenging. Consequently, even progressive legislative measures have limited effectiveness without corresponding shifts in societal attitudes.

The research also reveals the weak enforcement of existing legal entitlements and rights, particularly within SMEs. While Bulgaria's Labour Code has formally incorporated the EU Directive 2019/1158, including maternity, paternity, and parental leave entitlements, actual enforcement mechanisms and employer compliance remain insufficient.

Gender Care Gap

Survey results reinforce these structural and cultural findings: women represented 81% of respondents with caregiving responsibilities. They dedicate significantly more time to unpaid care work. Focus group participants consistently emphasised societal pressures discouraging men's active participation in caregiving, highlighting entrenched cultural norms that perpetuate gender disparities.

Employment & Work-Life Balance

Bulgaria's female employment rate stands at approximately 70%, aligning closely with the EU average. However, notably, part-time employment among women is exceptionally low, suggesting that many women choose to exit employment entirely when caregiving demands intensify, rather than transitioning into part-time roles. Focus group discussions revealed widespread reliance on informal, ad hoc arrangements rather than structured organisational policies to accommodate caregiving responsibilities, underscoring significant gaps in formal employer support.

Indicator	Value
Gender Equality Index (2023)	65.1
Female Labour Force Participation (20–64)	67.4%
Gender Pay Gap	12-20%

Figure 3: Key Labour Market and Gender Equality Indicators

Source: CÚRAM National Report Bulgaria

Legal Framework

Bulgaria has formally aligned its national Labour Code with EU Directive 2019/1158, establishing clear entitlements for maternity, paternity (15 days), and parental leave. The national legislative environment also includes the Protection against Discrimination Act and the National Strategy for Promoting Gender Equality (2021–2030), which explicitly prioritises redistributing caregiving responsibilities and promoting workplace equality. Nonetheless, awareness among the public, especially fathers, remains inadequate, limiting the practical utilisation of these rights. Weak enforcement mechanisms, particularly in SMEs, further constrain the effectiveness of these progressive legal frameworks.

Employers' Readiness

Employer engagement with caregiving and work-life balance issues in Bulgaria remains limited, with pronounced variations depending on organisational size. Larger employers offer some formal flexibility, while SMEs predominantly rely on informal arrangements determined by individual managers. Although some employers expressed openness to implementing supportive measures, limited awareness, inadequate guidelines, and financial constraints emerged as prominent obstacles. Formal policies or dedicated training related to caregiving responsibilities are exceptionally rare.

Public discourse surrounding shared caregiving and active fatherhood remains minimal, further inhibiting cultural acceptance and behavioural change. This lack of societal and organisational support significantly contributes to adverse career outcomes for women, including career stagnation, lower pay, and heightened mental and emotional strain stemming from dual responsibilities at home and work.

Flexible Work	Leave Awareness	HR Policies	Return Support	Cultural Attitudes
2	2	2	1	2

Figure 4: Employer Readiness – Bulgaria (Scale: 1 = low, 3 = high)

Source: CÚRAM National Report Bulgaria

In summary, Bulgaria has established the necessary legislative foundation for tackling gender inequalities in caregiving and employment. However, substantial cultural shifts, reinforced employer accountability, improved childcare infrastructure, and stronger enforcement mechanisms are urgently needed to translate policy intentions into tangible social and economic outcomes.

4.2 Greece

Overview

Greece exhibits a substantial and persistent gender care gap, largely driven by entrenched traditional family roles, insufficient childcare infrastructure, and limited workplace responsiveness. While recent legislative reforms have aligned national policies with EU standards on work-life balance, significant gaps between policy formulation and practical implementation remain evident. Cultural norms and organisational practices continue to reinforce an unequal distribution of caregiving responsibilities, adversely impacting women's economic participation and overall gender equality.

The national field research conducted in Greece encompassed quantitative surveys with 116 working parents and carers, predominantly women (79%), as well as 23 employers and HR professionals, primarily representing private-sector organisations. Complementary qualitative insights were obtained through a focus group discussion involving 11 participants, comprising working carers and employer representatives from diverse occupational backgrounds.

Key Findings & Challenges

Despite notable policy advancements, Greece continues to encounter substantial challenges in transforming cultural attitudes, redistributing caregiving roles, and developing supportive workplace practices.

Gender Care Gap

The research findings demonstrate the persistence of a significant gender disparity in caregiving. Women in Greece dedicate an average of 5.0 hours per day to unpaid caregiving tasks, which restricts their capacity to sustain full-time employment, compelling many to transition into informal caregiving roles or exit the workforce entirely.

Employment & Work-Life Balance

Female employment in Greece remains notably low, with only 62% of women actively engaged in the labour market, one of the lowest employment rates among the analysed countries. Additionally, part-time employment among women is relatively uncommon, suggesting that women predominantly opt for complete withdrawal from the labour market rather than transitioning to flexible working arrangements when caregiving responsibilities intensify.

Indicator	Value
Gender Equality Index (2023)	58.7
Female Labour Force Participation (20–64)	62%
Gender Pay Gap	15%

Figure 5: Key Labour Market and Gender Equality Indicators
Source: CÚRAM National Report Greece

Legal Framework

The recent legislative framework in Greece, notably Law 4808/2021, reflects significant policy progress in promoting gender equality and work-life balance. This legislation provides critical rights, including 14 days of paid paternity leave, up to four months of parental leave per parent with partial compensation, and the right for employees to request flexible working arrangements. Despite these advances, practical uptake remains limited. Low uptake is primarily attributed to insufficient employer awareness and deeply ingrained cultural attitudes discouraging paternal caregiving.

Employers' Readiness

Greek employers demonstrate modest preparedness to accommodate caregiving responsibilities within organisational policies and practices. Most organisations, particularly SMEs, rely predominantly on informal flexibility arrangements rather than structured HR policies. Survey findings indicate limited employer awareness of statutory caregiving entitlements, resulting in inconsistent implementation and a reliance on discretionary managerial decisions rather than systematic support mechanisms.

Additionally, inadequate public infrastructure exacerbates caregiving challenges. Respondents highlighted significant issues related to the limited availability, prohibitive cost, and varying quality of childcare and eldercare services, particularly in rural regions. Coupled with prevailing rigid workplace cultures, these infrastructural deficits disproportionately burden women, further entrenching gendered caregiving responsibilities.

Flexible Work	Leave Awareness	HR Policies	Return Support	Cultural Attitudes
2	2	2	1	2

Figure 6: Employer Readiness – Greece (Scale: 1 = low, 3 = high)

Source: CÚRAM National Report Greece

Focus group discussions underscored significant cultural and organisational barriers to shared caregiving responsibilities. Participants frequently cited societal expectations and workplace cultures as primary factors discouraging men's active engagement in caregiving roles, even when men demonstrated a willingness to contribute. Furthermore, the discussions highlighted a pervasive absence of training and formal guidelines for employers aimed at fostering family-friendly workplaces, pointing to a critical gap in organisational capacity-building and awareness-raising initiatives.

In summary, despite a robust legislative foundation, the effective redistribution of caregiving roles and gender equality in the Greek workplace remain severely constrained by cultural inertia, inadequate infrastructure, and insufficient organisational support. To effectively address these issues, comprehensive and coordinated actions are essential, combining infrastructure investment, employer engagement, cultural change campaigns, and strengthened policy enforcement.

4.3 Portugal

Overview

Portugal stands out among the partner countries for its progressive policy framework and proactive stance towards promoting equitable caregiving responsibilities. Despite these advancements, persistent structural barriers and deeply rooted cultural norms continue to challenge the full realisation of policy objectives. Consequently, the distribution of unpaid care responsibilities remains predominantly gendered, with women shouldering a significantly larger share of caregiving tasks.

The national field research conducted in Portugal involved structured surveys of 101 working parents and carers, 74% of whom were women, alongside surveys with 20 employers and HR professionals from various sectors. Additional qualitative insights were gathered from a focus group comprising both working carers and employer representatives (11 participants), providing comprehensive perspectives on care responsibilities, workplace culture, and policy effectiveness.

Key Findings & Challenges

Portugal distinguishes itself from other countries by integrating robust policy frameworks with strong employer engagement, illustrating how institutional commitment can positively influence organisational cultures. A particular strength is Portugal's cohesive national strategic approach, in which work-life balance initiatives are embedded across various policy areas, including gender equality, demographic sustainability, and social cohesion strategies. This integrated policy environment significantly supports progress towards equitable caregiving, although its impact at the workplace level remains somewhat uneven.

Despite this favourable institutional context, traditional gendered patterns persist. Continued efforts in cultural transformation and deeper employer engagement are therefore essential to fully bridge the gender care gap.

Gender Care Gap

In Portugal, women dedicate an average of 4 hours per day to unpaid caregiving tasks, which is approximately twice the amount of unpaid care as men. This continued imbalance underscores enduring cultural and societal expectations regarding gender roles in caregiving.

Indicator	Value
Gender Equality Index (2023)	61.3
Female Labour Force Participation (20–64)	72%
Gender Pay Gap	11.9%

Figure 7: Key Labour Market and Gender Equality Indicators

Source: CÚRAM National Report Portugal

Employment & Work-Life Balance

Portugal maintains the highest female employment rate (72%) among the studied countries and one of the lowest rates of part-time employment among women. This indicates that Portuguese women generally remain economically active despite caregiving responsibilities, supported in part by accessible childcare services and effective policy incentives.

Legal Framework

Portugal's legal framework demonstrates considerable maturity and alignment with the EU Directive 2019/1158 on work-life balance. Moreover, Portugal has taken significant additional measures through targeted national strategies. Notably, the "3 em Linha" (Three in a Row) programme actively promotes the harmonisation of work, family, and personal

life. Portugal provides generous leave provisions, including 20 working days of fully compensated paternity leave and shared parental leave options, resulting in the highest recorded paternity leave uptake among partner countries.

Furthermore, specific incentives have been established to encourage fathers to utilise leave entitlements and employers to adopt and enhance family-friendly workplace practices. These comprehensive initiatives position Portugal as a policy leader in fostering gender-balanced caregiving roles.

Employers' Readiness

Employer readiness in Portugal is notably advanced, particularly within larger organisations. Many employers have integrated formal and structured HR policies explicitly supporting flexible working arrangements, leave uptake, and return-to-work transitions for caregivers.

Flexible Work	Leave Awareness	HR Policies	Return Support	Cultural Attitudes
3	3	3	3	3

Figure 8: Employer Readiness – Portugal (Scale: 1 = low, 3 = high)

Source: CÚRAM National Report Portugal

Field research consistently highlighted high levels of awareness and commitment among both working parents and employers regarding caregiving rights and responsibilities. Nevertheless, several challenges persist:

Although fathers increasingly utilise paternity leave, many still encounter social stigma and workplace disincentives, particularly within smaller or less progressive companies. Women's disproportionate caregiving burdens remain pronounced, especially concerning early childcare and eldercare responsibilities.

Additionally, employer preparedness varies significantly across organisational sizes and sectors. Larger enterprises frequently offer comprehensive and formalised family-friendly policies, whereas smaller businesses face constraints related to limited financial resources, inadequate HR training, and inconsistent access to supportive public childcare infrastructure.

The focus group discussion further illuminated these dynamics, confirming generally positive employer attitudes but also identifying tangible obstacles, including limited internal capacity, budgetary restrictions, and uneven regional childcare availability, as critical barriers to achieving workplace equity and broader societal change.

In conclusion, Portugal exemplifies how strong institutional commitment, effective policy integration, and proactive employer engagement can substantially improve gender equality in caregiving. However, achieving lasting and meaningful change will require continued efforts to transform cultural perceptions, enhance organisational capacity, and ensure the equitable distribution of caregiving responsibilities between women and men.

4.4 Czech Republic

Overview

The Czech Republic exhibits one of the most pronounced gender care gaps within the EU, underpinned primarily by entrenched traditional gender norms, limited availability of childcare services, and rigid labour market conditions. Despite formal alignment with EU policy frameworks on gender equality and work-life balance, the practical reality for working parents remains significantly divergent, with women disproportionately shouldering unpaid care responsibilities.

The national field research conducted in the Czech Republic comprised surveys involving 100 working parents and carers (61% women). Additional insights were obtained through surveys with 20 employers and HR professionals across multiple sectors, complemented by qualitative data gathered in a focus group consisting of parents, HR managers, and employer representatives.

Key Findings & Challenges

The Czech Republic offers generous parental leave entitlements on paper, yet practical challenges severely undermine their equitable use. Limited childcare availability, particularly for children under three years, coupled with deeply ingrained cultural attitudes that frame caregiving as a predominantly female responsibility, significantly restricts women's labour market participation post-childbirth. This stark contrast between formal entitlements and actual utilisation highlights a critical need for structural policy enhancements and sustained cultural transformation efforts.

Gender Care Gap

Czech women spend significantly more time on unpaid care and domestic tasks compared to men. According to national surveys, women are responsible for approximately 63% of unpaid care activities, while men account for only 24%. The exceptionally low paternal uptake of parental leave, estimated at just 2%, demonstrates the cultural and institutional obstacles that hinder gender-balanced caregiving.

Employment & Work-Life Balance

The female employment rate stands at 70%, but this statistic masks underlying structural constraints in the Czech labour market. Part-time employment among women remains relatively low at 14%, reflecting limited opportunities for flexible working arrangements rather than low demand. The lack of adequate flexibility restricts women's ability to balance employment and caregiving, often forcing a choice between career and family responsibilities.

Indicator	Value
Gender Equality Index (2023)	57.2
Female Labour Force Participation (20–64)	70.4%
Gender Pay Gap	16.4%

Figure 9: Key Labour Market and Gender Equality Indicators
Source: CÚRAM National Report Czech Republic

Legal Framework

While the Czech Republic offers extended parental leave of up to three years, it primarily incentivises prolonged withdrawal from employment rather than facilitating a balanced early return to work. The legal right to request flexible working arrangements formally exists; however, actual implementation is highly uneven, with discretion left primarily to individual employers.

Overall, the legal and policy environment presents the following core features:

- Generous parental leave is predominantly utilised by mothers, with negligible paternal uptake (under 2%).
- Two-week paid paternity leave with persistently low uptake levels due to cultural stigmas and a lack of employer encouragement.
- Formal right to flexible work requests, but weak enforcement and limited practical application.

Employers' Readiness

Employer preparedness to support working caregivers remains limited in the Czech Republic. Formal HR policies related to caregiving and work-life balance are uncommon, and flexibility arrangements typically exist only within larger organisations. Return-to-work support after leave periods is minimal or non-existent, exacerbating difficulties for employees resuming their careers. Employers' awareness of leave entitlements and related policies is low, reflecting insufficient institutional efforts to promote gender equality at the workplace.

Flexible Work	Leave Awareness	HR Policies	Return Support	Cultural Attitudes
2	2	2	1	2

Figure 10: Employer Readiness – Czech Republic (Scale: 1 = low, 3 = high)

Source: CÚRAM National Report, Czech Republic

Quantitative and qualitative findings underline persistent structural challenges that exacerbate the gender care gap:

Women continue to undertake approximately 63% of unpaid care responsibilities, severely limiting their professional opportunities, economic independence, and career trajectories. Additionally, part-time employment, while potentially beneficial for balancing caregiving duties, remains culturally stigmatised and professionally undervalued, leading to scarce availability and limited uptake.

The COVID-19 pandemic intensified existing gender disparities, disproportionately affecting women who often reduced their employment hours or exited the labour market entirely due to increased caregiving demands.

Employer surveys highlighted low awareness and commitment to gender equality initiatives, particularly within SMEs, where financial constraints and administrative burdens pose significant barriers to implementing flexible work practices and gender-sensitive HR policies.

Focus group discussions illustrated the enduring cultural beliefs that caregiving is inherently a woman's responsibility. Men's involvement, even when attempted, often faced stigma, career-related repercussions, and societal disapproval. These cultural attitudes considerably restrict the potential impact of formal legal provisions and employer policies, underscoring the necessity of targeted awareness campaigns, comprehensive employer training programmes, and broader societal dialogue to shift public perceptions and promote genuine gender equality.

In summary, the Czech Republic exemplifies the significant challenges that persist when cultural norms, institutional rigidities, and inadequate infrastructure intersect. To address these multifaceted barriers effectively, a coordinated response involving policy reforms, infrastructural investment, employer engagement, and cultural transformation is imperative.

4.5 Italy

Overview

Italy represents a dual reality in the context of gender equality and caregiving. On one hand, the country has introduced significant legislative measures, comprehensive family policies, and the National Strategy for Gender Equality (2021–2026). On the other hand, traditional gender roles, limited cultural acceptance of shared caregiving, and organisational inertia continue to perpetuate a wide gender care gap. These dynamics undermine the effectiveness of otherwise well-structured policy initiatives.

The national field research in Italy involved 103 working parents and carers, 66% of whom were women, as well as 21 employers and HR professionals from both the public and private sectors. In addition, two focus groups were conducted with a total of 11 participants, combining the perspectives of working parents and HR representatives.

Key Findings & Challenges

Italy's policy framework provides a strong formal foundation for gender equality, but cultural and workplace barriers prevent its effective implementation. Although comprehensive parental leave provisions exist, fathers' uptake remains strikingly low, primarily due to workplace stigma, career penalties, and the insufficient financial attractiveness of leave schemes. The Italian context underscores the need for both stronger enforcement mechanisms and societal change, contrasting with Portugal's example of policy-driven progress supported by cultural acceptance.

Gender Care Gap

The gender division of unpaid care in Italy remains pronounced. Only 41.3% of Italian women are active in the labour force, compared to 58.6% of men. Many women who are not working cite caregiving responsibilities as their main obstacle, a challenge that disproportionately affects them compared to their male counterparts.

Employment & Work-Life Balance

Italy's labour market is gradually improving according to the latest data, with recent trends pointing toward increased employment. In the final quarter of 2024, Italy recorded one of its lowest unemployment rates in over 15 years, standing at 5.8%. While these numbers reflect positive momentum, the gender gap in employment remains wide. Achieving a healthy balance between work and personal life remains a struggle for many Italian workers, especially women.

Indicator	Value
Gender Equality Index (2023)	69.2
Female Labour Force Participation (20–64)	56.5%
Gender Pay Gap	8.7-20%

Figure 11: Key Labour Market and Gender Equality Indicators
Source: CÚRAM National Report Italy

Legal Framework

Italy's legal framework governing parental and paternity leave is aligned with the provisions of EU Directive 2019/1158 and is further reinforced by national measures aimed at promoting gender equality and work-life balance. Central to this framework are entitlements to paid maternity leave and paternity leave. However, despite the formal availability of paternity leave, its actual uptake by fathers remains notably low, indicating the presence of persistent structural and cultural barriers that hinder the effective implementation of these policies.

To address these challenges, Italy has adopted the National Strategy for Gender Equality (2021–2026), which outlines strategic priorities for reducing gender disparities both in the labour market and in the domain of unpaid care work. This strategy seeks to foster a more equitable distribution of caregiving responsibilities and to support the integration of gender-sensitive practices within institutional and organisational settings.

Complementing these efforts is the Gender Equality Certification Scheme, a national initiative designed to incentivise employers to adopt family-friendly policies and practices. By offering recognition and potential economic benefits, the scheme encourages organisations to actively promote gender equality and support employees in balancing professional and parental responsibilities.

Nevertheless, the impact of these measures remains limited due to entrenched cultural norms and workplace attitudes that discourage fathers, either implicitly or explicitly, from exercising their right to parental leave. Moreover, enforcement mechanisms lack the robustness necessary to drive substantial behavioural change at the organisational level. This underscores the need for a more comprehensive approach that combines legislative action with cultural transformation and institutional commitment to achieving meaningful gender equality in both public and private spheres.

Employers’ Readiness

Employers’ readiness to support caregivers in Italy remains modest and uneven. Private-sector employers, particularly SMEs, demonstrate limited awareness of caregiving-related rights and a lack of formalised HR policies. Only 38% of employers surveyed reported having explicit policies to support working parents, and structured return-to-work programmes remain rare.

However, positive trends are emerging. Larger organisations, particularly those seeking Gender Equality Certification, are adopting flexible working arrangements and childcare-related benefits. Yet SMEs, which represent the backbone of the Italian economy, often lack both the financial and administrative capacity to introduce comparable measures.

Flexible Work	Leave Awareness	HR Policies	Return Support	Cultural Attitudes
2	2	2	1	2

Figure 12: Employer Readiness – Italy (Scale: 1 = low, 3 = high)
 Source: CÚRAM National Report Italy

Focus group discussions highlighted deep-rooted gender stereotypes that reinforce the idea of caregiving as women’s responsibility. Fathers who take parental leave or seek flexible arrangements often face career-related penalties or implicit stigma, discouraging broader cultural change. Moreover, the lack of employer training on gender equality and work-life balance further limits the potential of existing policies to achieve their intended impact.

Italy illustrates a gap between policy design and practical implementation. While legislative and strategic frameworks exist, cultural barriers, insufficient enforcement, and the limited readiness of employers, particularly SMEs, continue to restrict progress. Strengthening enforcement, launching targeted campaigns to normalise fathers’ leave uptake, and providing financial and administrative support for smaller employers will be essential to close the gender care gap in Italy.

4.6 Ireland

Overview

Ireland presents a complex and evolving landscape in the realm of gender equality and work-life balance, where progressive legal frameworks and emerging cultural shifts coexist with deeply rooted traditional norms and persistent structural inequalities. While policy developments have increasingly recognised the importance of supporting working parents and carers, significant challenges remain, particularly concerning the disproportionate care burden borne by women and the limited flexibility offered within many workplaces.

National research conducted to explore these dynamics included a diverse sample of stakeholders. A total of 107 working parents and carers participated, of whom 87% were women, part of them highlighting the relevance of early childhood care in shaping their work-life experiences. In addition to individual participants, the study engaged 20 employers and human resources professionals from a range of sectors, providing insights into organisational practices and attitudes toward family-friendly policies.

Further depth was added through a focus group that brought together 10 working parents, carers, and representatives from HR and management roles. This facilitated a multidimensional understanding of the interplay between individual needs, workplace cultures, and institutional responses. The findings demonstrate the importance of addressing both policy and cultural dimensions to foster a more equitable and supportive environment for all working caregivers in Ireland.

Key Findings & Challenges

The country has made major strides through the Work-Life Balance Act (2023), introducing paid care leave and flexible work rights. However, high childcare costs and rural disparities remain significant challenges. Overall, Ireland represents a context of significant progress combined with substantial remaining challenges, particularly around cultural acceptance of shared caregiving and effective policy implementation at the workplace level. Despite legislative progress, traditional caregiving patterns remain evident. Many women continue to work part-time or exit the labour market entirely during periods of intensive caregiving. Moreover, the lack of affordable, high-quality childcare services represents a major barrier to labour market equality, with rural families disproportionately affected.

Gender Care Gap

Irish women spend an average of 4.9 hours per day on unpaid care work, compared to 2.0 hours for men. Although cultural attitudes towards shared caregiving are gradually shifting, the persistence of such a substantial gap demonstrates the need for targeted cultural and policy interventions to normalise fathers' involvement in caregiving.

Employment & Work-Life Balance

Female employment in Ireland stands at 70%, close to the EU average. However, a significant 31% of women work part-time, the highest proportion among partner countries, compared to only 9% of men. This reflects the continued reliance on part-time employment as a strategy for balancing caregiving with labour market participation, often at the expense of career progression and earnings.

Indicator	Value
Gender Equality Index (2023)	73.4
Female Labour Force Participation (20–64)	70%
Gender Pay Gap	9.6%

Figure 13: Key Labour Market and Gender Equality Indicators
Source: CÚRAM National Report Ireland

Legal Framework

Ireland has taken significant legislative steps in recent years to enhance work-life balance and advance gender equality, reflecting a growing commitment to aligning national policy with broader European standards. Among the most notable developments is the enactment of the Work Life Balance and Miscellaneous Provisions Act (2023), which introduces a range of entitlements aimed at supporting caregivers and promoting more flexible working arrangements. This legislation provides for five days of unpaid care leave, establishes formal rights to request flexible and remote working, and includes provisions for leave in cases of domestic violence, marking a progressive expansion of employee protections.

In addition to these recent reforms, Ireland maintains statutory maternity leave of 26 weeks, which is paid, as well as two weeks of paid paternity leave and seven weeks of parents' leave available to each parent. These measures collectively aim to support shared caregiving responsibilities and facilitate greater gender equity in both the home and workplace.

Further reinforcing Ireland's commitment to workplace equality is the introduction of mandatory gender pay gap reporting for large employers, in effect since 2022. This requirement enhances transparency and accountability, encouraging organisations to address systemic disparities in pay and career progression.

However, despite these legislative advancements, challenges in implementation remain. A key concern is the gap between formal legal provisions and their practical enforcement. This was further evidenced by the European Commission's decision to refer Ireland to the Court of Justice of the European Union for insufficient transposition of Directive 2019/1158. The referral highlights shortcomings in fully integrating EU standards into national law and ensuring their effective application. As such, while Ireland's policy framework is increasingly progressive, its impact is contingent upon robust enforcement mechanisms and sustained cultural change within workplaces and institutions.

Employers' Readiness

Irish employers show relatively strong readiness to support working parents and carers, especially in larger organisations. Many companies have introduced formal HR policies for flexible work, leave entitlements, and return-to-work support. However, inconsistencies remain across sectors, with smaller organisations facing greater financial and administrative constraints.

Flexible Work	Leave Awareness	HR Policies	Return Support	Cultural Attitudes
3	3	3	3	3

Figure 14: Employer Readiness – Ireland (Scale: 1 = low, 3 = high)

Source: CÚRAM National Report Ireland

Employers acknowledged the importance of supporting caregivers but reported barriers such as limited HR resources, budget constraints, and organisational inertia. The focus group indicated positive examples of employer-led initiatives, particularly in large organisations, but highlighted significant inconsistencies across sectors.

Cultural attitudes towards caregiving are gradually evolving; however, the CÚRAM focus group findings revealed that the social expectation for women to be primary caregivers remains strong, reinforcing gendered divisions of unpaid work and limiting the transformative potential of recent policy reforms.

Ireland demonstrates that legislative progress, while necessary, is not sufficient to eliminate the gender care gap. Cultural change, employer engagement, and major investment in affordable childcare are essential to ensure that the legal framework translates into tangible improvements in gender equality. Strengthening enforcement mechanisms and addressing rural service disparities will be crucial to achieving more equitable outcomes for working parents and carers.

5. Comparative Analysis

The comparative analysis of Bulgaria, Greece, Portugal, the Czech Republic, Italy, and Ireland highlights both shared structural barriers and notable differences in how gendered caregiving and work-life balance are addressed. While all countries have taken legislative steps to align with EU standards, the degree of policy implementation, employer engagement, and cultural transformation varies significantly.

Despite progressive legal frameworks in some states (e.g., Portugal, Ireland), implementation gaps, limited childcare infrastructure, and low employer readiness remain key barriers. Portugal demonstrates the most integrated policy approach, while Ireland leads in legislative reforms. In contrast, Bulgaria, Greece, the Czech Republic, and Italy show slower progress, driven largely by cultural norms and weak enforcement of existing policies.

While countries differ in policy maturity and cultural attitudes, the analysis identifies shared barriers and transferable best practices.

5.1 Gender Equality and Care Gap

The gender care gap remains a significant challenge across all six countries included in the CÚRAM research (Bulgaria, Greece, Portugal, the Czech Republic, Italy, and Ireland). Despite distinct differences in cultural attitudes, policy frameworks, and economic conditions, national analyses reveal several clear common patterns.

In all partner countries, women consistently bear the majority of unpaid caregiving responsibilities. This disproportionate burden is rooted in persistent societal beliefs of gender roles and is reinforced by uneven workplace policies. For instance, in Bulgaria, 81% of surveyed working parents were women, with a clear indication that care remains primarily female-dominated. Similarly, in Greece, 79% of the respondents were women, and most of the female respondents reported carrying the majority of household caregiving duties.

Italy and Portugal show similar dynamics, with 66% and 74% of respondents, respectively, identifying as women who consistently described experiences of significantly greater care burdens compared to their male counterparts. The Czech Republic, characterised by strongly traditional societal norms, reports that women perform approximately 63% of total unpaid care work nationally, while in Ireland, women spend nearly five hours per day on unpaid domestic and care tasks compared to men's two hours daily.

The data across countries indicate that even in countries with progressive policies (such as Portugal's "3 em Linha" programme or Ireland's recent Work-Life Balance Act), cultural expectations continue to limit meaningful redistribution of caregiving responsibilities between genders.

5.2 Employment and Work-Life Balance

While employment conditions and work-life balance opportunities for working parents and carers differ markedly between countries, they also reveal important commonalities. Across all nations studied, women frequently adjust their careers to accommodate caregiving duties, leading to part-time employment, career stagnation, or lower job security.

Employment data highlights stark contrasts in how care responsibilities influence labour market participation. Female employment ranges from 62% in Greece, where caregiving demands frequently push women out of the workforce, to 74% in Portugal, where more accessible childcare and supportive policies facilitate greater female participation.

Part-time employment reflects another dimension of gender inequality. In Ireland, 30.7% of women work part-time compared to just 9% of men, often as a means of balancing caregiving responsibilities with paid work. By contrast, Bulgaria reports a very low part-time employment rate (approximately 5%), indicating that many women may leave the labour force entirely rather than reduce their working hours. In the Czech Republic, only 14% of employed women work part-time, largely due to limited access to flexible work arrangements and persistent negative attitudes towards reduced-hour employment.

Bulgaria highlights severe challenges around access to affordable childcare, directly impacting mothers' decisions to return to full-time work or to seek employment opportunities with more flexible but less secure arrangements.

In Greece and Italy, a lack of genuine workplace flexibility exacerbates work-life balance struggles. While formal rights to request flexible arrangements exist, practical implementation remains inconsistent, often left to employers' discretion. Italian fathers, in particular, face workplace stigma when attempting to access parental leave or flexible work options, limiting the effective use of progressive policies.

Portugal stands out with relatively stronger institutional support, including national campaigns and incentives to promote flexible work arrangements and paternity leave uptake. However, even there, women continue to be disproportionately impacted by caregiving demands, and flexible working arrangements remain unevenly distributed, mostly concentrated within larger organisations.

Affordable childcare and flexible working arrangements are key enablers of sustained female participation in the labour market, while their absence is closely linked to labour market withdrawal or reduced working hours. Despite formal policy commitments to flexibility and work-life balance, real-world implementation across the six countries often falls short, particularly within SMEs and in rural areas.

5.3 Paternity Leave Uptake

Despite the existence of legal entitlements across all six countries, the uptake of paternity and parental leave by fathers remains consistently low, revealing a clear disconnect between policy and practice. While statutory provisions have improved in alignment with EU Directive 2019/1158, cultural norms, workplace stigma, and inadequate employer support continue to act as powerful deterrents.

Portugal stands out as the most progressive example, with a notably high rate of paternity leave uptake. This success is attributed to a combination of strong legal entitlements (20 days of fully paid paternity leave), targeted national awareness campaigns, and employer incentives. These measures have contributed to gradually normalising paternal involvement in caregiving and promoting a dual-career, dual-carer model. In contrast, the Czech Republic records the lowest paternity leave uptake among the partner countries, with only 2% of fathers availing of their entitlements. Despite having generous leave provisions on paper, practical uptake is hindered by cultural attitudes that strongly associate caregiving with women, as well as workplace stigma and a lack of encouragement from employers. Ireland has taken steps to improve uptake by introducing policies such as seven weeks of paid parents' leave per parent and formal rights to request flexible working. However, uptake by fathers remains limited. The European Commission's decision to refer Ireland to the Court of Justice of the European Union for insufficient transposition of Directive 2019/1158 highlights ongoing gaps in the enforcement and practical delivery of these entitlements.

In Greece and Bulgaria, while legislative frameworks have been updated to include paternity leave (14 days and 15 days, respectively), actual uptake remains low due to deeply rooted gender norms and a lack of visibility around male caregiving. In both contexts, paternity leave is often perceived as optional or even inappropriate, reinforcing the perception of caregiving as a female responsibility. Italy, despite introducing progressive national strategies and

incentives through initiatives like the Gender Equality Certification Scheme, continues to face low paternal leave uptake. Cultural and workplace resistance, along with insufficient financial compensation, deter many fathers from exercising their rights.

This analysis underlines that legal entitlements alone are insufficient to achieve genuine parity in caregiving roles. Paternity leave uptake is strongly shaped by cultural expectations, workplace norms, and the presence (or absence) of targeted awareness-raising and support mechanisms. Addressing these barriers is essential to fostering a more equitable distribution of caregiving responsibilities and closing the gender care gap.

5.4 Legal and Policy Frameworks

The legislative and policy frameworks concerning gender equality and work-life balance vary considerably in detail and implementation across the six countries, despite common adherence to EU standards (notably Directive 2019/1158).

Ireland and Portugal have implemented advanced legal structures aimed explicitly at enhancing work-life balance. Ireland's Work Life Balance and Miscellaneous Provisions Act (2023) notably introduced flexible work rights, care leave, and domestic violence leave. Portugal's comprehensive policy environment, notably the "3 em Linha" programme and generous paternity leave provisions, highlights a systematic approach toward integrating work-life balance in broader gender equality strategies.

Italy, similarly, has enacted the Gender Equality Certification Scheme to incentivise companies to adopt family-friendly policies. However, despite formal provisions, uptake remains low, especially in SMEs, due to cultural resistance and limited employer awareness.

Bulgaria and Greece demonstrate formal compliance with EU directives yet face substantial practical implementation challenges. Bulgaria's Labour Code aligns closely with European requirements, including parental and paternity leave, but field data indicates low awareness among employees and inconsistent application by employers. Greece's recent legislative update (Law 4808/2021) introduced enhanced leave provisions and flexible work options, yet practical awareness remains limited, and employer support uneven.

The Czech Republic illustrates perhaps the strongest discrepancy between formal policy and everyday practice. Despite generous statutory parental leave entitlements (up to three years) and paid paternity leave, actual participation by fathers remains exceedingly low (below 2%), largely due to cultural stigma and workplace biases.

While all six countries possess formal legal frameworks in line with EU directives, significant gaps persist between statutory rights and their real-world application, strongly shaped by national cultural attitudes and employer practices.

5.5 Experiences of Working Parents and Carers

Across the six countries, the experiences of working parents and carers reflect both shared structural challenges and country-specific dynamics that affect their capacity to combine paid work with caregiving responsibilities.

Time pressure and emotional strain are dominant themes. In all countries, respondents described significant difficulties in managing daily schedules, feelings of exhaustion, and constant role conflict. In Ireland, for instance, parents reported

that the “mental load” of coordinating work, school, and care for young children created ongoing stress and reduced productivity at work. In Portugal and Bulgaria, participants described similar emotional fatigue, often citing lack of employer understanding or rigid schedules as aggravating factors.

A recurring pattern is the gendered impact of caregiving on employment trajectories. In the Czech Republic and Greece, many women stated that caregiving responsibilities had delayed or derailed career development. In Bulgaria, several working mothers reported that they avoided applying for promotions or new jobs due to the anticipated inflexibility or perceived employer bias against carers. In Italy, respondents explicitly mentioned having to “choose between work and family” due to lack of part-time opportunities or affordable childcare.

Flexibility is a critical need, yet highly variable in availability. In Portugal and Ireland, some employers offered remote work, flexible schedules, or reduced hours, and parents in those cases reported significantly better well-being. Conversely, in Greece and the Czech Republic, participants emphasised the absence of real flexibility in most companies, especially SMEs. Requests for adjusted hours were often met with reluctance or outright denial, reinforcing a feeling of invisibility among working carers.

Access to care services plays a defining role in shaping experiences. While Portugal and Ireland benefit from relatively broader service availability (though still not universally accessible), in Bulgaria and the Czech Republic, public childcare slots are insufficient, and private options are unaffordable for many families. This forces families, mostly mothers, to reduce working hours or exit employment temporarily.

Many respondents across countries also expressed a sense of isolation in the workplace. Very few reported that managers checked in on their caregiving burden, and carers often feared disclosing personal circumstances for fear of discrimination. In Greece and Italy, some women described returning from maternity leave as a career “reset”, facing reduced responsibilities or subtle exclusion from advancement opportunities.

5.6 Employers’ Perspectives and HR Readiness

The employer dimension reveals a mixed picture across the countries studied; ranging from complete lack of awareness to early signs of proactive HR engagement.

In Ireland and Portugal, the research uncovered relatively high employer awareness of work-life balance policies. Large organisations in particular demonstrated internal structures (e.g., HR guidelines, family support protocols) and a willingness to innovate. Irish HR professionals mentioned formal mechanisms to assess leave usage and employee satisfaction, while in Portugal, several employers actively promoted paternity leave and remote work.

Conversely, SMEs in Greece, Bulgaria, and the Czech Republic appeared less prepared to support carers. The Czech employer focus group revealed minimal familiarity with flexible working rights or care leave entitlements.

A generalised absence of formal internal policies was noted across most SMEs in all countries. Many employers reported making case-by-case arrangements rather than offering structured options. While this ad hoc approach can show empathy, it risks inconsistency, lack of transparency, and unequal treatment.

Cultural attitudes among employers play a significant role. In both Italy and Greece, traditional gender norms continue to shape managerial expectations, with caregiving often seen as a woman’s responsibility. Men who request leave for caregiving may face informal discouragement or stigma, while women are routinely expected to assume such roles. These ingrained assumptions persist as barriers to gender equality, even where legislative frameworks have advanced.

A striking finding is the limited training for HR staff and managers on care-related needs. Most employer respondents had never received guidance on how to accommodate carers or implement inclusive practices. This creates a significant knowledge gap that inhibits the translation of legal obligations into real workplace support.

	Flexible Work	Leave Awareness	HR Policies	Return Support	Cultural Attitudes
Portugal	3	3	3	2	3
Ireland	3	3	3	2	3
Bulgaria	2	2	2	1	2
Greece	2	2	2	1	2
Czechia	2	2	2	1	2
Italy	2	2	2	1	2

Figure 15: Employer Readiness by country (Scale: 1 = low, 3 = high)

Source: CÚRAM National Reports; employer surveys

Portugal and Ireland show the highest employer readiness, with institutionalised HR policies and high leave awareness. In Bulgaria, Greece, the Czech Republic, and Italy, support for working parents remains informal and manager-dependent, particularly in SMEs.

Closing the gender care gap requires not only legislative reform but also targeted investments in childcare infrastructure, employer accountability, and cultural transformation to normalise shared caregiving responsibilities.

6. Best Practices

The analysis across the six countries highlights emerging best practices that can serve as inspiration and guidance for broader implementation, though these remain uneven and context-specific.

From an employer perspective, small but scalable practices were identified, including:

- Formalisation of flexible working policies
- Manager training in inclusive leave planning
- Return-to-work planning for carers
- Internal audits of gendered caregiving impact

While such practices are still rare in Bulgaria, Greece, and the Czech Republic, the national reports stress that employer interest is growing, particularly when tied to staff retention and well-being. The evidence points to a clear conclusion: where legal frameworks, cultural awareness, and organisational support converge, more equitable outcomes for carers, especially women, are possible. Promoting knowledge exchange across countries, tailored HR guidance, and national incentives can further accelerate this transition.

The findings of this comparative analysis underscore the importance of translating policy into practice and promoting cultural change across workplaces.

The next section focuses on Best Practices identified in the partner countries, showcasing concrete employer-led initiatives and policy innovations that can help close the gender care gap.

Bulgaria

Best Practice 1

Organiser/Provider

Bulgarian Centre of Women in Technology (BCWT)

Theme Content

Advocacy, training, and role modelling aimed at employer practices and cultural change in caregiving norms

Description of the practice

Since 2012, BCWT has:

- Organized Entrepregirl Awards and digital accelerators for women (including mothers)
- Run training on leadership, gender sensitivity, work-life balance
- Worked with companies to promote flexible work, mentorship, and gender-equitable policies.

Results

- Over 200 young women (16–25) participated in entrepreneurship competitions
- Increased awareness and positive policy uptake within ICT companies
- Enhanced visibility of female leadership, caregiving inclusion

Specific strategies integrated for

- Role-model visibility through women leaders
- Inclusive leadership training for employers
- Collaboration with companies, schools, and NGOs to promote shared-care awareness

Website address

<https://bcwt.bg/>

Justification for the selection

BCWT demonstrates a sectoral, community-led best practice, combining cultural change with organisational influence and scalable employer collaboration.

<https://eige.europa.eu/gender-mainstreaming/good-practices/bulgarian-centre-women-technology-initiatives-promote-women-ict-entrepreneurship-and-science>

Best Practice 2

Organiser/Provider

Deloitte Bulgaria

Theme Content

Holistic caregiver support: flexible working, mental health, and wellbeing

Description of the practice

As part of its progressive talent strategy, Deloitte Bulgaria has introduced a suite of caregiver-friendly policies, including flexible hours, remote/hybrid work, “caregiver days” for child or elderly care emergencies, access to wellbeing tools, and manager training on caregiver awareness. Public-facing materials and employee feedback indicate a well-integrated internal approach.

Results

- Enhanced retention and engagement among employees with caregiving duties
- Elevated employee recognition scores on work-life balance, Positive Glassdoor reviews emphasising flexibility and support

Specific strategies integrated for

- Formal flexible policy with written remote/flex guidelines
- Dedicated caregiver leave for intermittent care responsibilities
- Manager training on identifying and supporting caregiver staff
- Mental health programmes, including webinars, peer support, and EAP access

Website address

<https://www.deloitte.com/ce/en/about/story/our-markets/deloitte-bulgaria.html>

Justification for the selection

Deloitte Bulgaria exemplifies a real-sector, local implementation of caregiver-inclusive culture, combining formal policy, wellbeing support, and leadership buy-in. Their approach offers a scalable and replicable model for other Bulgarian employers.

Greece

Best Practice 1

Organiser/Provider

Alpha Bank

Theme Content

Corporate policy for work-life balance and gender equality

Description of the practice

Alpha Bank, one of Greece's largest private financial institutions, has implemented an integrated work-life balance policy that includes flexible working hours, extended parental leave (for both mothers and fathers), and part-time reintegration options for new parents. The bank also offers paid leave for caregiving, access to mental health support, and awareness-raising seminars on gender equity and emotional resilience.

Results

- Increased paternal leave uptake over the past 3 years
- Reduced return-to-work burnout rates for new parents
- Positive feedback from employee satisfaction surveys

Specific strategies integrated for

- Gender-neutral communication around caregiving roles
- Training for line managers on empathetic leadership and parental support
- Monitoring leave uptake to identify gaps and improve policy inclusiveness

Website address

<https://www.alpha.gr>

https://careers.alpha.gr/content/explore-what-we-offer/?locale=en_GB

Justification for the selection

Alpha Bank's approach goes beyond compliance—it integrates structural flexibility, cultural awareness, and systemic follow-up, representing a scalable model for large employers in Greece.

Best Practice 2

Organiser/Provider

Municipality of Heraklion (Crete) with local NGOs

Theme Content

Local government co-funded programme to support gender-equal caregiving

Description of the practice

“Equal Families” is a pioneering local action that includes training for municipal employees, public campaigns promoting father involvement, and the creation of community parenting hubs with free workshops for couples. The initiative supports both policy development (HR reforms) and grassroots-level awareness, encouraging dual-career, dual-carer family models.

Results

- More than 300 families reached in the first year
- 30% increase in male participation in caregiving-related events
- Local policy reform to include gender equality KPIs in municipal hiring and leave policy

Specific strategies integrated for

- Inclusion of men in parenting education
- Use of local media and schools to shift cultural expectations
- Training for HR and public sector team leaders

Website address

<https://www.heraklion.gr>

<https://www.herakliosurvivalmap.gr/en/municipality-of-heraklions-community-centre-and-social-development-directorate/>

Justification for the selection

This initiative showcases how local governance, when paired with social mobilisation, can create both institutional and cultural change around caregiving roles.

Portugal

Best Practice 1

Organiser/Provider

EDP Group

Theme Content

Gender-neutral caregiving support; promotion of shared parental leave

Description of the practice

EDP is a member of CIG's "Aliança para a Igualdade nas TIC", committing to gender equality and diversity in technological and caregiving roles. It offers equal parental leave entitlements, internal training on gender equality, and visibility to men who take caregiver roles, challenging the stigma around male parental leave.

Results

- Increased male uptake of parental and caregiving leave
- Enhanced work–life balance and employee morale
- Public recognition as a progressive and inclusive employer

Specific strategies integrated for

- Clear parental leave policies, equally accessible to all genders
- Internal awareness campaigns with male caregiving role models
- Training for HR and line managers on equitable leave rights and support

Website address

<https://www.alpha.gr>,

<https://www.edp.com>

Justification for the selection

Featured in CIG-coordinated initiatives, EDP demonstrates how large national companies can implement structural and cultural change, providing strong evidenced credibility. EDP's Gender Equality Plan is acknowledged and funded by the Comissão para a Cidadania e a Igualdade de Género (CIG) through EEA Grants. It includes measures aligned with CIG's gender-equality initiatives and promotes shared parental leave among employees

<https://www.eeagrants.gov.pt/en/programmes/work-life-balance/projects/edp-gender-equality-plan/> .



Best Practice 2

Organiser/Provider

CIP – Confederation of Portuguese Business, in partnership with CIG and EEAGrants

Theme Content

Promotion of dual-career models and gender parity in leadership

Description of the practice

“Projeto PROMOVA” is a leadership development initiative aimed at elevating female talent into management roles. It includes executive training modules, coaching, mentoring, and work–life balance discussions addressing challenges for caregiving parents aspiring to leadership.

Results

- 45 % of participants were promoted to management or executive positions
- 20 % advanced to board-level roles
- Adoption of gender equality initiatives in participating companies

Specific strategies integrated for

- Mentoring/coaching tailored to balancing leadership and caregiving
- Cross-company networking to share best practices
- Follow-up with participating organisations to embed gender-equality targets

Website address

<https://www.heraklion.gr>

<https://www.cip.org.pt/>

Justification for the selection

Funded and recognised by CIG and EEAGrants, PROMOVA offers a measurable and scalable example of how to integrate caregiving considerations into leadership development and gender-equal career progression. “Projeto PROMOVA” is part of a CIG and EEA Grants pre-defined project led by CIP – Confederation of Portuguese Business with support from Nova SBE. It focuses on female leadership development and includes components related to caregiving and work–life balance.

<https://www.eeagrants.gov.pt/en/programmes/work-life-balance/projects/promova/>

Czech Republic

Best Practice 1

Organiser/Provider

Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs (MPSV)

Theme Content

Work-life balance, gender equality, reducing the gender pay and care gap

Description of the practice

This five-year systemic project, funded under the EU's Employment Operational Programme, tackles persistent gender pay gaps (18.9 % in the Czech Republic—significantly above the EU average).

A gender pay gap calculator and “Logib” assessment tool for employers
Online training modules for public institutions and employers

Development of relevant policy and methodological guidelines (e.g., a pay transparency toolkit)
Awareness campaigns (e.g., Equal Pay Day conference, webinars with public sector actors)

Results

- Increased employer awareness of gender pay gaps through transparent reporting and new diagnostic tools
- National preparation for EU pay-transparency requirements (e.g., pay reporting in companies >100 employees)
- Empowering women and men with access to salary information and awareness of their rights

Specific strategies integrated for

- Enhancing pay transparency (public sector pilots, inclusion in legislation)
- Raising awareness among employers and the public through campaigns and education
- Launching pay-gap monitoring tools like Logib and proactive education/training initiatives
- Embedding equal-pay goals within national gender equality strategies

Website address

<https://www.rovnaodmena.cz/>

Justification for the selection

This project was selected as a good practice example because it comprehensively addresses one of the key structural factors contributing to the gender care gap—the persistent gender pay gap. Its focus on pay transparency, employer responsibility, and gender-sensitive organizational policies aligns directly with the goals of reducing inequalities in both paid and unpaid care work.

Best Practice 2

Organiser/Provider

Vodafone Czech Republic

Theme Content

Work-life balance, parental support, flexible working arrangements

Description of the practice

Vodafone Czech Republic implements a comprehensive package of measures to support employees with caregiving responsibilities. New fathers (or partners of mothers) are entitled to 16 weeks of fully paid leave upon the birth or adoption of a child, along with the option to return on a reduced working time while maintaining full salary. Mothers going on maternity leave also receive salary compensation to cover the gap between their wage and state parental benefits for 16 weeks. Furthermore, all positions are available as part-time roles, supporting employees in balancing work and caregiving duties.

The company also promotes flexible working models: employees typically spend 60% of their working time in a home office setting, while 40% involves in-person collaboration in a supportive office environment designed to encourage teamwork.

Results

Vodafone's policies have been recognized as market-leading in promoting gender equality, supporting both mothers and fathers in caregiving roles, and contributing to higher employee satisfaction, retention, and work-life balance.

Specific strategies integrated for

- 6 weeks of fully paid leave for new fathers/partners
- Salary top-up for mothers during maternity leave
- Option for all jobs to be part-time
- Hybrid working model (60% remote, 40% in-office)
- Pro-family, inclusive workplace culture

Website address

<https://www.vodafone.cz/kariera/>

Justification for the selection

Vodafone Czech Republic stands out as an example of best practice due to its holistic approach to supporting working parents of all genders. The company's parental leave policies go beyond national requirements, actively promoting the involvement of fathers in caregiving. Flexible work arrangements and universal part-time options further reduce barriers to work-life balance. These measures contribute directly to narrowing the gender care gap and represent a replicable model for other employers seeking to foster an inclusive, family-friendly workplace.

Italy

Best Practice 1

Organiser/Provider

As Italy's largest banking group, Intesa Sanpaolo plays a significant role not only in the economy but also in shaping workplace culture. Traditionally, banking has been a male-dominated sector with rigid schedules and conservative HR practices. However, Intesa Sanpaolo has taken bold steps to redefine what modern employment should look like, especially for employees with caregiving responsibilities.

What sets the company apart is its long-term, strategic commitment to promoting gender equality, shared caregiving, and work-life balance, not as separate issues, but as mutually reinforcing priorities.

Theme Content

Intesa Sanpaolo has introduced comprehensive flexible work models that go beyond the minimum legal requirements in Italy. These include:

- Remote working programs that allow employees to work from home for a set number of days per week.
- Part-time contracts and job sharing, tailored especially for parents of young children or employees with eldercare duties.
- Phased return-to-work programs after long caregiving leaves, with gradual workload increases and mentoring support.
- A results-based work culture, where trust and autonomy are emphasised over strict presence and facetime.
- The flexibility is available to both men and women, and is promoted as a performance-enhancing, not career-limiting, arrangement.

Description of the practice

Intesa Sanpaolo's People Care initiatives are wide-ranging and integrated across the employee life cycle. These programs address both childcare and eldercare, and reflect an understanding that caregiving changes over time:

- Childcare support.
- Contributions toward nursery and early childhood education fees.
- On-site or subsidized summer camps for employees' children.
- Parenting courses and counseling services for work-family management.
- Eldercare and long-term care support:
- Special paid leave for employees with elderly or dependent relatives.
- Access to dedicated helplines and care advisors for navigating health and legal care systems.
- Financial support and time off to manage complex care responsibilities.

These offerings acknowledge that caregiving is not only about parenting, but it also involves supporting aging parents, disabled family members, and others needing long-term care.

Results

Impact and Measurable Results

Rising male participation in caregiving leave: More men are using paternity and family leave benefits—an important shift in a sector where caregiving was traditionally seen as a woman's responsibility.

High satisfaction among caregivers: Surveys within the company show that employees with caregiving roles report strong levels of engagement, job satisfaction, and trust in management.

Public recognition: Intesa Sanpaolo has consistently been ranked among Italy's Top Employers, not only for its benefits but for the integrated approach to diversity, equity, and care.

The model proves that care-conscious employment is possible even in large, structured, and traditionally rigid industries. By combining policy, culture, and leadership, the bank has created a work environment where dual careers and shared caregiving can thrive together. Its approach demonstrates that supporting caregivers isn't a cost—it's an investment in happier, more productive, and more loyal employees. For other organizations in Italy and beyond, Intesa Sanpaolo offers a scalable, realistic, and deeply human model of workplace transformation.

Specific strategies integrated for

- Believe in the integrity and sustainability of our actions and those of our Bank. Care for our customers through the excellence of our products, our services, and our behaviour. Create value and innovation for people, businesses, and communities in all countries and areas where we operate.
- To support all the employees and create a better working environment.

Website address

<https://group.intesasanpaolo.com/en/sustainability/people/diversity-inclusion/support-for-parenting>

Justification for the selection

It is a relevant company practice in Italy and is considered a Intesa Sanpaolo – A Pioneer in Care-Inclusive Banking.

Best Practice 2

Organiser/Provider

Barilla group.

Theme Content

Barilla's people strategy is anchored in its broader sustainability vision: "Buono per Te, Buono per il Pianeta" (Good for You, Good for the Planet). Central to this is a strong belief that companies cannot grow sustainably unless their people are thriving. This includes a comprehensive view of employee wellness, not just physical or financial well-being, but also emotional and familial support.

Description of the practice

Long before remote work became a global necessity, Barilla had implemented a hybrid work framework rooted in autonomy and trust. Their Smart Working model includes eligibility tools, digital infrastructure, and management training. This allows caregivers to structure their day according to family rhythms without sacrificing productivity.

Barilla works to change workplace culture around male caregiving. Through storytelling, leadership modelling, and performance-neutral leave usage, they promote paternity leave as normal and necessary. Male leave uptake is tracked and celebrated, helping to challenge outdated norms.

The company ties DEI goals to executive performance, uses return-to-work transition plans, and integrates gender bias reviews into promotion systems. This ensures that career advancement is accessible even for those with caregiving responsibilities.

Barilla proves that care-inclusive and gender-equitable workplaces can drive performance, talent retention, and culture transformation. Its approach balances business outcomes with social progress, setting a new standard for what it means to be a modern employer.

Results

Impact Indicators: Culture Shift by Design

Barilla uses pulse surveys, feedback loops, and promotion data to track progress. Their strategy has resulted in:

- 35% increase in male parental leave uptake over five years
- Reduced attrition among mid-career women
- Increased internal mobility for women in leadership roles
- Higher engagement scores among caregivers and remote workers

The company has received awards and recognition including Top Employer Italy certification and finalist placement for the Catalyst Award.

Specific strategies integrated for

- Barilla's strategy works because care is embedded into the business model, not treated as an add-on. From leave tracking to flexible job design and leadership accountability, Barilla provides a replicable model for equitable workplace reform.

Website address

<https://www.barillagroup.com/>

Justification for the selection

Top Employer Certification achieve

Ireland

Best Practice 1

Organiser/Provider

Family Carers Ireland.

Theme Content

Supporting Working Carers.

Description of the practice

Family Carers Ireland's Caring Employers programme is a national programme designed to help employers recognise and support the needs of employees who balance paid work with unpaid caregiving responsibilities. This includes those caring for elderly parents, family members with disabilities or chronic illnesses, and crucially, working parents who juggle childcare with their careers. The programme supports businesses to assess their current workplace practices, build inclusive HR policies, and foster a workplace culture that values and retains employees with caring responsibilities.

Results

Employers that have engaged with the programme report improved staff retention, reduced absenteeism, and higher employee satisfaction. The initiative has brought national visibility to the challenges of balancing work and care, particularly for working parents, and positioned participating organisations as leaders in inclusive employment practices.

Rising male participation in caregiving leave: More men are using paternity and family leave benefits—an important shift in a sector where caregiving was traditionally seen as a woman's responsibility.

Specific strategies integrated for

- Workplace audits to assess carer- and parent-friendliness
- Policy development workshops for HR teams
- Manager training on supporting staff with care duties
- Promotion of flexible working hours, job-sharing, and parental leave options
- Certification as a "Caring Employer" to signal commitment to carer inclusion.

Website address

<https://familycarers.ie/carer-supports/caring-employers>

Justification for the selection

This programme is one of the few national initiatives that systematically integrates unpaid carers into diversity and inclusion frameworks in the workplace. It directly supports dual-career, dual-carer models and promotes cultural and organisational change across sectors.

Best Practice 2

Organiser/Provider

Marks & Spencer (M&S) Ireland

Theme Content

Comprehensive, empathetic family leave entitlements (including neonatal and child-loss support policies)

Description of the practice

M&S Ireland significantly enhanced its family leave policies to better support employees during pivotal life moments.

Key measures include:

- Extending maternity and adoption leave to 26 weeks, fully paid.
- Doubling paternity leave to four weeks, fully paid, and accessible to all non-birthing parents.
- Introducing a Neonatal Leave Policy, offering 12 weeks of fully paid leave for employees whose babies require specialist neonatal care.
- Implementing a Child Loss Policy, providing paid leave and support for employees affected by pregnancy or infant loss.

Results

These entitlements mark a first-of-their-kind commitment statewide, offering comprehensive support during emotionally and medically complex periods. M&S emphasises that these changes are part of a broader commitment to colleague wellbeing via its “Worklife” initiative.

Specific strategies integrated for

- Fully paid extended maternity, adoption, paternity, neonatal and child loss leave.
- Embedding these policies as part of the broader “Worklife” programme aimed at improving flexibility.
- Communicating the policy through leadership channels to ensure awareness across the workforce.

Website address

<https://jobs.marksandspencer.com/life-at-mands/supporting-families>

Justification for the selection

M&S Ireland’s policies go beyond standard statutory provisions, addressing deeply sensitive and often overlooked employee needs such as neonatal care and pregnancy/child loss. Its holistic, empathetic approach provides a strong model for inclusive, family-sensitive workplace policy.

7. Conclusions and Policy Recommendations

7.1 Summary of Key Findings

The transnational analysis across Bulgaria, Greece, Portugal, the Czech Republic, Italy, and Ireland highlights the persistence and severity of the gender care gap, reflecting a fundamental barrier to gender equality, economic participation, and personal well-being across Europe. While the legal landscape has improved significantly, implementation remains uneven, and deep-rooted societal attitudes continue to hinder progress.

Key findings include:

- **Persistent Gender Inequality in Caregiving**

One of the most striking findings is the extent to which women shoulder a disproportionate share of unpaid care. Across all six countries, women spend two to three times more hours on caregiving than men, with the most pronounced disparities observed in Greece and Bulgaria. Although Portugal and Ireland demonstrate relatively smaller gaps, women continue to remain the primary caregivers. This persistent inequality is closely linked to women's labour market outcomes: in Greece and Italy, many women withdraw from the workforce altogether, while in Ireland and the Czech Republic, high rates of part-time work indicate a different, but equally limiting, compromise.

- **Paternity leave uptake**

Although Portugal has successfully increased fathers' participation through targeted policies and cultural campaigns, in countries such as Bulgaria and the Czech Republic, uptake remains negligible. This reflects the powerful influence of workplace culture and societal expectations on parental behaviour, even in the presence of legal entitlements.

- **Implementation Gap**

Legal frameworks generally align with EU directives, yet practical implementation is inconsistent, particularly in SMEs and rural regions. Awareness among employers and employees about rights related to leave and flexibility remains alarmingly low, especially in Bulgaria, Greece, and the Czech Republic.

- **Limited Workplace Flexibility**

Although policies exist formally, actual workplace flexibility remains rare and unevenly accessible, predominantly benefiting employees in larger organisations or specific sectors (e.g., public institutions or IT companies). Employer readiness varies widely. While Ireland and Portugal show stronger engagement, with formal HR policies, flexible work arrangements, and structured support for parents, Bulgaria, Greece, Italy, and the Czech Republic rely heavily on informal arrangements dependent on individual managers' goodwill rather than institutionalised policies.

- **Care Infrastructure Gaps**

Lack of accessible, affordable, and quality childcare (especially for children under three) and/or eldercare services - exacerbate gender inequalities in several countries, particularly Bulgaria, Greece, and the Czech Republic. These gaps not only limit women's employment prospects but also reinforce traditional gender roles in caregiving.

Legal measures alone are not enough to close the gender care gap. Meaningful progress requires integrated approaches that combine legislation with employer engagement, cultural transformation, and sustained investment in care infrastructure.

7.2 Policy Recommendations for Governments

National governments must move beyond a compliance-based approach to work-life balance policies and adopt comprehensive, integrated strategies that simultaneously address structural, organisational, and cultural barriers. While legislative alignment with EU standards has been achieved in all six partner countries, the real challenge lies in translating these rights into practical, accessible solutions for families and ensuring their consistent application across the labour market.

One of the most urgent priorities is the expansion of affordable, high-quality childcare infrastructure, particularly for children under the age of three. Evidence from Portugal and Ireland demonstrates that well-developed childcare systems significantly increase women's participation in the labour market and reduce the risk of long-term career interruptions. In contrast, the lack of such infrastructure in Bulgaria, Greece, and the Czech Republic forces many mothers to withdraw from employment altogether, perpetuating gender inequalities and limiting economic growth. Strategic investment in rural areas and economically disadvantaged regions, combined with targeted subsidies for low-income families, would not only alleviate this burden but also promote social inclusion.

Equally important is the promotion of fathers' active participation in caregiving. Portugal's success in increasing paternity leave uptake illustrates how financial incentives and nationwide public campaigns can reshape cultural norms and reduce stigma around male caregiving. Replicating such measures in countries where resistance remains strong, such as Bulgaria and Italy, could accelerate cultural transformation and gradually normalise shared caregiving responsibilities.

At the same time, governments must ensure the effective enforcement of flexible work rights under the EU Work-Life Balance Directive. Employees, especially those working in small and medium-sized enterprises, should be able to request remote work or adjusted schedules without fear of negative career consequences. Financial incentives and tax breaks could further encourage smaller employers to implement such family-friendly policies.

To complement these measures, governments should establish structured training programmes for HR professionals and labour inspectors. By improving awareness of existing rights and best practices, such training would not only strengthen compliance but also build a more supportive organisational culture. Additionally, the introduction of robust monitoring mechanisms, gender equality audits, and regular employer evaluations would ensure that progress is measurable and that companies remain accountable for the implementation of work-life balance provisions.

Ultimately, transforming the landscape of caregiving and employment requires more than legislative reform. It calls for a coordinated, multi-level effort, combining policy, employer engagement, and cultural change, to dismantle the structural and societal barriers that continue to reinforce the gender care gap. By adopting this holistic approach, governments can create the conditions in which both women and men are equally supported in balancing work and family life, fostering not only gender equality but also a more inclusive and sustainable labour market.

Key Actions for Governments

1. Expand childcare services, prioritising underserved regions
2. Launch campaigns and incentives to increase fathers' leave uptake
3. Provide subsidies for SMEs to implement family-friendly policies
4. Introduce mandatory gender equality audits and public reporting
5. Enforce flexible work rights and penalise non-compliance

7.3 Recommendations for Employers

Employers hold a pivotal role in closing the gender care gap by shaping workplace policies and cultures that support employees with caregiving responsibilities. While governments provide the legislative framework, meaningful and lasting change often begins within organisations themselves, where daily practices and management attitudes determine whether work-life balance measures become a reality or remain only on paper. One of the most effective steps employers can take is the formalisation of clear and transparent HR policies on flexible working arrangements. Rather than relying on ad hoc, manager-dependent decisions, companies should implement structured guidelines that ensure equitable access to flexible hours, remote work, and phased return-to-work programmes. The experience of Ireland demonstrates that when such policies are codified, they lead to reduced staff turnover, greater employee satisfaction, and improved retention rates, particularly among working parents.

Beyond formal policies, organisational culture plays a critical role in supporting carers. Employers should actively promote the use of parental and care-related leave entitlements without penalty, addressing fears that utilising these rights might harm career prospects. Encouraging fathers to take parental leave through internal communication campaigns and visible managerial support can challenge entrenched gender stereotypes and normalise shared caregiving within the workplace. Investment in managerial training is equally important. HR professionals and line managers must be equipped with knowledge and tools to support employees with caregiving responsibilities effectively and without bias. Training programmes can help managers better understand legal entitlements, foster empathy for the challenges faced by carers, and develop practical strategies to balance operational needs with employee well-being.

Furthermore, employers can explore innovative practices such as compressed workweeks, return-to-work mentoring programmes, and the establishment of internal support networks for working parents and carers. Pilot projects in these areas can generate valuable evidence, enabling organisations to scale successful initiatives across their operations. Providing childcare support is another measure with proven benefits. Whether through childcare vouchers, partnerships with local providers, or the creation of on-site childcare facilities, such initiatives can reduce absenteeism, enhance employee loyalty, and strengthen workforce participation. Evidence from Bulgaria and the Czech Republic illustrates that even modest forms of employer-supported childcare can have a significant impact on retention rates among working parents.

Finally, employers should commit to accountability and transparency by monitoring and reporting progress using gender equality indicators. By systematically tracking the use of work-life balance measures and their outcomes, organisations can not only ensure compliance but also demonstrate their commitment to building inclusive workplaces where caregiving responsibilities are shared and supported.

Through a combination of formalised policies, cultural change, managerial training, and innovative practices, employers have the capacity to become key drivers of gender equality in caregiving. By embracing this role, they can contribute to a more equitable distribution of care, enhance workforce participation, and build stronger, more resilient organisations.

Key Actions for Employers

1. Introduce formal HR policies for flexibility and leave
2. Promote paternity leave uptake internally uptake
3. Offer childcare support through vouchers or partnerships
4. Train managers on supporting working parents
5. Monitor and report on gender equality indicators

7.4 Cross-national Learnings and Transferable Practices

Cross-national analysis confirms that reducing the gender care gap requires a systemic and integrated approach that combines legislative reform, employer incentives, and cultural change. While several successful initiatives have emerged across the partner countries, their value lies less in the specific measures themselves and more in the underlying principles they represent.

The experience of Portugal, Ireland, and Italy illustrates that progress is most sustainable where governments and employers act in coordination, reinforcing each other's efforts. Portugal's comprehensive alignment of policy objectives, Ireland's anticipatory approach to workplace flexibility, and Italy's use of incentive-based mechanisms demonstrate that a mix of regulation, organisational innovation, and cultural advocacy can deliver tangible results. Rather than replicating isolated measures, countries should adapt these principles to their own institutional and cultural contexts.

Crucially, the cross-country comparison highlights that no single reform can close the gender care gap in isolation. For example, legal entitlements are unlikely to achieve their intended effect without parallel efforts to dismantle cultural barriers or improve access to care services. Similarly, financial incentives for employers will have limited impact if they are not coupled with clear accountability mechanisms and robust monitoring.

This reinforces the need for a coordinated European approach to knowledge transfer. Governments should actively facilitate the exchange of successful policy tools and employer-driven initiatives, ensuring that the lessons learned in one country inform strategies elsewhere. Such collaboration could be supported through EU-level platforms that promote the sharing of evidence-based practices, accompanied by technical guidance on adapting them to diverse national contexts.

Ultimately, the most effective strategy for addressing the gender care gap is not to replicate individual best practices but to build comprehensive, context-sensitive policy frameworks that combine regulation, organisational support, and cultural change. By focusing on the mechanisms that make reforms work, rather than on isolated examples, policymakers and employers can create conditions for sustainable progress across Europe.

Key Transferable Lessons

1. Holistic policies work best when law, culture, and employer action align
2. Awareness campaigns and incentives are essential to change behaviour
3. Childcare infrastructure is the cornerstone of gender equality in employment
4. Employers can act as agents of change when supported by certification and reporting mechanisms

8. Reflections on Data Gaps, Participant Insights and Future Research Needs

8.1 Methodological Reflections and Gaps

The CÚRAM Transnational Needs Analysis Report provides a solid foundation for understanding the gender care gap across the six participating countries. However, while the combination of national reports, surveys, and focus groups has yielded valuable comparative insights, several methodological limitations must be acknowledged in order to contextualise the findings and inform future research efforts.

One of the most significant challenges lies in the variation of data availability and quality between countries. In Bulgaria and Greece, for example, comprehensive national statistics on unpaid care work disaggregated by gender remain limited, forcing reliance on EU-level data and secondary estimates. In contrast, Portugal and Ireland benefit from more detailed national datasets, which facilitate more precise policy targeting and monitoring. These disparities not only complicate direct cross-country comparisons but also underscore the pressing need for harmonised EU-level data collection standards to ensure consistency and comparability. Another important gap concerns the limited data available on employer practices. While countries such as Ireland and Portugal included employer-focused surveys that offer a clearer view of organisational policies and HR measures, others, including Bulgaria and the Czech Republic, rely more heavily on qualitative insights from focus groups or survey evidence. This lack of systematic, employer-level data constrains the ability to evaluate the prevalence and effectiveness of workplace initiatives aimed at supporting carers.

Additionally, the research reveals an overrepresentation of female participants. While this reflects the reality that women remain the primary providers of unpaid care, it also limits the ability to capture male perspectives on caregiving, and the barriers men face when attempting to engage more actively in family care. Without these perspectives, the analysis risks reinforcing a one-dimensional view of the gender care gap and may overlook opportunities to design more inclusive interventions that also address cultural and organisational barriers for fathers.

Finally, the absence of wide time data represents a further methodological constraint. Although the study identifies promising measures, such as Italy's *Gender Equality Certification* and Ireland's *Work-Life Balance Act*, the lack of long-term monitoring makes it difficult to assess their sustained impact over time. Establishing mechanisms for tracking the implementation and effectiveness of such policies would not only strengthen the evidence base but also provide policymakers and employers with critical feedback for future reforms.

In conclusion, while this report offers robust comparative insights, it also highlights the importance of improving data collection frameworks, expanding employer-focused research, incorporating male caregiving perspectives, and developing longitudinal monitoring systems. Addressing these gaps will be essential to building a more comprehensive and actionable understanding of the gender care gap across Europe.

Key Gaps Identified

1. Inconsistent national statistics on unpaid care by gender
2. Limited employer-level data across several countries
3. Lack of longitudinal tracking for new policies and workplace measures

8.2 Participant Testimonies in Addressing Gaps in Quantitative Findings

While quantitative data offers a valuable overview, it often fails to capture the lived experiences of parents and carers. The focus groups conducted across the six partner countries revealed hidden barriers and nuanced challenges that cannot be fully understood through numbers alone.

Many participants described the emotional and mental strain of balancing work and care, particularly in contexts where employer support is informal or dependent on individual managers. One mother in Bulgaria explained: "I am expected to be a perfect employee and a perfect mother, with no support from either side." Similarly, fathers in Greece and the Czech Republic expressed fears that taking parental leave could negatively impact their professional trajectories.

These insights demonstrate the need for policy measures to be accompanied by cultural change and targeted employer training to reduce stigma around caregiving. The qualitative data also revealed the often-overlooked economic consequences of unpaid care, such as the long-term impact on women's pensions due to career interruptions, an issue rarely addressed in official statistics.

Participant testimonies revealed a range of emotional and practical challenges:

- *"I missed a promotion because I had to care for my child. They told me it wasn't about that, but it clearly was."* (Working mother, Portugal)
- *"While the law allows men to take leave, in practice, no one does. They're afraid of how it looks."* (Respondent, Greece)
- *"We have the policies in place, but no one talks about them. Especially for men, taking parental leave still feels like breaking a rule."* (Focus group participant, Italy)
- *"Paternity leave is technically there, but men worry it might harm their reputation or career prospects."* (Female focus group participant, Italy)
- *"In public administration, I know my rights. In the private sector, it depends on your boss's mood."* (Focus group participant, Greece)
- *"It's not enough to have good policies on paper. People need to feel safe to use them, and we need to design our workplaces so that caregiving doesn't come at the cost of a career—for anyone."* (Focus group participant, Italy)
- *"It's not only about the law. If your own mother tells you, it's your job as a woman, you grow up believing it."* (Focus group participant, Greece)
- *"I had no idea I could even ask for flexible hours. HR never mentioned anything about that."* (Respondent, Bulgaria)
- *"When my partner asked for parental leave, his manager laughed and said, 'Are you serious?'"* (Female participant, Greece)
- *"Flexible work shouldn't feel like asking for a favour – it should be the norm for everyone."* (Participant, Czech Republic)
- *"When we feel supported as carers, we're more loyal and more productive. It's not just the right thing to do. It makes sense for business."* (Focus group participant, Ireland)

These statements highlight the importance of further research into workplace cultures, persistent stigma, and personal impacts of caregiving on personal, professional and economic wellbeing.

Key participant insights

1. Stigma around fathers taking leave persists in all countries except Portugal
2. Emotional and mental strain is a major but under-researched factor
3. Career penalties for mothers remain a common experience
4. The economic cost of unpaid care is rarely quantified

8.3 Suggestions for Future Research and Monitoring

Addressing the gender care gap effectively requires not only policy reform and organisational change but also a stronger and more coordinated research agenda at both national and EU levels. While the present study provides a robust comparative foundation, it also reveals several areas where further evidence is essential to inform more targeted and sustainable interventions. One of the most pressing priorities is the development of standardised EU-wide time-use surveys. Accurate, gender-disaggregated data on unpaid care work remains inconsistent across member states, making it difficult to assess the true scale of disparities or to evaluate the effectiveness of specific interventions. Establishing harmonised indicators would enable meaningful cross-country comparisons and support evidence-based policymaking.

Equally important is the need for employer-focused research. Systematic audits of workplace policies, HR practices, and organisational cultures would provide crucial insights into how family-friendly measures are implemented in practice, as well as their tangible impact on employee retention, productivity, and well-being. This would also strengthen the business case for greater employer engagement in work-life balance initiatives, especially in small and medium-sized enterprises where formal policies are often lacking.

Longitudinal studies represent another critical research gap. Evaluating the long-term effects of legislative and employer-driven initiatives, such as the implementation of flexible work rights in Greece or paternity leave incentives in Bulgaria, would offer valuable evidence of what works in different contexts and why. Without such monitoring, there is a risk that policies remain reactive rather than adaptive, failing to evolve in response to real-world outcomes.

Finally, future research should integrate qualitative approaches to capture the lived experiences of parents and carers. Understanding the perspectives of fathers, single parents, and those caring for elderly relatives or family members with disabilities would ensure that policy responses address not only structural barriers but also the social and cultural dimensions of care. These insights would add depth to quantitative findings and provide a more holistic understanding of the challenges faced by different groups.

A coordinated and multi-dimensional research agenda, combining standardised data collection, employer policy audits, longitudinal monitoring, and qualitative inquiry, is essential for building a more complete evidence base. Only through such an approach can policymakers and employers develop interventions that are both targeted and sustainable, ultimately closing the gender care gap across Europe.

Key Actions for Employers

1. Conduct wide time use assessments to measure the long-term impacts of national policies and employer practices
2. Investigate male experiences more thoroughly to identify effective strategies for increasing male engagement in caregiving
3. Explore urban-rural differences in care accessibility and support needs
4. Develop common EU-level indicators for monitoring the effectiveness of workplace flexibility and care policies

9. Conclusion

The transnational analysis of Bulgaria, Greece, Portugal, the Czech Republic, Italy, and Ireland confirms that closing the gender care gap is both a policy and cultural challenge. Across all six countries, the interplay between legislative frameworks, employer practices, and societal attitudes determines how parents and carers navigate work and family life. While progress has been made, particularly in countries such as Portugal and Ireland, where strong policy frameworks and employer engagement are visible, significant disparities remain. In Bulgaria, Greece, the Czech Republic, and Italy, entrenched cultural norms, limited childcare infrastructure, and informal workplace practices continue to restrict women's economic participation and reinforce traditional gender roles in caregiving.

The data in this report shows that legislation alone is not enough. Rights must be implemented, enforced, and supported by complementary measures, including targeted campaigns, employer incentives, and robust monitoring mechanisms. Furthermore, the lived experiences of parents and carers, highlighted through focus groups, underline the pressing need for cultural transformation, where caregiving is valued equally regardless of gender, and employers actively support a balanced division of responsibilities. The report also demonstrates that best practices are transferable. Portugal's integrated approach to paternity leave, Ireland's flexible work models, Italy's Gender Equality Certification, and employer-led childcare solutions from the Czech Republic and Bulgaria provide a roadmap for practical action. These examples prove that structural change is achievable when governments, employers, and civil society work in partnership.

Looking ahead, the challenge will be to scale these solutions and adapt them to different national contexts. Strengthening childcare infrastructure, normalising fathers' participation in caregiving, and embedding family-friendly policies into corporate governance are not isolated reforms but interconnected steps toward sustainable gender equality. Ultimately, addressing the gender care gap is not only a matter of fairness, but also a social and economic imperative. Unlocking women's full labour market potential, reducing the unpaid care burden, and fostering inclusive workplaces will drive productivity, support demographic resilience, and contribute to a more equitable Europe.

This report, therefore, calls for coordinated, multi-level action whereby governments must legislate and incentivise, employers must lead by example, and cultural narratives around care must evolve. Only by aligning these dimensions can we move from isolated improvements to systemic transformation, ensuring that every parent and carer, regardless of gender, has the support they need to thrive.

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