

# ERC CAPABLE: Tackling Persistent Inequalities in Work-life Balance: New research & policy directions



## What is CAPABLE?

Gender inequality in work and family is one of the most persistent social inequalities of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. The CAPABLE project, sponsored by the European Research Council (2018-2024), aimed to explain why this inequality is so persistent. We did this by investigating the role of national and local policies across Europe in shaping men and women's real opportunities for work-life balance. Central to the project was studying whether and how work-life balance policies enhance what men and women are truly able to do when combining paid work, care and everything else.

## What was the scope of the project?

CAPABLE looked at the European Union's work-life balance directive in Hungary, Italy, the Netherlands, Poland, Slovenia, Spain, Sweden and the UK. We then did a deep dive, unpacking gender inequality in work-life balance in the Netherlands, Slovenia, Spain and the UK. We focused on national and local levels of policy, studying Amsterdam and Nijmegen (NL), Ljubljana and Maribor (SI), Barcelona and Pamplona (ES), and London and Leeds (UK).

## Key findings

Overall, we see that many parents and caregivers are getting lost in increasingly complex systems that they are unable to navigate. Consequently, people have difficulty combining paid work with care or other activities. In the short and long term, this can negatively impact their health and wellbeing. Many issues can be addressed by giving more attention to policy design and the barriers experienced by parents and caregivers.

### *The design of work-life policies*

Many policies aim to facilitate work-life balance, like childcare, flexible working, and paid and unpaid leave. Our research shows crucial aspects of policy design matter for ensuring people are actually able to access and use these policies in practice.

- Accessibility to flexible work arrangements is broader when specified in national legislation

and when not made conditional to care obligations.

- Increasing accessibility to flexible work arrangements can, however, increase inequalities between men and women.
- Greater flexibility at work for caregivers can also impact caregivers' health negatively in the long run.
- Facilitating flexible work arrangements through collective bargaining offers innovation potential but can also (re)produce inequalities.
- Accessibility of policies targeting parents and carers can be improved by reducing policy complexity. Integrating informational sources is an important first step in reducing this complexity.
- Access to policies and services is further limited by the use of complex terms that are difficult to understand. Moreover, language is often a crucial barrier for parents or caregivers with a migration background.
- Accessibility is also lower for groups who diverge from the norm (e.g., workers not in stable, permanent employment; parents of children with complex care needs, people with migration backgrounds in need of social care services).
- More attention is needed for accessibility issues related to the digitalization of work-life balance policies and services.
- The European Work-Life Balance Directive could offer greater scope for an equitable expansion of resources. In particular, by recognizing how current policy designs are reproducing gender and socioeconomic inequalities.

### *Barriers for parents*

- Many policies aimed at supporting parents overemphasize individual responsibility (to find, understand, navigate and manage access to (policy) resources. Structural issues (e.g., financial vulnerability, language barriers) require greater consideration to ensure adequate support to parents.



- Privacy regulations limit policy coordination across departments, which can increase the administrative burden parents face.
- Fathers' involvement in childcare could be improved by increasing possibilities to work from home.
- Whereas moms often expressed concerns about the financial challenges of becoming a parent or about the impact of parenthood on their career progression, dads talked more about the feelings of responsibility they have towards their child(ren). Greater attention is needed for these gender differences in the experience combining parenthood with paid work.

### *Barriers for caregivers*

- A crucial barrier for caregivers is the fragmentation of information on support available to them. Caregivers must often find information in multiple areas across the health care and social care sectors. They often have to take on the role of care manager and coordinator, piecing together fragmented information and finding solutions to create sufficient support.
- Caregivers also face barriers in the availability, accessibility, affordability, and quality of formal care. Care services offer indirect support to caregivers and play a key role in alleviating the care burden, particularly for groups such as young carers. Without such support, the risk of work and health-related disadvantages in later life increases.
- Care needs assessments vary across municipalities and countries, which creates inequalities in the accessibility of formal care and informal care support services.
- Caregivers are a diverse group, including younger and older caregivers, women and men, people living in urban and rural areas. This diversity is not always reflected in support services, leading to a mismatch between caregivers' needs and available services.
- Informal carers often face many difficulties in handling caring tasks as well as in coping with the relational and emotional aspects connected to them. These barriers might lead to abusive relationships between caregivers and care receivers.

### **Next steps**

During the stakeholder meeting, we discussed ways of leveraging results from the CAPABLE project for developing equitable and sustainable policies for work-life balance. The next steps outlined here reflect a combination of project findings and stakeholder conversations:

- The CAPABLE findings serve as a (continued) motivation for policymakers to engage in conversations about inequalities and how to tackle them. Researchers, policymakers and other stakeholders should explore strategies to encourage such dialogue. While such dialogues may be ongoing, particular attention should be given to moments immediately following elections, with room for innovative policy options given the negotiation and formation of new political coalitions.
- The comparative cases from the CAPABLE project offer valuable examples to guide country-specific approaches to policies aiming at removing barriers to gender equality in work-life balance.
- For both caregivers and parents, facilitating access to information and guidance throughout the caregiving experience (i.e., a life course approach) would help, particularly when parents and caregivers need to navigate the work context as well as health care and social care systems.
- The accessibility of policies and services can further be broadened by reducing administrative burden, ensuring parents and caregivers have sufficient digital skills to access resources, and providing information in multiple languages. The latter is particularly important to ensure accessibility for parents and caregivers with a migration background.
- For caregivers, both national and local stakeholders (including both recognized and emerging actors in social care provision, e.g., care platforms, care work agencies, coaches and other private care providers) can continue to explore the advantages and disadvantages of practical solutions for alleviating the pressure of informal caregiving. For example, expanding the availability of care services or care allowances that do not penalise working caregivers in their career trajectories. Such solutions might also involve strategies for promoting skills development and providing psychological and emotional support.

- For parents, to ensure accessibility to policies and services, greater attention is needed for the needs of parents whose children have additional and/or complex care needs (e.g., transportation services to childcare).
- Flexibility for all workers, and not just those with care responsibilities, can help to counter inequalities if combined with attention for social and organisational gender norms. Broadening the scope of the EU's Work-Life Balance Directive would be useful in this regard.

Finally, at the stakeholder seminar, three ideas were discussed that could provide more sustainable solutions to gender and other social inequalities in work-life balance. For this to occur, more discussions are needed between scientists, policymakers and stakeholders on the following topics:

- Consideration can be given to reframing the issue of work-life balance under a broader area of concern, such as health or sustainability. Such a reframing could help address and mitigate issues related to access and coordination of information and services. However, a broadening of the issue has consequences for the remit and responsibility of work-life balance support. Currently, health issues are under the remit of Member States, therefore making work-life balance a health priority would exclude the role of the EU. Such a move is not recommended given the crucial role the EU has played in challenging gender inequalities, for example through the Work-Life Balance Directive. An alternative avenue could

be to consider work-life balance issues from a combined inequality and sustainability perspective.

- Greater insights are needed on the non-take-up of work-life balance policies and services, particularly given growing scepticism towards governments. Such data can be used to develop more effective work-life balance supports across society.
- Enhancing coordination between government levels as well as within communities (e.g., between municipalities and involved stakeholders, including private providers) is needed. Coordination between government levels is needed to counter the fragmentation of support towards parents and caregivers. Coordination within communities is needed to ensure effective policy implementation, thereby ensuring that those most in need of help actually receive it.

Together, attention for these aspects can contribute to more sustainable policy approaches for countering gender inequalities in work-life balance in Europe.

#### Want to know more?

Would you like to know more about the project? Check out the website for more information and links to project publications and other project outcomes ([www.worklifecapabilities.com](http://www.worklifecapabilities.com)). Do you have questions about the project? Contact the project leader, Professor Mara Yerkes: [m.a.yerkes@uu.nl](mailto:m.a.yerkes@uu.nl). We're always happy to hear from you!

