



COFACE Working group on work-life balance

27 January 2026 9.30-13.00 CET (online)

Summary report

COFACE hosted an online working group meeting on work-life balance with members and partners to discuss topics such as adequately paid leaves, take-up of leaves by men and the childcare gap.

The 25+ participants of the working group focused on the following:

- Taking stock of latest trends on work-life balance policies across the EU with a focus on the adequacy of leave payments and the take-up of parental and family leaves by men.
- Discussing the current state of play regarding the transposition and implementation of the EU Work-life Balance Directive in Member States.
- Examining the childcare gap, and explore how to bridge this period
- Identifying and discussing potential flagship initiatives and best practices that could help close this gap.
- Assessing recent research findings and policy developments that can enhance future action.

The working group participants included COFACE members from 10 countries (Austria, Belgium, Bulgaria, France, Germany, Greece, Hungary, Ireland, Italy, Spain) and representatives from the University of Zagreb, Leaves Network, European Observatory on Family Policy, OECD, and EIGE. The meeting was moderated by Attila Bóhm, Senior Policy and Advocacy Officer, COFACE Families Europe.

Following a formal welcome by Antonia Torrens, President of COFACE Families Europe, the working group kicked off discussions in two study sessions. Some of the key points of discussion are summarised below, and the presentations are available on the dedicated working group webpage on the COFACE website.

Study session 1: Well-paid family leaves across Europe: reality check

This session focused on family leaves available to mothers and fathers, their payment levels across countries, eligibility of the leaves, as well as take-up.

According to the findings of the European Equality Legal Network, gaps in the transposition of the EU Work-life Balance Directive persist - particularly in ensuring adequate compensation for parental leave and encouraging greater uptake of family leaves by fathers. These shortcomings, often rooted in gender inequalities such as the gender pay gap, further deepen the childcare gap. Strengthening the effective implementation of the EU Work-life Balance Directive, especially by improving parental leave compensation and promoting equal sharing of caregiving responsibilities, is therefore essential to closing the childcare gap and supporting parents more effectively in the early years of their child's life.

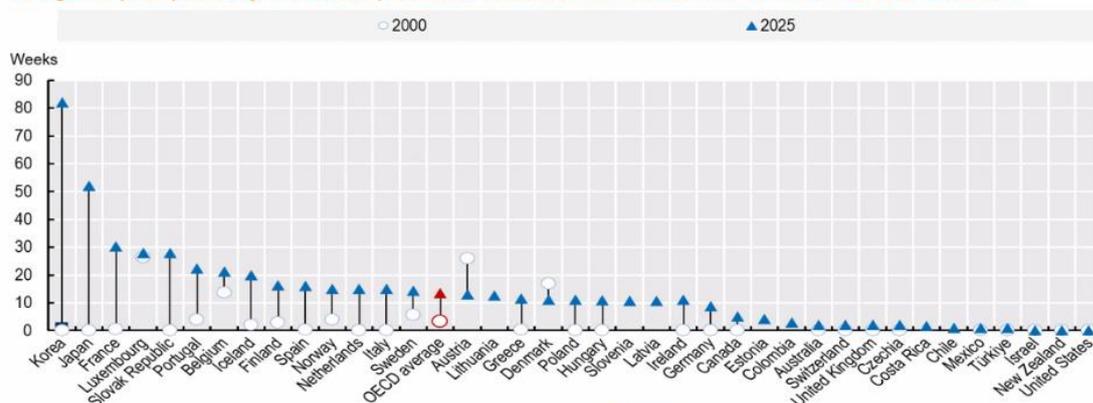
Paid leave for fathers in OECD countries

OECD Senior Economist, Willem Adema, gave an overview of work, family and fertility trends in OECD countries. He explained that family leaves are not an island on their own, but intrinsically linked to other measures such as services, cash benefits, tax breaks: all part of family policies in most countries. While comparisons between countries is complex, he used the OECD family database to give an overview of length of paid leave earmarked for fathers, highlighting that such leaves have significantly increased between 2000 and 2025.

The length of paid leave “earmarked” for fathers has increased since 2000 in many OECD countries

Duration of paid leave for fathers

Length of paid paternity leave and paid child-related leave earmarked for fathers, 2000 and 2025



Source: OECD (2025), 'PF2.5 Trends in leave entitlements around childbirth', OECD Family Database. <http://oe.cd/fdb>

He highlighted that the availability of measures is one thing, while take-up is another matter. For instance, in South Korea, take-up of paid parental leave by fathers is limited. The group found this international overview extremely useful, and especially positive to see the increase in father-related leaves over the last two decades (including the role of the EU Work-life Balance Directive in achieving this). For a more granular picture of available leaves for fathers, a suggestion was made to consider non-transferable and well-paid leave (paternity leave + earmarked and well-paid parental leave) as a reference point.

Eligibility of paid parental leave in the EU: a new study.

Vytautas Peciukonis, Researcher at the European Institute for Gender Equality (EIGE), highlighted the upcoming EIGE study on the eligibility of parental leave across EU countries. They had carried out this exercise in 2018 and will do the same in 2026 (results available end of the year). He referred to the key research objectives namely 1. to estimate the share of potential working parents eligible for parental leave and reasons for non-eligibility, 2. to identify synergies and gaps between parental leave policies and ECEC, and 3. to assess policy design elements and measures that promote men's take-up of leaves.

Vytautas also discussed the dimensions of eligibility which will be considered in the study including employment-related conditions, family/household conditions, and citizenship or residency conditions.



Dimensions of eligibility considered

- Employment-related conditions**
 - Type of employment (self-employed and other non-standard workers)
 - Length of service (tenure)
 - Economic sector
- Family/household conditions (relationship to the child)**
 - Same-sex couples
- Citizenship and residency conditions**
 - Non-citizens/migrants
 - Refugees and asylum seekers

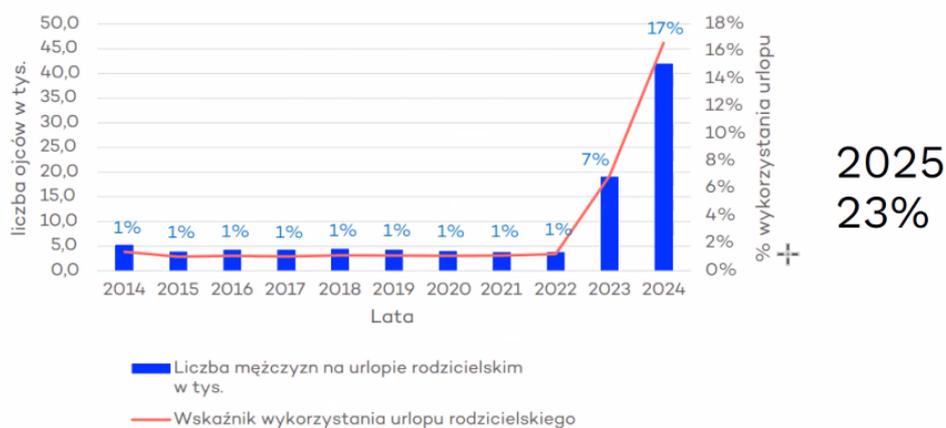
European Institute for Gender Equality | An EU Agency | 

The group welcomed this study and shared some comments/feedback. For instance, they suggested looking at the role of employers in encouraging take-up of parental leave, and namely the trends in more gendered economic sectors (e.g. do male-dominated sectors promote take-up of leaves as much as female-dominated sectors). There were also comments on the definition of well-paid parental leave used as definition in the study (60% income replacement rate was the reference for the EIGE study of 2018). Some of the discussion focused on the intersectional approach of the study also looking at age, migrant status and education, with some comments about the criteria of “standards of living” being interesting as well (e.g. are some parental leave systems means-tested in Europe?)

Spotlight on Polish parental leave reforms and their impact on families

Karolina Andrian, Board member of Share The Care in Poland (and COFACE member), highlighted the partnership family model as the driver for Share The Care advocacy. They advocate for father-inclusive policies and services, working closely with employers and public policy-makers in Poland. She highlighted trends in take-up of parental leaves by men in Poland over the last ten years, showing the positive impact of the EU Work-life Balance Directive on take-up of leaves by Polish fathers in 2024 and 2025 (see below).

FATHERS ON PARENTAL LEAVE



Karolina focused on the importance of culture in supporting take-up of leaves by fathers. In Poland fathers are perceived as second caregiver, and not equally (even in the laws). The EU Charter of Fundamental Rights (Article 33 on family and professional life) mentions protection from dismissal during maternity leave but omits paternity leave. She referred to some recommendations to shift towards a partnership-based family model (and hence better leave take-up): involving fathers in perinatal care (not only mothers) and educating health professionals about this especially; the need for separate use of parental leave by each parent, also as a way to fill the childcare gap; building societal trust in fathers as competent and independent caregivers; involving employers is essential in building parental equality.

Some of the key discussion points of the first study session were the following:

- The level of financial stress of families is important to know, in order to understand why people cannot take up leaves (if they live on poor salaries, this can explain the lack of take-up). Fixed rates for parental leave could be helpful for people on low-income, but if the flat rate is too low this is not helpful (e.g. in Belgium there is a flat rate, but the payment remains very low).

- There was a discussion on the definition of well-paid leave and the inadequacy of 60% income replacement, and the need to aim for higher income replacement rates across the EU.
- The group referred to mandatory leaves for fathers. This widely accepted for mothers, so why not for fathers?
- The role of employers was mentioned in different respects: some employers top-up poorly paid parental leaves, and there are some certifications for companies which promote gender equality, including take-up of paternity leave.
- While the focus on payments is very important, in the current economic climate it would be important to also focus on other gaps such as eligibility.
- Some members referred to the introduction of grandparents leave, or the possibility to allow parents to extend their leave to other family members. In some countries there is talk of giving each family a general amount of leave to use across the lifecycle and for different family members. However, some cautioned about the possible negative impact of this approach on gender equality and equal sharing of care.
- Reference was also made to the links between childcare and pension credits.
- Advocacy is needed across countries in order to raise awareness about existing leaves, encouraging take-up and more. However, in some countries, there is no organisation or NGO focusing on the rights of working families.

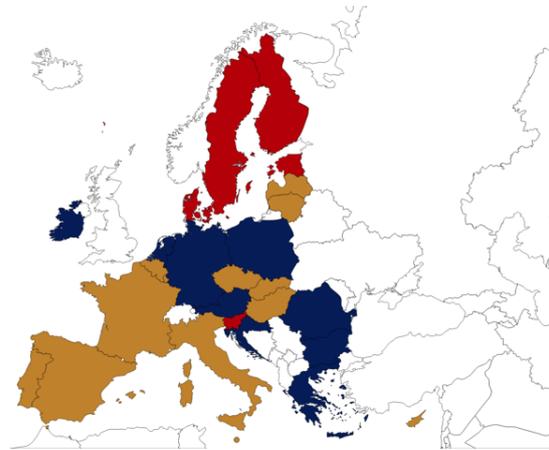
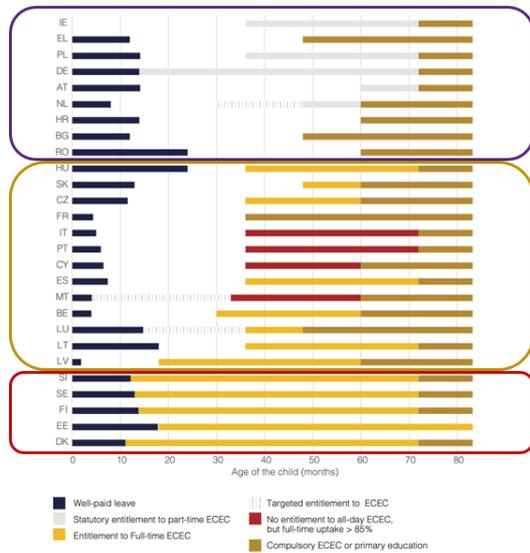
Study session 2: How to close the childcare gap?

The childcare gap remains one of the most pressing challenges facing new parents across Europe today. This gap arises following the birth of a child, when well-paid parental leave has been exhausted, but access to state-supported full-time Early Childhood Education and Care is not yet available. During this period, families often struggle to balance care responsibilities and employment. This shows the shortcomings of existing work-life balance policies. The group discussed different approaches to fill the childcare gap, and the role of COFACE in advocating to fill the childcare gap.

An overview of the childcare gap in Europe

Martino Serapioni, Senior research coordinator, European Observatory on Family Policy highlighted the research carried out on the childcare gap. He clustered countries according to the extent of the childcare gap, from countries without any gap to countries with structural deficits in their systems (and not just a timing issue). Even in countries with a legal entitlement to ECEC, there can be such regional variation that creates real disparity in access to ECEC (see below).

3 COUNTRY GROUPS



Martino highlighted key conditions to close the childcare gap including: early onset of entitlement to ECEC as a key factor; length of leave period important but perhaps not decisive; integrated 0-6 ECEC cycle seems conducive to a closing of the gap; income-based fee-paying model until start of compulsory education is the funding model of reference in most "no-childcare-gap" countries. Working group participants welcomed this overview and highlighted the need to look at the level of payment of ECEC as well, as decisive in closing the gap in reality (in France ECEC costs can reach 1000 euros/child/month). This was not examined as part of the Observatory's work as the research remained at system level. However, it would be useful to push for further research (e.g. under Horizon Europe projects) to gain insights into ECEC costs and levels of payment. In Scandinavian countries (which have no childcare gap), the early ECEC entitlement is typically combined with an income-based model of ECEC payment. It would be interesting to dive into the local/regional level and to assess how much of a household income should a family pay for ECEC.

Diverse approaches to closing the childcare gap

Ivana Dobrotic, Professor, University of Zagreb and member of the International Network on Leave policies and research gave an overview of key drivers of the childcare gap, highlighting that parenting leave systems are built with multiple exclusions. This is due to normative assumptions about ideal caregivers, weak recognition of family diversity, and poor eligibility of leave linked to employment status, citizenship, family situation, sexual orientation.

Policy mechanisms producing the childcare gap?

(1) Parenting leaves design faced with many exclusions: various inequalities in statutory leave entitlements/**systematic exclusion** of some parents

- Normative ideas about the **'ideal' caregiver** & poor accommodation of policies to the lived experiences of diverse parents' situations
- A weak recognition of **family diversity** within the leave design (e.g. lone parents, parents faced with disabilities/chronic illness, 'larger' families; Dobrotić & Iveković Martinis, 2023)
- Leave eligibility is shaped by a complex interplay of factors such as **employment status** (e.g. employee/self-employed/marginally employed), **employment characteristics** (e.g. contribution histories, employment sector, earnings/hours accumulated), **legal residency or citizenship, family situation or sexual orientation** (cf. Dobrotić & Blum, 2019; Kaufmann et al., 2022; Dobrotić & Iveković Martinis, 2023)

Ivana referred to the childcare gap being even more pronounced for families which deviate from typical family and work standards. For instance, precarious workers, families with heavier care responsibilities (e.g. with a disability), single parent families, families in migration. She ended with some pointers on ways to close the childcare gap namely 1. access to well-paid leaves (to allow for genuine take-up of leaves), 2. the need for a legal entitlement to ECEC for all children, 3. the need to build policies based on the recognition of family diversity and recognition of diverse care needs (including heavy care needs). The group participants acknowledged the concept of childcare gap is a useful advocacy tool to highlight weaknesses in policy design. It had already been mentioned in the previous study session that taking parental leave individually (and not together) can help fill the gap by increasing the length of parental leave overall for the household. The perspective of single parents and large families was also brought into the discussion. Regarding large families, some are stigmatised by ECEC systems which give priority to parents working full-time (while large families might be in part-time work due to the important childcare responsibilities). Regarding single parent families, three main points were made to help fill the childcare gap including 1. More access to part-time jobs (but this is not always widespread nor affordable) 2. Increasing opening times of ECEC services (but longer hours for children in ECEC can be problematic) and 3. Greater flexibility from employers (even if this can create tensions between single parents and two-parent families).

Some of the key discussion points were the following:

- We do not know what people do, what trajectories they have. The data available is a general average of take-up of benefits, leaves, employment rates. It would be useful to study family trajectories in order to get better insights into the realities of families e.g. do people need to cut their own food to pay for childcare.
- It could be useful to launch a poll of parents to get a clearer view of what parents want.

- A focus on affordability of childcare would be important as we explore solutions to close the childcare gap. This is a real blind spot in current EU data. Income-based fees are common. But the level of payment is quite decisive.
- Closing the childcare gap would require potentially a full rethinking of policies and be used as an opportunity to evaluate and review existing policies and policy design. This could be an opportunity to build in the reality of family diversity into policy design.
- Legal entitlements to ECEC were also discussed, as something which should be a reality in all EU countries in order to pave the way towards closing the childcare gap.

Conclusions and next steps

The discussions were very rich, with perspectives from many EU countries and research in Europe and beyond (OECD countries).

- The group took stock of latest trends on work-life balance policies across the EU with a focus on the adequacy of leave payments and the take-up of parental and family leaves by men (highlighting factors which hinder or encourage take-up such as affordability, payment, culture, policy design and more).
- They discussed the current state of play regarding the transposition and implementation of the EU Work-life Balance Directive in Member States, with some insights into the positive impact of the directive at national level.
- The group examined the childcare gap from different perspectives and explored how to bridge this gap. There is greater clarity on the policy weaknesses and drivers of the childcare gap, as well as family types which are suffering more than others from such gaps. Recommendations were made on how to fill the gap.

The information collected will be used to shape COFACE advocacy moving forward in 2026 and beyond.