



European Expert Meeting  
**Gender Equality, Sustainability  
& Workplace Wellbeing**

# Good practices, better workplaces

Family friendly workplaces as a  
cornerstone for an economy that cares



## European expert meeting Key reflections and findings

September 2022

## Summary

# Building blocks for family-friendly workplaces

- **Ensure a win-win for employers and employees.** The economic benefits of family-friendly company policies includes attracting talents, motivated/engaged employees, employee retention, diversity that drives innovation, being one step ahead of EU legislation (with less disruption).
- **Approach the parent journey in companies from pre-natal to post-natal,** with clear communication strategies to support employees through their parenthood journey.
- **Adopt a two-generation approach considering the impacts on children and their parents,** and see family-friendly company policies as boosting the environment of children in the first years. Children have the right to be cared for by their families.
- **Consider care across the lifecourse,** and namely care for children *and* adults (e.g. adults with disabilities, ageing family members), supporting both working parents and carers.
- **Break down gender stereotypes in the workplace,** consider the needs of both women and men using a broader diversity and inclusion approach, with parental equality and co-responsibility as a shared goal for public authorities and companies alike. Take-up of family leaves by men is highly associated with positive workplace conditions and culture.
- **Conduct a tailored needs-analysis** to ensure that family-friendly actions are tailored to the needs and realities of the company or organisation for an effective process of change.
- **Consult employees (including their trade union representatives), and not only HR and management,** for an effective cultural shift throughout the company which considers work-life balance for all.
- **Organise trainings** for managers, and develop tangible support through different tools and guides to help with conversation starters on the topic of work-life balance and family-friendliness.
- **Acknowledge the importance of intangible forms of supports** as well, including positive and enabling attitudes, behaviours, leadership, role models and communication, and leaders leading by example.
- **Create a safe workplace environment** where people can talk about their family and care responsibilities and their need to reconcile work and care.
- **Support certification, labels or awards for companies** for different dimensions of family-friendliness (parents, carers, disability, gender equality, diversity and more).
- **Provide spaces and support groups for employers** to exchange on different workplace well-being strategies, within a country and across countries.
- **Support the post-COVID transition** towards hybrid workplaces which allow for better reconciliation of work and care, while considering especially the work-life balance of workers who cannot telework and essential workers, treating all employees equally.
- **Develop strong policy and legislative frameworks to underpin company efforts** for family-friendliness with strong gender-responsive public policies to support families of today (e.g. through the minimum standards of the EU work-life balance directive).
- **Redefine families,** moving on from heteronormativity and acknowledging that families are multifaceted. Care work/support needs are to be understood in light of this family diversity.
- **Use the momentum around Environmental, Social and Governance (ESG) reporting** for large companies, to include issues like parental equality and family-friendliness in the conversation.
- **Trust in employers** makes the relationship between employer and employee particularly important, and research clearly indicates that societal leadership is currently one of the key functions of business.
- **Study and research** the gap between existing policies to support working families (leaves, care services, flexible working) and the ability of families to take up and use their social rights.

# Background

**COFACE and Pro Parents Netherlands** hosted a European expert meeting on 14th June 2022 in Amsterdam (The Netherlands), with 70+ Dutch and European experts.

## About the hosts

**COFACE Families Europe** promotes the well-being, health, social inclusion and security of families and family members in our ever-changing society. We serve as a trusted entity to voice the issues and needs of families in Europe. We advocate for non-discrimination policies and equal opportunities for individuals as well as for families of all shapes and sizes. Our support specifically goes out to policies and initiatives aimed at increasing equality between women and men, focused on a union of work, care and family life.

**Pro Parents Netherlands** is on a mission to reinvent the way companies support their employees on the path to parenthood. With science-based parental health policies and practices for employers who wish to commit to gender inclusion. In addition, Pro Parents is building an Employer benefit platform for parents @work, to help navigate the joy and journey for parents at work.

## A chance to build back better

Working families around the globe were dramatically impacted by the changes COVID-19 brought. Increasing anxieties around job security, mounting home schooling demands, and radical birth and postpartum plan shifts have taken the small safety net around families away. We are still in the phase of COVID recovery, gearing up for the next normal in work and life. There is an opportunity to build back better and coordinate a societal shift both at home and in the workplace. We need to redefine the future of work and how we envision care and work. How care responsibilities are organized to ensure that people with care responsibilities (mostly women and/or mothers, but also family members who take care of elderly relatives or relatives with disabilities) are properly represented in the workplace.

## Future of Work

This European expert meeting focused on helping women and men balance their work and family life through 21st century workplace wellbeing strategies. This is perfectly aligned with the current developments within EU policy regarding work-life balance. After all, giving inhabitants the right tools to adequately combine work and care – both on a societal and policy level – is a prerequisite for a healthy and thriving economy and society. This is reflected in the latest EU work-life balance directive which aims to embed adequately paid leave into national law and in the upcoming EU Care Strategy. These EU initiatives are driving change in workplace culture and encouraging the development of high-quality care and support services to help families combine work and care.

## Creating the building blocks

With the Sustainable Development Goals 1 (no poverty), 3 (health and well-being), 5 (gender equality) and 8 (decent work and economic growth) in mind, the objective of this European expert meeting was to create the building blocks for a caring economy by:

- connecting families, policy-makers and employers in order to collect best practices for family-friendly workplaces and create European guidelines to help employers create a culture shift;
- upscaling good practices from The Netherlands to other countries, and encourage further cross-country exchanges;
- preparing the future of work to deal with labour market challenges due to gender inequality and the lack of appropriate work-life balance measures, such as female under-representation, absenteeism, loss of talent and talent shortages, mental health issues and more;
- studying solutions to improve gender equality in the labour market;
- boosting the implementation of the European Pillar of Social Rights Action Plan, namely principles 2 (gender equality), 3 (equal opportunities) and 9 (work-life balance).

The video summary and keynote presentations are available at [www.coface-eu.org](http://www.coface-eu.org)

# Programme

## 9.00-9.30 Welcome

Joyce Knappe, CEO, Pro Parents Netherlands  
Annemie Driessens, President of COFACE  
Families Europe

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## 9.30-11.00 Health and well-being of working families in Europe: state of play

Co-moderators: Joyce Knappe (Pro Parents CEO) & Elizabeth Gosme (COFACE Director)

### Gender Inclusion, Interrelated health of children and their parents in the first 1000 days

By Prof. Dr. Tessa Roseboom, University of Amsterdam, The Netherlands

### Dismantling discriminatory social norms in the workplace

By Marie Toulemonde, Gender specialist, United Nations Population Fund, Eastern Europe and Central Asia, and Adelina Tërshani, Program Officer for Women's Economic Empowerment, Kosovo Women's Network, Kosovo

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11.00-11.30 Stretching and coffee break

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## 11.00-13.00 Parallel deep dives on workplace well-being strategies in The Netherlands

### A wide range of on- and offline tools for working parents and their managers

By Joyce Knappe, CEO of Pro Parents Netherlands  
Moderator: Floris Tiemstra, Operating Officer Pro Parents

### Key steps to build inclusive employership

By Helen Gleis, Project Manager Diversity & Inclusion, BDO Netherlands  
Moderator: Tetske van der Weg, Product Owner Pro Parents

## Why We Need Workplace Wellbeing Strategies: Evidence from the Netherlands

Mara Yerkes, Associate Professor of Interdisciplinary Social Science, Utrecht University

Moderator: Mira Faas, Vitality manager Pro Parents

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13.00-14.00 Lunch break

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## 14.00-15.30 Parallel deep dives into practices in other EU countries

### Supporting employers to build parent equality organisational culture

By Sylwia Ziemacka, Council member, Share the Care Foundation, Poland

Moderator: Attila Böhm, COFACE Policy and Advocacy Officer

### Equality, Father- and Family-Friendliness

By Marina Wetzer-Karlsson, Programme Director, Väestöliitto, Family Federation of Finland

Moderator: Elizabeth Gosme, COFACE Director

### A label for carer-friendly workplaces

By Lucie Boulter, Cap'Handéo Policy officer, Handéo Services, France  
Moderator: Camille Roux, COFACE Policy and Advocacy Officer

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15.30-15.45 Break

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## 15.45-16.30 Conclusions and next steps: key ingredients for building family-friendly workplaces

Greet Vermeylen, Policy Officer, Gender Equality unit, DG Justice, European Commission  
Aline Brüser, Advisor on Gender Equality, European Trade Union Confederation  
Koen Cabooter, Social affairs adviser, UNIZO, SMEunited

Moderator: Elizabeth Gosme, COFACE Director



## Welcome

Joyce Knappe started with a general reflection on holding this international meeting in The Netherlands, a country which sees low levels of engagement in care. She reminded participants that the aim of this expert meeting was to build bridges between academia, policy makers and the private sector, and the timing is right for this. The current public discourse in the Dutch media refers to Environmental, Social and Governance (ESG) reporting for large companies, and this is an opportunity to include issues like gender equality in the conversation. Meanwhile, the new generation is asking for a more people-driven economy. Finally, the meeting was held just as the European Union agreed on [legally-binding quota for women on corporate boards](#), which was welcomed by Pro Parents.

Annemie Driekens thanked Pro Parents for the hospitality and partnership. She thanked the European Commission for its financial support to enable COFACE to provide a voice to the challenges and needs of families of today in our fast-changing societies, pushing for investments in well-being and social inclusion of families of all forms and sizes and building a healthy environment fit for children.

The expert meeting took place close to the deadline for the transposition of the [EU work-life balance directive](#), a piece of EU legislation with minimum standards on leave policies for women and men,

introducing social rights in the workplace. Research shows that parental leave policies lead to better nutrition, reduced stress in families and better social and cognitive development of children. She referred to the opportunity to build back better in this post-COVID phase, taking into account the positive aspects of the pandemic-driven workplace shifts (telework, flexible working and more). Finally, she referred to the upcoming EU Care Strategy in September 2022 and the high expectations of COFACE in this regard to ensure it recognises the essential caring role of families and the need to provide them with high quality services to manage their work-life balance.

Annemie reflected on the key elements of family-friendly workplaces: smooth returns to work following leaves, keeping employees informed about workplace changes even when on leave, taking temporary time away to care for family members or to deal with acute family matters, the possibility to work flexibly for work-life balance. Creative solutions are needed to meet the specific needs of employees as well as the company itself. Having a family-friendly working environment must not be seen as a concession to employees but as a win-win; a new way of doing business, more responsible, more sustainable where the family-friendly measures become an integral part of the business strategy.

Together with all participants, experts and in partnership with representatives of the Employers, the Trade Unions and the European Commission, COFACE wishes to find some building blocks for family-friendly workplaces and pave the way to close the gender care gap and shift towards an economy which cares.

# Health and well-being of working families in Europe: state of play

This opening plenary session aimed to set the European context of the discussions throughout the day, with a spotlight on trends in family and child well-being and investment in early childhood; and trends in the workplace (family-friendliness, gender equality, general well-being).

## Gender Inclusion, Interrelated health of children and their parents in the first 1000 days

By Prof. Dr. Tessa Roseboom, University of Amsterdam, The Netherlands

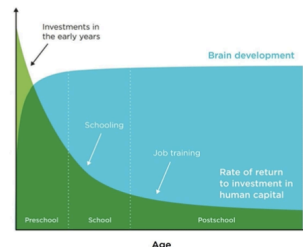
Prof. Dr. Tessa Roseboom referred to the first 1000 days of life as the foundation on which we build our future, namely the period from conception to the 2nd birthday in which investments are most effective, with the highest rate of return later in life both in terms of health and of education. Humans are extremely sensitive to the environment in general, but in particular during these first years of extremely rapid growth: all human beings are shaped significantly by what occurs in their environment during the first period of their lives.

Consequentially, birth location and the environment in which human beings spend their first years of life associate strongly with returns later in life, such as health conditions (from life expectancy to likelihood to take up smoking), school achievement (years of schooling, grades achieved, likelihood to drop out) and future income (income earned, employment status).

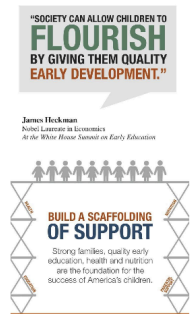
Longitudinal studies on World War 2 cohorts show differences in brain development between children,

depending on various degrees of exposure to food deprivation. Namely, lower degrees of brain development at a younger age correlate with illnesses at later stages in life. Unborn babies are often "unheard and unseen" and thus become easily "unprotected". And yet the societal costs of this type of early-onset disadvantage can hardly be overstated.

Figure 5.1 Investments in high-quality programs during children's early years pay off



Source: WDR 2018 team, based on Carneiro, Cunha, and Heckman (2003); Martin (2002).



One critical aspect that makes false starts in life so costly - individually and socially - is that the disadvantages they engender cluster. So do societal costs linked with them. 20% of the population bear 80% of the social costs of "false starts".

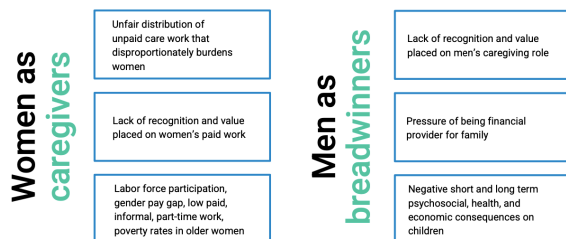
Investments in early human capital development are associated with sustainable advancements towards reaching the SDGs: maximizing opportunities for early development necessarily calls for increased attention to global issues of hunger, poverty, gender equality (tackling domestic violence, stress). Investments in promoting gender equality have also been shown to associate positively with increased survival rates up until to age five.

## Dismantling discriminatory social norms in the workplace

By Marie Toulemonde, Gender specialist, United Nations Population Fund, Eastern Europe and Central Asia; and Adelina Tërshani, Program Officer for Women's Economic Empowerment, Kosovo Women's Network, Kosovo.

Marie Toulemonde introduced the projects of UNFPA Eastern Europe and Central Asia in relation to gender equal norms in the workplace in four countries: Belarus, Kosovo, Albania, and Moldova. Social norms can be defined as a combination of shared beliefs and expectations that are prevalent across society. Social norms could also be defined as "*What we expect others to believe*". She referred to data on the gendered distribution of care work pre-pandemic: women used to spend 9 hours more than male partners on caring duties (on a weekly basis).

### Gender norms



Why tackle these social norms? Firstly, the unfair distribution of unpaid care work has harmful economic consequences on the entire household. Secondly, women live longer, but their discontinuous professional careers, often marked by early retirement and low career advancement perspectives have significant impacts on pension/social security. Women in Eastern Europe and Central Asia countries rarely have long and remunerative enough professional careers to ensure high enough retirement pension benefits to effectively insure them against poverty in old age. The cost/opportunity for women

to not participate in the labour market is becoming too high, to the point that we are witnessing increased risks of migration, as well as a clear demographic impact.

As well as developing gender responsive public policies for family and child well-being, the private sector (workplaces) can have a strong impact on changing social norms: from developing diversity and inclusion policies, to assuming a formal commitment to gender equality. UNFPA supports companies assuming the role of 'Champions of Gender Equality': supporting and organising exchanges between EECA countries with countries like Sweden, so that employers/managers can learn good practices in terms of family-friendly workplaces.

Marie gave examples of practical supports in family-friendly workplaces, connected to time, IT and financial support: routines and praxis are important (i.e. flexible and remote working, meetings scheduled only during core working hours), necessary equipment (i.e. IT equipment for remote working, tools for flexible time management etc.), financial support (i.e. paid parental leave, domestic/household support, childcare support).

But even more crucial is to work on the overall working culture, working on broadening acceptance and support for men to take active caring roles, and for women assuming increased responsibility within the workplace with e.g. male managers taking leaves to lead by example. Abstract support is the more intangible support provided to employees, especially by their managers and senior staff, and is based on positive and enabling attitudes, behaviours, leadership, role models and communication. It changes expectations around behaviors and practices - and therefore social norms.

Finally, Marie referred to the need to **redefine families**: moving on from heteronormativity and acknowledging that families are multifaceted, and care work/support needs are to be understood in light of this family diversity.

Adelina Tërshani spoke about the implementation of this UNFPA programme in the Kosovo reality,

starting with one telling statistic: only 16% of women are formally part of the labour force in Kosovo. The reasons for women not accessing/falling out of the labour force are multiple: the provision of unpaid care work; gender-based discrimination in the labour force (difficulties in accessing employment, violation of maternity rights, sexual harassment); the inadequacy of current labour law in Kosovo. Maternity leave is still being paid by the employer.

In line with developments in the neighbouring EU which have legislation on maternity, paternity, parental, carers leaves, the UNFPA is working with key stakeholders to work both on improvements in the workplace and also in reforming labour law encouraging governments to take over this financial role.

## Parallel deep dives on workplace well-being strategies in The Netherlands

### Deep Dive 1. A wide range of on- and offline tools for working parents and their managers By Joyce Knappe, CEO of Pro Parents Netherlands

Joyce referred to the origins of the actions of Pro Parents. The reasons for working on workplace well-being are to **create connections between occupational health and healthcare, and creating a health path for recovery from childbirth**, creating post-partum support (physiotherapist, lactation consultant and more) in public policy and in the workplace. For cancer, there is a protocol for creation of a multidisciplinary team and plan for full recovery. Why not also for post-partum recovery and maternal health? The first step to engage employers in the lives

of working parents is to understand the needs of families and the needs of the company, in order to develop a process of change. The approach of Pro Parents is driven by the Sustainable Development Goals, both SDG 5 gender equality and SDG 3 health and well-being. Pre-COVID, Dutch data highlighted the parent trap and its impact on gender equality in society and the workplace. Working parents are a growing part of the Dutch population, and burnout is an occupational disease with costs for the employer. Parenthood is a burnout factor, with 1 in 3 women experiencing emotional instability 3 years after birth, 1 in 10 mothers stopping work after the birth of a child. Joyce highlighted the key steps used by Pro Parents when working with employers. The first step is an intervention mapping protocol rolled out over two years through the following actions: needs assessment, developing a theoretical framework, selecting learning methods and models, designing and redesigning the policy company, and developing train-the-trainer tools. **The change comes in the meeting between the pregnant woman and the manager, so it is important to be ready for this and start early, with investment in a prenatal programme.** A one-size-fits-all solution is not possible. Employability and the specific needs of the company are the starting point. Needs assessments include interviews with works council, employees, and managers, on a wide range of topics: lactation, fertility treatment, flexible working, using a multi-disciplinary approach.

Key messages from the workshop discussion:

- The benefits of family-friendly workplaces were discussed: improved work relationships, worker retention, attractive work packages for senior level, improved employer brands, readiness for ESG reporting, impact on gender equality and diversity.
- Tools include provision of information to expecting parents, conversation guidelines for managers and parents, a roadmap for managers and HR departments. These tools are central for implementation and important for dialogue/ conversation starters. Creating spaces for internal



discussions on parental well-being e.g. Teams channel for conversation can help get the conversation going. Dialogue about family diversity, the realities of same-sex families, single parents, large and blended families must be part of the conversation on building inclusive and diverse family-friendly workplace strategies, building strategies for the return to work for both women and men.

- While the early years (pre-partum up until 2,5 years) are crucial, we must not forget working parenthood beyond the early years and the needs of parents of children with disabilities for instance.
- Governments must lead the way in driving change in policies to accommodate the needs of working parents and carers, but in some cases companies and workplace changes can also lead to public policy change especially in countries like the United States which have no strong minimum standards for family leaves in employment legislation. For instance, the use of employer resource groups on rainbow families has proven useful in countries like Poland, with these groups also impacting public policy discourse.
- The importance of involving trade unions and work councils was underlined, namely talking to them from the start and involving them in any needs assessment process in the company, so that solutions can be co-created between workers and management.
- The discussion also put the spotlight on essential workers: health sector, care workers, cleaners. They are generally on low-incomes or even the minimum wage, cannot benefit from telework arrangements, and yet need even more support for return to work after family leaves. Management needs to consider all workers equally. Night shifts, after working hour shifts (especially shifts in bedtime story slots) have an impact on family life, paternal, maternal and child well-being. For instance, cleaning does not

necessarily have to be after office hours, but could be accommodated during the working day – this would also have a positive impact on employee connections and teamwork.

- Managers, team leaders need to manage employee work-life balance, but they are often assessed on the basis of the product on the shelf and not on employee well-being. So a shift is needed in HR culture at that level. This starts with a culture of safety, learning, diversity. But who takes the first step in a company? This will depend on existing policy and legal frameworks in a given country. In some cases, this comes from employees or works councils, in other cases HR departments are best placed to kick off the change, together with leadership who makes the financial decisions to invest in workplace well-being policies.

## Deep Dive 2. Key steps to build inclusive employership

By Helen Gleis, Project Manager  
Diversity & Inclusion, BDO  
Netherlands

Helen explained that the objective of BDO Netherlands (company providing a wide range of financial services and working with 75 partner organisations) is to create a more diverse and inclusive workplace with more than 3000 staff. Among various initiatives, they are developing a working parents programme to enhance family-friendly employership, seen as both an investment in the employees and in the company. **The starting point was gender equality, aiming for a gender diverse and inclusive organisation to address the fact there were mostly men only in top levels of management in the company.** The process of change started with creating awareness rather than direct implementation, through a video with testimonies from different managers in the company, their regrets at not spending more time with their children, encouraging next generations not to miss these important life moments.

Key factors to build inclusive employership



BDO

The BDO “Parent Journey” project started with a needs assessment, holding interviews with colleagues in different phases of parenthood, in different departments (HR, management) and the presentation of the results to board members. The COVID-19 pandemic sped up the process of review of existing structures for flexible working and greater well-being for working parents. The managers were given tools (e.g. checklists, leaflets, trainings) on how to address parental well-being in the workplace, to increase their understanding of parental realities, special needs, breaking gender stereotypes, family diversity and more. **The employees (expecting parents and parents) were also given tools, to empower them to start conversations.** Further work is needed to roll out the Parent Journey resources in BDO Netherlands, and there is clearly a space to develop more research, investigating the special needs of working parents and carers, but also existing needs in a broader diversity and inclusion perspective (religious background, sexual orientation, disability and more).

Key messages from the workshop discussion:

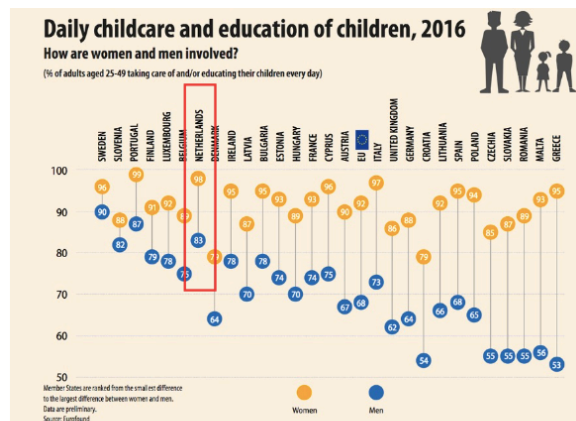
- The awareness-raising strategy is for multiple levels of the company, educating different levels of management on Parent Journey and the need to factor in parental well-being of employees in current and future managers.
- Measuring employee engagement and commitment to this topic is key to phasing in new parental well-being policies, which also do not discriminate employees who have no care responsibilities. Commitment is especially high in women with families, and can lead to them feeling more tied and committed to the workplace.

- Evaluating employee effectiveness/productivity and comparing full-time and part-time work effectiveness is useful and relevant since parents tend to gain skills in managing work and care duties, with better capacity to prioritise.
- Trainings for managers includes developing emotional intelligence, giving guidelines for employee assessments, and boosting leadership skills.
- The grey zones need to be tackled, such as awareness on different family types. For example HEMA has a policy for rainbow families, to ensure both parents get the same amount of parental leave.
- Changing workplace culture has an impact on employees and working methods and this requires effective communication to support the transition to family-friendly workplaces. New rights are also not taken up by all employees, or they need variations of those rights (e.g. not all women and men will want to take up parental leave in block but rather in shorter periods). Accomodating these different preferences and needs is done by focusing on organisation and company culture, which allows for flexibility.
- Putting in place a Parent Journey programme is also about ensuring engagement of employees in the company during their leaves (e.g. keeping them fully informed about structural changes, or consulting them on a micro level about their preferences).
- Key factors for a successful Parent Journey programme is establishing routines at different work levels, dedicating resources for research and evaluation, finding budgets to invest in workplace well-being, and rethinking the core of the business model (not just finance and HR departments). But HR culture is crucial to phase in this family-friendly culture in the recruitment process from the start and approach working parenthood in the right way.

## Deep Dive 3. Why We Need Workplace Wellbeing Strategies: Evidence from the Netherlands

By Mara Yerkes, Associate Professor of Interdisciplinary Social Science, Utrecht University

The focus of the deep dive was on gender inequality during the pandemic (with evidence from the Netherlands), **discussing a shift from inequalities to capabilities (gender and more), and suggestions for moving forward to reduce gender inequality and the chance to build back better.** Mara started with some key statistics on gender inequalities. Across Europe, women do more cooking and housework than men. On average, 79% of women cook and/or do housework daily. On average, 34% of men cook and/or do housework daily. Across Europe, women do more childcare than men. On average, 92% of women educate and/or care for children daily. On average, 68% of men educate and/or care for children daily.



Eurofound and Eurostat, 2020.

Across Europe, men are more often in paid work than women. On average, 74% of men are in paid employment. On average, 63% of women are in paid employment. But: not all employment is equal. Women are more likely to work part-time and men are more likely to work full-time. There are important differences across countries (e.g. in The Netherlands: 3/4 of women work part-time). The highest rates of

part-time work concern mothers especially. The Netherlands has the highest proportion of female part-time work across the EU. These gender inequalities in care and work matter for the workplace. Work-life balance is recognised as crucial for well-being (as evident from the EU social agenda and the recently transposed EU work-life balance directive). Gender inequalities significantly disadvantage women (career progression, wages, economic insecurity and lack of independence), their leisure time (replaced with unpaid care work) and their quality of life; but also disadvantage men with fewer opportunities to care, struggling with continued social expectations of man as breadwinner and woman as caregiver. **The high gender inequality among parents in The Netherlands was compounded by pandemic-related measures.** A recent survey undertaken by Odissee and the University of Utrecht in The Netherlands indicate changes in Dutch household arrangements during lockdowns (with more than half of the parents working from home in April 2020); with most children at home as well (away from school/care arrangements); a change in work patterns and pressure with many parents working evenings; and deteriorating work-life balance. 56% of the mothers worked in an essential occupation versus 34% of the fathers. While 57% of households had at least one parent in essential occupation.

Key messages from the workshop discussion:

- Gender inequalities persist in household tasks, childcare, and employment.
- Pre-pandemic, women were already engaging in more household and care tasks than men, with an intensification of parenting (more educated parents engage in more ‘parenting’).
- These inequalities have an impact on workplace well-being of both working mothers and working fathers, and stereotypes at home spill over in the workplace and labour market.
- Recent surveys in The Netherlands indicate COVID-19 has had an impact, with pandemic

measures placing double or triple burden on families.

- Fathers participation in care and household tasks increased during the pandemic, thereby reducing gender inequalities, but the inequalities prior to the pandemic now persist post-COVID as do the barriers to greater equality. There is insufficient understanding of why this inequality persists.
- It is important to study the gap between existing policies to support working families (leaves, care services, flexible working) and the ability of families to take up and use their social rights (that is the aim of the European Research Council project called CAPABLE)
- There is a persistence of inequality, and also inadequate interventions in public policy and in companies, with many questions on designing company policies to support work-life balance, and perceptions matter: it is important not only to talk to management but also consult employees, working together towards a whole-organisation cultural shift to workplace well-being.

## Parallel deep dives into practices in other EU countries

### Deep Dive 4. Supporting employers to build parent equality organisational culture

By Sylwia Ziemacka, Council member, Share the Care Foundation, Poland

In this deep dive, Sylwia focused on the Polish context and employer engagement in family-friendly workplace culture. According to an annual trust and credibility survey (Edelman Trust Barometer 2022 results), business remains the most trusted institution in many countries, ahead of NGOs, government and

the media. Trust in employers makes the relationship between employer and employee particularly important, and the research clearly indicates that societal leadership is currently one of the key functions of business. Hence, engaging employers in parental equality is also part of that societal leadership.

**In Poland, the decision to take paternity/paternal leave is highly associated with workplace conditions** (support/absence of support to men taking up caring roles), as well as to the relationship between employer and employee. Polish legislation allows parents to share up to 32 weeks of parental leave, yet only 1% of couples do take the full amount, mainly due to men not taking up their share. When asked about the main barriers for men to take parental leave, men indicate: financial worries, preoccupation that taking up leave may negatively impact professional stability/professional career. When asked about the main barriers for men to take parental leave, women indicate: men's inability to perform housework/caring/parental chores, financial worries, fear of missing out on the opportunity to rest - staying home with the children is often framed by women themselves as an opportunity to (at least partially) rest, outside from work.

Conversely, when asked about the main motivations for men to take up parental leave, men point to: subsidy (salary replacement) rate up to 100% of salary, assurance that the job will be waiting, assurance that the professional development/career trajectory will not be negatively affected. When asked about the main factors for men to take up parental leave, women mention (to give parental leave to their husband): awareness of the option, culture of acceptance for working mothers, abolishment of gender stereotypes.

**Employers however also need to be also incentivized, as they have a huge role to play in driving change, and they will also benefit.**

## PARENTAL LEAVE FOR FATHERS – EVERYONE WINS

WORKSHOP FOR MANAGERS – GOAL: TO SHOW ALL THE BENEFITS OF PMI CHANGES IN PARENTAL POLICY

BUSINESS	EMPLOYEES	MANAGERS
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Diversity that drives innovation and lead to better insight into your customers</li><li>• Attracting talents</li><li>• Motivated/engaged employees</li><li>• Employees retention</li><li>• Leader of change - one step ahead of UE regulation</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Improved work-family balance</li><li>• Higher satisfaction of work and life</li><li>• Abolishing the GENDER stereotypes</li><li>• Time off from work</li><li>• Strong bond with kids</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Committed and engaged team</li><li>• The right to be a parent too</li><li>• Employees' new soft skills learnt during parental leave.</li></ul>

### Key messages from the workshop discussion:

- Example from another country: Iceland, which has 20 years of experience of shared parental leave, with the legislation starting from the child's stated right to be cared for by both parents. They started in the year 2000 with a father quota and 80% salary replacement rate. The high take-up of this policy is also associated with decreasing divorce rates.
- Employers can be approached with different ideas/actions in mind: building brand awareness around the topic; showing that parental equality is something that companies should address; and presenting the different benefits; all this in a language which can lead to full integration into the core business goals and strategy of the employer.
- More specifically different tools can be used such as educational workshops or webinars, provision of legal advice, and operational advice for implementation of workplace strategies and benefits for working parents; as well as external tools for awareness raising with the media, for social media, drafting publications and good practice guides.
- Getting both women and men's perspective in the discussion on partnership/parenthood is essential.
- The EU work-life balance directive transposition was also discussed, and the need to prepare different stakeholders for the 2<sup>nd</sup> August 2022 deadline, with recommendations for changes in business culture as well, for an effective

transposition, targeting both managers and HR managers.


- A list of concrete recommendations were included in the keynote of Sylwia with different target groups in mind: recommendations for company boards (the place of parental leave in the overall strategy of diversity and inclusivity; changing attitudes of line managers to parental leave for men, and more); recommendations for HR and internal communications (start with research and analysis on attitudes to parental equality, develop communication tools for mums and dads, encourage parental leave ambassadors to lead by example, break down gender stereotypes); recommendations for personnel and payroll departments (understand labour legislation and impact of EU work-life balance directive, provide flexible options of take-up of leaves, ensure fathers are fully aware of their rights); and recommendations for managers (ensure company policy on parental leave is clear, consider what questions employees may have on parental leave).
- The business/economic benefits of strong parental equality company policy were highlighted: attracting talents, motivated/engaged employees, employee retention, leaders of change, diversity that drives innovation, being one step ahead of EU legislation (with less disruption). Benefits for employees include improved work-family balance, higher satisfaction of work and life, reduced gender stereotypes, stronger bonds with their children, improved health and well-being.

## Deep Dive 5. Equality, Father- and Family-Friendliness

By Marina Wetzer-Karlsson,  
Programme Director, Väestöliitto,  
Family Federation of Finland

Take-up of paternity and parental leave in Finland is low, so that different measures and incentives are needed. Marina started by presenting the results of a study carried out by Väestöliitto which was the starting point for developing the Equality and Fathers project (2019-2021), aiming to strengthen parenthood and equality in working life. Companies joined the project for better paternity leave, and gave two main reasons:

### What does the top leadership think?



*"Equality has always been an important and self-evident value for me. The need to develop our company's operative methods and the employer image inspired us to get involved in the project."*

Väestöliitto



*"The management of our organization has seen father-friendliness as a good way to improve the employer image. In connection with the discussion of the Equality and Gender Equality Plan, the Equality and Fathers project was launched."*

**Lessons learned from the project are multiple. It is important that every company has equality policies in place, but also that these policies are implemented successfully:** organizational culture should lead to actions and a change in attitudes. Every company is different: there is no-one-size-fits all solution, and companies start at different levels. A wide variety of actions are needed: interventions, development, research, communication. When families have equal work at home, fathers take up more of their paternity leaves from their employer. The more family leaves, especially parental leaves, are shared between parents, the more equal is the situation in working life. **While the starting point of the project was fathers, it became clear that it is important to focus on the entire family and not just on fathers.**

In terms of the policy context in Finland, certain reforms are underway for family leaves. The paternity leave is now converted into a parental leave. The father and mother can stay at home at the same time if they so wish, from the time the child is born. The total amount of parental leave days has now increased overall. **Parental leave is an issue that applies to everybody, it is not a question of sex and gender.** Finally, all professions have a right to work and family life.

Key messages from the workshop discussion:

- In The Netherlands, in Deloitte, candidates and workers have the possibility to customize their work career, but there were cases of stigmatisation if they chose certain options such as wishing to spend more time with their family. In Finland, there is a governmental body which checks if you are being discriminated based on your choices (for instance, taking up parental leave). The burden of proof lies on the employer, that they have not discriminated their employee. But many people do not make use of such recourse, especially because they might not be able to stay at their company as a consequence.
- Parental leave and single parents: in Finland single parents have the right to both parental leaves, hence 320 days (the equivalent of 2 parents 160 days).
- Adopting a broad definition of family is important, and the Finnish equality law states that everyone has to be treated equally.
- Tensions between employees with and without children: how to build policies which treat all workers equally while also providing targeted support to employees with care duties? It is important to underline that family leave policies and company policies will benefit everyone at one point in their lives, whether it is about having children, or caring for a family member, and thus it should not matter if part of the workforce does not feel like they benefit from these policies at a given moment, because they

will eventually benefit from them throughout their lives.

- Many parents lack information about the measures that are there to support them, so better communication is key.
- Flexibility is very important to ensure high take-up of the leaves, and this can also be beneficial for smaller companies allowing their workers to take leaves piecemeal for smaller periods (for instance, 15 days, then go back to work). However, reforms are needed around part-time legislation since one obstacle to more job flexibility is that in some countries two part time workers can cost more to a company than one full time worker.
- Other measures such as “take it or leave it” or non-transferability can incentivize take-up, but there are many dimensions and obstacles to the take-up of parental leave, such as the pay or compensation, which can be very low in some countries. Company culture and societal culture are also very important for take-up – for instance in Spain, many fathers are not taking their 10 weeks of leave because they have to come to an agreement with their employer, which is not easy. In France, there are now 20 days of paternity leave, but only 67% of fathers take up the parental leave. But there still hasn’t been a study about the reasons for the 33% who do not take up this paternity leave. In Moldova, there has been a reform of paternity leave, which allows fathers to take their leave within one year, instead of imposing the take up right after birth. This reform was to enable flexibility and enhance take-up, because many fathers skip the paternity leave if it is imposed right after birth.
- In some countries, paternity leave is mandatory (like Portugal), but not parental leave. Paternity leave is meant to ensure that fathers are involved from the start, at birth, creating an immediate bond with their child. A mix between compulsory and voluntary take up might help

fathers to take up more of their paternity/parental leave.

- In Austria, companies receive a family-friendly award from the government. Why not create a European award for family-friendly companies and especially the participation of fathers?

## Deep Dive 6. A label for carer-friendly workplaces

By Lucie Boulier, Cap’Handéo Policy officer, Handéo Services, France

Lucie talked about the work of the French organisation Handéo, founded in 2007 by a group of organisations working on disability rights, with the ambition that every person could live independently and can fully participate in every aspect of society, whatever their disability or age. She took a deep dive into one stream of the Handéo services: the certification and label activities referred to as Cap’Handéo. It is the first quality label in France that assesses and recognises companies and organisations committed to fulfilling the needs of persons with disabilities and the needs of carers. Around 300 organisations/companies have received the label until now, with different certificates available e.g. on autism, multiple disabilities, technical assistance, mobility and personal services.



Lucie put the spotlight on the **carer-related certificate**, starting with the definition of carer: someone providing support to a friend, neighbour or

family member who has lost part of their autonomy due to a disability, ageing or an illness. There are four criteria for the definition of carer: the non-professional nature of the support provided, the origins of the care situation (illness, disability, ageing, accident), the frequency of the support (daily), and the nature of the care provided (medical, administrative, financial.). There are 11 million carers in France, the average age is 52, 57% carers are women, 79% are living with the person they are taking care of, 62% carers have a professional life. 1 out of 5 employees are concerned, and a predicted 1 out of 4 by 2030, which means the trend is increasing and it is becoming a real issue for the next years in terms of work-life balance and the economy. **Care has gone from being a family-related issue to a societal issue**, with different challenges for the carer (lack of information, financial and organisational difficulties), the impact of caring on their health and quality of life (increasing health, sleeping problems, burnout), but also many opportunities for carers (discovering strengths and skills, stronger bonds with relatives and more). Yet companies still do not recognise enough the reality of care and working carers; there is a lack of information on the rights of carers (leave, respite, insurance and financial support); and workplaces are not always a safe place to talk about carer situations.

The **2019 National Strategy for supporting carers** consists of French legislation which incentivizes companies to integrate the topic of working carers into corporate social responsibility discussions and strategies. The CAP'Handéo label (in partnership with KLESIA) is a way of operationalising this and ensuring that companies take into account working carers. **Any company or organisation can apply for the label, whatever the size/sector (even for small companies), with a strict set of requirements to fulfil but with flexibility so that each company can go at its own pace and according to its means.** To receive the label, companies follow a quality reference framework (which lists the actions to be implemented), a self-diagnosis, and methodological guidelines. Only when the company feels ready, there is a one-day on-site audit to control the fulfillment of the basic requirements, then the audit report is anonymously presented to a National committee

(composed of national organizations) for an advisory opinion. The main goal of the certification is to have enabled companies to identify to what extent their employees are concerned by care duties, develop knowledge on this issue, identify actions that could be promoted or implemented according to working carers' needs, open the dialogue broadly in the company and not only from an HR perspective, and create links with local associations and services supporting carers and providing complementary solutions for working carers.

Key messages from the workshop discussion:

- One possible solution to break the carer taboo in the professional field would be to put forward the skills (capacity to adapt, prioritisation) developed when in a caregiving situation.
- Examples of actions which can be implemented by companies for working carers include: provide information on financial/administrative support existing within or outside the company; more flexibility on working hours, offer training to management on the subject of working carers; create support groups so that working carers can share their experience; have a referent in the company who is available to answer questions/share experiences.
- The organisation of focus groups with working carers can be sensitive especially if carers prefer not to be identified and it is important to respect their right to privacy. But individual meetings between the employer and carer employees is encouraged.
- In Kosovo: working carers is a taboo because it would be recognizing women's abnormally high involvement in household tasks (caring tasks). In France, trade unions are surprisingly not so sensitive to the topic of working carers (yet). It is more HR departments that are more willing to introduce this subject to companies. And when it comes to carer's leave, people prefer to take sick leaves (because carer's leave is less remunerated, 40€/day, while sick leave days are fully remunerated).



- There was a discussion around the status of carers: in France, the debate is still ongoing, because it could be stigmatizing, but you can be considered as a carer with a medical certificate. The carer's leave can last up to 3 months, it is paid (not fully), and renewable once. But the problem is that leaves are considered as made for emergency, while the situation of carers is precisely a day-to-day situation.
- Some carers take care of more than one person (this can be children, parents,...). Furthermore, during the pandemic, family carers took on the role of care professionals.
- Small companies reach out to Cap'Handéo often when in emergency situations because they do not necessarily have the infrastructure in place for working carers. For now, the strategy of Cap'Handéo is to promote the label to encourage companies to go at their own pace. Small companies are also encouraged to mutualize actions or information, and help each other when they are in the same situation. In small companies, links are more individualized and sometimes strong between employers and employees, it is an interesting base to build upon to implement dialogue and understand the need of working carers.

## **Conclusions and next steps: key ingredients for building family-friendly workplaces**

Greet Vermeylen (Policy Officer, Gender Equality unit, DG Justice, European Commission), Aline Brüser (Advisor on Gender Equality, European Trade Union Confederation), and Koen Cabooter (Social affairs adviser, UNIZO, SMEunited) reflected on family-friendly workplaces from their three perspectives: public authority, trade union and business.

Key takeaways include the following:

- The changes in workplaces during the pandemic lockdowns led to hybrid working patterns in many sectors. The workplace culture and business leadership will be crucial to ensure that hybrid and flexible working arrangements remain and allow for stronger work-life balance, but with the adequate and quality care infrastructure (provided by public authorities and/or companies) in order to support family-friendly workplaces. It is important to note however that there are pros and cons of telework, and the right to disconnect must be respected.
- We need to consider also low-income workers, essential workers (carers, nurses and more) and their needs more firmly in the family-friendly workplaces picture. They need work-life balance the most. This means also exploring flexible work arrangements for workers who are not able to telework.
- The EU work-life balance directive is establishing minimum standards, but stronger regulation is needed. The “right to request” flexible work arrangements is not strong enough for some stakeholders. Yet for business, it is all a question of balance between the needs of the employers and the needs of employees, and the right to request is an example of such balance.
- It is essential to understand the nature of small/family businesses. For instance the impact of leave measures is quite different to the impact on big companies. We cannot put all the burden on the shoulders of employers - this needs to be a collective responsibility as we are all in this together: women, men, social partners, policy-makers, NGOs.
- EU funding programmes (such as the ESF+ or CERV) can be used to help experiment shifts in workplace culture towards more parent and carer-friendly workplaces, to promote exchanges, develop trainings for managers and HR, test labels and certification, develop care infrastructure and more.

# Further reading

## COFACE resources

[COFACE expert meeting on the position of larger families with children in society: strengths and barriers](#) (2022)

[COFACE assessment of the EU work-life balance directive](#) (2019)

[Meeting report from the COFACE expert meeting on families in vulnerable situations](#) (2020)

[Child Compass 2030: Shaping a healthy society, environment and economy fit for children](#) (2020)

## European Union resources

[European Pillar of Social Rights](#)

[European Pillar of Social Rights action plan](#)

[Council Recommendation \(EU\) 2021/1004 of 14 June 2021 establishing a European Child Guarantee](#)

[EU work-life balance directive](#)

[Child Guarantee action plans](#)

[Child Guarantee coordinators](#)

[Legally-binding quota for women on corporate boards](#)

[European Social Fund Plus](#)

[Citizens, Equality, Rights and Values Programme](#)

## Expert meeting resources

[Cap'Handéo - carer-friendly workplaces](#) (France)

[The Family-Friendly Workplace Program](#) (Finland)

[Equality and Fathers Project 2019–2021](#) (Finland)

[Deloitte video](#) (Finland)

[Kela video](#) (Finland)

[Lahti Energia video](#) (Finland)

[Edelman Trust Barometer](#) (Societal leadership as core function of business)

[Equal at home, equal at work: Practical guide for working parents and employers](#) (Poland)

[CAPABLE - Enhancing capabilities? Rethinking Work-life Policies and their Impact from a New Perspective](#)

[Covid-19 Gender \(In\)equality Survey](#) (The Netherlands)

[Pro Parents - Inclusive employership](#) (The Netherlands)



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