

Equal at Home – Equal at Work:

How to effectively support mothers and fathers in balancing family and work life?

European expert meeting
Key reflections and findings

May 2025



Background

Balancing work and family responsibilities is a growing challenge across Europe. According to a 2018 Eurobarometer survey, even before COVID-19, a quarter of Europeans reported difficulties in taking family leave, with over 27% feeling discouraged from doing so by their supervisors. Additionally, one in three Europeans lacks access to flexible work arrangements, emphasising the need for systemic support. Families require robust support structures to manage work-life balance effectively. This can be achieved through well-defined public social protection policies - such as job security, health benefits, and inclusion initiatives - as well as supportive workplace policies, including zero tolerance for discrimination, flexible work options, and equal access to family leave for both men and women. Addressing these needs from both angles is essential to creating a caring economy that benefits families, businesses, and society as a whole.

Why This Matters

COFACE advocates for inclusive, family-supportive workplace cultures built on equal opportunities, non-discrimination, and a recognition of family diversity. Today's families are diverse - single parents, same-sex couples with children, blended families, large and multigenerational households, families with disabilities, and more. Transforming organisational culture to support all workers, regardless of family structure, benefits the entire organisation. Such cultural shifts contribute to a more attractive and inclusive workplace, helping businesses retain diverse talent and motivating employees.

Context and Policy Background

The European expert meeting organised in Warsaw on 21st May drew upon key European policies and legislation, including the [EU Work-Life Balance Directive](#), the [European Care Strategy](#), [European Strategy for the rights of persons with disabilities](#), the [EU Gender Equality Strategy](#), and the [Corporate Sustainability Reporting Directive](#). These frameworks offer significant potential to foster family-friendly workplaces across Europe.

Meeting Objectives

- **Highlight Key Research:** Present studies on current workplace challenges and opportunities for support.
- **Engage Employers and Policymakers:** Facilitate discussions between employers, employer organisations, policymakers, and NGOs to address challenges and explore effective solutions.
- **Discuss Practical Solutions:** Conduct hands-on sessions to identify actionable steps for fostering a family-supportive workplace culture.

The keynote presentations and takeaways are available [here](#) on the COFACE website.

Programme

Conference moderators:

Attila Bóhm, Senior Policy and Advocacy officer, COFACE

Sylvia Ziemacka, Board member of the Share the Care Foundation



9.15-9.30 Welcome address

Magdalena Sobkowiak, Polish presidency of the EU

Karolina Andrian, Founder of Share The Care Foundation

Antonia Torrens, President of COFACE

Mariusz Jedynak, Board Member, ZUS

9.30-10.00 Keynote Speech: Why Should We Care? The Future of Family Supportive Workplaces

An ageing workforce, declining birth rates, and increasing caregiving responsibilities are reshaping our societies. This keynote explored the links between gender equality measures and family-supportive workplace policies, as a benefit not just for employees and employers, but society at large.

Speaker: **Jasmin Thomas**, Economist, Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD)

10.00-10.30 Values and Policies - What the EU Agenda Means for Employers, Policymakers, and Families

An overview of key European policies affecting work-life balance and support systems, including insights into the EU Work-Life Balance Directive

and other legislative frameworks that can help create family-friendly workplaces, focusing on impact of those directives on workplace but also employees/society.

Speaker: **Elizabeth Gosme**, Director, COFACE

10.30-11.30 Panel discussion: Building Family-Supportive Workplaces: Translating Goals and Values into Action and Benefits to all

This panel discussed the importance of cross-sector collaboration in fostering truly inclusive, family-supportive workplaces. Speakers discussed the impact of recent regulations, examining both progress and areas for improvement. A key focus was on the need to adapt policies to the realities of modern family life and the evolving workplace. This session aimed to inspire actionable insights on how employers and policymakers can build workplaces that not only meet regulatory standards but also adapt to the changing dynamics of family and work.

Panellists:

Samantha Howe, European Public Service Unions

Magdalena Jarzynska, HR Lead Poland, Mattel

Jon Rogstad, Oslo Metropolitan University, Norway

Elisabeth Wenzl, Familie & Beruf Management GmbH, Austria

11.30-12.10 Panel discussion. Case Study: Mums and Dads in Poland – Are the Regulations Effective?

An in-depth look at parental benefits and social support in Poland, from maternity and paternity leave to the Active Parents programme and social benefits for parents. This session provided a comprehensive overview of what works, what does not, and where improvements can be made, based on perspectives from parents, employers, policymakers, and service providers.

Panellists:

Karolina Andrian, Share the Care

Mariusz Jedynak, ZUS

Aleksandra Gajewska, Secretary of State, Ministry of Family, Labour and Social Policy in Poland

Marcin Stanecki, Chief Labor Inspector, National Labor Inspectorate

12.10-13.10 Networking lunch

13:10 – 14:00 Panel discussion. Beyond Compliance: How Leading Workplaces Pioneer Family-Supportive Practices

Panellists:

[Joanna Majda](#), Employee Development and Engagement Manager, Lidl
[Karolina Gębura-Nowak](#), Director of People and Culture, Member of the Management Board, PMI
[Anna Podlewska](#), Director of Strategic HR Initiatives at Credit Agricole Bank Polska
[Agnieszka Krawczyk](#), Poland, Ukraine & CEE Commercial HR BP, Haleon
[Malwina Wąsowska-Domirska](#), Chapter Lead Feature Engineer III, ING Hubs Poland
[Małgorzata Petru](#), Diversity and Inclusion Manager, BNP Paribas Bank Poland

A conversation with pioneering employers who are leading the way in Diversity, Inclusion, and Equality (DIE) practices, creating workplaces that support families and attract top talent by fostering inclusive cultures even before regulations mandate it.

14:00 – 15:10 Breakout sessions

Session 1: Do we need EU regulations?

Discussion leaders:

[Sylwia Ziemacka](#), Board Member, Share The Care, Poland
[Annina Lubbock](#), Social Scientist and Gender Specialist, CSB onlus, Italy

Experts:

[Ewa Rumińska-Zimny](#), Vice President Women Congress Association
[Katarzyna Gawel](#), Head of DEI, Ringier Axel Springer Polska,
[Robert Lisiecki](#), Director of the Labor Department at the Lewiatan Confederation

This session explored the effectiveness and necessity of key regulations shaping equal opportunities in the workplace, including the European Union's Work-Life Balance Directive, the Directive on Improving the Gender Balance on Corporate Boards, the EU Pay Transparency Directive, and the Corporate Sustainability Reporting Directive (CSRD). The panel discussed how these directives contribute to fostering fair and inclusive work environments, focusing on gender diversity, equal pay, and work-life balance integration.

Session 2: Centering Families in Social Policy Amid Declining Fertility Rates

Discussion leaders:

[Jérôme Gourod](#), Board member, UNAF France
[Andreas Edel](#), Director, Population Europe

Experts:

[Iga Magda](#), Vice President, IBS- Institute of Structural Research
[Andrzej Kubisiak](#), Deputy Director, Polish Economic Institute
[Tomasz Pactwa](#), Director, Ministry of Family, Labour and Social Policy, Poland

With fertility rates plummeting, there is a need to reconsider how families are valued in society. This session explored the evolving roles of mothers, fathers, and children, focusing on policies that benefit families without alienating other social groups.

Attendees discussed how to create family-centred policies that foster inclusive dialogue, reduce scepticism, and address the broader social need for family support. The discussion emphasised the importance of educating citizens about intergenerational and interpersonal solidarity, explaining why supporting citizens based on their needs is crucial for the well-being of society as a whole. The aim was to explore how policies can be designed to balance the needs of families with those of other groups, ensuring social harmony and avoiding inequalities.

Session 3: Attracting Mothers Back to the Workforce: Policies and Perceptions that Drive Success

Discussion Leaders:

[Lutgard Vrints](#), Policy and research advisor, Gezinsbond, Belgium
[Marie Toulemonde](#), Gender specialist, UNFPA EECA

Experts:

[Justyna Łuczak-Rzepkowska](#), Business Manager, Femmeritum
[Marika Hartwich](#), VP, Central Europe People Business Partner, Mastercard
[Aldona Kozłowska](#), Diversity and Inclusion Manager, Senior HR Business Partner, Orange

This session examined the barriers and motivations for mothers re-entering the workforce after childbirth. The discussion covered regulatory frameworks, workplace culture, social attitudes, disability and care realities, and supportive measures that can make the transition smoother. Participants evaluated policies that effectively facilitate mothers' return to work, identifying best practices and areas for improvement.

Session 4: Engaging Men in Parental Equality: Breaking Down Barriers and Building Support

Discussion Leaders:

[Anna Tarrant](#), University of Lincoln, UK
[Miguel de la Corte](#), European Equality Law Network

Experts:

[Nikki van der Gaag](#), Representative of Men Engage Europe
[phd Kamil Janowicz](#), Psychologist, SWPS University
[Karolina Andrian](#), Board Member, Share the Care Foundation
[Błażej Kobus](#), Head of Social Media Team, BNP Paribas Bank Poland
[Rafał Błażejewski](#), HR Team Lead, Nordea
[Kamil Wojtowicz](#), Project Manager, ING Hubs Poland
[Joanna Szczesiak](#) HR Project Manager, Credit Agricole Bank Polska S.A.

This session explored strategies to foster greater male involvement in parenting, promoting equality in caregiving roles. Participants discussed approaches to encourage men to embrace shared parental responsibilities and explore how engaged fatherhood benefits families, employers, and society as a whole. The session also addressed ways to help women and employers see the advantages of actively supporting male engagement in parenting.

Session 5: Does the Partnership Family Model Support Fertility?

Discussion leaders:

[Kathleen Emmerly](#), Odisee Centre for Family Studies
[Sven Iversen](#), Association of Germany Family organisations

Experts:

[Kacper Nosarzewski](#), Partner 4CF,
[phd Anna Kurowska](#), Associate Professor at the University of Warsaw,
[phd Agnieszka Chłoń-Domińczak](#), Vice Rector, Warsaw School of Economics,
[Rafał Zadykiewicz](#) MD, Warsaw Medical University

The role of men in the decline of birth rates is often overlooked. In recent years, there has been a growing trend of increasing male involvement in caregiving roles. However, new tools, such as parental leave for fathers, are still underutilised in most EU countries, and the main focus of demographic discussions continues to be on the needs of mothers. Could partnership, and understanding what it means for both women and men, help in shaping solutions that support fertility?

Session 6: Crafting Inclusive Family Campaigns: Engaging Diverse Audiences in the Workplace and Public Sphere

Discussion leaders:

[Marina Wetzter-Karlsson](#), Programme Director, Vaestoliitto, Finland
[Genny Sangiovanni](#), Secretary, NELFA

Experts:

[Renata Szredzińska](#), President of the Board at Empowering Children Foundation
[Radosław Wierzbński](#), PhD in Social Sciences, Dadvertising Experet, Head of Comms, Allegro
[Anna Bachulska-Kossek](#), Marketing Manager (OTC), Haleon

How can workplaces, local authorities, and government bodies design campaigns that promote family values - like motherhood, partnership, and fatherhood - without alienating single parents, child-free individuals, seniors, or LGBTQ+ communities? This session explored strategies for communicating family support inclusively, crafting messages that resonate across diverse demographics and foster positive reactions.

15.10-15.30 Networking break

15.30-16.00 Conclusion and next steps Breakout session reports back to the Plenary

Welcome



After a warm welcome by **Magdalena Sobkowiak**, of the Polish Presidency of the EU and the co-hosts from Poland (ZUS and Share The Care), **Antonia Torrens**, President of COFACE Families Europe, welcomed the audience and thanked Share The Care and ZUS for bringing participants together and providing space for dialogue and cooperation. She stated that the family policy COFACE advocates is framed in gender equality and inclusion, and built on inclusive and family-supportive workplace cultures which promote equal opportunities, non-discrimination, and a recognition of family diversity. Family models are also evolving all over Europe, with families becoming less traditional and more diverse - single parents, same-sex couples with children, blended and multigenerational households, families with members with disabilities, and many more. Supporting them all effectively means reshaping how we think about work-life balance.



Antonia referred to the recently adopted (in December 2024) recommendations of the Employment, Social Policy, Health and Consumer Affairs Council on ensuring work-life balance and gender equality for all generations, especially amidst Europe's demographic challenges. Among their recommendations was a clear call to promote efforts by employers and social partners to develop and implement policies that support mental health, gender equality, and family-friendly workplaces—including breastfeeding-friendly environments and targeted support for fathers.

She highlighted that this European expert meeting brought together more than 100 participants from across 27 European countries - family organisations, employers, social partners, researchers, policy-makers, and practitioners. The expert meeting aims to discuss workplace transformation and explore innovative, practical solutions for a better balance between work and family life.

She reminded participants that the challenges faced by families are not new (lack of carer-friendly workplaces, poor take-up of family leaves, inadequately paid leaves, lack of flexible work arrangements), but they remain urgent.

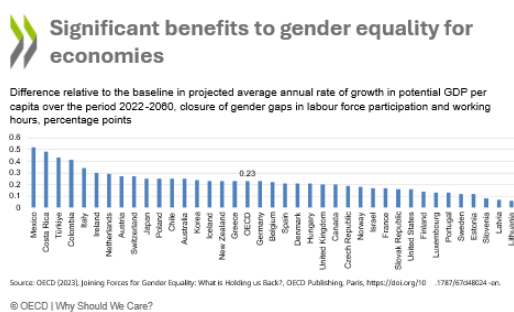
Antonia gave an overview of the meeting programme that was designed to tackle these challenges from different angles. She highlighted topics such as engaging men in parental equality, supporting mothers to return to the workforce, and creating inclusive campaigns that reflect Europe's diverse families.

She concluded her opening remarks by inviting participants to use this opportunity not only to share their knowledge but to shape a new vision of workplace culture - one that values care, inclusion, and the full diversity of families.

Keynote Speech. Why Should We Care? The Future of Family Supportive Workplaces

Jasmin Thomas, Economist,
Organisation for Economic
Cooperation and Development¹
(OECD)

Jasmin Thomas set the scene with her keynote speech which focused on the impact and importance of care, and what this means for fostering family-supportive workplaces for women and men. She started by underscoring a key economic finding which might be familiar but cannot be emphasised enough: gender equality is not a zero-sum issue but a driver of macroeconomic performance. This suggests that one reason we should care is because gender equal labour markets are more productive labour markets.



Moreover, gender equal labour markets are more resilient in the face of demographic shifts. The old-age dependency ratio is rising, signalling there are increasingly fewer working-age individuals to support a growing number of older adults. This will place pressure on pension systems, health care, and public finances more broadly.

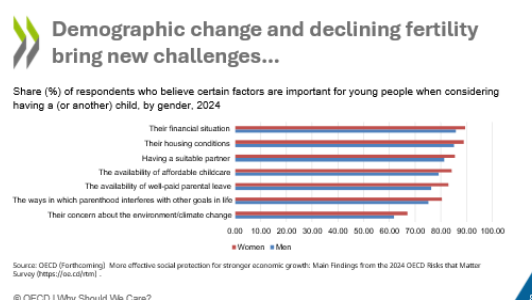
Citizens are aware of the potential for negative impacts from population ageing on economic growth and the provision of social protection,

including long-term care systems. According to the results from the OECD Risks that Matter Survey in 27 countries, 65% of people expressed concern about population ageing beyond the next ten years. One way to address the issue of population ageing is to grow the labour force – and one way to grow the labour force is to encourage women's labour force participation.

In the abovementioned survey, the strongest support from respondents was for strategies that promote labour supply, especially among women and underrepresented groups. Hence, there is consensus that boosting women's labour supply is key to addressing population ageing. But boosting women's participation in the labour market requires care services – for children, young people and older adults – that are affordable, accessible and of good quality. When available, they can help reduce unpaid care responsibilities and enable increases in labour supply.

In the same survey, 43% of respondents want to see boosts to fertility used as a solution to address population ageing. Yet the difficulty of reconciling paid work with family responsibilities remains a notable factor influencing people's decisions to have a child or another child.

Indeed, when asked to reflect on the factors that are the barriers to having a child (or another child), those relating to gender inequality in the labour market – e.g. availability of parental leave, availability of affordable childcare – were noted by over 80% of women.



Another important challenge highlighted by Jasmin was the growing demand for long-term care workers. In the next decade, OECD research suggests this demand is expected to increase by 32%. In the absence of a strong professional long-

¹See further OECD reports: (2025), *More Effective Social Protection for Stronger Economic Growth: Main Findings from the 2024 OECD Risks that Matter Survey*, OECD Publishing, Paris, <https://doi.org/10.1787/3947946a-en>, OECD (2024), *Megatrends and the Future of Social Protection*, OECD Publishing, Paris, <https://doi.org/10.1787/6c9202e8-en>

term care sector, a growing share of care will need to be provided informally by family members as a complement to or substitute for formal care services.

This is a problem for gender equality. Unpaid caregivers are disproportionately women. In the OECD countries, for example, 60% of unpaid daily carers aged 50 years and over are women – with rates above 75% in Spain and Hungary. And these are only those that provide daily care and do not factor in the type of care provided. Some research, for example, finds that men participate in unpaid care activities that are more flexible, less regular and demand less time, such as house maintenance and outdoor work.

Research further shows that unpaid care responsibilities can negatively impact labour supply, particularly when adequate care services are not provided. This notably concerns “sandwich carers”, the ones providing care for older and younger people. Among women aged 25-49 years in the EU, those who have care responsibilities for both children and incapacitated relatives have the lowest labour force participation rates.

Jasmin went on to highlight 3 key challenges in creating family supportive workplaces:

- **Gender stereotypes and norms:** care and leave policies are differently accessed by men and women, which can entrench gender norms and stereotypes around paid and unpaid work.
- **Availability and accessibility of childcare:** school-and pre-school start around the age of 4-6 years, but even after school starts, school hours do not necessarily align with business hours. In the absence of affordable and accessible care, one parent must stay home or reduce or rearrange their work hours. This is often the mother, which is both a product of and a contributor to continued gender norms and stereotypes around paid and unpaid work.
- **Family leave:** gender differences in the use of family leave exist for several reasons, including gender stereotypes and norms around paid and unpaid work, as well as the rules and incentives present in public policy. While an increasing number of countries offer fathers access to paid leave around childbirth, most leave still privileges mothers. But even when leave can be shared, replacement rates and benefit generosity may imply strong negative implications for household finances if the father

goes on leave when the father earns more than mother.

In the last part of her presentation, Jasmin highlighted the most important actions that governments, employers, social partners and families can take to create more family-supportive workplaces.



Governments can provide affordable, accessible and high-quality childcare services, well paid and equally shared family leaves and flexible working arrangements that are available to all types of workers.

When it comes to employers, Jasmin stressed two key concepts. Similarly to governments, employers can support childcare. For instance, they can offer onsite childcare, if possible. If not possible, they could partner with local providers to reserve spots or offer information packages to new or soon-to-be parents. And all employers – whether big or small – could advocate for more public investment.

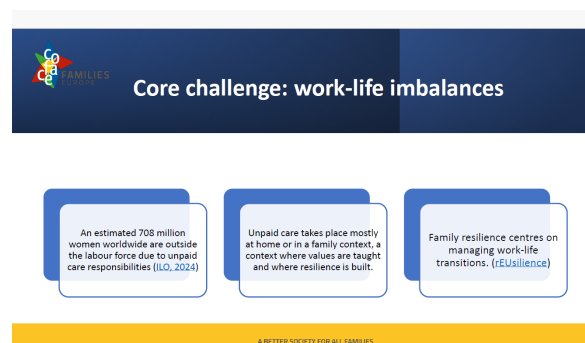
Social partners - like unions and employer associations - also have a vital role to play. First, social partners can shape culture, by normalising the use of family-friendly policies - especially by men - through public campaigns and advocacy. Second, social partners can empower their members, offering legal guidance and information, including toolkits, training, and peer learning. This ensures that employees understand their rights and can access the benefits, and employers know their legal responsibilities and how to meet them.

Jasmin concluded her presentation by mentioning the roles of families in creating more family supportive workplaces and challenging gender stereotypes. She emphasised the importance of small actions to shape big change, including challenging gender roles in our own homes, since everyone has a role to play in advancing equality.

Keynote Speech. Values and Policies: What the EU Agenda Means for Employers, Policymakers, and Families

Elizabeth Gosme, Director, COFACE
Families Europe

In her keynote, Elizabeth provided an overview of key European policies affecting work-life balance and support systems, including insights into the EU Work-Life Balance Directive and other legislative frameworks that can help create family-friendly workplaces.



Elizabeth began by pointing out that the core challenge affecting families today is work-life *imbalances*. The EU agenda should recognise this imbalance, but should also support families, especially during key transitions. For example, the birth of one or more children, a major change in employment status of one or both parents, children's transition through the school system and into work, as well as transitions of family members to old age.

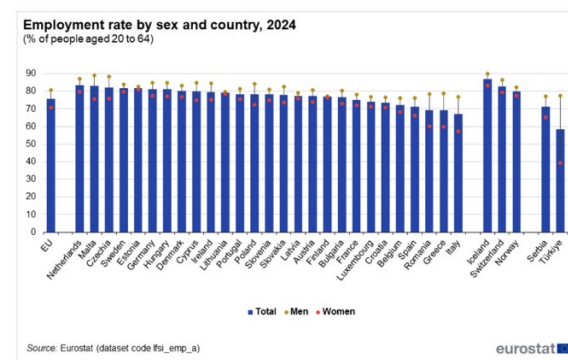
In this context, she highlighted the role of employers. For them, the EU agenda offers both challenge and opportunity. The push for green, digital, and inclusive transformation demands adaptation, but it also allows for reinvention, for a new social contract. Employers in the EU develop legal agreements, adopt joint statements on childcare, but they have not yet taken position on family supportive workplaces and parental equality.

Yet, employers' voices matters, so that they must be recognised not just as economic actors but as partners in shaping social progress. It is key to understand their needs and challenges and highlight good practices in the workplace. It would benefit everyone if employers saw work life balance and family supportive workplaces not as a burden but a strategic advantage.

Next, Elizabeth brought attention to fundamental EU legal frameworks, such as Article 3 of the Treaty on European Union (TEU) and Article 153 (1) of the Treaty on the Functioning of the EU (TFEU) which provide legal and political foundation for EU action. Moreover, Article 33 of the Charter of Fundamental Rights provides that families shall enjoy legal, economic and social protection and right to paid maternity and parental leave.

Based on these articles, the EU develops policies which impact families, which impact family policies and services, and impact employers. Even if policies for families remain largely under national jurisdiction, the EU influences them through legislation, funding, technical assistance, strategic guidelines and transnational exchanges (for instance, through policy frameworks like the European Pillar of Social Rights, the European Care Strategy, European Child Guarantee, Gender Equality Strategy, Disability Rights Strategy, but also laws such as the EU Work-Life Balance Directive).

As for the European Pillar of Social Rights Action Plan, adopted in 2021 (and currently being reviewed), it has a target to at least halve the gender employment gap by 2030 compared to 2019. The gender employment gap varies between countries and Member states are invited to take action to reduce it to reach the 2030 target, and the Commission monitors this through annual Eurostat data.



In terms of further EU initiatives, Elizabeth mentioned the EU Work-life Balance Directive, first deliverable of the European Pillar of Social Rights, adopted in 2019. Since then, work-life balance remains a key area of European consensus as demonstrated by the adoption of recommendations by all 27 Ministers of social affairs in December 2024 on ensuring work-life balance and gender equality for all generations in the context of demographic challenges.

However, despite this consensus and political will, there are still gaps in the transposition of the directive and general room for improvement across countries:

- Parental and carers leaves are still not adequately paid in all EU countries, affecting take-up;
- The leaves are not accessible to all types of workers (self-employed are not covered under the Directive);
- Flexible working is still not culturally acceptable in all sectors, yet is essential for all workers, especially for more vulnerable workers such as parents and carers with disabilities;
- Take-up of leaves by men remains low, even if there is some progress;
- Fragmentation between policies persists, for instance, in childcare gap (which is the gap between well-paid parental leave and entitlement to full-time early childhood education and care).

Finally, Elizabeth put the spotlight on the European Social Fund + which currently funds the development of services that support parents in balancing work and family responsibilities, such as childcare facilities, parental support programmes and family centres. Moreover, this fund provides opportunities for enhancing education for children, particularly those from disadvantaged backgrounds and students with disabilities.

Elizabeth concluded by stressing that equality at home and equality at work is a shared project. It is not only a national, but a European project and this includes all countries on the European continent, going beyond the European Union initiatives - referring here to people in the audience or listening in from North Macedonia, Norway, the UK, Albania, Kosovo, Serbia, Georgia and many more.

Panel discussion. Building Family-Supportive Workplaces: Translating Goals and Values into Action and Benefits to all

This panel discussed the importance of cross-sector collaboration in fostering truly inclusive, family-supportive workplaces. Speakers discussed the impact of recent regulations, examining both progress and areas for improvement. A key focus was on the need to adapt policies to the realities of modern family life and the evolving workplace. This session aimed to inspire actionable insights on how employers and policymakers can build workplaces that not only meet regulatory standards but also adapt to the changing dynamics of family and work.

Panellists:

Samantha Howe, Policy Assistant, European Public Service Unions

Magdalena Jarzynska, HR Lead Poland, Mattel

Jon Rogstad, Research Professor, Oslo Metropolitan University, Norway

Elisabeth Wenzl, Director, Familie & Beruf Management GmbH, Austria



The discussion consisted of two rounds. The first round of questions focused on the challenges in building family supportive workplaces in their respective fields. Then the second round shifted to practical recommendations and solutions.

Main challenges highlighted

In her reflection on the challenges of creating family friendly workplaces in Austria, Elisabeth Wenzl stated that challenges are like in other countries in general. Employers have a hard time recruiting and part-time employment rates are low. The rate of men working part-time is only 14%. The government is looking for solutions but empowering and supporting women requires men to participate. Moreover, Elisabeth raised important questions about whether the different measures target the right audience and are communicated in the right way.

She also mentioned that currently in Austria, there are many different generations on the job market, and it is challenging to align their needs. To provide work-life balance measures requires flexibility, however work councils fear these kinds of measures. Hence, there is a need for negotiations.

Jon Rogstad, whose research focuses on discrimination and vulnerability in the workplace, stated that in Norway there is a high participation in labour market among women, which widely contributed to the country's economic success. However, employers in the private sector are looking for an "ideal" worker, which means someone who is always available. Therefore, only the public sector tends to have high participation of women in the labour market.

In general, employers do not want to take chances and want to reduce risks. Yet, they are open to negotiations. For instance, good arrangements exist for paternity leave, however fertility rates are not high in the country. He emphasised the fact, that it is about changing the societal and workplace culture, which requires more work and is intrinsically harder.

In terms of private sector initiatives, Magdalena Jarzynska shared that in Mattel they came up with the "Time for Play" proposal which is about making children happy so there is a natural alignment between HR and family policies. Moreover, she mentioned that Mattel provides several work-life balance measures for parents. As a matter of principle, they support the path to parenthood for all types of families. They also implement family benefits like fully paid parental leave for primary/secondary caregivers and support return to work.

However, she pointed out that in the private sector there is a need for approval by shareholders. To implement family supportive policies, they are required to put a business case forward to show their advantages (e.g. competitive advantages in talent acquisition and building staff resilience).

Hence, one of the biggest challenges in terms of implementation of such policies is to reach an agreement with the different parts of business, such as HR, legal team, shareholders. It is crucial to ensure effective communication between these fields and stakeholders as well as validation from mid-management. Moreover, it is key to ensure that family benefits are used and to normalise using them. Leadership should celebrate their use and promote them.

Shifting to the trade unions' perspective, Samantha Howe's intervention focused on the difficult reality of care sector workers (childcare and long-term care) when it comes to achieving work-life balance, a situation which has worsened since the COVID-19 pandemic.

Among the main challenges, she mentioned staff shortages, staff retention and recruitment. Due to being a sector which is generally understaffed, work-life balance is difficult to be achieved. This is why, as a first step, staff shortages and retention challenges need to be addressed. It is a big challenge to make this an attractive sector especially for young workers.

This leads to the next challenge, the demographic issue. Care sector workers are mostly over 50 years old and due to the ageing population, there is an increased need for long-term care. As for early childhood education and care sector, workers spend most of their day on their feet which results in a bigger impact on physical health and psychosocial risks. Furthermore, workers providing long-term care deal with difficult situations at work: people with chronic health issues, dementia, facing the end of life.

Finally, care workers often face third party violence such as being harassed and/or abused by families or other related individuals. This has a serious impact on their physical and mental health, along with psychosocial risks and this affects their family life.

Practical solutions and recommendations

In the second round of the panel discussion, the conversation shifted towards solutions. The discussion focused on what is working and what measures should be taken.

In terms of good practices, Elisabeth mentioned that childcare measures and flexible working arrangements have already been implemented in Austria. She emphasised that gender equality is a matter of culture. As a best practice to improve this, she mentioned women network programmes in companies which try to involve male employers and create male allyship. Another good practice from Austria is to work with municipalities on equal care (or sharing the care). For example, Equal Care Day (an initiative from Germany) on the 29th of February was adopted.

Moreover, there is an ongoing role model campaign by the Austria Federal ministry of family affairs showcasing best practices of men engaging in care work. She also stressed the important role of peer-groups. To make a change, we need bigger engagement from men to participate in care duties since now only 20-30% of male employers take more than 2 months of parental leave.



Similarly to Elisabeth, Jon also mentioned that a cultural shift is needed to address gender inequalities. The gender pay gap is still large, consequently it is usually the mother who takes the parental leave, so the family loses less income. He also stressed the importance of communication with employers, so they understand that gender equality benefits the business.

In her response to challenges, Magdalena took the example from Mattel, as they develop inclusive policies considering the reality of all types of families as well as involving primary and secondary

carers. Furthermore, she highlighted the importance of listening to the employees as they do at Mattel in the form of employee engagement surveys. She also stressed the role of leadership when it comes to support employees through role-modelling by showcasing examples of fathers being primary caregivers encouraged to take time off. Taylor-made solutions are key as well: policies need to be designed to employees' need. On the employers' side, there is a need for strong collaboration with employees to hear their voices and best answer to their needs.

Samantha concluded the discussion with some positive news. In 2023, the European Commission approved the 44th Sectoral Committee Dialogue for Social Services. The first meeting took place in December 2023 where a framework of actions on recruitment and retention was negotiated with employers. One big chapter of this framework is work-life balance and gender equality. It focuses on how to encourage more men to work in the care sector, since this is a feminised sector due to low wages. Moreover, the framework consists of 18 different actions covering all aspects of work, e.g. career progression and how to integrate older workers. It is to be signed in June 2025.

The Committee's work will be to implement this framework in the coming years. Finally, Samantha highlighted the need for more collective bargaining agreements that cover work-life balance in the care sector including measures for flexible work arrangements, workload management and parental leave.

Key points of discussion with participants

During the question and answer segment of the session, the dialogue opened with a comment from an Italian delegate on the need to highlight the positive benefits of family-supportive workplaces and gender equality for child well-being. It is crucial to show the importance and focus on the huge benefits for children of having two responsive parents in the first 1000 days. Research shows there are huge benefits including higher educational attainment and less problems during adolescence.

A delegate from Lithuania noted that some campaigns promoting the involvement of men in care sometimes face opposition from women, which points to a need to shift culture in some countries.

Bouncing back on this reflection, a Polish delegate agreed. Besides male allyships to support women, he stated that we also need female allyships to support men and fathers. For instance, the duration of paternity leave in Poland is shorter than maternal leave and men have little access to perinatal education. It seems like men are not allowed to be as well-prepared as women for parenthood.

As for further good practices to support the care sector, Samantha mentioned the Men in Health Initiative from Norway which aims to encourage men to join the healthcare sector. It targets men between the ages of 18-55 who are currently unemployed. They follow a training course and can then be hired. This can be considered as a successful practice alleviating staff shortages and balance of gender in the care sector.

In this context, a delegate from the UK mentioned a research project which focuses on how to create an ecosystem approach to be more inclusive of fathers. It deals with the question of how we involve men more as fathers as soon as the pregnancy journey starts. She added that there is a lot of potential for a cultural shift, but men face systemic barriers, since some people are more resistant to allowing men into care. Another UK delegate drew attention to the crucial role of educating boys from an early age. It would be key to show them how important it is to care, just the same as for girls. This should already start with education at school.

The issue of hiring illegal workers as care workers was addressed by a Polish delegate. It is a problem that Poland faces as many Polish women work illegally in Germany. The questions are how we can provide protection for these women, who are themselves sometimes also mothers. The migration of the care workforce is a big issue. Moreover, there is the issue of care workers who work individually in homes which is hard to legislate on because these workers are hard to find. Hence, it is hard to check on their working conditions, yet they should have full access to their rights as care workers.

A delegate from Poland came back to the notion of men as caregivers, as being quite a new trend. So, it cannot be expected that change happens so quickly. Narratives should be changed: we should discuss benefits. The question is how we can make everyone benefit. If we talk about women having access to equality opportunities, we talk about benefits concerning employment and

competencies, but when we talk about men being involved in care, we fail to mention benefits.

Elisabeth pointed out that the approach of different organisations depends on the culture, not to mention differences between regions within a country. For instance, there are cultural differences between Eastern and Western Austria.

Jon also raised the matter of the growing debate on new masculinity. It is not about fathers doing it the same way as mothers but finding their own way to do it. And this is a great challenge: boys most often see women working in education and care services but not enough men, so they lack male role models.

Magdalena raised attention to the issue of the narrative that if mothers take care of children, it is considered normal but if fathers do it, they are supporting mothers. This is why Mattel communicates about primary/secondary caregivers instead of motherhood/fatherhood. We need to be consistent about this practice and have more employers do it as role models.

Case Study: Mums and Dads in Poland – Are the Regulations Effective?

This panel discussion offered an in-depth look at parental benefits and social support in Poland, from maternity and paternity leave to the Active Parents programme and social benefits for parents. It provided a comprehensive overview of what works, what does not, and where improvements can be made, based on perspectives from parents, employers, policymakers, and service providers.



Panellists:

Aleksandra Gajewska, Secretary of State, Ministry of Family, Labour and Social Policy

Mariusz Jedynak, Board Member, ZUS

Karolina Andrian, Board Member, Share the Care

Marcin Stanecki, Chief Labor Inspector, National Labor Inspectorate

This session marked the launch of the report: **"Mothers and Fathers at Home and at Work: Parental Equality in Poland in a Broader Socio-Economic Context"**

The report presents key data and evaluates the effectiveness of existing regulatory and support systems in promoting parental equality and work-life balance. It targets decision-makers in government, public institutions, business, and civil society, emphasising that in the face of demographic decline and labour shortages, supporting parents is not just good policy—it is a national imperative.

Based on the key findings of the report, the proportion of fathers taking parental leave has risen from 1% in 2022 to 17% in 2024 (ZUS data), signalling a cultural shift in caregiving roles and enabling more women to return to the workforce sooner.

Fathers on parental leave received an average of PLN 167 per day, compared to PLN 124 for mothers in 2024 - a 30%+ difference that highlights the persistent wage gap between genders, even when benefits are calculated equally. Seasonal peaks suggest some fathers may not fully utilise leave for caregiving. More targeted public education is needed to reinforce paternal engagement and the purpose of parental leave.

Moreover, the report underscores that unpaid care work still falls on women. Women account for 79% of absences due to child illness.

Legal changes are an important foundation, but long-term success depends on shifting societal norms and expectations.

It was further underlined that the private sector plays a critical role in enabling parental equality. Without updated HR practices, leadership engagement, and supportive workplace culture, legal frameworks risk becoming ineffective. Labour market forecasts show that supporting parenthood is essential for economic sustainability.

As a key recommendation, the report sets out that the government, employers, public institutions, and NGOs must work together in a coordinated and consistent manner to build a modern, balanced support system for families.

The session also provided insights about the Polish system of financial support for families. In Poland, parents receive various forms of financial support to help cover the costs of raising children. The Social Insurance Institution (ZUS) is responsible for implementing key elements of the social security system, acting as the main body for distributing family-related benefits. This support is intended to partially offset the financial burden of parenting, while the responsibility for the child's upbringing, care, and development remains with the parents.

A major policy milestone in 2024 was the launch of the Active Parent programme, targeting the critical age of 12–35 months—when parental leave typically ends, and before access to preschool begins. The programme enables families to choose between different childcare options while

maintaining or regaining labour market participation.

This system of flexible and targeted benefits recognises diverse family needs while encouraging professional reintegration and shared caregiving responsibilities.

In conclusion, the session and the accompanying report marked that while regulatory and financial mechanisms are in place, long-term success will depend on social change, employer action, and sustained cross-sector collaboration to build a truly family-friendly ecosystem in Poland.

Panel Discussion. Beyond Compliance: How Leading Workplaces Pioneer Family- Supportive Practices

Discussants:

- **Joanna Majda**, Employee Development and Engagement Manager, Lidl
- **Karolina Gębura-Nowak**, Director of People and Culture, Member of the Management Board, PMI
- **Anna Podlewska**, Director of Strategic HR Initiatives at Credit Agricole Bank Polska
- **Agnieszka Krawczyk**, Poland, Ukraine & CEE Commercial HR BP, Haleon
- **Malwina Wąsowska-Domirska**, Chapter Lead Feature Engineer III, ING Hubs Poland
- **Małgorzata Petru**, Diversity and Inclusion Manager, BNP Paribas Bank Poland
- **Karolina Antoniak**, People Consultant, Nordea



This panel brought together Human Resource leaders from top employers to share practical strategies and organisational insights on fostering family-supportive workplaces - emphasising a shift from compliance to culture.

The panellists pointed out that companies recognise that advancing gender equality in caregiving and the workplace is not only a matter of social justice, but also a path to economic sustainability, talent retention, and organisational performance.

Businesses involved in the panel see parental equality as a strategic goal - investing in it enhances employee satisfaction, builds inclusive cultures, and strengthens employer branding. During the discussion, several best practices were shared on how leading companies enhance family supportive policies.

For instance, to make parental leave accessible for fathers, companies like Philip Morris and Haleon are actively removing financial and cultural barriers

that prevent fathers from taking parental leave. Tactics include topping up parental pay to 100% for non-transferable leave periods and extensive internal communication to normalise paternity leave. These companies' comprehensive benefits extend to adoptive and LGBTQ+ parents, signalling inclusive intent at policy level.

Moreover, firms such as Lidl and PMI emphasised that meaningful change starts with internal education and leadership alignment. They implemented workshops, simplified HR materials, and updated procedures to reflect legal changes, ensuring clarity and support for employees and managers alike. Furthermore, ING and BNP Paribas showcased initiatives that adapt careers to parenting needs. This includes flexible working models, awareness campaigns, and Employee Resource Groups (ERGs), employees' internal

networks that promote positive male role models in caregiving.

To support mothers' career continuity, organisations such as Credit Agricole and Mastercard stressed the importance of reducing stigma around working mothers. Their policies promote smooth transitions back to work, validate motherhood as an asset, and prepare leaders to foster inclusive dialogue around parental decisions.

Across the board, employers are embedding parental support into broader diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) strategies. Nordea highlighted that

changing the narrative around fatherhood is essential for achieving true gender equality. In terms of implementation issues, it was mentioned that although the EU Work-Life Balance Directive introduced critical rights - like non-transferable leave for both parents - implementation gaps remain.

Many companies still operate with outdated systems, inadvertently limiting parental choice. Conscious employers are stepping up to correct this.

On the other hand, the dramatic increase in the number of fathers taking parental leave in Poland - from 3,800 in 2022 to nearly 42,000 in 2024 - shows the power of visible examples and supportive ecosystems in encouraging behavioural change.

Based on the above, family-inclusive practices benefit everyone: they empower women to continue their careers, enable men to be active caregivers, and build happier, more engaged teams. Organisations report positive outcomes in loyalty, productivity, and employer attractiveness.

As for final remarks, the panel underscored that real progress comes when employers treat family support not as a compliance obligation but as a business and cultural opportunity. These companies demonstrate that creating workplaces where caregiving is valued and enabled - regardless of gender - is not only possible, but profitable.

Parallel breakout sessions. Key Ingredients for Building Family Supportive Workplaces

These six parallel breakout sessions focused on practical approaches to foster family-supportive environments. Each session was hosted by two organisations leading in a specific area, allowing participants to engage directly with experts, discuss best practices, and brainstorm about effective strategies for change.

Session 1: Do we need EU regulations?

Session 2: Centering Families in Social Policy Amid Declining Fertility Rates

Session 3: Attracting Mothers Back to the Workforce: Policies and Perceptions that Drive Success

Session 4: Engaging Men in Parental Equality: Breaking Down Barriers and Building Support

Session 5: Does the Partnership Family Model Support Fertility?

Session 6: Crafting Inclusive Family Campaigns: Engaging Diverse Audiences in the Workplace and Public Sphere

Session 1: Do we need EU regulations?

Discussion leaders:

- **Sylvia Ziemacka**, Board Member, Share The Care, Poland
- **Annina Lubbock**, Social Scientist and Gender Specialist, CSB onlus, Italy

Experts:

- **Ewa Rumińska-Zimny**, Vice President Women Congress Association
- **Katarzyna Gawęł**, Head of DEI, Ringier Axel Springer Polska,
- **Robert Lisiecki**, Director of the Labor Department at the Lewiatan Confederation



This session explored the effectiveness and necessity of key regulations shaping equal opportunities in the workplace, including the implementation of the European Union's Work-Life Balance Directive, the Directive on Improving the Gender Balance on Corporate Boards, the EU Pay Transparency Directive, the Corporate Sustainability Reporting Directive (CSRD) and the revised Barcelona targets for ECEC. The panel discussed how these directives contribute to fostering fair and inclusive work environments, focusing on gender diversity, equal pay, and work-life balance integration.

During the discussion, participants identified the issue of gaps between laws and realities in terms of take-up of family leaves. In this regard, SMEs have more difficulties complying with family friendly policies and responding to families' needs than big companies with more resources. Among possible solutions, KPIs (key performance indicators) for companies were mentioned as well as introducing reporting and commitment trackers at national level to monitor corporate compliance.

Participants agreed that it must be ensured that all relevant directives include sections on monitoring, reporting, as well as enforcement mechanisms. Furthermore, a more inclusive understanding of caregiving must be encouraged, that extends beyond parenting to other forms of family care, with an intersectional perspective.

The session concluded on a positive note, recognising a cultural shift among younger generations who are increasingly vocal about workplace rights and demanding stronger institutional commitments to equality.

Session 2: Centering Families in Social Policy Amid Declining Fertility Rates

Discussion leaders:

- **Jérôme Gourod**, Board member, UNAF France
- **Andreas Edel**, Director, Population Europe

Experts:

- **Iga Magda**, Vice President, IBS- Institute of Structural Research
- **Andrzej Kubisiak**, Deputy Director, Polish Economic Institute
- **Tomasz Pactwa**, Director, Ministry of Family, Labour and Social Policy



With fertility rates plummeting, there's a need to reconsider how families are valued in society. This session explored the evolving roles of mothers, fathers, and children, focusing on policies that benefit families without alienating other social groups. Attendees discussed how to create family-centred policies that foster inclusive dialogue, reduce scepticism, and address the broader social need for family support. The discussion emphasised the importance of educating citizens about intergenerational and interpersonal solidarity, explaining why supporting citizens based on their needs is crucial for the well-being of society.

The aim was to explore how policies can be designed to balance the needs of families with those of other groups, strengthening individual's wellbeing and, at the societal level, social cohesion.

Iga kicked off the discussion by pointing out to the multifaceted nature of family policy and highlighted

the recent challenge of how to address the issue of ageing population without putting burden on different generations. Research shows the shift towards a more societal discussion on fertility rates rather than individual choice. One of the biggest challenges seems to be how to make family policies respond to changing family structures as systems and services need to respond to these families' needs.

Likewise, Andrzej cited ageing society and low birth rates as one of the most pressing issues and a strain on social systems. He highlighted the general trend of postponement of founding families from young people as having a child is rather regarded as a "problem" due to financial burdens and housing issues, challenges of work-family reconciliation or with regard to negative perception of the future. Recent reports on sharing parental responsibilities show that in couples seeing family as teamwork there is more chance of further births.

Andreas highlighted the necessity of changing our perception of what family is, as with growing population heterogeneity, families are also becoming more diverse in terms of their socio-demographic characteristics. Thus, family today is different from what it was in the generation of our parents and grandparents. Moreover, Jérôme added that maternal life is not always compatible with general well-being. Expecting young people to follow societal expectations about fertility will not lead to rising fertility rates. Providing better support for young families to have the number of children they desire is essential.

In his intervention, Tomasz underscored the importance of affordable housing and the crucial role of supportive labour market for young parents. He also mentioned that paid family leaves must focus on men as well to enhance take up by fathers. Moreover, he pointed out that increase in birth rates has a lot to do with awareness raising and sharing information about benefits and available resources thanks to EU funds and investment in ECEC by the government. However, further investments are needed in quality ECEC in terms of staff training and focus on education and development.

Other participants mentioned the need for investments in health services for supporting people struggling with fertility issues and facilitating adoption. Valuing informal care can also contribute to better perception of the roles of families in the society.

Session 3: Attracting Mothers Back to the Workforce: Policies and Perceptions that Drive Success

Discussion Leaders:

- **Lutgard Vrints**, Policy and research advisor, Gezinsbond, Belgium
- **Marie Toulemonde**, Gender specialist, UNFPA EECA

Experts:

- **Justyna Łuczak-Rzepkowska**, Business Manager, Femmeritum
- **Marika Hartwich**, VP, Central Europe People Business Partner, Mastercard
- **Aldona Kozłowska**, Diversity and Inclusion Manager, Senior HR Business Partner, Orange

This session examined the barriers and motivations for mothers re-entering the workforce after childbirth. The discussion covered regulatory frameworks, workplace culture, social attitudes, disability and care realities, and supportive measures that can make the transition smoother. Participants evaluated policies that effectively facilitate mothers' return to work, identifying best practices and areas for improvement.



The discussion pointed out that encouraging mothers to return to work begins well before maternity leave. A supportive, trusting work environment increases long-term retention. Communication tools and mutual trust between employer and employee are essential in this matter.

As a best practice, Orange Poland's "Game On" programme was highlighted for ensuring smooth returns after parental leave. It includes re-onboarding checklists, community support meetings, hybrid work options, and automatic salary adjustments during absence. The lack of accessible and available childcare was highlighted as a core issue - especially in rural areas - since it

limits mothers' ability to work. Therefore, policy must address both affordability and geographic availability. Poor working conditions in childcare also undermine service quality.

The discussion further underlined that cultural norms often place caregiving on mothers. Instead, parental leave policies should incentivise fathers' involvement and include salary protection to reduce financial barriers for both parents.

Moreover, the vital role of support for mental health was mentioned. For instance, some companies provide counselling and peer groups, especially during key parenting transitions. However, these services are mostly limited to large firms.

Attention was raised to the tendency that flexible work is often misused to extend working hours. Instead, it should be based on clear performance goals, though this may not suit all roles.

Furthermore, non-traditional work (e.g., gig jobs) was mentioned as it complicates access to parental leave and benefits. Hence, more inclusive policy frameworks are needed. It was also added that parents of children with disabilities require greater financial and caregiving support. Some childcare systems exclude non-working mothers, creating barriers to job re-entry.

Session 4: Engaging Men in Parental Equality: Breaking Down Barriers and Building Support

Discussion Leaders:

- **Anna Tarrant**, University of Lincoln
- **Miguel de la Corte**, European Equality Law Network

Experts:

- **Nikki van der Gaag**, Representative of Men Engage Europe
- **phd Kamil Janowicz**, Psychologist, SWPS University
- **Karolina Andrian**, Board Member, Share the Care Foundation
- **Błażej Kobus**, Head of Social Media Team, BNP Paribas Bank Poland
- **Rafał Błażejewski**, HR Team Lead, Nordea
- **Kamil Wojtowicz**, Project Manager, ING Hubs Poland
- **Joanna Szczesiak**, HR Project Manager, Credit Agricole Bank Polska S.A.



This session explored strategies to foster greater male involvement in parenting, promoting equality in caregiving roles. Participants discussed approaches to encourage men to embrace shared parental responsibilities and explore how engaged fatherhood benefits families, employers, and society. The session also addressed ways to help women and employers see the advantages of actively supporting male engagement in parenting.

Anna opened the discussion by emphasising that her wider body of research has evolved beyond paternity leave to examine broader caregiving and welfare arrangements, including gender-equal part-time work. This set the tone for a conversation that looked at caregiving as a lifelong commitment rather than a one-time policy intervention. Miguel reinforced this by comparing national leave uptake rates, noting that even well-paid leave schemes (like Poland's) see low participation without cultural and structural support.

Karolina shared insights from Poland, where only 6% of fathers feel comfortable requesting parental or flexible work arrangements. Her organisation has shifted focus from educating men to engaging employers who play a pivotal role in normalising caregiving. Miguel echoed this, pointing to Spain's success in increasing uptake after introducing non-transferable leave, suggesting that policy alone is insufficient without employer buy-in.

Nikki stressed the delicate balance needed between individual behaviour change, legal reforms, and structural adjustments. She reflected on how discourse around masculinity has evolved over two decades but cautioned against complacency. She argued that parental leave exemplifies this balance - policy must be coupled with shifts in workplace culture and societal expectations.

Kamil expanded on the socialisation gap: men often lack preparation for caregiving roles, while women face disproportionate expectations. He highlighted hidden barriers, such as mothers' gatekeeping, where fear of losing domestic decision-making power can deter shared care. Structural changes, like father-inclusive antenatal care and accessible parenting spaces (toilets/changing rooms), are critical to making caregiving visible and viable for men.

A participant from Poland added that caregiving requires ownership - defining oneself as a carer and not just taking leave. Employers' structural readiness (flexibility) significantly influences fathers' willingness to request leave. The pandemic, noted by another attendee, was a game-changer in normalising flexible work and enabling some men to see themselves as caregivers.

Representatives from Crédit Agricole underscored the need to support caregiving beyond infancy.

While parental leave around birth is increasingly accepted, policies enabling leave or flexibility for older children's care remain rare. Kamil and Karolina agreed that workplace flexibility (such as adjusted hours or part-time options) must extend throughout the parenting life-course.

However, Nikki warned against overlooking informal workers (gig economy fathers), who lack access to formal protections. A bank employee added that feeling secure in one's job is a key determinant in deciding to take leave, highlighting how economic precarity intersects with caregiving.

Language emerged as a powerful lever for change. Nikki urged banning terms like "help" (which frames care as women's responsibility) and "burden" (which devalues care work). Others critiqued the

word "leave," suggesting it frames caregiving as an exception rather than an integral part of life.

A participant from Spain noted that even progressive policies can backfire if they replicate traditional roles, for instance, as is the situation in Spain where fathers tend to take leave simultaneously with mothers to "assist" rather than share primary care. Early education is equally vital: Gezinsbond advocated "de-gendering" roles from childhood through toys, clothing, and school curricula.

Community-building for fathers was another theme. Anna pointed out that antenatal groups are often dominated by mothers, leaving men without peer support. Kamil added that public discourse centres on motherhood, side-lining fathers' experiences. Mandatory leave, as in Spain, was proposed to kickstart cultural change, though participants debated whether it leads to sustained engagement. The session closed with reflections on the need for patience and persistence. Structural shifts - like redefining workplaces to accommodate care - must be paired with cultural work to dismantle stereotypes.

Session 5: Does the Partnership Family Model Support Fertility?

Discussion leaders:

- **Kathleen Emmery**, Odisee Centre for Family Studies
- **Sven Iversen**, Association of Germany Family organisations

Experts:

- **Kacper Nosarzewski**, Partner 4CF,
- **phd Anna Kurowska**, Associate Professor at the University of Warsaw,
- **phd Agnieszka Chłóń-Domińczak**, Vice Rector, Warsaw School of Economics,
- **Rafał Zadykowicz MD**, Warsaw Medical University



This session examined whether the "partnership family model" - characterised by gender equality, shared caregiving responsibilities, and mutual support - has a measurable impact on fertility rates in Europe. The discussion also explored the broader societal implications of promoting this model, beyond demographic outcomes. Regarding the connection between the partnership model and fertility, it was underscored that there is no indication whether the partnership model harms fertility rates.

If any impact exists, it appears to be positive. However, participants emphasised that fertility is driven by a wide range of complex, interrelated factors, not by family models alone. While not necessarily a primary driver of fertility, the partnership model contributes to greater well-being for adults and children and positive social outcomes. Therefore, the partnership model is to be promoted, not for fertility but for equality, societal and economic reasons.

The session highlighted that low fertility rates are primarily influenced by structural and environmental barriers, including affordable housing, accessible childcare, paid family leave, job quality and security, and healthcare system. Fertility is not only a private or family choice but also shaped by the environment. When that environment is hostile to families or caregivers, birth rates drop. In conclusion, participants advised against narrowly focused pronatalist policies that aim to increase birth rates without addressing root causes. Instead, policymaking should prioritise removing structural barriers that prevent people from making autonomous and supported reproductive choices.

Session 6: Crafting Inclusive Family Campaigns: Engaging Diverse Audiences in the Workplace and Public Sphere

Discussion leaders:

- **Marina Wetzer-Karlsson**, Programme Director, Vaestoliitto, Finland
- **Genny Sangiovanni**, Secretary, NELFA

Experts:

- **Renata Szredzińska**, President of the Board at Empowering Children Foundation
- **Radosław Wierzbński**, PhD in Social Sciences, Dadvertising Experet, Head of Comms, Allegro
- **Anna Bachulska-Kossek**, Marketing Manager (OTC), Haleon

This breakout session brought together researchers, advocates, and practitioners to explore the multifaceted challenges and opportunities in promoting equitable caregiving, particularly focusing on fathers' engagement. The discussion highlighted the need for systemic shifts (spanning policy, workplace culture, education, and societal norms) to move beyond paternal leave and foster long-term, meaningful participation of men in caregiving.



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Participants stated that to identify gaps in inclusivity, we should identify stereotypes first. For instance, stereotypes about what a family should look like or what parenthood should be like. Ways of challenging these stereotypes may include making fathers more visible, showing that parenthood is not always easy or ideal, and highlighting family diversity by including same sex couples, families with disability, and families of multiple ethnic origins in the discussion.

Moreover, participants acknowledged the challenge itself in breaking these loops of stereotypes since they are entrenched and perpetuated through many areas, including internalised social norms. It was further underscored that inclusive family campaigns should be based on data, research, and provide useful information to tackle assumptions. What is more, they should be based on generally accepted objectives, such as the wellbeing of the child as a focal point. It is also crucial to use campaigns to share good and inclusive examples (based on individual and real-life experiences if possible) that reinforce the benefits of inclusive directions.

The importance of targeted messages and use of inclusive language was also highlighted. In addition, it was pointed out that campaigns with opposite messages and different views should not be ignored either. For example, campaigns using a narrower, more traditional definition of family. This aspect should also be integrated into the campaign strategy, as in trying to find, whenever possible, a common ground with opposition campaigns.

The discussion was concluded on the note that it is not only the content of communication that matters, but also the frequency, the distribution and the integrating techniques of family campaigns so they can reach the widest possible audiences with more efficient outcomes.