European Institute for Gender Equality

Investing in childcare for the EU's social and economic resilience

Executive summary

Childcare is a social and economic investment. High-quality, affordable and accessible services support children's learning and development, help parents balance paid work and care, and strengthen the EU's labour force by enabling more parents, especially mothers, to enter and remain in employment.

Childcare continues to shape women's employment far more than men's. Across the EU-27, 27 % of women with childcare responsibilities have reduced their working hours or stopped working for care reasons, compared with 16 % of men. Women are also more likely to provide intensive childcare, which is generally associated with lower employment rates.

Many families still lack childcare support when they need it. In 2025, 41 % of children under the age of three received early childhood education and care (ECEC), which is below the EU-level 2030 target of 45 %. Around 25 % of parents with children aged five and under report having unmet ECEC needs, rising to about 39 % for out-of-school care needs. Cost, waiting lists, limited availability and unsuitable opening hours are the main barriers.

The level of childcare intensity and access to support also affect parents' well-being. Poor well-being increases from 23 % among parents providing 1–7 hours of care a week to 41 % among those providing 71 hours or more, and the impact is particularly marked in women. Support from family, friends or neighbours can ease these pressures and is associated with better well-being and fewer unmet childcare needs.

Gender and intersecting inequalities shape families' childcare options. Lower-income families use formal childcare services less and report more unmet needs. Single parents, most of whom are women, have fewer opportunities to share care, while parents with disabilities and migrant parents may face specific barriers to accessing services and informal support. Expanding service provision is therefore not enough. Services need to respond to differences in affordability, availability and working schedules, supported by adequate parental leave ([1]) and flexible working arrangements ([2]).

([1]) Leave from work for parents on the grounds of the birth or adoption of a child for the purpose of taking care of that child. It is designed as a gender-neutral entitlement available to either parent and follows immediately after maternity or paternity leave, covering the period when children are very young. This distinguishes it from maternity leave (granted to mothers or primary caregivers before or upon a child's birth) and paternity leave (granted to fathers or secondary caregivers).

([2]) The opportunity for workers to adjust their working patterns, including through the use of remote working arrangements, flexible working schedules or reduced working hours.

Figure 1: The role of childcare in the EU's social and economic resilience

Accessible, affordable and high-quality childcare enables families to thrive and strengthens the EU economy

1. Why childcare matters

Supports children's development
ECEC and out-of-school care promote learning, well-being and social inclusion.

Enables parents to work
Helps parents, especially mothers, enter, stay in and progress in employment, driving women's uptake of full-time jobs.

Advances gender equality
Reduces unequal care responsibilities and gender gaps in employment, pay and pensions.

Drives economic resilience
Higher employment and productivity support a major opportunity for inclusive and sustainable growth.

2. Key findings

Care limits women's employment
27 % of women with childcare duties cut hours or stopped working, versus 16 % of men.

Gaps in formal childcare remain
Participation of children under three in ECEC is at 41 %, below the EU's 45 % 2030 target; unmet ECEC and out-of-school care needs are common.

Cost and access are key barriers
Parents most often cite cost, waiting lists, limited availability and unsuitable opening hours.

Care intensity affects well-being
Poor well-being rises from 23 % at 1–7 hours of care per week to 41 % at 71+ hours per week; informal support is uneven.

Inequalities go beyond gender
Low-income and single-parent families, parents with lower education, parents with disabilities and migrant parents face greater barriers.

3. What's at stake

Lower employment, wider gender gaps
Women's lower participation and earnings reduce economic potential.

Higher risks to health and well-being
Intensive care and unmet needs are linked to poorer mental and physical health.

Higher poverty and vulnerability
Care gaps increase reliance on lower incomes and risk perpetuating an intergenerational cycle of poverty, reducing security in later life.

Pressure on public finances
Low access and low employment raise costs in terms of social protection and pensions.

Underutilised talent
Inequality in care limits skills use, innovation and long-term growth.

Drivers behind childcare patterns and outcomes

- Gender norms and unequal sharing of care
- Insufficient and inaccessible formal childcare services
- Weak labour market and social protection support
- Territorial and socioeconomic inequalities
- Affordability, availability and suitability gaps

Policy priorities: A childcare system that works for all

Expand and improve ECEC
Expand affordable, accessible and high-quality ECEC, especially for children under three.

Remove barriers to access
Reduce costs, waiting lists and complex procedures; improve availability and opening hours.

Strengthen out-of-school care
Align with school schedules and parents' work patterns; monitor out-of-school care with clear benchmarks.

Support leave and flexible work
Ensure effective access and promote more equal sharing of care responsibilities.

Coordinate support
Link childcare, employment and social services; value informal support as a choice, not a necessity.

Monitor what matters
Track access, unmet needs, affordability, hours and outcomes for ECEC and out-of-school care.

MONITORING & EVALUATION: LEARNING WHAT WORKS

Monitor with sex-disaggregated data across groups and territories for ECEC and out-of-school care.

Evaluate impacts on employment, well-being, gender equality and economic competitiveness.

Build a more equal and inclusive EU through sustainable childcare systems that benefit people and the economy.

Source: Authors.

Introduction

Provision of good-quality, affordable childcare services ([3]) **is one of the strongest expressions of care as a public value in the EU.** When families have access to formal care ([4]), such as early childhood education and care (ECEC) and out-of-school programmes, they gain real flexibility to organise care in ways that suit their needs. These services help parents balance paid work and caregiving, support children's early learning and social development and reinforce the idea of childcare as a shared social responsibility.

When childcare is unavailable, unaffordable or incompatible with working hours, care responsibilities fall heavily on women. The unequal sharing of care between women and men shapes mothers' ability to enter, stay in and advance in employment, driving gender gaps in working hours, earnings and pensions across the life course. Across millions of households, these patterns add up to lost employment, underused skills and slower economic growth in the EU.

From this perspective, investment in accessible childcare is a lever for expanding labour supply and the use of human capital and for strengthening competitiveness. The aim is not to replace informal care, but to widen families' real choices by supporting the care they provide while ensuring formal services are available when needed.

EU policy recognises access to childcare as central to equal opportunities and employment. The Council recommendation on the revised Barcelona targets sets 2030 targets for ECEC participation and calls on Member States to improve the affordability, availability and quality of services and reduce unequal access. The Work–Life Balance ([5]) Directive strengthens rights to leave and flexible working to support the equal sharing of care. The 2026 communication on the European Pillar of Social Rights links ECEC to the EU's 2030 employment target and women's labour market participation. Together, these frameworks recognise childcare as a public responsibility and an investment in equality, social resilience and economic growth.

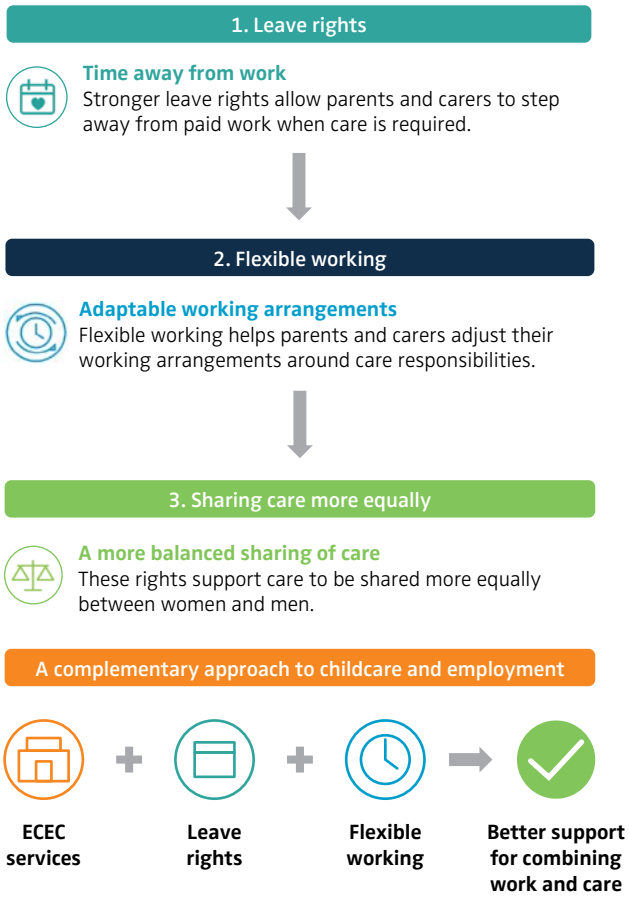
About the EIGE CARE Survey

This brief is based on data from the 2024 wave of the European Institute for Gender Equality (EIGE) Survey on Gender Gaps in Unpaid Care, Individual and Social Activities (CARE Survey), the EU's dedicated source of individual-level data on how women and men share care responsibilities and how these responsibilities shape their daily and working lives. The survey covers all 27 EU Member States and includes more than 65 000 individual responses, building on the first wave, which was conducted in 2022. The third wave is planned for 2027. For more information, visit EIGE's care and gender web page. The findings presented in this brief show statistical associations and should not be interpreted as evidence of causation.

([3]) Childcare services refer to the provision of public, private, individual or collective services to meet the needs of parents and children.
([4]) Formal care refers to care provided through organised services by paid care workers or professionals, whether publicly or privately provided. In this brief, formal care covers early childhood education and care (ECEC) and out-of-school care services.
([5]) The achievement of balance between work and not only domestic tasks and caring for dependent relatives but also extracurricular responsibilities and other important life priorities.

Figure 2: The Work–Life Balance Directive

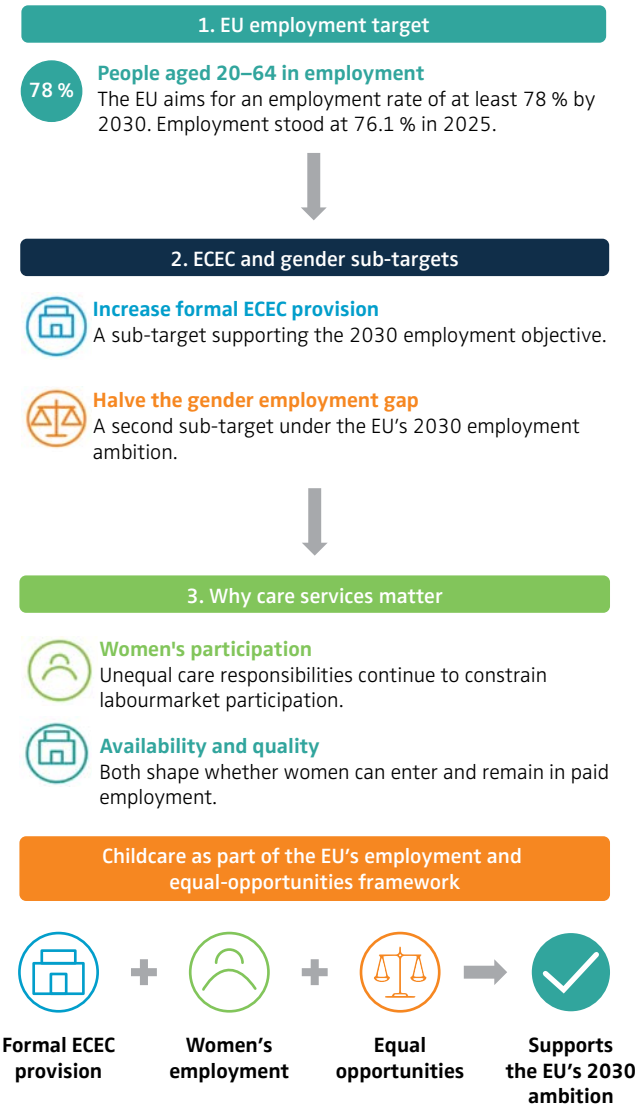
How employment rights complement formal childcare and help parents combine paid work and care



Source: Directive (EU) 2019/1158.

Figure 3: ECEC and the European Pillar of Social Rights

How childcare provision supports the EU's 2030 employment ambition and equal opportunities



Source: Commission communication on the European Pillar of Social Rights.

1. Why investing in childcare pays off

The value we do not count: childcare, time and its costs

Much of the childcare that sustains families in the EU is provided unpaid, takes place within the home and rarely appears in the statistics used to measure the economy. Care within families has social and relational value, and many families combine it with ECEC or services outside school hours. Recognising this contribution is important for understanding the wider economic value of childcare.

Unpaid childcare is also shared unequally between women and men. These patterns are shaped less by circumstance than by persistent gender norms ([6]) about who is expected to provide care. As a result, the time, effort and opportunity costs associated with childcare fall disproportionately on women (EIGE, 2026a).

This unequal distribution of time has economic consequences. The time women devote disproportionately to childcare carries real costs across their working lives. When childcare responsibilities limit the time available for paid work, they can affect employment, working hours, earnings and, in the longer term, pensions. These costs, and the way they operate through the labour market, are examined in detail in Section 2.

Investing in childcare pays dividends through higher employment

Investment in childcare can generate substantial labour market gains. Modelling evidence ([7]) suggests that increasing formal childcare participation among children under three to 50 % could increase mothers' labour supply by up to 48 % and employment by up to 32 %, depending on the national context (Narazani et al., 2025).

Provision of childcare: key facts

Childcare responsibilities. According to the CARE Survey (2024), across the EU-27, 24 % of women and 21 % of men provide childcare for their own children aged under 12. Around 19 % of adults also care for children other than their own (grandchildren, siblings, cousins, other relatives, friends, etc.).

Care intensity. Among those providing childcare, 36 % of women spend more than 35 hours a week on it, compared with 18 % of men. Within the highest intensity band (71 hours or more a week), there are around five times as many women as men providing childcare (20 % and 4 %, respectively) (EIGE, 2026b).

Work and childcare. In 2025, 70 % of mothers aged 25–54 whose youngest child was under six years old were employed, compared with 92 % of fathers. This gap widens with the number of children, from 4 percentage points among adults with no children to almost 30 percentage points among those with three or more (Eurostat, 2026a).

For more on the economic case for care investment and its contribution to labour market participation and competitiveness, see the companion policy brief *Investing in Care: Advancing EU competitiveness and gender equality* (EIGE, 2026a).

Income-related differences in employment are particularly pronounced among parents with childcare responsibilities. Among parents providing childcare, each additional income decile is associated with a 2.8-percentage-point increase in the probability of being employed. This association remains positive for both women and men and across all country groups analysed. Parents with childcare responsibilities are also less likely to work full-time. Each additional income decile is associated with a 2.4-percentage-point higher probability of full-time employment among parents.

([6]) The standards and expectations to which women and men generally conform, within a range that defines a particular society, culture and community at a given point in time.
([7]) The estimates are based on a microsimulation combining Euromod and the Eurolab labour supply and demand model.

These economic returns of childcare investment depend on how services are designed and delivered. Employment gains are largest where formal childcare use and women's employment are lower, while reducing fees has the greatest effect where fees are higher (Narazani et al., 2022, 2025). Expanding affordable childcare provision and ensuring that opening hours align with families' needs can therefore maximise employment impact.

Childcare and work–life balance measures work together

Work–life balance measures can complement formal childcare by helping parents manage care responsibilities during periods when services are unavailable or insufficient. Paid parental leave can support continuity in employment around childbirth, but its labour market effects depend on its duration and design (EIGE, 2026c; Nandi et al., 2018; Thévenon et al., 2013). Well-paid leave specifically for fathers can encourage a more equal sharing of care (OECD, 2025), while flexible working arrangements can help parents accommodate care responsibilities alongside paid work (Çivilidağ et al., 2026). The EU's work–life balance framework reflects this integrated approach by combining leave and flexible working arrangements with formal care services and employment protections (Directive (EU) 2019/1158).

Investing in childcare: key facts

Public investment in education generates the highest returns during early childhood and the preschool years (Bukowski, 2019).

Across the EU, the expansion of ECEC provision has been accompanied by a narrowing gender employment gap, from 17.7 percentage points in 2002 to 10.8 percentage points in 2021 (Council recommendation on early childhood education and care).

Following the expansion of public preschool in Spain, **around two additional mothers entered employment for every 10 children who gained access to childcare** (European Commission: Directorate-General for Justice and Consumers et al., 2022).

The alignment of parental leave and childcare provision is particularly important. In some Member States, paid parental leave ends before children become entitled to an ECEC place. Where such gaps exist, families may struggle to arrange care, often leading mothers to remain out of employment for longer than intended. Ensuring a smooth transition from parental leave to affordable and accessible childcare can strengthen the employment benefits of both policies (European Education and Culture Executive Agency et al., 2025).

The benefits of these measures extend beyond families and into the wider economy. Evidence from Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development countries indicates that job-protected paid parental leave can support women's labour force participation and safeguard their incomes and earnings (Nandi et al., 2018). Employers may also benefit from access to a wider talent pool, fewer short-term absences and productivity gains (Commission communication on an initiative to support work–life balance for working parents and carers; International Finance Corporation, 2017).

2. How unequal sharing of care impacts carers' employment and well-being

The child penalty

The birth of the first child often marks the point at which mothers' and fathers' employment and working time starts diverging. CARE Survey data shows that 27 % of women with childcare responsibilities have reduced their working hours or stopped working for care-related reasons, compared with 16 % of men (Figure 4).

Women are more affected by childcare constraints in almost every Member State. The gender gap varies from about 5 percentage points to nearly 20 percentage points, reflecting differences in the cultural, policy and institutional environment surrounding childcare and employment.

In Spain, when parents struggle with the availability, quality or cost of professional childcare, the gender gaps in labour force participation and employment go up to 31 percentage points and 39 percentage points, respectively. Among parents using professional childcare, the gender gaps are much smaller, at 4 percentage points and 7 percentage points, respectively (Cervini-Plá et al., 2025). This shows how accessible childcare can notably reduce gender inequalities in employment.

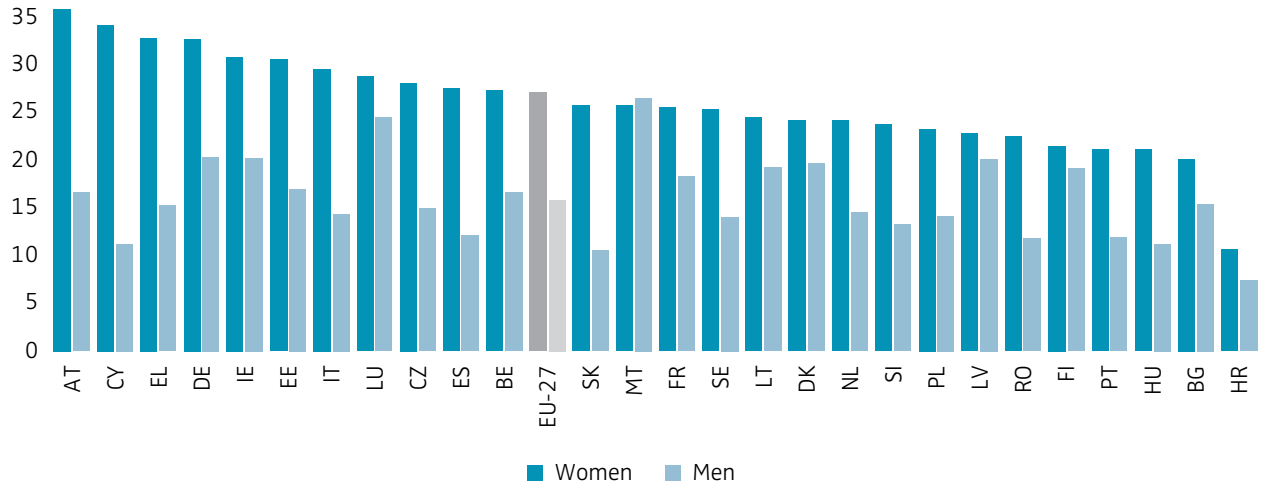
Childcare, work and well-being: key facts

Care-related inactivity and part-time work. In 2025, care responsibilities were the main reason that 17 % of women outside the labour force did not seek employment, compared with 3 % of men (Eurostat, 2026b). Among part-time workers, care responsibilities were the main reason for 27 % of women and 7 % of men not seeking full-time employment (Eurostat, 2026c).

Support networks and well-being. Informal support with childcare is associated with higher well-being among parents, showing how family and community networks can ease care pressures (EIGE, 2026b).

Household composition. Overall, 26 % of single parents have reduced their working hours or stopped working because of childcare, compared with 18 % of parents in couples. Single parents also provide slightly more childcare themselves, at an average of 32 hours a week (EIGE, 2026b).

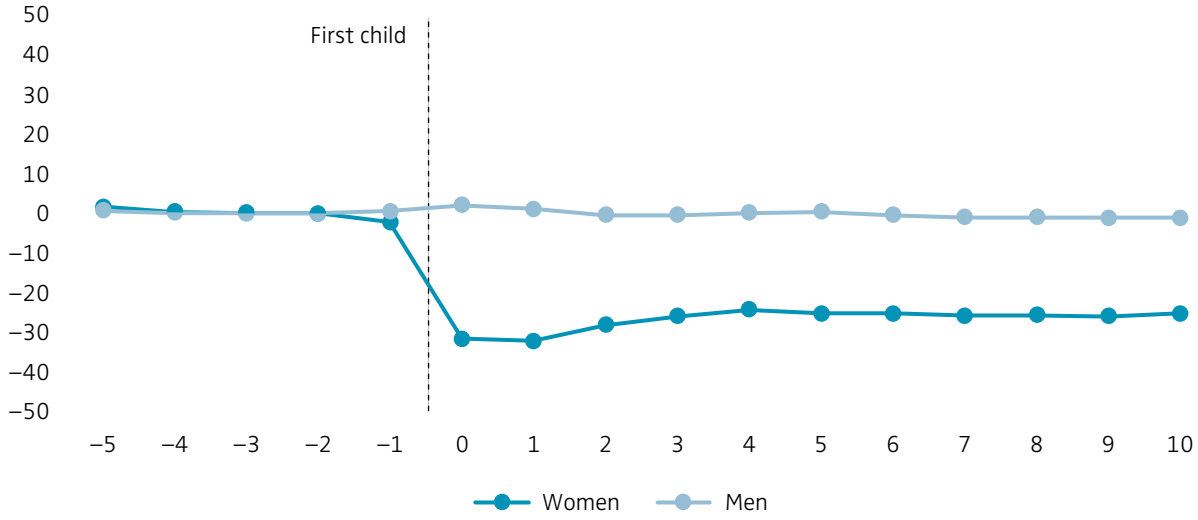
Figure 4: Share of mothers and fathers who reduced working hours or stopped working due to childcare responsibilities (%, EU-27)



Notes: Sample is limited to respondents who provide care to their own children. AT, Austria; BE, Belgium; BG, Bulgaria; CY, Cyprus; CZ, Czechia; DE, Germany; DK, Denmark; EE, Estonia; EL, Greece; ES, Spain; FI, Finland; FR, France; HR, Croatia; HU, Hungary; IE, Ireland; IT, Italy; LT, Lithuania; LU, Luxembourg; LV, Latvia; MT, Malta; NL, the Netherlands; PL, Poland; PT, Portugal; RO, Romania; SE, Sweden; SI, Slovenia; and SK, Slovakia.
Source: CARE Survey, 2024.

The child penalty persists long after the first child is born. It shapes mothers' return to work, employment continuity and job quality (Fauser et al., 2024; Reiter et al., 2026), as shown in Figure 5. These effects are often greater for mothers with lower education and lower household income, reinforcing existing inequalities.

Figure 5: Change in employment rates after the birth of the first child, by sex of parent (%)



Notes: The figure refers to the European countries included in the Child Penalty Atlas and does not represent an EU-27 aggregate. The figure shows the percentage changes in women's and men's employment (vertical axis) relative to the counterfactual employment level in the absence of children, using two years before the first birth as the reference period. Estimates account for age and year effects.
Sources: Child Penalty Atlas (accessed August 2026); Kleven et al., 2025.

Parents' employment rates and working time increase with household income. The CARE Survey results show that, among parents with childcare responsibilities, moving up one income decile is associated with a 2.8-percentage-point higher likelihood of employment and a 2.4-percentage-point higher likelihood of working full-time. These associations are positive for both women and men across all country groups, although they are weaker than among people without childcare responsibilities.

Having children is associated with a wider earnings gap within couples. In the EU, employed women in couples with children have median annual earnings equivalent to 59 % of their partner's earnings, compared with 89 % among women in couples without children. For employed men, the corresponding figures are 171 % and 127 % (EIGE, 2025).

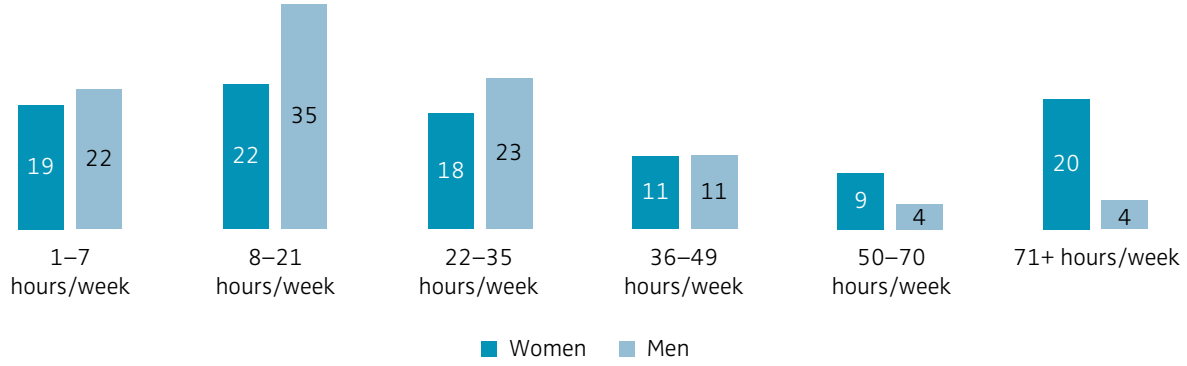
Childcare reforms can reduce the child penalty. Ireland's 2019 national childcare scheme increased formal childcare use among mothers whose youngest child was aged under six by an estimated 12 percentage points, largely through a shift away from informal care ([8]), and increased mothers' labour market participation by 0.5 percentage points (Doorley et al., 2025). Malta's free childcare scheme increased mothers' probability of employment by an estimated 1.3–2.4 percentage points (Bezzina Maltseva, 2026). In Germany, a 10-percentage-point increase in public childcare coverage reduced the maternal earnings penalty by around 2.3 percentage points, accounting for more than half of the total decline over the reform period (Duletzki et al., 2025). The child penalty is, therefore, not inevitable: its scale depends partly on how well parents can combine childcare with paid work.

([8]) Informal care refers to unpaid care provided by family members, relatives, friends or neighbours. In this brief, informal childcare covers unpaid support for daily living and instrumental activities for children.

Beyond parenthood: why the intensity of care matters

Childcare inequalities concern not only who takes on care, but also how much time they spend on it. The gender gap is particularly pronounced among parents who provide many hours of childcare. In 2024, 36 % of women provided more than 35 hours of childcare a week for children aged 11 and under, compared with 18 % of men. At 71 hours or more, the gap widened further, to 20 % of women compared with 4 % of men (Figure 6).

Figure 6: Distribution of weekly hours dedicated to childcare activities by intensity of childcare and sex (%, EU-27)



Note: Sample is limited to respondents who provide care to their own children.
Source: CARE Survey, 2024.

The gender gap in time-intensive childcare is particularly pronounced in families with children under six. CARE Survey evidence shows that having one child under six is associated with a 16-percentage-point increase in the likelihood that mothers provide more than 35 hours of childcare a week, compared with a 5-percentage-point increase among fathers. With two young children, the corresponding increases are 11 percentage points for mothers and 4 percentage points for fathers.

Highly time-intensive childcare is also linked to lower employment. Providing more than 71 hours of childcare a week is associated with a 15-percentage-point lower probability of employment across the EU – around 17 percentage points for women and 12 percentage points for men. Policies that expand childcare coverage and align ECEC with parents' working patterns can therefore support both gender equality and labour supply.

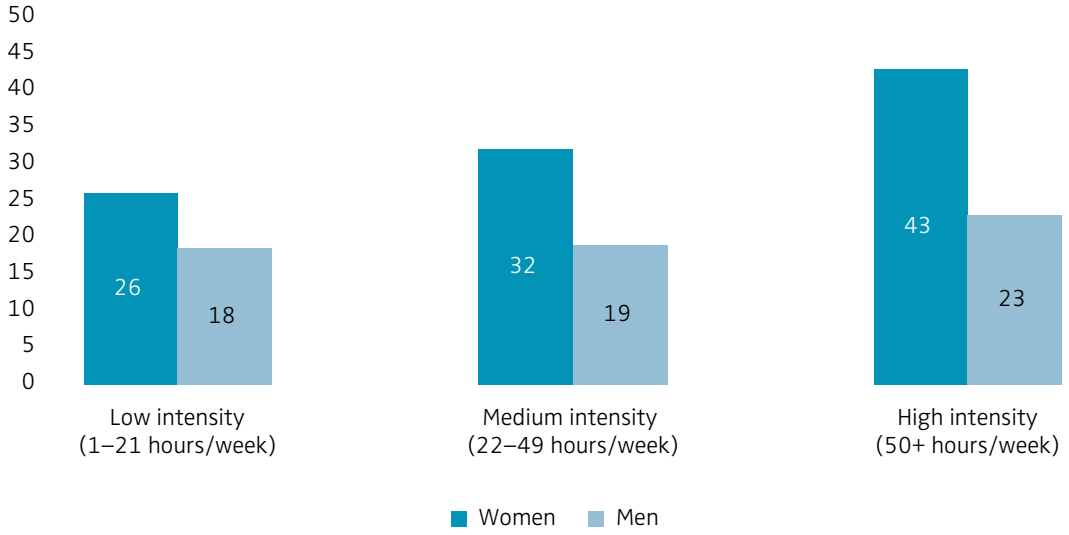
Protecting carers' well-being through stronger support

Time-intensive childcare is associated with poorer mental well-being in parents. Using the World Health Organization-Five (WHO-5) Well-being Index ([9]) to assess data from the 2024 CARE Survey shows that average well-being falls from 68 points among parents providing 1–7 hours of care a week to 56 points among those providing at least 71 hours. Over the same range of respondents, the share of parents reporting poor well-being (a WHO-5 score below 50) nearly doubles, from 23 % to 41 %.

The well-being impact is markedly greater for women. As childcare becomes more intensive, women's average WHO-5 score falls from 65 to 54 points, while the share reporting poor well-being rises from 26 % to 43 % (Figure 7). Among men, well-being remains more stable across most levels of childcare intensity.

([9]) The WHO-5 Well-being Index is a scale ranging from 0 to 100, where higher scores indicate better well-being.

Figure 7: Share of mothers and fathers reporting poor well-being, by childcare intensity (%, EU-27)



Notes: Poor well-being refers to respondents scoring below 50 on the WHO-5 Well-being Index (0–100), where higher scores indicate better well-being. 'Don't know' and 'prefer not to answer' are treated as missing values. Sample is limited to respondents who provide care to their own children.
Source: CARE Survey, 2024.

Support networks can cushion the effects of intensive care. Parents who can rely on relatives, friends or neighbours report better well-being. Living with a grandparent of the child is associated with a 4.9-point higher WHO-5 score, while having informal support with childcare is associated with a 3.2-point increase.

However, access to informal support is unequal. Among parents who needed help with childcare in the previous 12 months, 19 % of women and 14 % of men did not receive such support. In general, men are more likely to receive informal support with childcare on a weekly basis: 37 % compared with 28 % of women.

Single parents have fewer options for sharing care. They report WHO-5 well-being scores almost 2 points lower than parents in couples. Their longer childcare hours and lower use of formal services show that they have fewer options for arranging and sharing care.

Unmet ECEC needs are linked to lower well-being. Support from relatives, friends or neighbours can partly offset this impact but does not fully compensate for unmet childcare needs. Families with nearby relatives, strong social networks or more resources may have more options when formal services fall short than families without such support. Informal care can therefore complement formal services, but relying on it to cover unmet needs can widen inequalities and bring pressure and unpredictability.

3. Access to formal childcare and unmet needs

Access to early childhood education and care

Formal childcare is essential for helping parents reconcile paid work with care. ECEC supports children's learning and social development while giving parents more choices in organising care. When services are limited, care shifts back to households and informal networks, with women bearing a disproportionate share.

Participation among children aged under three has increased, but large differences between Member States remain. In 2025, 41 % of children under three in the EU used formal childcare, which was up from 30 % in 2015 but still about 4 percentage points below the 2030 target (Eurostat, 2025). National rates ranged from 2 % in Slovakia to 67 % in Denmark and the Netherlands (Figure 9).

Access to formal childcare and unmet needs: key facts

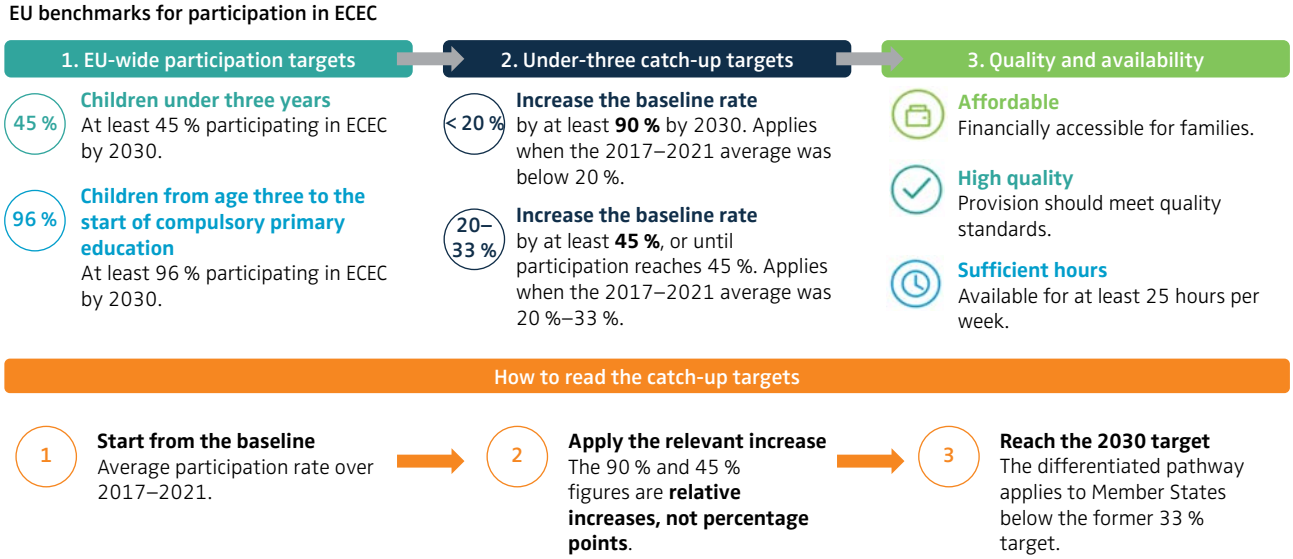
ECEC participation. Eleven Member States have met the EU's 2030 target of 45 % participation among children under three. Nine have met the 96 % target for children aged three to the start of compulsory primary education (Eurostat, 2025).

Out-of-school care. In 16 Member States, fewer than half of parents with children aged 6–11 use formal out-of-school care services (Eurostat, 2025).

Unmet needs. Unmet out-of-school care service needs exceed unmet ECEC needs in every Member State. In nine of them, the gap is higher than 20 percentage points.

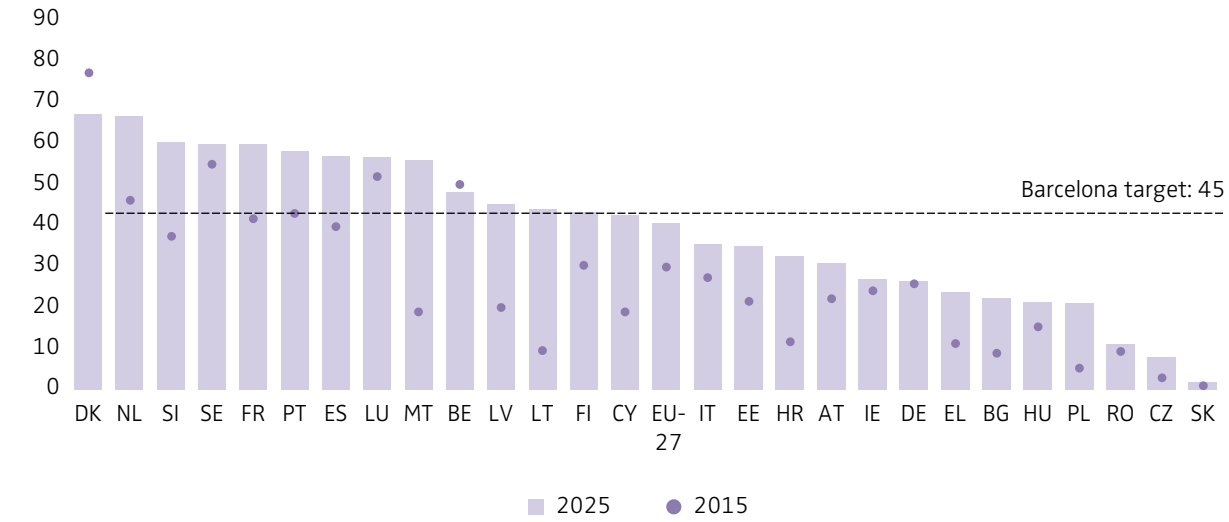
Cost barriers. More than **40 % of low-income parents** with unmet childcare needs cite cost as a barrier, compared with around **28 % of high-income parents**.

Figure 8: Barcelona targets for 2030



Source: Council recommendation on early childhood education and care.

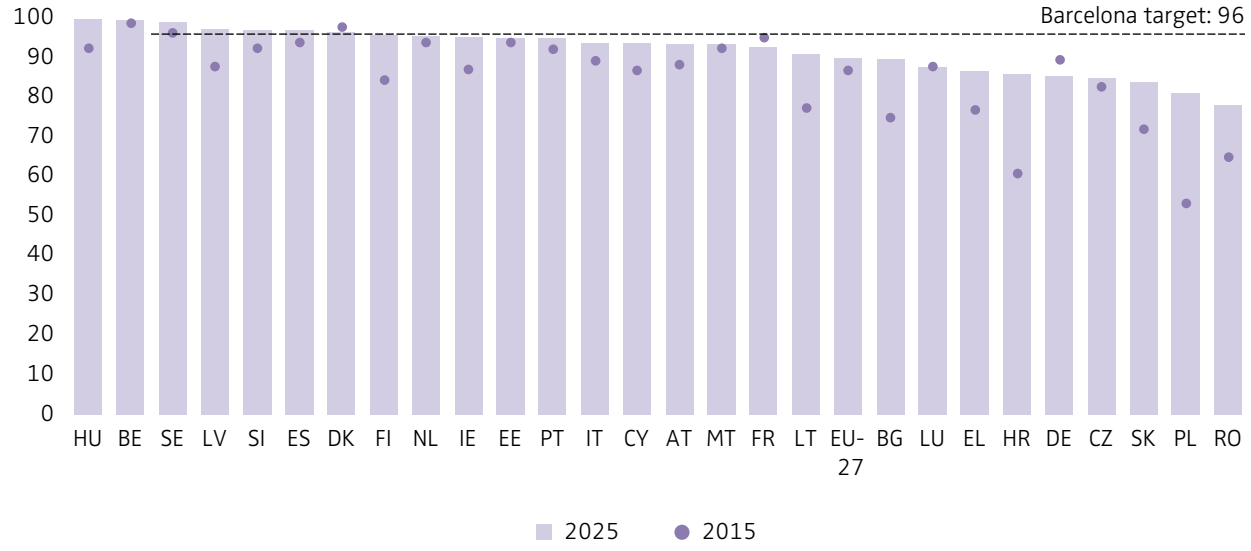
Figure 9: Children aged under three in formal childcare or education, 2015 and 2025 (%, EU-27)



Notes: The 45 % benchmark is the EU-level target for 2030. Member States that did not meet the previous Barcelona target of 33 % participation between 2017 and 2021 are subject to differentiated catch-up targets. Member States with participation rates below 20 % have to increase participation by at least 90 %, while those with rates between 20 % and 33 % have to increase participation by at least 45 % or reach an overall participation rate of 45 %. AT, Austria; BE, Belgium; BG, Bulgaria; CY, Cyprus; CZ, Czechia; DE, Germany; DK, Denmark; EE, Estonia; EL, Greece; ES, Spain; FI, Finland; FR, France; HR, Croatia; HU, Hungary; IE, Ireland; IT, Italy; LT, Lithuania; LU, Luxembourg; LV, Latvia; MT, Malta; NL, the Netherlands; PL, Poland; PT, Portugal; RO, Romania; SE, Sweden; SI, Slovenia; and SK, Slovakia.
Source: Eurostat, 2025.

Participation is considerably higher among children aged three to the start of compulsory primary education. In 2025, 89 % participated in pre-primary education, 7 percentage points below the 96 % EU target (Eurostat, 2025). Although differences between Member States are narrower than for children under three, the national rates ranged from 78 % in Romania to 100 % in Hungary (Figure 10). Most Member States increased participation between 2015 and 2025.

Figure 10: Children from age three to minimum compulsory school age in formal childcare or education (%, 2015 and 2025)



Notes: AT, Austria; BE, Belgium; BG, Bulgaria; CY, Cyprus; CZ, Czechia; DE, Germany; DK, Denmark; EE, Estonia; EL, Greece; ES, Spain; FI, Finland; FR, France; HR, Croatia; HU, Hungary; IE, Ireland; IT, Italy; LT, Lithuania; LU, Luxembourg; LV, Latvia; MT, Malta; NL, the Netherlands; PL, Poland; PT, Portugal; RO, Romania; SE, Sweden; SI, Slovenia; and SK, Slovakia.
Source: Eurostat, 2025.

Access to out-of-school care

Childcare needs continue after children start primary school. School hours and holidays often do not align with parents' working schedules, creating a need for before- and after-school services or holiday care. The EU has recognised that affordable, accessible and high-quality out-of-school care can support parents', particularly mothers', employment and working hours (Council recommendation on early childhood education and care). Across the EU, 48 % of parents with children aged 6–11 use formal out-of-school care, varying from 31 % in Italy to 77 % in Cyprus (Figure 11).

Figure 11: Share of parents with children aged 6–11 who have used formal out-of-school care, by Member State (%, EU-27)



(*) Low reliability.
Notes: Data for Luxembourg is not presented due to the low number of observations. Sample was limited to respondents with children between 6 and 11 years old who accessed out-of-school care in the previous three months. AT, Austria; BE, Belgium; BG, Bulgaria; CY, Cyprus; CZ, Czechia; DE, Germany; DK, Denmark; EE, Estonia; EL, Greece; ES, Spain; FI, Finland; FR, France; HR, Croatia; HU, Hungary; IE, Ireland; IT, Italy; LT, Lithuania; LV, Latvia; MT, Malta; NL, the Netherlands; PL, Poland; PT, Portugal; RO, Romania; SE, Sweden; SI, Slovenia; and SK, Slovakia.
Source: CARE Survey, 2024.

The drivers of unmet childcare needs

Formal childcare is growing, yet unmet needs remain widespread. Across the EU, around one in four parents of children aged five and under could not access ECEC when needed in the previous three months. Unmet needs were even more common for out-of-school care, with these reported by 39 % of parents.

Unmet needs are higher for out-of-school care than for ECEC in every Member State. The gap is particularly large in Hungary (59 % for out-of-school care compared with 24 % for ECEC), Finland (40 % versus 11 %), Italy (60 % versus 30 %) and Romania (52 % versus 25 %). It shows weak continuity between ECEC and out-of-school care, which often operate as separate parts of the childcare system.

Common barriers to childcare

1. **Co-payment systems** may still place a higher financial burden on some families, even when fees are adjusted by income.

2. High-quality childcare services are often **more available in higher-income areas.**

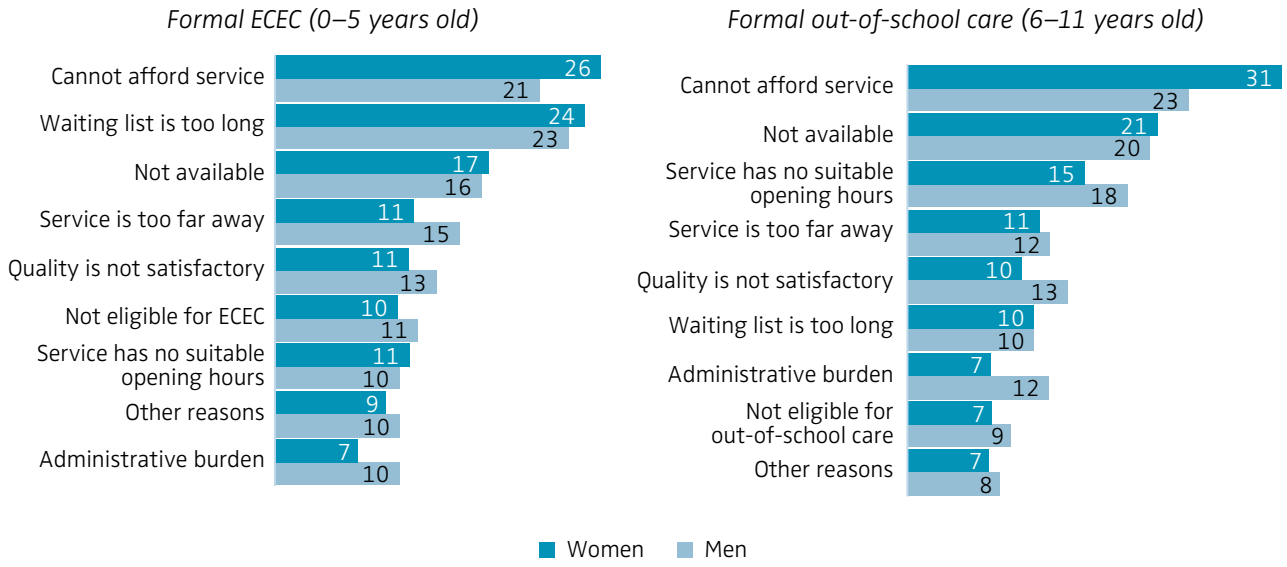
3. **Opening hours** may not reflect the needs of parents who are working shifts or irregular hours or have non-standard jobs.

4. **Complex administrative procedures** may make it harder for some households to access support.

Cost and waiting lists are the main barriers to ECEC. Parents with unmet ECEC needs also frequently mention a lack of places. Distance, unsuitable opening hours, quality concerns, restrictive eligibility criteria and burdensome administrative requirements are reported less often (Figure 12).

Barriers to out-of-school care differ slightly. Cost remains the most common barrier, affecting 31 % of women and 23 % of men with unmet childcare needs. This is followed by a lack of places, reported by 21 % and 20 %, respectively, while unsuitable opening hours affect 15 % of women and 18 % of men.

Figure 12: Reasons for unmet formal childcare needs by type of childcare and sex of parent (%, EU-27)



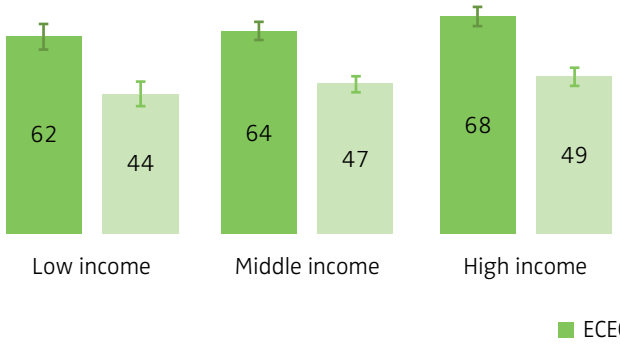
Notes: Percentage of respondents with unmet ECEC or out-of-school care needs who selected each reason. Sample was limited to respondents with children aged 0–5 and 6–11 who could not use ECEC and out-of-school care, respectively, when they needed to.
Source: CARE Survey, 2024.

Lower-income families face both lower use and greater unmet needs. Model estimates based on the CARE Survey indicate that the predicted probability of using ECEC increases from 62 % among lower-income parents to 68 % among high-income parents, while use of out-of-school care rises from 44 % to 49 % (Figure 13a). Lower-income parents are also 6 percentage points more likely to report unmet ECEC needs and 8 percentage points more likely to report unmet out-of-school care needs (Figure 13b).

Lower education is associated with fewer childcare options, both formal and informal. Based on the regression model using CARE Survey data, parents with lower education have a higher predicted probability of reporting unmet ECEC needs than parents with higher education (by 8.3 percentage points). They also have a lower predicted probability of receiving unpaid childcare support from relatives, friends or neighbours (by 8.7 percentage points).

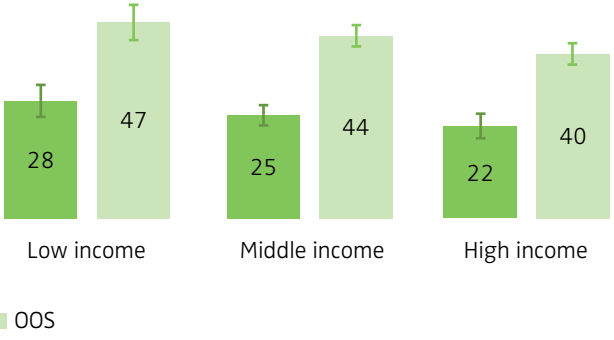
Single parents have fewer opportunities to share childcare within the household. They provide an average of 32 hours of childcare a week, compared with 29.8 hours among parents in couples. This has implications for childcare service provision. For single parents seeking to combine employment and care, flexible opening hours are therefore particularly important, especially when informal support from relatives or friends is limited (OECD, 2022).

Figure 13a: Probability of ECEC and out-of-school care use, by household income (%, EU-27)



Notes: Sample was limited to respondents with children aged 0–5 and 6–11 who accessed formal childcare services in the previous three months. The vertical lines indicate the margin of uncertainty around each estimate: the true probability is likely to lie within this range. Longer lines reflect smaller sample sizes for that group. OOS, out-of-school care.
Source: CARE Survey, 2024.

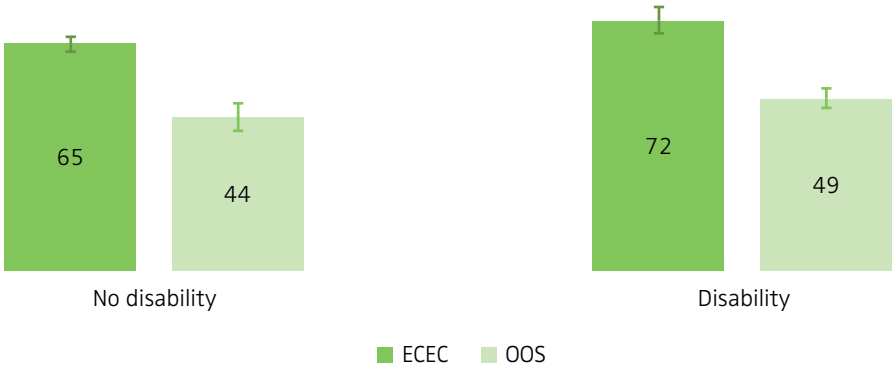
Figure 13b: Probability of ECEC and out-of-school care unmet needs, by household income (%, EU-27)



Notes: Sample was limited to respondents with children aged 0–5 and 6–11 who could not use ECEC and out-of-school care, respectively, when they needed to. The vertical lines indicate the margin of uncertainty around each estimate: the true probability is likely to lie within this range. Longer lines reflect smaller sample sizes for that group. OOS, out-of-school care.
Source: CARE Survey, 2024.

Parents with long-term disabilities use a broader mix of formal and informal childcare arrangements to meet their care needs. Compared with parents without disabilities, they have a 7-percentage-point higher predicted probability of using ECEC (Figure 14). They are also 9–12 percentage points more likely to receive unpaid childcare help from relatives, friends or neighbours, depending on the child's age.

Figure 14: Probability of ECEC and out-of-school care use, by parent's disability status (%, EU-27)



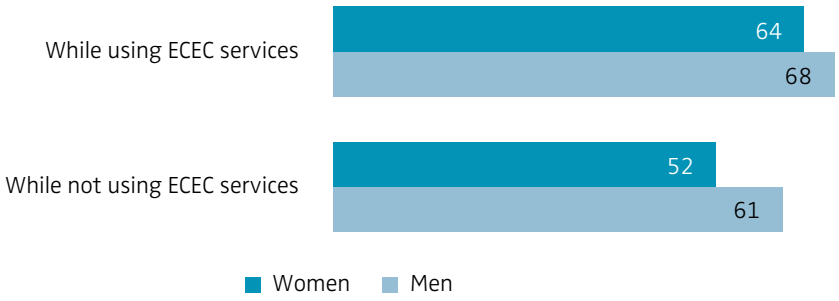
Notes: Sample was limited to respondents with children aged 0–5 and 6–11 who accessed formal childcare services in the previous three months. The vertical lines indicate the margin of uncertainty around each estimate: the true probability is likely to lie within this range. Longer lines reflect smaller sample sizes for that group. Disability is defined as a long-standing activity limitation due to a health problem (at least six months). OOS, out-of-school care.
Source: CARE Survey, 2024.

How formal and informal childcare work together

Formal childcare often complements rather than replaces informal support. Among parents using ECEC, 64 % of women and 68 % of men also receive informal childcare support from relatives or friends. Even among parents who do not use formal childcare, informal support remains common, albeit at lower levels (52 % of women and 61 % of men) (Figure 15).

Employment partly explains this pattern. Among mothers who do not use formal childcare, 34 % are outside employment, compared with 26 % of mothers who do use it (EIGE, 2026b). Even when formal childcare covers much of families' needs, informal help often fills the remaining gaps.

Figure 15. Share of parents of children under six years old relying on unpaid help from family, friends or others (%, EU-27)



Source: CARE Survey, 2024.

Informal support is more strongly linked to out-of-school care than to ECEC. Receiving informal childcare support is associated with a 17.7-percentage-point higher probability of using formal out-of-school care, around three times the corresponding association for ECEC (5.7 percentage points). Informal support is also associated with a 15-percentage-point lower likelihood of unmet out-of-school care needs, compared with 3.7 percentage points for ECEC.

Formal and informal childcare therefore work together and, especially for school-age children, appear to function as complementary rather than separate forms of provision. This complementarity is particularly evident for out-of-school care, where formal services must fit around school and working hours. At the same time, families without relatives or other trusted carers have fewer options when formal provision does not fully meet their childcare needs.

4. The way forward: policy pointers

Childcare, gender equality and employment are closely linked. When childcare services are unavailable, unaffordable or do not fit parents' working schedules, care responsibilities are more likely to fall on mothers, limiting their employment opportunities. Policy action therefore needs to address these challenges together: expanding childcare services, removing barriers to the use of these services and promoting equal sharing of care between genders.

Recognise childcare services as a social and economic investment

Invest in affordable, accessible and high-quality ECEC

- Recognise ECEC as a social and economic investment. Expand affordable, accessible and high-quality services that give parents genuine choices in organising care, help carers remain in or return to paid work and support carers' work–life balance.
- Accelerate progress towards the Barcelona targets while ensuring that services are affordable, high quality, geographically accessible and available at times that meet families' needs.

Make out-of-school care a core pillar of childcare policy

- Recognise childcare needs before and after school and during school holidays, aligned with school schedules and parents' working hours.
- Monitor out-of-school care separately from ECEC targets and develop national or regional benchmarks for availability, access, use and quality.

Support families through leave, adequate income replacement and flexible working, as well as coordinated services that respond to their diverse needs

Use leave and flexible working to complement formal childcare

- Strengthen effective access to maternity, paternity and parental leave with adequate income replacement and flexible working arrangements, and promote equal take-up among women and men.
- Design these measures to support shared care, which can prevent prolonged labour market withdrawal among mothers.

Strengthen coordinated support for parents with intensive childcare responsibilities

- Improve coordination between childcare, employment and family support services so that parents with intensive care duties can find and access the support available to them.

Design childcare services to respond to diverse family circumstances

- Adapt fees, eligibility rules, enrolment procedures, information, physical accessibility and opening hours to the needs of lower-income families, single parents and parents with disabilities.
- Provide targeted information and enrolment support so access does not depend on families' resources, support networks or knowledge of the system.

Make evidence and evaluation drive childcare policy and investment

Monitor effective access to services, unmet needs and outcomes

- Track the actual use of services alongside unmet needs, affordability, geographical coverage, opening hours and their impact on parents' economic and social well-being.
- Monitor ECEC and out-of-school care separately, using sex-disaggregated data and, where possible, data by income, household composition, disability, migrant background and place of residence.

References

Bezzina Maltseva, N. (2026), 'The impact of Malta's free childcare scheme on female employment', *SSRN Electronic Journal*, https://doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.6176120.

Cervini-Plá, M. and Silva, J. I. (2025), 'Childcare restrictions and gender gap in labor outcomes', *Applied Economic Analysis*, Vol. 33, No 98, pp. 92–117, https://doi.org/10.1108/AEA-12-2023-0479.

Çivilidağ, A. and Durmaz, Ş. (2026), 'The relationship of flexible working arrangements on work-family conflict, work–life balance and organizational commitment: A systematic review and meta-analysis', *BMC Psychology*, Vol. 14, No 1, p. 472, https://doi.org/10.1186/s40359-026-04216-y.

Doorley, K., Tuda, D. and Duggan, L. (2025), 'Will childcare subsidies increase the labour supply of mothers in Ireland?', *Fiscal Studies*, Vol. 46, No 2, pp. 239–259, https://doi.org/10.1111/1475-5890.12399.

Duletzki, L.-M. and Lim, N. (2025), 'Can early public childcare reduce child penalties? Evidence from Germany', *SSRN Electronic Journal*, https://doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.5109977.

EIGE (2025), *Gender Equality Index 2025 – Sharper data for a changing world,* Publications Office of the European Union, Luxembourg, https://doi.org/10.2839/1693233.

EIGE (2026a), *Investing in Care: Advancing EU competitiveness and gender equality*, Publications Office of the European Union, Luxembourg.

EIGE (2026b), *Sharing Care, Closing Gender Gaps – CARE Survey 2024*, Publications Office of the European Union, Luxembourg, https://doi.org/10.2839/3368911.

EIGE (2026c), *Gender Equality Index 2026 – Making parental leave work*, Publications Office of the European Union, Luxembourg.

European Commission: Directorate-General for Justice and Consumers, Stockholm University and Utrecht University (2022), *Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) – A focused review of reform impact studies*, Publications Office of the European Union, Luxembourg, https://data.europa.eu/doi/10.2838/912771.

European Education and Culture Executive Agency, Motiejūnaitė-Schulmeister, A., De Coster, I. and Noorani, S. (2025), *Key data on early childhood education and care in Europe 2025 – Eurydice report*, Publications Office of the European Union, Luxembourg, https://data.europa.eu/doi/10.2797/66224.

Eurostat (2025), Children in formal childcare or education by age group and duration – % over the population of each age group, dataset, accessed 1 September, https://doi.org/10.2908/ILC_CAINDFORMAL.

Eurostat (2026a), 'Employment rate of adults by educational attainment level, number of children and age of youngest child', accessed 1 September, https://doi.org/10.2908/LFST_HHEREDCH.

Eurostat (2026b), 'Persons outside the labour force not seeking employment by main reason', accessed 1 September, https://doi.org/10.2908/LFSA_IGAR.

Eurostat (2026c), 'Persons in part-time employment by main reason', accessed 1 September, https://doi.org/10.2908/LFSA_EPGAR.

Fauser, S., Struffolino, E. and Levanon, A. (2024), 'Converging mothers' employment trajectories between East and West Germany? A focus on the 2008-childcare-reform', *Journal of Marriage and Family*, Vol. 87, No 2, pp. 566–589, https://doi.org/10.1111/jomf.13040.

International Finance Corporation (2017), *Tackling Childcare: The business case for employer-supported childcare*, https://www.ifc.org/content/dam/ifc/doc/mgrt/01817-wb-childcare-report-finalweb3.pdf.

Kleven, H., Landais, C. and Leite-Mariante, G. (2025), 'The Child Penalty Atlas', *The Review of Economic Studies*, Vol. 92, No. 5, pp. 3174–3207, https://doi.org/10.1093/restud/rdae104.

Nandi, A., Jahagirdar, D., Dimitris, M. C., Labrecque, J. A., Strumpf, E. C. et al. (2018), 'The impact of parental and medical leave policies on socioeconomic and health outcomes in OECD countries: A systematic review of the Empirical literature', *The Milbank Quarterly*, Vol. 96, No 3, pp. 434–471, https://doi.org/10.1111/1468-0009.12340.

Narazani, E., Agundez Garcia, A., Christl, M. and Figari, F. (2022), *The impact of alternative childcare policies on mothers' employment for selected EU countries*, European Commission, Seville, JRC130477, https://publications.jrc.ec.europa.eu/repository/handle/JRC130477.

Narazani, E., Agúndez García, A., Christl, M. and Figari, F. (2025), 'Increased childcare to promote mothers' employment in selected EU countries', *Journal of Policy Modeling*, Vol. 47, No 3, pp. 492–511, https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jpolmod.2024.12.005.

OECD (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development) (2022), *Evolving Family Models in Spain: A new national framework for improved support and protection for families*, OECD Publishing, Paris, https://doi.org/10.1787/c27e63ab-en.

OECD (2025), *Paid Leave for Fathers: Recent OECD policy trends*, OECD Publishing, Paris, https://doi.org/10.1787/07442bed-en.

Reiter, C. and Spitzer, S. (2026), 'When gender trumps skills: Employment trajectories of Austrian parents after their first birth,' *Comparative Population Studies*, Vol. 51, https://doi.org/10.12765/CPoS-2026-01.

Thévenon, O. and Solaz, A. (2013), 'Labour market effects of parental leave policies in OECD countries', *OECD Social, Employment and Migration Working Papers*, No 141, OECD Publishing, Paris, https://doi.org/10.1787/5k8xb6hw1wjf-en.

Legislation and related items

Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions – An initiative to support work–life balance for working parents and carers, COM(2017) 252 final of 26 April 2017, https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=celex:52017DC0252.

Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions on the European Pillar of Social Rights, COM(2026) 650 final of 22 July 2026, https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/HTML/?uri=CELEX:52026DC0650.

Council Recommendation of 8 December 2022 on early childhood education and care: the Barcelona targets for 2030, 2022/C (OJ C 484, 20.12.2022, p. 1, ELI: https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=CELEX:32022H1220(01)).

Directive (EU) 2019/1158 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 20 June 2019 on work–life balance for parents and carers and repealing Council Directive 2010/18/EU (OJ L 188, 12.7.2019, p. 79, ELI: https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=CELEX:32019L1158).

European Institute for Gender Equality

Publications Office of the European Union

European Institute for Gender Equality

Gedimino pr. 16
LT-01103 Vilnius
LITHUANIA

eige.europa.eu

Follow us

PDF ISBN 978-92-9486-357-7 doi:10.2839/3643457 MH-01-26-059-EN-N

This publication was promoted as part of EIGE's gender equality for growth campaign. The campaign highlights how investing in people can help build more competitive, resilient and prosperous economies.

The European Institute for Gender Equality (EIGE) is the EU knowledge centre on gender equality. EIGE supports policymakers and all relevant institutions in their efforts to make equality between women and men a reality for all Europeans by providing them with specific expertise and comparable and reliable data on gender equality in Europe.

© 2026 European Institute for Gender Equality

An EU Agency