

Creating Family-Friendly Workplaces:

Lessons and Results from the Expanding Choices Project in Albania, the Republic of Moldova and Kosovo



Introduction and overview

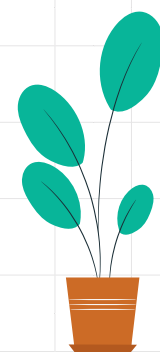
The Expanding Choices project is increasing the commitment to, as well as knowledge, evidence and tools on, gender-responsive family policies among governments, private sector actors and civil society organizations in Albania, the Republic of Moldova and Kosovo.* Family-friendly policies are not only a matter of social justice but also an investment in sustainable development. When women and men are able to balance their work and family responsibilities, they can participate fully in the economic growth and social well-being of their communities. Addressing the absence of gender-responsive family policies and harmful social norms that restrict women to caregiving roles and men to breadwinning roles is crucial. Gender-responsive family policies allow for a more balanced redistribution of unpaid care work and promote gender equality and economic empowerment.

By fostering shared caregiving responsibilities and endorsing work-life balance,

gender-responsive family policies empower women to fully join and progress in the labour force,

thereby reducing gender pay and pension gaps. This also alleviates women's economic dependency on men and decreases poverty among older women, often exacerbated by the typical lifespan disparities between genders. Ultimately, gender-responsive family policies advance women's participation in the economy and contribute to sustainable growth in their countries while simultaneously addressing gender inequalities.

* All references to Kosovo shall be understood to be in the context of Security Council Resolution 1244 (1999).



Promoting work–life balance: the Expanding Choices project’s efforts to advance gender equality and economic growth

In Eastern Europe and Central Asia, women typically spend three hours more daily on unpaid care work than men.¹ The scarcity of child- and elder-care services, restricted parental leave and the absence of flexible work arrangements often compel women to make a tough choice between pursuing a career and starting a family. This predicament results in some of the lowest rates of female workforce participation across Europe and even worldwide for some countries in Eastern Europe and Central Asia.² Gender norms and stereotypes that favour women’s domestic and unpaid care roles also impact men, often relegating them to the traditional role of financial provider. This social dynamic, wherein men’s limited involvement in caregiving roles persists, can create challenges for couples in starting or expanding their families. As the burden of childcare and domestic responsibilities largely falls on women, it can impact their participation in the labour market, hinder their career growth and lead to couples collectively deciding to have fewer children. This situation, in turn, can influence both fertility rates and development in the region.

In response to the gender disparities in unpaid care work and the challenges faced by women in balancing work and family, the Expanding Choices project, in collaboration with 19 champion companies across Albania, the Republic of Moldova and Kosovo, has already made significant strides in promoting gender-responsive family policies and creating family-friendly workplaces. Through the combined efforts of the public and private sectors, these initiatives

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1. Data collected prior to the project indicated a significant disparity in the distribution of unpaid domestic and care work in Albania and the Republic of Moldova. In Albania, women dedicated 22 per cent of their day to these tasks, compared with a mere 3 per cent for men, according to 2011 data. Similarly, 2012 data from the Republic of Moldova showed that women spent 19 per cent of their day on unpaid work, nearly double the 10 per cent that men spent on such work. No further updates were available to track changes over the course of the project. This data is available in unpublished UNFPA annual reports.
 2. International Labour Organization, *Women in Business and Management: Gaining Momentum in Eastern Europe and Central Asia* (Geneva, 2017).

have resulted in the establishment of more inclusive and supportive work environments, benefiting nearly 14,000 employees. With nearly two thirds of the workforce at champion companies being women, the implementation of gender-responsive family policies is crucial for achieving gender equality and work-life balance.

This document offers a comprehensive overview of best practices and lessons learned during the implementation process. It demonstrates how these efforts have already reshaped workplaces, fostering more inclusive and supportive environments. The document ultimately provides a testament to the value of gender-responsive family policies, underscoring their potential in

driving both employee well-being and business success while contributing to more **equal, prosperous and resilient societies.**



Work–life balance

The Expanding Choices project recognizes the significance of work–life balance in enabling families to effectively manage both their careers and family responsibilities. By promoting initiatives to support work–life balance, the project bolsters women’s labour force participation, acknowledging that without adequate support, women often face challenges that cause them to leave their jobs. Through its comprehensive initiatives and policies, the project is already fostering a more balanced and inclusive work environment. Champion companies, as a result of the project’s intervention, have embraced work–life balance and implemented various initiatives to support their employees and their caregiving responsibilities. These include flexible work arrangements such as hybrid, remote, part-time and condensed schedules, as well as designated breastfeeding areas and other measures that create a conducive and inclusive work environment for working parents. Together, these efforts exemplify the project’s success in promoting work–life balance and creating family-friendly workplaces, empowering women to actively participate in the workforce while maintaining fulfilling lives.

As part of the Expanding Choices project in Albania, R&T, a champion company, partnered with national stakeholders to improve family policies. The company introduced a range of gender-responsive family policies, including flexible working hours and remote work options, that were influenced by the project’s intervention. These initiatives have enabled employees to have greater control over their work schedules and achieve a better work–life balance.

As a result of its participation in the project, the champion company Raiffeisen Bank Albania introduced work–life balance measures such as hybrid work options and extra days off. Employees now have the opportunity to take a day off for their birthday and gain additional days off based on their years of service. The bank also offers flexible work arrangements for young mothers, including shortened workdays and paid time for breastfeeding, recognizing the importance of supporting working parents in their roles. The bank believes that its success is closely related to the well-being and health of its staff both at work and outside the workplace. It also promotes a holistic approach to well-being,

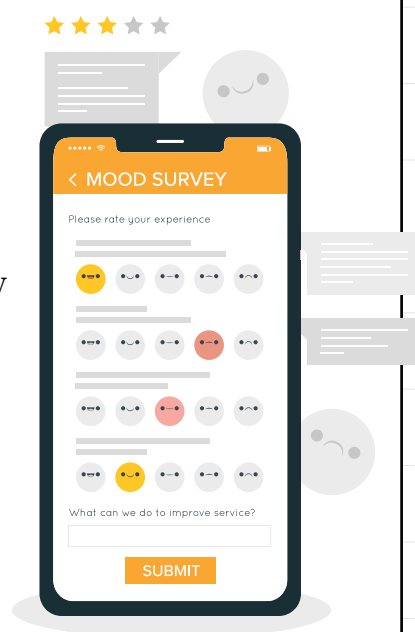
which includes emotional, mental and social aspects. Moreover, the bank offers a joint contribution scheme for private pensions and health care.

Super Viva, another champion company in the Expanding Choices project, extended its paternity leave provisions beyond legal requirements, demonstrating its commitment to a family-friendly workplace. It also implemented a policy allowing pregnant employees to work fewer hours while still receiving full pay. The company is actively exploring additional initiatives such as health insurance coverage and designated spaces for breastfeeding and pumping, aligning with the Expanding Choices project's goal of promoting gender equality in the workplace.

Orange Moldova, a champion company in the Expanding Choices project, established a fathers' club to provide a platform for employees to grow personally and professionally while discussing their concerns and experiences as fathers. This initiative has helped employees become better fathers and employees, contributing to a more supportive work environment.

Raiffeisen Bank Kosovo has also made gender-responsive family policies a top priority, influenced by its participation in the Expanding Choices project. It has implemented family-friendly measures such as the inclusion of employees' elderly parents in health insurance coverage and creating an internal community of parents for peer support. The bank actively seeks employee feedback through satisfaction surveys and is committed to implementing necessary changes based on employees' input, thus fostering a workplace that supports work-life balance and family well-being.

While advocating for policy change is crucial, the real impact of these efforts becomes clear in the way they affect people's lives. The project's impact can be seen in the lives of individuals like Mariana Arsene, a woman living with a disability in the Republic of Moldova. She works at one of the champion companies, where she benefits from the positive impact of inclusive policies enabling shorter work weeks, training and the possibility of remote work.



Breaking barriers: Mariana's journey from discrimination to empowerment in the workplace

Mariana Arsene, a 27-year-old woman living with a speech impairment and a disability in the Republic of Moldova, serves as a powerful example of the positive impact of gender-responsive family policies. She faced discrimination throughout her life, from childhood until she entered the workforce. However, Mariana's story shows that gender-responsive family policies can remove barriers that prevent persons with disabilities from entering and thriving in the labour market.

Today, she works in Chisinau as a customer operations agent at Orange Moldova, one of the 19 champion companies partnered with the Expanding Choices project. At the company, she benefits from a shorter work week, in line with Moldovan law, which allows persons with disabilities to work six hours per day instead of the standard eight. In addition to this, she has access to training, a free mobile package, health insurance, a performance bonus, lunch vouchers and the possibility to work remotely. Mariana's story underscores the positive impact that family-friendly workplaces have in making companies more inclusive and diverse.

In an effort to promote accessible childcare options for working families, the Expanding Choices project has supported initiatives such as the crèche fund, a financial resource aimed at establishing and expanding public crèches in the Republic of Moldova. The crèche fund provides funding and support to create more childcare facilities that can accommodate the needs of working parents and provide a safe and nurturing environment for their children. By investing in the development of public crèches, the project aims to alleviate the childcare burden on families, enabling parents to pursue their careers while ensuring that their children receive quality care and early childhood education.

In Albania, the Expanding Choices project collaborated with the Tirana Municipality and Act for Society, a UNFPA implementing partner, to strengthen good-parenting clubs in all 27 of the country's administrative units. This partnership resulted in the development and accreditation of a training manual along with a three-day training session attended by 18 employees from six community centres. The aim was to establish a model that supports parents and families in child-rearing, enhances parenting skills and promotes a more equal distribution of unpaid care work.

Parental leave policy and engaged fatherhood

The Expanding Choices project has made significant advancements in promoting parental leave policies and engaged fatherhood within the private sector and at the national level. Through a combination of legislative changes and initiatives implemented by champion companies, the project has fostered a supportive environment for fathers to actively participate in caregiving responsibilities. These efforts have not only benefited individual companies but have also contributed to a broader cultural shift towards gender equality and shared parenting.

Substantial legislative changes have already materialized in the Republic of Moldova as a result of the project, having a positive impact on families and caregivers. Law No. 195 permitted shared childcare leave and introduced a higher-income, shorter-term childcare allowance. Law No. 367 established alternative childcare services, while Law No. 353 modified maternity leave provisions. This reshaping of the Republic of Moldova's national gender-responsive family policies has far-reaching impacts that benefit the entire population. These legislative changes were achieved not in isolation but through careful coordination and dialogue between various stakeholders.

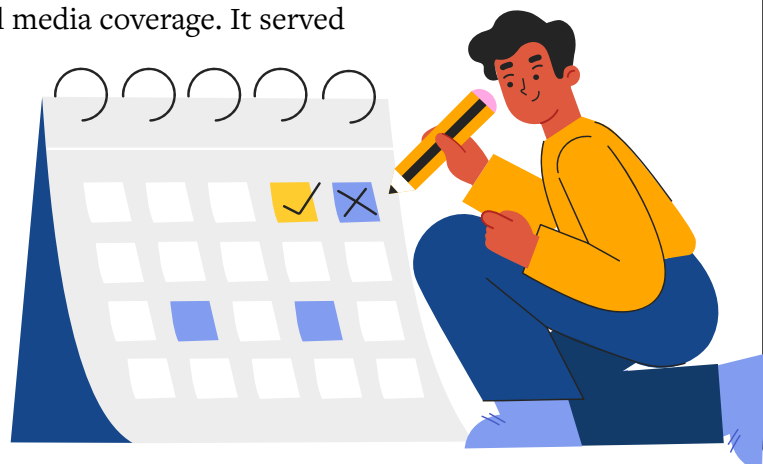
The Expanding Choices project's efforts on the policy front include the development of a policy brief on the financial implications of maternity, paternity and parental leave. The proposed model suggests covering these leave benefits through Kosovo's governmental budget, thus relieving employers of the burden. This strategy is expected to



stimulate greater economic activity among women, potentially offsetting the associated costs within the first year through increased revenue from profit and income taxes. The endorsement of the policy brief by significant stakeholders, as well as its usage as a key reference in meetings with government officials and members of the European Parliament, highlights its role in driving policy changes aimed at establishing a more equitable and inclusive work environment.

Recent changes to the Labour Code in Albania have introduced the concept of parental leave, allowing individuals to take unpaid leave for a minimum of four months. While there have been improvements in relation to paternity leave, more detailed provisions are still needed to support fathers who take this leave in line with the EU directive on the promotion of life-work balance. The Expanding Choices project plays a crucial role in advocating for these legislative changes and promoting gender-responsive family policies. For example, Kliton Tane, a sales agent at Agna Group, a champion company in the project, was able to take five months of paternity leave with the support of the company's human resources department. This highlights the importance of both the legal framework and support from employers in enabling fathers to take leave and benefit from the time they spend with their children. Protection against termination during paternity leave is provided by Article 105(2) of the Labour Code, further safeguarding employees.

The project in Kosovo partnered with local organizations to host the Father's Day Festival in Pristina, an event that aimed to promote equal and active fatherhood, and included activities such as an art exhibition, superdad competitions and interactive activities designed to demonstrate the fulfilment of being an involved father. The festival, in addition to resulting in a significant turnout, amplified its core values through social media and traditional media coverage. It served as an impactful platform for raising awareness of parental leave, equality in parenting and active fatherhood, and it garnered positive feedback from participants.



Men's active involvement in caregiving, particularly through taking parental leave, has shown positive effects on their relationships with their children. In Kosovo, for example, 91 per cent of men reported a positive impact in this regard.³ This increased engagement not only benefits men but also supports women in pursuing their career and family goals, allowing them to achieve a better work–life balance. By sharing caregiving responsibilities, men contribute to a more balanced distribution of duties within the family, fostering gender equality and enabling both parents to thrive personally and professionally.

By working closely with companies and advocating for legislative reforms, the project has paved the way for more inclusive and supportive workplace cultures that encourage fathers' involvement in childcare and family life. The achievements in this area highlight the project's commitment to promoting gender-responsive family policies and transforming social norms regarding parental roles.

Through strategic collaboration with government entities and dedicated advocacy for work–life balance, the Expanding Choices project is successfully influencing legislative changes and promoting policies that support the harmonious integration of career and family responsibilities. The project, in collaboration with the Women's Economic Forum, has actively advocated the inclusion of provisions on maternity, paternity and parental leave in the Labour Law of Kosovo, aligning with the EU work–life balance directive.



3. Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe Mission in Kosovo and UN Population Fund Kosovo, *A Men's Perspective on Gender Equality in Kosovo: Main Findings from the International Men and Gender Equality Survey* (Prishtinë/Priština, 2018).

Additionally, the project played a significant role in promoting the policy brief on costing maternity, paternity and parental leave provisions in the Labour Law by providing valuable insights and recommendations. Through efforts like these, the Expanding Choices project contributes to advancing work–life balance by advocating supportive family policies and encouraging policy reforms.

The project played a significant role in building the knowledge and evidence base around gender-responsive family policies, particularly their importance and benefits, by conducting a national study in Albania on gender-responsive family policies. The study examined the knowledge, attitudes and perceptions of employees and employers in both the public and private sectors regarding these policies. The findings of the study will serve as evidence-based advocacy tools to inform legislative changes and policy recommendations, thus contributing to the improvement and implementation of family-friendly and gender equality policies in Albania.

The implementation of gender-responsive family policies, specifically policies on family-friendly workplaces, can have a significant impact on fathers' involvement in caring for their children with disabilities and in sharing unpaid care work. The findings from the technical brief commissioned by the Expanding Choices project reveal that these policies play a crucial role in promoting equal participation of fathers in caregiving responsibilities. By creating an inclusive and supportive environment that recognizes the diverse caregiving needs of employees, including those with children with disabilities,

fathers are empowered
to actively engage in
caring for their children
and contributing to their
well-being.

This not only strengthens the bond between fathers and their children but also helps to alleviate the caregiving burden on mothers, enabling them to pursue their own career aspirations and achieve a better work–life balance.

Supportive workplace culture

A supportive workplace culture is a crucial aspect of the Expanding Choices project's focus on family-friendly workplaces and gender-responsive family policies. Adopting policies to support work–life balance and gender equality is not sufficient; companies need to create a workplace culture that empowers employees to use these policies and feel supported in better balancing their work and care responsibilities. One approach to nurturing such a culture is through employee support programmes, which offer assistance programmes encompassing a range of work–life issues and provide resources and counselling. For example, Asena Textil, one of the champion companies, fosters a supportive workplace culture by addressing domestic violence, a critical societal issue affecting its employees. Understanding its role beyond just its professional commitments, the company provides support services to employees by distributing pamphlets with essential information for survivors of domestic violence. Asena Textil is empowering its workforce, enabling them to access help and connect with the necessary support services, thus fostering an environment of care, safety and support.

Raiffeisen Bank Kosovo, another champion company in the Expanding Choices project, demonstrates its commitment to a supportive workplace culture through various initiatives, including ones within the cultural context. For example, the bank instituted a practice whereby employees visit bereaved colleagues at their homes, aligning with the cultural norm of providing personal support during times of loss. This approach not only shows empathy and understanding but also strengthens the sense of community and support within the bank, creating a workplace environment that values and cares for its employees.

The Expanding Choices project, with its strong emphasis on social inclusion and diversity, recognizes the importance of considering diverse caregiving needs in family-friendly policies and workplaces. Research in the region, such as in Albania, where 15 per cent of employees care for sick relatives or persons with disabilities, informs the project's approach. The project has also influenced policy revisions in the Republic of Moldova, ensuring that specific provisions

are in place for parents and caregivers of children with disabilities. A regional-level technical brief highlighted the significance of gender-responsive family policies, particularly policies on family-friendly workplaces, in promoting equal participation on the part of fathers in caregiving for children with disabilities and sharing unpaid care work. These efforts by the Expanding Choices project contribute to creating inclusive and supportive environments that address the diverse caregiving responsibilities of employees, including those caring for relatives with chronic illnesses or disabilities or for elderly family members.

In addition to its work on policy revisions, the UNFPA programme in the Republic of Moldova plays an active role in promoting a supportive environment for gender equality and gender-responsive family practices through public campaigns and engagement with business associations. As part of their efforts, a joint initiative was organized with Panilino, one of the champion companies, to celebrate the International Day of Families. The event brought together employees and their families to participate in activities that emphasized the importance of sharing unpaid care work responsibilities and highlighted the significance of tailored gender-responsive family policies.



Working with allies

The Expanding Choices project goes beyond working directly with individual companies and actively involves the private sector as a whole. Through strategic partnerships with organizations from various sectors, including the public and private sectors, as well as policymakers, the project empowers these entities, such as members of parliament (MPs), companies' senior managers and companies themselves, to promote gender-responsive family policies within their respective areas. By fostering enduring alliances, the project harnesses the influence and expertise of these partners to drive significant and lasting change on a broader scale.

Through its focus on strategic partnerships, the project succeeds in fostering enduring alliances with a variety of organizations, such as ParentSmart Employers, the Kosovo Women's Network, the Kosovo Chamber of Commerce and the Women's Economic Forum in Kosovo. These partnerships, marked by activities such as round tables, conferences and notable events such as the Best of Kosovo 2021 gala, extend the project's reach into otherwise untapped areas and populations. The collaboration with the Women's Economic Forum specifically played a vital role in advocating improved maternity, paternity and parental leave provisions.

Moreover, at the *Made in Moldova* exhibition, the project showcased its achievements through a round-table discussion that reinforced the importance of family-friendly policies for corporate success. Perhaps most innovatively, the project capitalized on its relationships with business networks like the chambers of commerce in both countries. These collaborations not only expand the project's outreach but also facilitate the institutionalization of its work, as both entities created awards for family-friendly workplaces, thereby incentivizing engagement from the private sector and fostering enduring change.

Furthermore, the project collaborates strategically with government entities to strengthen the impact of its initiatives. In Kosovo, the project fortified its cooperation with Fatmire Kollcaku, an MP and the Chairperson of both the Parliamentary Committee on Health and Social Welfare and the Sustainable

Development Council of the Kosovo Assembly, the territory's parliament, who has demonstrated a steadfast commitment to promoting gender-responsive family policies. This productive collaboration demonstrates the substantial changes that can occur when policy at the highest levels aligns with the goals of gender equality and women's empowerment. Ms. Kollcaku spearheaded the organization and facilitation of the [Regional Western Balkan meeting of members of parliament](#) to discuss the importance of gender-responsive family policies and regional collaboration to promote such policies within the participants' own countries and territories. Nineteen MPs and government representatives from the region came together to discuss the situation in their respective countries and territories as well as the reasons they needed policies to be more gender-responsive and family-friendly, and they made commitments to further push for these policies within their legislative frameworks.

Collaboration among policymakers is vital to the success of the project, but it has resulted not only in greater political will for gender-responsive family policies. An important impact of the project is the way policymakers themselves have become role models and beneficiaries of the transformative changes brought about by these policies.

The project harnesses the influence of role models in both the public and private sectors to exemplify the positive outcomes of gender-responsive family policies and normalize their use.

This approach is more than a mere endorsement of these policies; it serves as a reminder to policymakers, whether in government or the corporate world, of the personal benefits they stand to gain from such policies. The policies are not just beneficial for employees or society but also directly impact the lives of those who create and implement them.



Striking a balance: a member of parliament and an executive director emphasize the impact of gender-responsive family policies on work–life balance

Adrian Băluțel, a serving member of parliament, has demonstrated the power of gender-responsive family policies in his personal life. A hands-on father since the birth of his child, Băluțel took full advantage of the paternity leave provisions in place, underlining the importance of such policies for familial involvement.

Diana Donțu, the Executive Director of Panilino, balances her demanding career with being a mother of triplets. With the supportive involvement of her partner and the flexibility of her employer, Donțu's story showcases how gender-responsive family policies can enable caregivers to reconcile professional and family responsibilities.

Public sector

Private sector



Raising awareness of rights and entitlements

The Expanding Choices project promotes awareness and understanding of existing entitlements and benefits related to gender-responsive family policies. Through targeted campaigns and advocacy initiatives, the project ensures that citizens are informed about new policies and legislative changes, as well as their entitlements, such as paternity leave. By raising awareness and promoting knowledge of these rights, the project empowers individuals to exercise their entitlements and navigate the evolving landscape of family-friendly policies. The advocacy campaigns conducted by the project play a vital role in bridging the gap between policy changes and public awareness, fostering a more informed and empowered society. The project's efforts to enhance public awareness and advocacy include six successful public awareness campaigns on gender equality. Additionally, the project's efforts have resulted in six business networks committing to promoting family-friendly policies. This shows the project's effective strategy in promoting gender-responsive family policies across different sectors and to a broad audience.

The project's awareness-raising and advocacy activities have successfully reached over 1.5 million people online, engaging them in campaigns addressing topics such as the EU work-life balance directive, the significance of family-friendly workplaces and the positive impact of these policies on people's well-being.

In the Republic of Moldova, for example, the project has developed and rolled out specific policies to address gaps in HR processes and policies within companies.



One policy, tailored to the needs of the champion companies, focuses on preventing gender discrimination in the recruitment process. Another policy currently being elaborated aims to ensure clear onboarding processes for new employees, including information about gender-responsive family policies and how to access them. Additionally, a policy is being developed to establish a buddy system to support new recruits during their first few weeks of employment, thus fostering engagement and staff retention. These policies help employees understand their rights and obligations as well as the support available to them regarding work–life balance and caregiving responsibilities.

Besides influencing internal policies, the project plays an instrumental role in fostering partnerships with the private sector to amplify gender equality awareness. Premier Energy, a company backed by the project, amplified gender equality awareness beyond its workforce by launching a massive information campaign about paternity leave legislation. This included printing information on the back of its bills, thereby educating over 60,000 households about their rights and entitlements and reaching 900,000 people. This highlights the company’s significant role in promoting societal change, underlining the power of private sector partnerships in driving awareness and equality.

Apart from these partnerships, the project in the Republic of Moldova also takes a direct approach to educating employees by organizing information sessions with employees from all champion companies. These sessions, conducted both online and offline, provide knowledge on gender equality, labour and employment relations, and types of legally guaranteed social leave. Experts from public authorities, including the Ministry of Labour and Social Protection and the National Social Insurance House of Moldova, as well as technical experts from civil society and academia facilitated these sessions. The feedback from participants was positive, as employees appreciated receiving information about their rights and entitlements from trusted and unbiased experts. In addressing gaps in HR processes, providing clear guidelines for onboarding and offering information sessions on important topics, the project promotes a culture of knowledge, support and empowerment within the champion companies.

Companies play a crucial role in raising awareness within their own workplaces of employee rights and entitlements. They serve as advocates and educators by implementing internal communication strategies, conducting training

sessions and providing resources to ensure that employees are well informed about their rights, benefits and available support systems. By fostering a culture of transparency and open dialogue, companies empower their employees to navigate the evolving landscape of family-friendly policies and actively exercise their entitlements, ultimately contributing to a more informed and empowered workforce.

While the project has brought about positive changes, it is also important to acknowledge the challenges faced during implementation, especially in driving mentality shifts within the workforce. Champion companies such as INCA in Albania face challenges with employees not being accustomed to these types of changes. During efforts to collect feedback, for instance, many employees left the comment section blank, perhaps indicating a lack of understanding and the need for better engagement with employees on these measures. However, these difficulties served to underscore the necessity of open dialogue and sustained communication about the purpose and benefits of these policies. In response to challenges stemming from the fact that employees are not accustomed to these types of changes, INCA continues to hold discussions during company workshops aimed at aligning with the Expanding Choices project's approach, to demonstrate how feedback directly contributes to creating a more responsive workplace. Over time, these persistent efforts are expected to result in a shift in employee mindset, resulting in an increased understanding of and involvement in shaping a work environment that empowers employees. This expected outcome underscores the value of patience and consistent communication in driving change, emphasizing that while the adoption of new policies can face initial resistance, sustained engagement can facilitate a mentality shift towards acceptance and active participation.

One effective way to inspire and engage employees is through testimonial videos, a tool that the project is utilizing. The project shared videos featuring employees from champion companies in Albania on social media and during various events and awareness-raising campaigns. These videos showcase the personal stories of employees who have taken paternity or maternity leave, highlighting the support they received from their respective champion companies. The sharing of testimonial videos featuring employees who have availed themselves of these leave benefits is crucial, as it inspires and

encourages others within the company to feel that they are supported in taking their own leave, thus fostering a culture that values work–life balance and parental involvement.



In addition to its efforts in the private sector, the Expanding Choices project has also made significant strides in its public sector initiatives. As part of these initiatives, the project in the Republic of Moldova in collaboration with the National Social Insurance House of the Republic of Moldova orchestrated a comprehensive public awareness campaign called “Be an informed parent, know your rights”, which reached 17,000 individuals through both in-person and online events. Through 41 information meetings held across 36 districts and municipalities, the campaign successfully educated parents about their rights and options provided by the state. By using a blend of communication channels and print materials, the project not only raised awareness but also encouraged increased uptake of paternity leave and childcare leave among fathers, thus addressing societal barriers and promoting greater gender equality.

The business case for family-friendly workplaces

Through the Expanding Choices project, champion companies receive valuable support and guidance in implementing gender-responsive family policies. The project works closely with companies, providing tailored action plans and strategies to help them incorporate family-friendly practices into their existing policies. This collaboration empowers the champion companies to create work environments that prioritize work-life balance and support the needs of their employees.

Family-friendly workplaces not only contribute to the well-being of employees but also yield significant benefits for businesses. Champion companies in the Expanding Choices project have already experienced positive outcomes and a return on investment since implementing gender-responsive family policies. Asena Textil, a Moldovan champion company, has witnessed an increase in revenue, which it attributes to a boost in employee morale resulting from the implementation of these policies. The improved work-life balance and support provided by Asena Textil have led to increased productivity and a more engaged workforce.



Employee retention is another area where champion companies have seen the impact of gender-responsive family policies. Raiffeisen Bank Kosovo reported several cases of employees turning down international offers to stay with the company due to the bank's attractive policies supporting work-life balance. This demonstrates the value employees place on having a supportive and inclusive work environment that prioritizes their needs. High retention rates contribute to the stability and continuity of the workforce, reducing recruitment and training costs for the company.

Despite the challenges faced in Albania, INCA, an Albanian champion company, has shown resilience and growth. In 2022, it was able to add 12 new employees to its workforce. This growth is significant considering the talent retention issues in the country due to high levels of outmigration. By implementing gender-responsive family policies, INCA has created an appealing work environment that not only attracts new talent but also retains existing employees.

These examples highlight the business case for family-friendly workplaces and the positive impact of gender-responsive family policies on champion companies. The investments made in supporting work-life balance and addressing the needs of employees have resulted in

increased revenue, improved employee morale and productivity, higher retention rates and even growth in challenging contexts.

The Expanding Choices project continues to advocate for these policies, recognizing the mutual benefits they bring to both employees and businesses.

Conclusion

The UNFPA Expanding Choices project demonstrates how a comprehensive approach, effective collaboration and targeted advocacy can bring about significant positive changes. In Albania, the Republic of Moldova and Kosovo, the project successfully implements gender-responsive family policies, leading to improved workplace conditions and work-life balance. These policies, including extended paternity leave, flexible work arrangements and dedicated spaces for children, have not only benefited employees but also enhanced companies' ability to attract and retain skilled workers, already resulting in increased productivity and sustainable economic growth. The project's success with champion companies highlights the transformative impact of family-friendly policies and serves as a blueprint for creating inclusive and supportive work environments in other regions.

