

# The Cost of Not Having Gender-Responsive Family Policies



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# Abbreviations

CSO	Civil society organization
ECEC	Early childhood education and care
GDP	Gross domestic product
GRFP	Gender-responsive family policy
HIV	Human immunodeficiency virus
ILO	International Labour Organization
OECD	Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development
SRH	Sexual and reproductive health
UNICEF	United Nations Children's Fund
UNDP	United Nations Development Programme
UNFPA	United Nations sexual and reproductive health agency

# Executive summary



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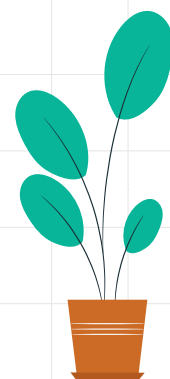
## Purpose and objectives

This report is the result of a collaborative research endeavour by the Eastern Europe and Central Asia Regional Office of UNFPA (the United Nations sexual and reproductive health agency) and the Europe and Central Asia Regional Office of the United Nations Children’s Fund (UNICEF).

This comprehensive study examines the costs to societies and businesses in Europe and Central Asia of not having gender-responsive family policies (GRFPs), highlighting the profound social and economic implications of such policy gaps for countries and territories. It also analyses the context, challenges and complexities in the development and implementation of GRFPs in the region.

The purpose of this study is to underscore the critical importance of GRFPs in promoting gender equality, enhancing family well-being and fostering economic growth. By investigating the consequences of the absence of such policies, the study aims to provide a robust evidence base that can inform policymaking and encourage the adoption of GRFPs. The objectives include identifying the social and economic costs, understanding policy gaps and challenges, providing evidence-based insights and fostering informed discussions among stakeholders.

By deepening our understanding of the multifaceted dynamics at play in gender-responsive family policies, this study aims to contribute to the discourse on gender equality and social development in the Europe and Central Asia region. It aspires to support stakeholders in making informed decisions that will lead to more inclusive, equitable and prosperous societies.

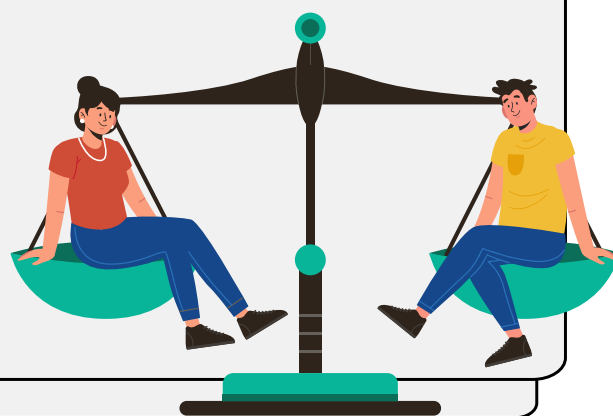


# Introduction

Demographic shifts coupled with economic and social change and efforts by international organizations and feminist and women's movements have led governments and the private sector in the Europe and Central Asia region to increasingly keep GRFPs on their agenda. GRFPs aim to empower women economically, redistribute household and care duties among women and men, and enhance child development, among other outcomes.

Gender-responsive family policies help women and men to balance paid work responsibilities with family, care and domestic tasks, supporting a more equal redistribution of unpaid care work and contributing to sustainable growth, gender equality, early childhood development and poverty reduction. These policies typically provide four types of essential resources needed by parents and caregivers: time, finances, services and protection. The objective of these policies is to support families in all their diversity, foster gender equality and empower all individuals within the family. This is achieved by ensuring that the specific needs of each family member are addressed and their rights upheld.

The policies are gender-responsive when they respond to gender inequalities, protect women's rights and do not perpetuate gender norms, roles and stereotypes.



However, entrenched gender norms and policy gaps still hinder the achievement of a balanced reconciliation between family and work responsibilities. Women often face the dilemma of choosing between work and family obligations, leading to inequalities in labour force participation and the distribution of care work.

A holistic mix of GRFPs can mitigate these challenges by facilitating the equitable sharing of caregiving duties between women and men, reducing female workforce dropout rates and narrowing the gender pay gap while improving economic productivity. Moreover, these policies alleviate parenting stress, foster parental well-being and contribute to happier families and healthier children.<sup>1</sup>

Today, GRFPs in the Europe and Central Asia region need more consistent development and enforcement as well as a stronger gender focus. Against this backdrop, it is crucial to establish an evidence base, evaluate policy effectiveness and identify best practices to mobilize support from

1. UNFPA Eastern Europe and Central Asia Regional Office, *The Family-Friendly Workplace Model* (Istanbul, 2022).

governments and the private sector and demonstrate that, despite financial implications, GRFPs represent an investment in more tolerant, demographically resilient, equal and prosperous societies.

This study has five sections, including conclusions and an appendix. Section 1 delves into the social and gender norms that shape gender relations in the Europe and Central Asia region, and the distribution of paid and unpaid work in particular, amid ongoing changes in family structures. It also explores how GRFPs can benefit all family members, particularly women and children, and have the potential to foster sustainable societies. Section 2 presents a summary of trends in the adoption of GRFPs in the Europe and Central Asia region. Section 3 highlights the economic and social costs of not having GRFPs and provides an in-depth analysis of the challenges and consequences when such policies are lacking for economies and societies, children and caregivers, women, governments and the private sector. Section 4, the conclusions, discusses the implications of findings from the preceding sections and suggests directions for future policymaking efforts. Lastly, Appendix 1 introduces a comprehensive policy framework for GRFPs, serving as a guide for their assessment and implementation. It includes a checklist for practitioners to ensure that policies empower women, promote child development, address harmful gender norms and stereotypes, and reduce economic and social costs.

## Methodology

The study was drafted using information from three different background data sources: a mapping of the status of 10 GRFPs across 21 countries and areas in the Europe and Central Asia region,<sup>2</sup> a literature review examining the economic and social arguments in favour of GRFPs for governments and the private sector spanning the past decade<sup>3</sup> and key informant interviews providing ground-level perspectives on GRFPs in six countries. This study and its background data sources focus on GRFPs from three distinct perspectives: GRFPs as drivers of gender equality, family policies responding to gender inequalities and family policies impacting all family members.

Two limitations that impacted the development of this study and its background data sources need to be acknowledged. First, the region's language diversity posed challenges in accessing and understanding the relevant literature, data and perspectives obtained by conducting interviews. Translation and interpretation were requested for interviews when necessary. Second, there was limited availability of or accessibility to data, as well as inconsistent or incomplete data on specific GRFPs in some countries and territories in the Europe and Central Asia region.

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2. The Europe and Central Asia region countries and territories covered in this study are Albania, Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Czechia, Georgia, Hungary, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, North Macedonia, Poland, the Republic of Moldova, Serbia, Slovakia, Tajikistan, Türkiye, Turkmenistan, Ukraine, Uzbekistan and Kosovo.

3. The literature review, spanning the past decade and various disciplines including gender studies, sociology and public policy, encompasses peer-reviewed academic work, think tank reports, evaluations by donor organizations, analyses by non-governmental organizations, and documents from governments and international agencies. An inclusive approach, utilizing Internet searches with relevant keywords, ensures comprehensive coverage of the available literature. However, assessing the actual impact of gender-responsive family policies remains a challenge due to the limited data available.

## Key takeaways

### Importance of gender-responsive family policies

- **Social norms and cultural transformation:** As evolving social norms reshape family dynamics, there is a perceptible rise in public support for GRFPs. Concurrently, men's perspectives and roles are undergoing changes, marked by a gradual shift towards assuming greater care responsibilities in their families, while women are gaining greater agency in navigating their career and family aspirations. These transformations are redefining social and familial dynamics. Despite gradual improvements, women across the region still face persistent discrimination and inequalities that are rooted in entrenched, harmful gender norms.
- **Changing family structures and generational shifts:** Family structures are changing, with contemporary trends revealing a preference for delayed marriage and childbearing. Families are not homogeneous, and nuclear heteronormative family structures are decreasingly the norm, with multigenerational families, single-parent families, blended families and one-person households becoming increasingly common. This shift reflects evolving social expectations and changing economic landscapes and is part of a broader generational shift in values and priorities, where women, men and couples intentionally plan the timing of significant life milestones.
- **GRFPs support closing gender gaps throughout the life course:** Closing gender gaps throughout the life course is crucial for securing women's economic well-being throughout their lives, including in old age. Women, however, are often at a disadvantage from an early age and frequently enter later years without sufficient means for a comfortable life due to gender wage and pension gaps. GRFPs can address this disadvantage by fostering equal opportunities and responsibilities in both the workplace and the home, ensuring a more equitable distribution of resources, opportunities and benefits, for lifelong economic well-being.
- **The impact of GRFPs on child development:** Undoubtedly, robust gender-responsive family policies contribute to the well-being of children by fostering a nurturing and supportive family environment. This results in improved health and nutrition outcomes, enhanced access to quality education, a reduction in violence against children and women within the family, and the promotion of children's rights and participation. Prioritizing accessible childcare, quality education and equal opportunities supports cognitive and emotional development, laying the foundation for children's emotional, academic and future success.



## How to develop family policies that are gender-responsive

- **Expanding GRFPs to meet gender and family diversity:** The focus of GRFPs should be expanded to cover a broader range of areas that address the diverse needs of all genders and family types: from designing safe public and virtual spaces that are harassment- and violence-free to improving transportation systems, ensuring equitable access to opportunities and resources for all genders and ensuring that technological advances remain effective and responsive to the changing needs of families.
- **Women's empowerment at the centre of GRFPs:** At the heart of effective GRFPs lies the empowerment of women in various aspects of their lives, including economic independence, decision-making power within the family, and access to education and health care. Societies become more equitable and positive gender norms and power dynamics are promoted only when women's economic and social empowerment is placed at the centre of GRFPs.
- **Collaborative effort for GRFPs:** GRFPs are the result of coordinated and collaborative efforts that necessitate the active participation of various stakeholders, encompassing government agencies, civil society organizations and the private sector. Grass-roots input is highly valuable and should be taken into account in decision-making processes. Synergies between these diverse stakeholders are indispensable for enhancing, evolving and establishing new provisions that promote gender equality and provide robust support for families. The private sector is playing an increasingly active role in promoting and implementing GRFPs, exemplified by initiatives such as the establishment of company-sponsored kindergartens and childcare facilities. These innovative approaches demonstrate alternative avenues for advancing the principles of GRFPs within corporate settings.
- **Data:** Data is fundamental for GRFPs, as it reveals gender gaps and informs strategies to close them. By using data, policymakers can tailor policies to different groups' needs and challenges. Data disaggregated by sex, disability, income quintiles and other characteristics is key for addressing data gaps on violence, discrimination, harassment, parenthood, labour force participation, the coverage and adequacy of benefits, and policy effectiveness. This can enhance evidence-based decisions and progress in terms of gender equality, leading to better economic and social outcomes, especially for women who have faced compounding disadvantages due to intersectional factors such as age, ethnicity or socioeconomic status.

## Why countries should invest in such policies

### Costs of poorly designed family policies

Inadequately designed family policies can yield unintended consequences and may exacerbate prevailing inequalities, including harmful gender norms and stereotypes. Likewise, policies lacking flexibility or neglecting the diverse needs of different family structures may fall short in effectively supporting working parents and caregivers. Thoughtful planning, comprehensive research and a consideration of potential consequences are essential elements in crafting impactful and equitable GRFPs.

### Cost of not having GRFPs

The absence of GRFPs in Europe and Central Asia carries significant costs, both financially and socially. Without GRFPs, individuals, particularly women, face difficult choices that affect their family, career and well-being trajectories. Without the support provided by GRFPs, women are compelled to shoulder the majority of unpaid care and domestic work, limiting their access to education, skills development and employment opportunities, which perpetuates gender wage and pension gaps. The persistence of traditional gender roles, despite some shifts in social norms, continues to stifle women's progress and fuel structural gender inequalities.

For governments, the lack of GRFPs strains health and social services due to women's reduced economic activity and creates barriers to children's development, diminishing their potential for future economic contributions. This also hampers overall economic growth and perpetuates intergenerational inequalities. The financial implications of not implementing GRFPs are substantial, as the investments required for their implementation are far outweighed by the costs of not having them. GRFPs are crucial for supporting individuals and families throughout their life course and for promoting gender equality. Beyond financial costs, the absence of GRFPs affects societal well-being and the ability of families to thrive. The absence of these policies also forces businesses to adapt piecemeal to the diverse needs of their employees, whereas a public policy approach could provide these benefits universally.

Furthermore, the engagement of civil society organizations, feminist and grass-roots movements, and marginalized communities is crucial in shaping responsive GRFPs that address the diverse needs of individuals and families. These groups promote gender equality, offer tools and best practices, and engage in public policy debates, playing a pivotal role in fostering a shift towards more inclusive policies. Robust political will, stakeholder collaboration, resource allocation, and monitoring and evaluation are imperative for effective GRFP implementation and long-term impact assessment.

Ultimately, the absence of GRFPs extends beyond financial repercussions, impacting social and economic dynamics, health and social services, and perpetuating gender inequalities. Prioritizing and advancing GRFPs is not only a quest for social justice but also a strategic imperative for building inclusive and demographically resilient societies. The cost of not implementing these policies is far greater than the investments required, underscoring the need for governments and the private sector to adopt and support GRFPs for the benefit of women, men, families and society as a whole.



# Purpose and objectives



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This report is the result of a collaborative research endeavour by the UNFPA Eastern Europe and Central Asia Regional Office and the UNICEF Europe and Central Asia Regional Office.

This comprehensive study examines the costs to societies and businesses in Europe and Central Asia of not having gender-responsive family policies, highlighting the profound social and economic implications of such policy gaps for countries. It also analyses the context, challenges and complexities in the development and implementation of GRFPs in the region.

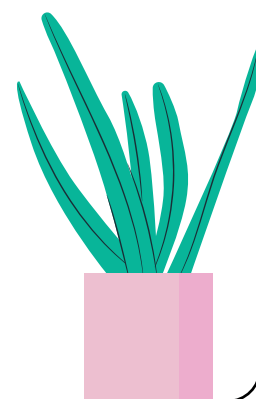
The purpose of the study is to underscore the critical importance of GRFPs in promoting gender equality, enhancing family well-being and fostering economic growth. By investigating the consequences of the absence of such policies, the study aims to provide a robust evidence base that can inform policymaking and encourage the adoption of GRFPs. The objectives include the following:

**Identifying the social and economic costs:** The study aims to quantify the social and economic costs of not having GRFPs, focusing on the impact on economies and societies, governments, the private sector, women, children and families. It explores how the lack of supportive policies can hinder economic productivity, exacerbate gender inequalities and strain social welfare systems.

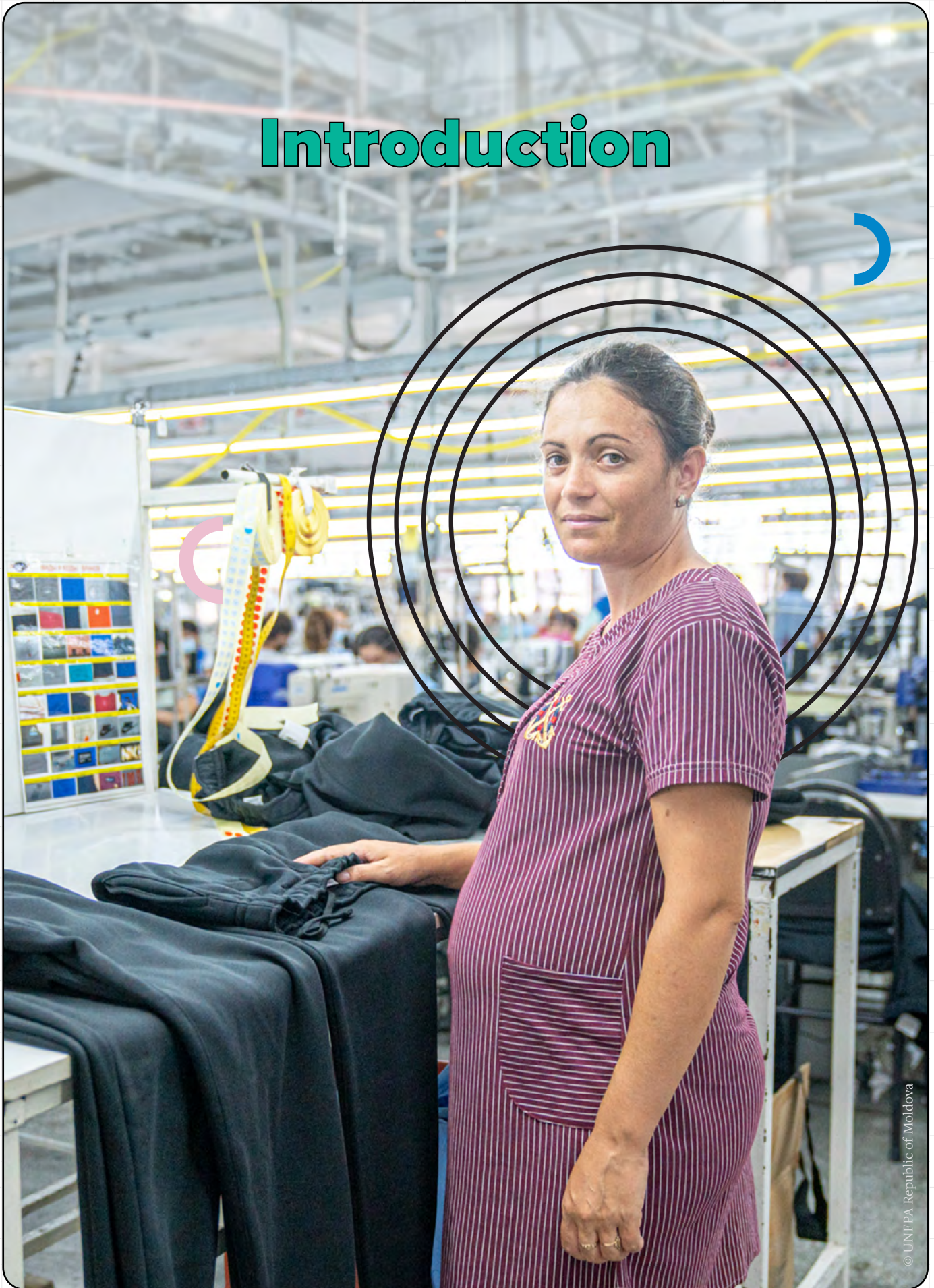
**Understanding policy gaps and challenges:** By analysing the current state of GRFPs in Europe and Central Asia, the study seeks to identify existing policy gaps and the challenges faced by governments and businesses in implementing these policies.

**Providing evidence-based insights:** The study aims to offer evidence-based insights that can guide stakeholders and governments, and the private sector in particular, in developing and implementing effective GRFPs. It highlights best practices and successful models from within the region and beyond, providing a roadmap for policymakers and businesses.

By deepening our understanding of the multifaceted dynamics at play in gender-responsive family policies, this study aims to contribute to the discourse on gender equality, demographic resilience and social development in the Europe and Central Asia region. It aspires to support stakeholders in making informed decisions that will lead to more inclusive, equitable and prosperous societies.



# Introduction



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Demographic shifts coupled with economic and social change and efforts by international organizations and feminist and women's movements have led governments and the private sector in the Europe and Central Asia region to put gender-responsive family policies on their agenda. Entitlements such as maternity leave; paternity leave; parental leave; carer's leave; flexible working arrangements; affordable, quality early childhood education and care; and child and family benefits have been increasingly regarded as means to support women in fulfilling their career and fertility aspirations, to redistribute the household and care burden more equally, and to promote child development. On the other hand, this shift in policies could also enhance opportunities for men to spend adequate time bonding with their biological or adopted children and to meet their children's health, nutrition and developmental needs.

Existing policy gaps as well as gender norms and stereotypes, however, continue to hinder the achievement of a gender-balanced reconciliation between family and work responsibilities in all life phases. This is especially true for women after childbirth and during early child-rearing, many of whom are forced to choose between paid work and family obligations. Today, women in the Europe and Central Asia region participate less than men in the labour force, get paid less and bear a disproportionate share of the unpaid care and domestic work burden.<sup>4</sup>

A holistic mix of GRFPs can therefore enable women and men to share parenting, caregiving and domestic responsibilities equitably, in turn making women less likely to drop out of the workforce, reducing the gender pay gap and improving economic productivity. These policies can also help to reduce parenting stress and promote well-being among parents and caregivers, which means better businesses, happier families and healthier children.<sup>5</sup>

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4. Guillem Fortuny Fillo and Ala Negruta, *Keep the Promise, Accelerate the Change: Taking Stock of Gender Equality in Europe and Central Asia 25 Years after Beijing* (New York, UN Women, 2020).

5. UNFPA Eastern Europe and Central Asia Regional Office, *The Family-Friendly Workplace Model*.

Today, GRFPs in the Europe and Central Asia region need more consistent development and enforcement as well as a stronger gender focus. Against this backdrop, it is crucial to establish an evidence base, evaluate policy effectiveness and identify best practices to mobilize support from governments and the private sector and demonstrate that, despite financial implications, GRFPs represent an investment in more tolerant, demographically resilient, equal and prosperous societies.

This study has five sections, including conclusions and an appendix. Section 1 delves into social and gender norms shaping gender relations in the Europe and Central Asia region, and the distribution of paid and unpaid work in particular, amid ongoing changes in family structures. It also explores how GRFPs can benefit all family members and have the potential to foster sustainable societies. Section 2 presents a summary of trends in the adoption of GRFPs in the Europe and Central Asia region. Section 3 highlights the economic and social costs of not having GRFPs and provides an in-depth analysis of the challenges and consequences when such policies are lacking for economies and societies, children and caregivers, women, governments and the private sector. Section 4, the conclusions, discusses the implications of the findings from the preceding sections and suggests directions for future policymaking efforts. Lastly, Appendix 1 introduces a comprehensive policy framework for GRFPs, serving as a guide for their assessment and implementation. It includes a checklist for practitioners to ensure that policies empower women, promote child development, address harmful gender norms and stereotypes, and reduce economic and social costs.



# Methodology



Austrian  
Development  
Cooperation

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This study was drafted using information from three different background data sources.

First, a mapping of the status of 10 GRFPs across 21 countries and territories in the Europe and Central Asia region was compiled based on current national laws and policies and reviews by international organizations. Section 2 presents a short summary of the regional mapping.

Second, a literature review was carried out that examined the economic and social arguments in favour of GRFPs for governments and the private sector spanning the past decade. A systematic search strategy was employed to identify relevant literature. The academic database used was JSTOR, including all its research databases. Grey literature<sup>6</sup> was obtained using both Google and Google Scholar searches.

Third, key informant interviews were conducted that provided ground-level perspectives on GRFPs. UNFPA and UNICEF identified a purposeful sample of six countries at different stages of GRFP adoption and implementation, taking into consideration balanced representation within the agencies' geographical scope and diversity of contexts, demographics and governmental priorities (Armenia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Georgia, Kazakhstan, the Republic of Moldova and Uzbekistan). Around forty in-depth semi-structured interviews were conducted between June and August 2023 with stakeholders from central and local governments, the private sector, civil society organizations, trade unions, employers' associations, state care agencies, and universities and other academic and research institutions. The interviewees included similar numbers of women and men. Simultaneous interpretation was provided for one third of all the interviews. Alternatively, written submissions based on the interview's questionnaire were accepted.

Two limitations that impacted the development of this study and its background data sources need to be acknowledged. First, the region's language diversity posed challenges in accessing and understanding the relevant literature, data and perspectives obtained by conducting interviews. Translation and interpretation were requested for interviews when necessary. Second, there was limited availability of or accessibility to data, as well as inconsistent or incomplete data on specific GRFPs in some countries in the Europe and Central Asia region.

This study and its background data sources focus on GRFPs from three distinct perspectives.

**GRFPs as drivers of gender equality:** Policies that aim to challenge and transform unequal power relations between men and women in the family and society were examined. These policies promote the rights of and opportunities for women and girls in all spheres of life,<sup>7</sup> decrease their burden of unpaid and domestic work, improve education and health outcomes, and can contribute to reducing violence against women and girls.<sup>8</sup>

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6. Grey literature, information produced outside of traditional publishing and distribution channels, can include reports, policy literature, working papers, newsletters, government documents, speeches, white papers, urban plans and so on.

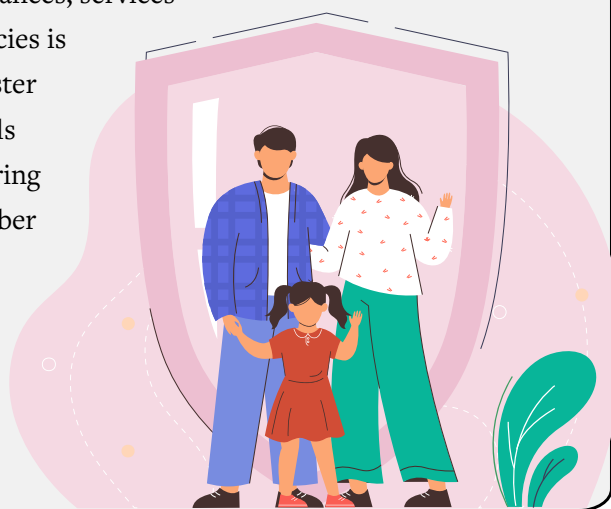
7. United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF), *Technical note: Gender-responsive parenting* (2021). Available at [https://www.unicef.org/eca/media/16436/file/Gender\\_Responsive\\_Parenting.pdf](https://www.unicef.org/eca/media/16436/file/Gender_Responsive_Parenting.pdf) (accessed on 9 August 2024).

8. Deepta Chopra and Meenakshi Krishnan, *Linking family-friendly policies to women's economic empowerment: An evidence brief* (UNICEF, 2019).

**Family policies responding to gender inequalities:** Policies that recognize and address men’s and women’s different needs and preferences as well as the constraints facing them in the family and in society were reviewed. These policies aim to reduce gaps and barriers that prevent women and girls from realizing their full potential.<sup>9</sup> Examples include policies providing equal access to resources, services and benefits for men and women, such as social protection, childcare, parental leave and flexible working arrangements.<sup>10</sup>

**Family policies impacting all family members:** Policies that consider the diverse and changing realities of families in different contexts and stages of life were explored. These policies aim to enhance the well-being and development of all family members, especially children and adolescents. Examples include policies fostering positive parenting practices, gender-responsive caregiving, intergenerational solidarity, compensation for the economic cost of children and child development.

For the purposes of this study, gender-responsive family policies are defined as policies that help women and men to balance paid work responsibilities with family, care and domestic tasks, supporting a more equal redistribution of unpaid care work and contributing to sustainable growth, gender equality, early childhood development and poverty reduction. These policies typically provide four types of essential resources needed by parents and caregivers: time, finances, services and protection. The objective of these policies is to support families in all their diversity, foster gender equality and empower all individuals within the family. This is achieved by ensuring that the specific needs of each family member are addressed and their rights upheld. The policies are gender-responsive when they respond to gender inequalities, protect women’s rights and do not perpetuate gender norms, roles and stereotypes.



9. Jemma Maree Galvin, “The role of the workplace in supporting positive and gender-responsive parenting”, UNICEF East Asia and Pacific, 15 June 2023.

10. Ibid.

# Social norms, family structures and the distribution of paid and unpaid work



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This section analyses prevailing gender and other social norms that shape gender relations in the Europe and Central Asia region, and the distribution of paid and unpaid work in particular, amid ongoing changes in family structures. It explores gender inequalities to understand how policies can drive gender equality by challenging unequal power relations between men and women and promote women and girls' rights, access to resources, choices and opportunities.<sup>11</sup> It also examines how policies can respond to gender inequalities and address unequal outcomes by reducing gaps and barriers that prevent women and girls from realizing their full potential.<sup>12</sup> Lastly, it explores how gender-responsive family policies can benefit all family members, particularly women and children, and have the potential to foster sustainable societies.

## **Harmful gender norms fuel gender inequality across multiple domains**

Gender norms are “a subset of social norms that relate specifically to gender differences. They are informal, deeply entrenched and widely held beliefs about gender roles, power relations, standards or expectations that govern human behaviours and practices in a particular social context and at a particular time. They are ideas or ‘rules’ about how girls and boys and women and men are expected to be and to act. People internalize and learn these ‘rules’ early in life. Gender norms sustain a hierarchy of power and privilege that typically favours what is considered male or masculine over that which is female or feminine, reinforcing a systemic inequality that undermines the rights of women and girls and restricts opportunity for women, men, and gender minorities to express their authentic selves.”<sup>13</sup>

The Gender Social Norms Index, which analyses attitudinal biases against women in politics, education, the economy and physical integrity, shows that, among 15 countries and territories covered by this study,<sup>14</sup> the share of respondents that have at least one bias in these dimensions ranges from 67.2 per cent in Hungary to 99.9 per cent in Tajikistan. Physical integrity is the dimension with the highest share of respondents with biases, followed by political participation, economic participation and education.<sup>15</sup> Across all six Eastern Partnership countries (Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Georgia, the Republic of Moldova and Ukraine) a majority of men – as well as women in Armenia and Ukraine – believe that it is better for preschool children to have a mother who does not work.<sup>16</sup> This and other analyses of gender norms in the region show that, as in the rest

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11. UNICEF, *Technical note: Gender-responsive parenting*; Chopra and Krishnan, *Linking family-friendly policies to women's economic empowerment*.

12. Galvin, “The role of the workplace in supporting positive and gender-responsive parenting”.

13. UNFPA and UNICEF, *Technical note on gender norms* (2020).

14. Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Bulgaria, Hungary, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Poland, the Republic of Moldova, Romania, Serbia, Slovakia, Tajikistan, Türkiye, Ukraine and Uzbekistan.

15. United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), *2023 Gender Social Norms Index: Breaking Down Gender Biases – Shifting Social Norms towards Gender Equality* (New York, 2023).

16. UNFPA and UN Women, *Analytical brief: Baseline study on stereotypes in Eastern Partnership countries* (2022).

of the world, traditional gender norms and attitudes reinforce the idea that women are primarily responsible for caregiving and household work, while men are primarily responsible for earning a living, despite many men's and women's own beliefs being at odds with these restrictive roles. For instance, most women and men in Armenia, Belarus, Georgia, the Republic of Moldova and Ukraine generally see having a job as a key part of their identity, with over 9 in every 10 women and men considering it just as important for their daughters to get good jobs as it is for their sons.<sup>17</sup>

According to International Men and Gender Equality Surveys (IMAGES), 52 per cent of men in Bosnia and Herzegovina agree that women's most important role is connected with housework and taking care of children;<sup>18</sup> 80 per cent of men in Serbia agree that their primary role is to earn enough money for their children;<sup>19</sup> and over 70 per cent of men in Kosovo<sup>20</sup> agree that changing diapers, giving children a bath and feeding children are women's responsibility.<sup>21</sup> Moreover, in Kyrgyzstan, 57 per cent of women and 65 per cent of men think that if a woman earns more than her husband, it is highly likely to lead to issues.<sup>22</sup> In Ukraine, these percentages stood at 29 per cent and 32 per cent, respectively. Meanwhile, in Azerbaijan, 53 per cent of women and 68 per cent of men share the belief that when a mother works for a salary, it negatively affects the well-being of her children.<sup>23</sup>

These gender norms and stereotypes limit women's access to education, training and employment opportunities and perpetuate the gender wage gap and other forms of gender-based discrimination. This is exacerbated when compounded with other layers of discrimination. For instance, Roma women in Albania and Serbia were only half as likely to complete compulsory education as non-Roma women.<sup>24</sup> For girls and boys with disabilities, pervasive social stigma exerts pressure on their families to keep them at home or in specialized schools, hindering their integration into mainstream education. This not only impacts parents' ability to find and maintain employment but also affects the future employability and productivity of children with disabilities, perpetuating cycles of economic and social disadvantage.<sup>25</sup>

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17. Ibid.

18. Srdjan Dušanić, *Man and Gender Relations in Bosnia and Herzegovina: Results of "Images" Research* (Banja Luka, Perpetuum Mobile - Centre for Youth and Community Development, 2012).

19. Marina Hughson, *Men in Serbia: Changes, Resistance and Challenges – Results of Research on Men and Gender Equality – IMAGES Serbia* (Belgrade, Center E8, 2018).

20. Hereafter referred to in the context of United Nations Security Council Resolution 1244 (1999).

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

22. World Values Survey, Online Data Analysis. Available at <https://www.worldvaluessurvey.org/WVSONline.jsp> (accessed on 9 August 2024).

23. Ibid.

24. Fillo and Negruta, *Keep the Promise, Accelerate the Change*.

25. UNICEF, *Children with disabilities in Europe and Central Asia: A statistical overview of their well-being* (New York, 2023).



## Evolving family structures amid social, economic and demographic shifts

In recent decades, the Europe and Central Asia region has witnessed significant changes in family structures and women's autonomy and participation in public life. These and other economic and social changes (see Box 1) have had a profound impact on families and societies.<sup>26</sup> Family formation patterns have shifted. What was considered an “ideal nuclear family” is not the norm anymore. In Central Asia, marriage is undergoing profound transformations due to migration, the impact of globalization, changes in social norms, and the political and economic situation in countries, among other factors.<sup>27</sup> People marry later, and they often opt for a long-term partnership without being married; women's childbearing age has increased, and the number of children per woman has tended to decrease.<sup>28</sup> In some contexts, however, child marriage continues to severely undermine the potential of and future opportunities for young girls, trapping them in cycles of poverty and limiting their access to education, employment and personal development.

The way young people approach the decision to have children has also changed, with older generations more inclined to see having children as their duty to society (in Azerbaijan, Armenia, Belarus, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Georgia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, North Macedonia, Poland, Romania, Russia, Serbia, Tajikistan, Türkiye and Ukraine).<sup>29</sup> The share of multigenerational families – households that include three or more generations – is on the rise in many countries,<sup>30</sup> including Albania where the share has reached 18 per cent, Kazakhstan (19 per cent), Kyrgyzstan (28 per cent), Romania (11 per cent), Tajikistan (45 per cent), and Turkmenistan (40 per cent).<sup>31</sup> Intergenerational support from grandparents has increased in terms of childcare and domestic work, as well as emotional support and advice.<sup>32</sup>

In addition, an ageing population has led to an increase in unpaid care work for older people, predominantly done by women.<sup>33</sup> For instance, people aged 65 years or older accounted for more than

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26. Richard Wike and others, “European public opinion three decades after the fall of communism”, Pew Research Center, 15 October 2019.

27. Juliette Cleuziou and Lucia Direnberger, “Gender and nation in post-Soviet Central Asia: From national narratives to women's practices”, *Nationalities Papers*, vol. 44, No. 2 (2016).

28. Sophie Roche, ed., *The Family in Central Asia: New Research Perspectives* (Berlin, Klaus Schwarz Verlag, 2017); United Nations Economic Commission for Europe (UNECE) and UNFPA, *Ensuring Rights and Choices amid Demographic Change: Regional Report on the Implementation of the Programme of Action of the International Conference on Population and Development in the UNECE Region* (Geneva, UNECE, 2023).

29. World Values Survey, “WVS Wave 7 (2017-2022)”. Available at <https://www.worldvaluessurvey.org/WVSDocumentationWV7.jsp> (accessed on 20 August 2024).

30. United Nations Population Division, Database on Household Size and Composition 2022.

31. Ibid.

32. Rebecca Sear, “The male breadwinner nuclear family is not the ‘traditional’ human family, and promotion of this myth may have adverse health consequences”, *Philosophical Transactions of the Royal Society B*, No. 376 (2021).

33. Ariane Ophir and Jessica Polos, “Care life expectancy: Gender and unpaid work in the context of population aging”, *Population Research and Policy Review*, vol. 41 (2022); Government of Ontario, Pay Equity Office, “Time to care: Recognising the truth behind the economy of unpaid care”, 2023.

one in six people in Western Balkan countries (18 per cent),<sup>34</sup> with the highest proportion in Serbia (21 per cent), Bosnia and Herzegovina (18 per cent) and Albania (17 per cent).<sup>35</sup> Increases in divorce rates and male outmigration as well as advances made in life expectancies coupled with higher male mortality have led to a rise in the number of one-person households, mostly headed by older women, and single-mother households. One-person households account for more than 20 per cent of all households in Belarus, the Republic of Moldova, Serbia and Ukraine, while single-mother households are particularly prevalent in Kyrgyzstan (7.0 per cent of all households), Georgia (7.3 per cent), Belarus (7.6 per cent), the Republic of Moldova (7.9 per cent), Kazakhstan (8.8 per cent) and Ukraine (9.0 per cent).<sup>36</sup>



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34. UNFPA calculations using the World Population Prospects 2022 database (<https://population.un.org/wpp/>), available on the website of the Population Division of the United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs (accessed on 10 August 2024).

35. Ibid.

36. UNFPA Eastern Europe and Central Asia Regional Office, *The state of gender-responsive family policies in the Eastern Europe and Central Asia region* (Istanbul, 2023)



## Box 1. The legacies of the socialist and communist regimes in the region's economies and societies

The region's social and economic context is shaped by the legacies of socialist and communist regimes, which promoted women's participation in the workforce, labour rights<sup>37</sup> and legal equality with men,<sup>38</sup> marking a significant shift in gender equality and family life.<sup>39</sup> Some of these reforms, however, were reversed with the collapse of the Soviet Union.<sup>40</sup> In Central Asia, the economic collapse of the 1990s and the reduction of the state's investment in social protection<sup>41</sup> led to a redefinition of marriage, family and gender roles.<sup>42</sup> In Eastern Europe, the transition to market economies in the 1990s came with a decline in women's participation in the labour force and widening gender pay gaps due to occupational segregation. Nowadays, social expectations about gender roles still reflect, to some degree, the assumptions of the male-breadwinner model.

37. Svetlana Torno, "Tajik in content—Soviet in form?", in Sophie Roche, ed., *The Family in Central Asia: New Perspectives* (De Gruyter, 2017). In 1917, the Bolshevik government blazed a trail by granting women voting rights, the ability to divorce and access to abortion – pioneering advancements on the global stage and among the earliest globally to grant women key rights.

38. Svetlana Peshkova and H el ene Thibault, "Introduction", in *Central Asian Affairs*, vol. 9, Nos. 2–4 (2022). The 1918 Family Code furthered gender equality by ensuring women's legal equality with men and equal rights for legitimate and illegitimate children, secularizing marriage and permitting couples to choose their surname. The communist era in Eastern Europe and Central Asia also witnessed streamlined divorce processes and introduced communal facilities to ease women's domestic duties.

39. Rochelle Goldberg Ruthchild, *Equality and Revolution: Women's Rights in the Russian Empire, 1905–1917* (Pittsburgh, PA, University of Pittsburgh Press, 2010).

40. Ibid. By the late 1920s, there was a shift towards conservatism in both public and political attitudes regarding family policies, and many of the rights granted to women and families in the 1918 Family Code were rolled back.

41. Richard Pomfret, "Central Asian economies: Thirty years after dissolution of the Soviet Union", *Comparative Economic Studies*, vol. 63 (2021).

42. Marianne Kamp, "The Soviet legacy and women's rights in Central Asia", *Current History*, vol. 115, No. 783 (2016).

## Traditional gender norms shape the distribution of unpaid and paid work

In this shifting context, to understand how policies can drive gender equality, we should first look at the norms and attitudes linked to traditional gender roles that rely on women primarily as mothers and carers in their families and communities. From this perspective, women's participation in public life and in paid work is understood as an add-on to this primary role, resulting in more precarious, flexible and unstable labour conditions and less access to economic independence and resources,<sup>43</sup> while there is also the likelihood of women – as mothers – being seen as less able and committed employees, and paid lower salaries, but still considered good mothers.<sup>44</sup>

The unequal sharing of the unpaid care and domestic work burden is one of the main barriers that women face in accessing quality employment,<sup>45</sup> as gender norms influence their participation in the labour force.<sup>46</sup> Globally, women and girls spend three times as much time on unpaid care as do men and boys.<sup>47</sup> In Bosnia and Herzegovina, women spend over six hours a day on unpaid care work, while men spend just over three hours. Over 8 in every 10 women cook at least once a day (85 per cent), compared with only 27 per cent of men. In Belarus, Kyrgyzstan, the Republic of Moldova and Serbia, women dedicate up to twice as many hours to unpaid care and domestic work as men.<sup>48</sup> In Kazakhstan, North Macedonia and Kosovo, this gender disparity increases to around three times, while in Türkiye it exceeds five times.<sup>49</sup> The most substantial difference is observed in Albania, where women spend over six times more hours on unpaid care and domestic responsibilities than men.<sup>50</sup>

The region continues to grapple with uneven employment opportunities for women, as they are more likely to hold insecure, informal, low-paying jobs and participate less in formal employment.<sup>51</sup> Between 2017 and 2020, women in Armenia and Belarus were two to three times more likely than men to be employed part-time (29 per cent versus 13 per cent, and 24 per cent versus 8 per cent, respectively).<sup>52</sup> This trend, although somewhat less distinct, was also evident in Azerbaijan, Georgia, the Republic of Moldova and Ukraine.<sup>53</sup> Consequently, women generally earned considerably less than their male counterparts: Substantial gender pay gaps were observed in Azerbaijan (42 per cent),

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43. Fillo and Negruta, *Keep the Promise, Accelerate the Change*.

44. Stephen Benard and Shelley J. Correll, "Normative discrimination and the motherhood penalty", *Gender and Society*, vol. 24, No. 5 (2010).

45. UN Women, *A toolkit on paid and unpaid care work: From 3Rs to 5Rs* (New York, 2022).

46. Rosina Gammarano, "Gendered social norms continue to shape labour force participation, new data show", UN Women, 8 May 2020.

47. UN Women, *Global factsheet* (2019).

48. United Nations, Department of Economic and Social Affairs, SDG Indicators Database. Available at <https://unstats.un.org/sdgs/dataportal> (accessed on 10 August 2024).

49. Ibid.

50. Ibid.

51. Courtney von Hippel, Elise K. Kalokerinos and Hannes Zacher, "Stereotype threat and perceptions of family-friendly policies among female employees", *Frontiers in Psychology*, vol. 7 (2016).

52. UNFPA and UN Women, *Analytical brief*.

53. Ibid.

Georgia (36 per cent) and Armenia (33 per cent), between 2017 and 2019.<sup>54</sup> Belarus, despite enacting legislation for equal remuneration in October 2020, still exhibited a significant pay gap of 27 per cent. Ukraine (23 per cent) and the Republic of Moldova (14 per cent) also faced noteworthy gender pay disparities.<sup>55</sup>

Other barriers faced by women include restricted access to financial services<sup>56</sup> and occupational segregation, with some areas of the economy highly feminized – such as the care and services sectors<sup>57</sup> – and others where women are significantly under-represented.<sup>58</sup> Harmful gender norms and stereotypes are also visible in governments and the private sector. In Albania, only 21 per cent of businesses consider it reasonable to apply family-friendly policies for men, a proportion that is significantly lower compared with women with young children (61 per cent) and employees who have sick relatives (58 per cent).<sup>59</sup> Lastly, as gendered expectations and societal norms disproportionately burden women with unpaid care work and domestic responsibilities, they are more likely to experience time poverty – that is, to witness their opportunities for personal, professional and social fulfilment constrained.<sup>60</sup>



© UNFPA Ukraine/Valentyn Kuzan

54. Ibid.

55. Ibid.

56. Zvi Lerman, “Gender gaps in Central Asia: A reassessment”, Research Paper, Hebrew University of Jerusalem, 16 September 2021; World Bank, “Financial inclusion”, Europe and Central Asia Economic Update (Washington, DC, 2019).

57. A report by the European Council analyses the sectoral impact of the COVID-19 crisis across euro area countries and highlights the disproportionate effects on women-dominated sectors such as tourism, catering and entertainment. The broader impact of COVID-19 in the region paints an alarming picture. Georgia, for example, experienced a loss of 52,000 jobs, 67 per cent of which belonged to women. These losses cannot be attributed solely to employers dismissing workers; in many cases, women themselves felt compelled to resign due to family responsibilities and the challenges posed by online education. See Eric Canton and others, *The Sectoral Impact of the COVID-19 Crisis: An Unprecedented and Atypical Crisis*, Economic Brief 069 (Luxembourg: Publications Office of the European Union, 2021).

58. Seema Jayachandran, “Social norms as a barrier to women’s employment in developing countries”, *IMF Economic Review*, vol. 69 (2021).

59. Blerina Metanj, Blerta Kalavace and Olta Cakoni, *Implementing Family-Friendly Policies and Gender Equality in the Public and Private Sectors* (Tirana, UNFPA, 2022).

60. Elizabeth Hyde, Margaret E. Greene and Gary L. Darmstadt, “Time poverty: Obstacle to women’s human rights, health and sustainable development”, *Journal of Global Health*, vol. 10, No. 2 (2020).

## Gender-responsive family policies benefit all family members and foster sustainable societies

Access to maternity leave, paternity leave and affordable, accessible and quality childcare, among other gender-responsive family policies,<sup>61</sup> has the power to rebalance the distribution of unpaid care and domestic work within households and enable children to access quality and nurturing early childcare, which enables them to become healthier, learn better and stay in school longer, thus having higher earnings as adults.<sup>62</sup> This access, in combination with the duration of parental leave, can have an impact on women's work opportunities and financial independence, as gender-responsive family policies can hinder or enable women's opportunities and choices in their working and family lives.<sup>63</sup>

In Georgia, 58 per cent of women who are both willing and able to work face barriers such as a lack of childcare or an inability to pursue education as well as the pressures of gender roles, resulting in a 22 percentage-point difference in labour force participation between women and men, which is higher between the ages of 25 and 34.<sup>64</sup> Family policies, especially leave policies for care such as maternity leave, can inadvertently exacerbate gender disparities, primarily due to the disruption of continuous employment<sup>65</sup> caused by extended leave. Moreover, if policies are not gender-responsive, they might reproduce inequalities, such as long maternity leave periods coupled with a lack of paternity leave, which results in penalization in the labour market.<sup>66</sup> In addition, the failure to provide sufficient support for low-income families or different types of families can result in inequality and poverty.<sup>67</sup> Policies on ageing that do not have a gender lens can worsen older women's economic disadvantages, as they often face a significant gender pension gap.

When men are seen only as primary breadwinners, they are not expected to take on their responsibilities in unpaid care and domestic work,<sup>68</sup> and they can experience harassment in the workplace when they take caregiving leave or reduce their working hours to do so.<sup>69</sup> This limits their ability to actively engage in caring for their children, despite the fact that many of them want to do

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61. UNICEF, "Redesigning the workplace to be family-friendly: What governments and businesses can do".

62. Ariane Hegewisch and Janet C. Gornick, "The Impact of work-family policies on women's employment: A review of research from OECD countries", *Community, Work and Family*, vol. 14, No. 2 (2011).

63. Emma Samman and Joan Lombardi, *Childcare and working families: New opportunity or missing link? An evidence brief* (UNICEF, 2019).

64. Interview with a key informant in Georgia.

65. Joya Misra, Stephanie Moller and Michelle J. Budig, "Work-family policies and poverty for partnered and single women in Europe and North America", *Gender & Society*, vol. 21, No. 6 (2007).

66. Irene Boeckmann, Joya Misra and Michelle J. Budig, "Cultural and institutional factors shaping mothers' employment and working hours in post-industrial countries", *Social Forces*, vol. 93, No. 4 (2015).

67. Janet C. Gornick, Marcia K. Meyers and Katharin E. Ross, "Supporting the employment of mothers: Policy variation across fourteen welfare states", *Journal of European Social Policy*, vol. 7, No. 1 (1997).

68. Jennifer L. Berdahl and Sue H. Moon, "Workplace mistreatment of middle class workers based on sex, parenthood, and caregiving", *Journal of Social Sciences*, vol. 69, No. 2 (2013).

69. Ibid.

so. Some men across the region understand the value of taking paternity leave, such as being closer to their children as well as removing barriers to their partner’s career. A great majority of men who took paternity leave in Kosovo reported that it had a positive impact on their relationship with their child in the long run (91 per cent).<sup>70</sup> Over 80 per cent of men in Georgia, the Republic of Moldova and Ukraine believe that their involvement in all aspects of childcare is important, and 96 per cent and 95 per cent of men in Armenia and Belarus, respectively, feel that they should be involved in their children’s education and development.<sup>71</sup> However, many employed men have not taken paternity leave due to a lack of legal provisions, limited knowledge of regulations or the feeling that they were not allowed or empowered to do so.

Even when paternity leave provisions exist and are known, low compensation rates – or a lack of compensation altogether – and fear of backlash from employers and peers limit men’s uptake. Research shows that only 3 per cent of male employees in Albania and 1.9 per cent of men in Serbia have taken paternity leave, while 0.6 per cent of men in North Macedonia have availed of parental leave.<sup>72</sup> Paternity and parental leave, flexible working arrangements and resources for active involvement on the part of fathers can help men to question traditional male roles, and men who foster close, non-violent relationships with their children tend to lead longer lives, have improved mental and physical well-being, are less likely to have substance abuse issues, have heightened workplace productivity and are happier overall compared with fathers who do not actively cultivate such connections.<sup>73</sup> This, in turn, paves the way for a more equitable and healthier family environment, while also supporting gender equality.

Finally, the well-being of all family members, especially children, is also linked to gender norms and expectations in family relations. Comprehensive support systems, including education, health services and employment assistance, influence inequality in outcomes for boys and girls and mothers and fathers. For instance, children may legally have the right to early childhood education and care (ECEC), but services may not be easily accessible due to factors such as location, availability of space or cost. In this case, children’s right to ECEC cannot be materialized, showing the importance of a broader perspective that also considers issues



70. OSCE Mission in Kosovo and UNFPA Kosovo, *A Men’s Perspective on Gender Equality in Kosovo*.

71. UNFPA and UN Women, *Analytical brief*.

72. Metanj, Kalavace and Cakoni, *Implementing Family-Friendly Policies*; Hughson, *Men in Serbia*; Reactor, *Men in Care (MIC): Caring Masculinities in North Macedonia – Country Report* (2021).

73. UNFPA and Promundo, *Engaging men in unpaid care work: An advocacy brief for Eastern Europe and Central Asia* (Istanbul and Washington, DC, 2018).

such as zoning laws and urban–rural divides, among other factors. In addition, many communities fail to recognize the educational value of ECEC, viewing it merely as a babysitting service. This perception often forces parents to stay at home with their young children or rely on grandparents, especially grandmothers, to provide care while they work, impacting both the parents’ and children’s opportunities for growth and development.

Paternity leave, parental leave, breastfeeding support, child and family benefits and affordable, accessible and quality ECEC services are all essential elements that contribute to positive family outcomes and the health and development of both children and their parents. When both parents share caregiving responsibilities, the family’s financial stability is improved and there are stronger parent–child bonds. Affordable and quality early childhood education and care supports working parents and provides a safe and stimulating environment for children’s social, emotional and cognitive development. It also leads to better cognitive and social and emotional outcomes for children,<sup>74</sup> while helping reduce stress levels in parents.<sup>75</sup>

From a child’s perspective, gender-responsive family policies have direct and indirect benefits. They directly affect the child’s health by allowing their mothers to take remunerated breastfeeding and lactation breaks without fear of discrimination. Similarly, children who receive quality and nurturing early childcare are healthier, learn better and stay in school longer, and have higher earnings as adults.<sup>76</sup> Such policies allow for more quality time with parents, leading to a less stressful home environment.

Indirectly, children benefit by witnessing successful work–life balance and parents who share responsibilities, which shapes children’s future work attitudes and aspirations. Children learn about healthy relationships, understanding that everyone has equal rights and opportunities regardless of their gender; as a result, they are more likely to hold gender-equal beliefs and attitudes.<sup>77</sup> Gender equality begins at home, and families are at the forefront of change.<sup>78</sup>

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74. Nicola Carone and others, “Editorial: LGBTQ parents and their children during the family life cycle”, *Frontiers of Psychology*, vol. 12 (2021).

75. Ibid.

76. UNICEF, “Redesigning the workplace to be family-friendly”.

77. Carone and others, “Editorial: LGBTQ parents and their children during the family life cycle”.

78. UN Women, “Gender equality starts at home: Seven tips for raising feminist kids”, 15 May 2019.

# Trends in the adoption of gender-responsive family policies



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Gender-responsive family policies have emerged as a dynamic component of state policies in the Europe and Central Asia region, gaining traction and influencing policy frameworks. Factors such as the level of overall welfare state development, labour market conditions, demographics, changing families and gender and social norms, political history and cultural attitudes influence the way these policies are designed and implemented. Nonetheless, entitlements around childbirth and child-rearing do not tend to benefit working parents and their children equally. Instead, they remain focused mostly on mothers and do not promote the full involvement of fathers in caregiving, which reinforces traditional gender roles and adds to women's unpaid workloads.

Supporting women's fertility and career aspirations in the Europe and Central Asia region therefore requires a shift from maternalistic policies to gender-responsive family policies that reduce and redistribute women's unequal responsibility for care work among men, employers, the state and private service providers. Gender-responsive family policies not only pay off in greater gender equality; they also contribute to the human development of countries and particularly to early childhood development, since they allow mothers, fathers and caregivers to balance their work and personal life and caring for their children. Moreover, by shifting discriminatory gender norms and distributing unpaid care work so that both women and men can fulfil their career aspirations and fertility intentions, these policies directly contribute to making societies more demographically resilient.

## **Maternity leave and paid breastfeeding breaks**

Paid and job-protected maternity leave offers a host of benefits for mothers, children and their families in the areas of health, safety and economic security.<sup>79</sup> While all 21 countries and territories covered in the Europe and Central Asia region have adopted statutory provisions for maternity leave in their legislation, many mothers are likely to see their earnings diminish during this period.<sup>80</sup> Most countries grant working mothers with newborns maternity leave of either 18 weeks (Azerbaijan, Belarus, Georgia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, the Republic of Moldova, Ukraine and Uzbekistan) or 20 weeks (Armenia, Poland and Tajikistan). In Czechia, Hungary, North Macedonia and Slovakia, the duration of maternity leave ranges from 24 to 39 weeks. During maternity leave, working mothers with newborns can expect to receive 100 per cent of their previous earnings in only 9 out of the 21 countries and territories covered (Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan, North Macedonia, Poland, the Republic of Moldova, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, Ukraine and Uzbekistan).

Breastfeeding breaks are essential to promoting the health and well-being of the mother and child and to supporting workplace inclusivity. Women are entitled to paid breastfeeding breaks in all countries and territories covered, but breastfeeding facilities remain largely unavailable in the public and private sector.

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79. International Labour Organization (ILO), *Care at Work: Investing in Care Leave and Services for a More Gender Equal World of Work* (Geneva, 2022).

80. The findings presented in this section are based on UNICEF and UNFPA, *Mapping of gender-responsive family policies in the Europe and Central Asia region* (forthcoming).



## Paternity leave

Paternity leave ensures that fathers can take a short period of leave immediately following the birth of a child to support the mother and the newborn, bond with their baby and equitably share the unpaid care burden.<sup>81</sup> Statutory provisions for paternity leave are central to challenging conventional gender norms that cast women as caregivers and men as breadwinners.<sup>82</sup> Paternity leave is associated with increasing fathers' long-term involvement in unpaid care work, in turn promoting women's participation in the labour force.<sup>83</sup>

All countries and territories covered have legal provisions on paternity leave in place with the exception of Georgia, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan. In these three countries, fathers can be involved in early child-rearing only by making use of their parental leave entitlement, which varies widely (Georgia, 84 weeks plus an additional 12 weeks until the child turns 5; Turkmenistan, 156 weeks until the child turns 3; and Uzbekistan, 104 weeks until the child turns 2). In eight countries, fathers are granted paternity leave lasting up to just 7 working or calendar days (Albania, 3 working days; Armenia, 5 working days; Kazakhstan, 5 working days; Türkiye, 5 working days for private sector employees, 10 working days for civil servants; Bosnia and Herzegovina, 7 working days in the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina, 3 working days in the Republika Srpska and in the Brčko District; North Macedonia, 7 working days; Serbia, 7 working days; and Tajikistan, 7 calendar days). Fathers receive 100 per cent of their previous earnings in only 9 of the 18 countries and territories that have legal provisions on paternity leave (Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Hungary, Kyrgyzstan, North Macedonia, the Republic of Moldova, Serbia, Türkiye and Ukraine).



## Parental leave

Parental leave, usually available to either parent, allows mothers and fathers to take care of their child after their maternity and paternity leave entitlements have expired.<sup>84</sup> Paid and job-protected parental leave is particularly relevant where universal and free early childhood education and care services are lacking, since it allows working parents to keep their jobs while caring for their children.<sup>85</sup> Men are much less likely than women to use parental leave, although evidence suggests that the benefits for women, men and societies are similar to those offered by paternity leave.<sup>86</sup>

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81. ILO, *Care at Work*.

82. Ibid.

83. Ibid.

84. Ibid.

85. Ibid.

86. Ibid.

Legal provisions on parental leave are in place in all 21 countries and territories covered except for the Republika Srpska and Brčko District in Bosnia and Herzegovina. In three countries, only mothers are granted parental leave, with leave periods varying significantly (North Macedonia, 13 weeks; Türkiye, 26 weeks; and Tajikistan, 156 weeks). The duration of parental leave also varies widely in the countries and territories where both parents are eligible for parental leave. In 10 of these countries, parents are entitled to parental leave of 156 weeks – that is, until their child reaches age 3 (Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina in Bosnia and Herzegovina, Czechia, Kazakhstan, Republic of Moldova, Slovakia, Turkmenistan, Ukraine). Among these, Czechia is the only country covered by this study granting parental leave to same-sex parents.<sup>87</sup> Shorter parental leave is granted in seven other countries and territories (Uzbekistan, 104 weeks; Georgia, 84 weeks; Serbia, 52 weeks; Albania, 35 weeks; Poland, 32 weeks; Kosovo, at least 4 months; and Hungary, 44 working days).

## Carer's leave

Carer's leave provides women and men with caring responsibilities across generations with greater opportunities to remain in the workforce and share the care burden more equally. As societies continue to age, care needs are projected to increase. Middle-aged workers, and women in particular, increasingly become first responders to the care needs of their relatives such as parents and siblings, in addition to caring for their children and remaining engaged in the labour force. Older workers play a key role in the provision of care to younger generations too when prime-age adults have migrated abroad. At the same time, working parents may need to take time off work temporarily if their child falls sick.

Legal provisions for paid carer's leave that specifically target working parents are in place in just 6 out of 21 countries and territories (Albania, Azerbaijan, Czechia, the Republic of Moldova, Serbia and Slovakia). In nine others, national legislation supports the uptake of unpaid leave for family-care purposes by the general worker population (Armenia, Belarus, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Hungary, Kyrgyzstan, Poland, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Ukraine). Workers on carer's leave receive 100 per cent of their previous earnings only in Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina and Serbia.

## Flexible working arrangements

Flexible working arrangements can support work-life balance for workers caring for younger and older generations and keep them in the labour force. In some instances, they may also serve to increase the productivity of companies. The adoption of a range of flexible working modalities has gained momentum since the COVID-19 pandemic, including flexible working hours, compressed hours, outcome-based commissioning, remote work, mobile work, term-time work and part-time work.<sup>88</sup>

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87. Ibid.

88. ILO, *Working from Home: From Invisibility to Decent Work* (Geneva, 2021); ILO, "Teleworking arrangements during the COVID-19 crisis and beyond", paper prepared for the 2nd Employment Working Group Meeting under the 2021 Italian Presidency of the G20, April 2021; ILO, *Working Time and Work-Life Balance around the World* (Geneva, 2022).

Entitlements regarding flexible working arrangements vary across countries, benefiting pregnant women, mothers and fathers to various degrees. Legal provisions enabling parents to work part-time until their children reach adolescence or during parental leave are common (14 out of 21 countries and territories), while those regulating work from home (10 countries) and flexible working schedules (7 countries) are less widespread.

## Early childhood education and care and pre-primary education

Universal and free quality early childhood education and care has far-reaching benefits. Access to quality services forms the foundation for lifelong learning and success, making them an integral part of education systems with significant returns for societies and nations.<sup>89</sup> Besides having long-term benefits for children’s development, early childhood education and care reduces parents’ unpaid care burden, which is primarily shouldered by women, supports their participation in the job market and generates jobs in the care sector.

Many children in the Europe and Central Asia region lack access to affordable and quality early childhood education and care services in the first years of their lives, particularly after their parents exhaust their parental leave.<sup>90</sup> Moreover, the most marginalized caregivers and parents who work in the informal labour market and who might be on subsistence wages often cannot access parental leave benefits and would benefit the most from quality ECEC services to support their livelihood. These childcare policy gaps continue to push women into a primary caregiving role to the detriment of their employment aspirations. Only 11 out of the 21 countries and territories covered by this report have established a national early childhood education and care system targeting children under 2 years, while this

service is not available in 10 others. Albania, Belarus, North Macedonia and Ukraine run a universal funding scheme, where the full or almost full cost of services is absorbed by the state. In Hungary, Kazakhstan, Poland and Serbia, parents and the state share the cost of this service according to means tests and without



89. European Commission, “Early Childhood Education and Care: Providing all our children with the best start for the world of tomorrow”, COM(2011) 66 final, 17 February 2011.

90. UNICEF Europe and Central Asia Regional Office, *Supporting early childhood development* (2018). Available at <https://www.unicef.org/eca/media/3686/file/in-focus-ecc.pdf> (accessed on 22 August 2024).

causing financial hardship to the former, while in Bosnia and Herzegovina, Georgia and Kosovo parents have to pay for this service out of pocket, potentially incurring financial hardship. And while pre-primary education systems targeting children aged 3 and older have been established in 19 out of 21 countries and territories (except Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan), this service may be part-time, lack sufficient capacity and come at a cost for parents.<sup>91</sup>

## Sick leave

Sick leave policies play a crucial role in ensuring the well-being of workers and supporting them in times of illness or incapacity. These policies provide financial security and contribute to employee retention, productivity and overall health in the workplace.

Workers in all 21 countries and territories covered are entitled to a certain number of paid sick days per year, ranging from a few days to several weeks, but many are not fully compensated. The duration of sick leave comprises up to 15 days in 11 countries (Armenia, 1–5 days; Ukraine, 5 days; Turkmenistan, 5–14 days; Türkiye, 7 days; Kyrgyzstan, 10 days; Slovakia, 10 days; Belarus, 12 days; Albania, 14 days; Azerbaijan, 14 days; Czechia, 15 days; and Hungary, 15 days), while it ranges from 20 to 42 days in 6 other countries and territories (Kosovo, 20 days; Georgia, 30 days; North Macedonia, 30 days; Serbia, 30 days; Poland, 33 days; and Bosnia and Herzegovina – Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina, 42 days; Republika Srpska, 30 days; Brčko District, 42 days). In Kazakhstan, the Republic of Moldova, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan, the duration of sick leave is not specified in legislation.

## Child and family benefits

Child and family benefits are crucial support systems designed to enhance the well-being of families and play a vital role in supporting the most vulnerable populations. Child and family benefits vary by criteria for eligibility or benefit level and rarely work as a stand-alone form of support for families. Social transfers and tax-related programmes require some data exchange to determine the total financial support for families.<sup>92</sup> In the Republic of Moldova, for instance, the childcare allowance is granted for all children up to the age of 2, regardless of whether their parents are insured or not.<sup>93</sup> In Ukraine, there are means-tested programmes, such as the Guaranteed Minimum Income programme, which provides financial assistance to low-income families.<sup>94</sup>

Family tax breaks in the Europe and Central Asia region vary significantly by country and territory,

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91. UNICEF and UNFPA, *Mapping of gender-responsive family policies in the Europe and Central Asia region*.

92. World Bank, “National Development Strategy Croatia 2030 Policy Note: Personal Income Tax Benefits for Families with Children” (Washington, DC, 2019).

93. Guvernul Republicii Moldova, “Programul „Familia” – un set de măsuri guvernamentale pentru susținerea familiilor și a copiilor din Republica Moldova”, 21 September 2022.

94. Thomas Byrnes, “Overview of the Ukraine Government’s Housing and Utilities Subsidy Programme and the Guaranteed Minimum Income Programme” (Social Protection Technical Assistance, Advice, and Resources Facility, 2023).

but families with children are generally provided with some tax relief.<sup>95</sup> In Serbia, the taxable annual income may be reduced by personal deductions and allowances for supporting dependent family members. For taxpayers, the deduction is 40 per cent of the average yearly salary. For each dependent family member, there is a deduction of 15 per cent of the average annual salary. However, total deductions cannot exceed 50 per cent of the taxable income.<sup>96</sup> In Central Asian countries, family tax breaks are provided, mainly through deductions for dependent children and tax incentives for large families. In Belarus, family tax breaks are implemented through the State Programme for Family Support, which includes tax deductions for families with children, childcare subsidies and housing support. These measures aim to improve the economic conditions<sup>97</sup> of families and incentivize childbearing, at times pushed by pro-natalist agendas.<sup>98</sup>

Elder care in Europe and Central Asia, which typically falls to women to provide, faces challenges, including an ageing population, inadequate social security and pension systems, a lack of long-term care and policy coordination. With an anticipated increase in the number of older people<sup>99</sup> needing long-term care due to the global ageing population and low retirement compensation, caring for senior family members at home often occurs in multigenerational households.<sup>100</sup> Some countries, such as Armenia, have rolled out a range of programmes and services, encompassing home-care services that provide individualized care and assistance in the comfort of the recipient's home.<sup>101</sup> Others, such as Kazakhstan, have developed tactics for conducting practical activities for primary-stage (outpatient) assistance.<sup>102</sup> In many countries, governments have adopted a more hands-off approach and, in some instances, have encouraged private sector involvement in the long-term-care market, encompassing home care. This shift has often been accompanied by reduced regulations and oversight by government authorities, raising some controversy, or with an increased time burden for women, who bear the lion's share of unpaid care work.<sup>103</sup>

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95. Türkiye has the smallest gap in the region, with tax burdens of 38.2 per cent on families and 39.7 per cent on single individuals, a difference of only 1.5 percentage points.

96. PwC, "Serbia: Individual – Deductions", 12 June 2024. Available at <https://taxsummaries.pwc.com/serbia/individual/deductions> (accessed on 10 August 2024).

97. BelTA, "State support for large families in Belarus emphasized", 24 September 2020. Available at <https://eng.belta.by/society/view/state-support-for-large-families-in-belarus-emphasized-133761-2020/> (accessed on 10 August 2024).

98. President of the Republic of Belarus, "State support for families in the Republic of Belarus". Available at <https://president.gov.by/en/belarus/social/social-protection/family-life>.

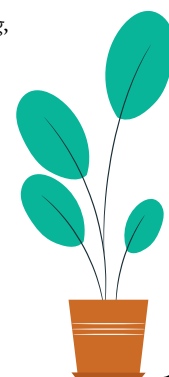
99. UNFPA Eastern Europe and Central Asia Regional Office, "Older people are the fastest growing age group in Europe: It's time we recognize this as an opportunity", 15 June 2022.

100. Marsela Musabelliu, "Albania social briefing: The hardships of the elderly in Albania", China-CEE Institute, *Weekly Briefing*, Vol. 50, No. 3 (April 2022).

101. Ani Griroryan, "Armenia set for a comprehensive Labor and Social Protection Strategy in 2022", UNICEF Armenia, 28 January 2022.

102. Vera Tchaikovskaya and others, "The need for change: Policy of medical care for the elderly in Kazakhstan", *Research Journal of Medical Science*, vol. 14, No. 5 (2020).

103. Laura Oliver, "How they did it: Inside the for-profit takeover of Europe's elder care homes", Global Investigative Journalism Network, 18 May 2022. An investigative journalist examined the elder-care industry across 15 European countries, concluding that the care industry has seen increased participation from international corporations and private investors, with an estimated annual value of around EUR 220 billion (\$240 billion) in public funds. This shift has been criticized for leaving out those who cannot afford any nursing home dependent on government assistance, which is often very basic, while the private sector profits from the growing market.



# The cost of not having gender-responsive family policies



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The costs associated with the implementation of GRFPs could be substantial, although they vary considerably from context to context. They would depend on which policies are being considered or expanded, coverage gaps and intended beneficiaries, and benefit levels – among many possible criteria. The costs would be sustained by a range of stakeholders, with multi-year financing implications as the scale-up of GRFPs would stretch over several years. National and local governments would cover a significant portion of these costs, through budget allocations for the delivery of public goods or services, and the private sector would make use of contractual policies to ensure that the rights of employees are enhanced. However, assessing these policies solely through the lens of immediate, monetary implications would lead to an incomplete assessment of their overall impact.

The benefits associated with the implementation of well-designed GRFPs would be equally substantial,<sup>104</sup> with impacts extending beyond individuals, to families and societies.<sup>105</sup> Paid maternity, paternity and parental leave empowers women, men and couples to pursue their career and fertility aspirations; contributes to children’s health and development; and helps reduce the gender wage and pension gap within households and societies.<sup>106</sup> Flexible working arrangements enable employees to balance paid work and family responsibilities,<sup>107</sup> enhancing women’s labour force participation and removing barriers to career progression.<sup>108</sup> Access to affordable and quality early childhood education and care and child and family benefits have long-term benefits for children’s education and growth,<sup>109</sup> allowing parents to stay in the workforce while fulfilling their caregiving duties.<sup>110</sup>

GRFPs also challenge discriminatory gender norms and stereotypes that portray men as breadwinners and women as homemakers. By recognizing, compensating and redistributing the unpaid care burden, which is largely absorbed by women, GRFPs safeguard pensions from the impact of caregiving-related career breaks,<sup>111</sup> reducing the gender gap in pension contributions.<sup>112</sup>

A cost–benefit analysis shows that GRFPs bring long-term benefits that clearly outweigh the costs. Therefore, the *cost of not having GRFPs* refers to tomorrow’s missed opportunities for socioeconomic development due to today’s lack of investments. Drawing on global and regional evidence, the following subsections include evidence of the cost to economies and societies, the costs for children and caregivers, the costs for women, the costs for governments and the costs for the private sector.

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104. Mihaela Robila and Ambika Krishnakumar, “The role of children in Eastern European families”, *Children and Society*, vol. 18, No. 1 (2004).

105. Clara Alemann, Aapta Garg and Kristina Vlahovicova, “The role of fathers in parenting for gender equality”, Promundo-US, 2020. Available at <https://www.equimundo.org/resources/the-role-of-fathers-in-parenting-for-gender-equality/> (accessed on 10 August 2024).

106. Alison Earle and Jody Heymann, *Paid parental leave and family-friendly policies: An evidence brief* (UNICEF, 2019).

107. *Ibid.*

108. Felix Richter, “The motherhood penalty in labor force participation”, Statista, 12 May 2023.

109. Michel Vandenbroeck, Karolien Lenaerts and Miroslav Beblavý, “Benefits of early childhood education and care and the conditions for obtaining them”, EENEE Analytical Report No. 32 (Luxembourg, Publications Office of the European Union, 2018).

110. Gender and the Economy, “Work-life balance”. Available at <https://www.gendereconomy.org/work-life-balance/> (accessed on 10 August 2024).

111. Camila Arza, “The gender dimensions of pension systems: Policies and constraints for the protection of older women”, Discussion Paper No. 1 (UN Women, 2015).

112. *Ibid.*

## The cost to economies and societies

GRFPs can reduce gender inequalities in the labour market by increasing women's labour force participation,<sup>113</sup> reducing the gender pay gap and boosting productivity. A study by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) estimated the economic toll of gender-based discrimination within social institutions (i.e. formal and informal laws, social norms and practices) to cost US\$12 trillion for the global economy.<sup>114</sup> Research by McKinsey highlighted that, despite constituting 52 per cent of the population of seven Central and Eastern European countries, women represent only 45 per cent of the labour force.<sup>115</sup> In Georgia, where the participation of working-age women in the formal labour market is just around 40 per cent,<sup>116</sup> the World Bank estimated that the cost of disparities in the labour market represents 11 per cent of the country's gross domestic product (GDP).<sup>117</sup> In the Republic of Moldova, women's labour market participation is 54 per cent,<sup>118</sup> which can be largely attributed to the unpaid care and domestic work burden, which limits their availability for formal employment. According to a survey conducted by the International Labour Organization (ILO) in 2013 in Albania, Montenegro, the Republic of Moldova and Serbia, companies said that the main barrier to women's leadership was unpaid care work, followed by a lack of support for a caregiving role for men.<sup>119</sup> The underutilization of women's abilities and expertise leads to decreased economic productivity and growth. Furthermore, it increases women's economic dependence and susceptibility to poverty. This not only affects individual women and their families but also has broader implications for social and economic progress (see Box 2).

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113. Michela Bia, German Blanco and Marie Valentova, "The causal impact of taking parental leave on wages: Evidence from 2005 to 2015", Luxembourg Institute of Socio-Economic Research, Working Paper No. 2021-08 (Luxembourg Institute of Socio-Economic Research, 2021).
  114. Gaëlle Ferrant and Alexandre Kolev, "The economic cost of gender-based discrimination in social institutions" (OECD Development Centre, 2016).
  115. McKinsey & Company, "Closing the gender gap in Central and Eastern Europe", 22 September 2021.
  116. National Statistics Office of Georgia, "Indicators of the labour force (employment and unemployment) 2020", 18 May 2021. Available at <https://www.geostat.ge/media/38207/Indicators-of-the-Labour-Force---Indicators-of-the-Labour-Force---2020.pdf> (accessed on 21 August 2024).
  117. UNDP Georgia, "Georgia strives to strengthen the care economy and introduce gender-responsive family policies", 8 June 2022.
  118. UNFPA Eastern Europe and Central Asia Regional Office, *Empowering parents and caregivers through gender-responsive family Policies: A Moldovan case study* (Istanbul, 2023).
  119. ILO, *Women in Business and Management: Gaining Momentum in Eastern Europe and Central Asia* (Geneva, 2017).





## Box 2. GRFPs have the potential to boost the regional and global economy

Research by McKinsey focused on Central and Eastern Europe suggests that GRFPs could unleash a substantial economic boost, potentially unlocking up to EUR 146 billion (\$160 billion) in annual GDP by 2030.<sup>120</sup> Research by the World Bank in Europe and Central Asia underscores that global wealth could increase by as much as \$160 trillion if women had a greater role in the economy, working in paid jobs and earning wages equal to those earned by men,<sup>121</sup> highlighting the substantial economic gains that could be realized by enhancing women's workforce participation.

Irrespective of educational attainment, women are more likely to be engaged in low-paying jobs and face restricted access to management positions, enduring a pervasive gender pay gap. The lack of universal secondary education for many adult women results in an estimated global loss ranging from \$15 trillion to \$30 trillion.<sup>122</sup> OECD studies reveal that discriminatory laws and social practices can reduce women's schooling by 16 per cent and labour force participation by 12 per cent, culminating in a global income loss of 7.5 per cent of GDP.<sup>123</sup> Yet, matching women's labour force participation with men's could boost GDP by \$1.1 trillion, or 23 per cent of the annual regional GDP in Eastern Europe and Central Asia.<sup>124</sup> According to ILO, women in the Europe and Central Asia region are on average more educated than men, yet they are under-represented in businesses and face a skills mismatch.<sup>125</sup> In fact, while women in tertiary education surpass men in all but two countries in the region (Tajikistan and Uzbekistan), they are still under-represented in STEM areas, where there is high demand for jobs in the region.<sup>126</sup>

GRFPs can support the achievement of gender equality in the labour market, with profound economic implications for the region. Closing the gender gap in participation by 25 per cent by 2025

120. McKinsey and Company, "Closing the gender gap in Central and Eastern Europe".

121. Anna Bjerde, "Europe and Central Asia economies need more women entrepreneurs and business leaders", World Bank, 8 March 2022.

122. ILO, *Women in Business and Management*.

123. Stefania Fabrizio, Daniel Gurara and Lisa Kolovich, "Fiscal policies for women's economic empowerment", IMF Blog, 18 February 2020.

124. ILO, *Women in Business and Management*.

125. Human capital wealth is defined as the present value of the future earnings of the labour force.

126. Quentin Wodon and others, *Missed Opportunities: The High Cost of Not Educating Girls* (World Bank, 2018).

could increase global GDP by \$5.3 trillion. The economic impacts of closing the participation gap could generate an additional \$1.4 trillion in tax revenues.<sup>127</sup> A 2015 report by the McKinsey Global Institute revealed that equalizing women's participation rates in the workforce could increase global annual GDP by \$28 trillion, equivalent to a 26 per cent increase, by 2025.<sup>128</sup> The costs associated with the absence of GRFPs and gender segregation in educational subjects are substantial, impacting not only individual women but also families and society,<sup>129</sup> exacerbating economic inequality and failing to promote inclusive economic growth.<sup>130</sup>

Supporting men's role as caregivers could also improve gender equality in the labour market. Legal provisions on paternity leave are in place in 18 countries and territories, whereas in Georgia, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan fathers can avail of parental leave.<sup>131</sup> Eight countries with paternity leave provisions in place provide fathers with seven or fewer working or calendar days, and only nine countries provide 100 per cent compensation for paternity leave regardless of the duration.<sup>132</sup> In such instances, fathers are left with limited opportunities to engage in early child-rearing, impacting home dynamics and relationships, especially in dual-earner households.<sup>133</sup> This puts professional identities at risk and compromises overall relationship quality, contributing to heightened absenteeism and staff turnover in the workplace.<sup>134</sup> Even when paternity leave is available, men's uptake is often limited by their lack of knowledge, inadequate compensation, and a fear of backlash from their employers and peers due to harmful gender norms.

Beyond monetary costs, the absence of GRFPs also entails noteworthy non-monetary implications for families and societies. The emotional toll and mental health impact on women, men and couples navigating work and family responsibilities without, or with limited, GRFPs are profound.<sup>135</sup> No access or limited access to paternity leave, parental leave, flexible working arrangements, and affordable and quality early childhood education and care, among other entitlements, creates a turbulent work-life balance, which can evolve into exhaustion and burnout.<sup>136</sup> Indeed, GRFPs have a significant impact on time, either spent or saved, which impacts individuals' choices, opportunities and well-being.

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127. ILO, "Economic impacts of reducing gender gap", What Works, Research Brief No. 10 (2017).

128. Jonathan Woetzel and others, *The Power of Parity: How Advancing Women's Equality Can Add \$12 Trillion to Global Growth* (McKinsey Global Institute, 2015).

129. ILO, *Women in Business and Management*.

130. UNFPA Eastern Europe and Central Asia Regional Office, *Why do women tend to earn less than men throughout life?* (Istanbul, 2021).

131. UNICEF and UNFPA, *Mapping of gender-responsive family policies in the Europe and Central Asia region*.

132. Ibid.

133. Ibid.

134. UNICEF, *Family-friendly policies: Redesigning the workplace of the future – A policy brief* (New York, 2019).

135. Jaunathan Bilodeau, Amélie Quesnel-Vallée and Thomas Poder, "Work stressors, work-family conflict, parents' depressive symptoms and perceived parental concern for their children's mental health during COVID-19 in Canada: A cross-sectional analysis", *BMC Public Health*, vol. 23 (2023).

136. UNICEF, *Technical note: Gender-responsive parenting*.

## The costs for children and caregivers

Accessible, affordable, inclusive and quality early childhood education and care is key for the well-being of children and their caregivers. For children, early childhood education and care constitutes a powerful equalizer for their development and lifetime opportunities, as access to quality education and care during their early years sets children up for success throughout their education.<sup>137</sup> Research on brain development has shown that the period from birth to school age includes uniquely sensitive periods in which the foundations for cognitive learning, self-regulation, social interaction and overall development are laid.<sup>138</sup> More specifically, evidence indicates that high-quality childcare in the first three years of life can produce benefits for cognitive, language and social development.<sup>139</sup> This holds true especially for the most vulnerable, disadvantaged children, which makes ECEC a powerful equalizer.<sup>140</sup>

For caregivers, accessible, affordable and quality ECEC is key to balancing and reconciling paid work and family life, as it enables working parents to meet their work obligations and aspirations.<sup>141</sup> Prevailing gender norms around care work means that the brunt of childcare tends to be disproportionately carried out by women, often at the expense of their professional careers. ECEC for children aged 0–6 coupled with flexible working arrangements for parents with young children can be associated with reduced parental stress and enhanced parental well-being, as well as reductions in absenteeism and staff turnover, ultimately leading to an increase in women’s labour participation while also freeing up time for parents to engage in nurturing their young children.<sup>142</sup>

From an economic perspective, investing in ECEC provides countries and societies with multiple returns. The benefits of improved early childhood development, including through quality affordable childcare, are estimated to result in a 7 per cent or higher return on investment to society.<sup>143</sup> An economic review found median returns of \$4.19 in total benefits for every dollar invested in an education programme.<sup>144</sup> UNICEF’s recent study in Bosnia and Herzegovina showed that investments in ECEC services in the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina yield substantial socioeconomic benefits.<sup>145</sup> For every BAM 1 (\$0.56) invested in ECEC, an expected return of around

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137. Ivelina Borisova and others, *A World Ready to Learn: Prioritizing Quality Early Childhood Education* (New York, UNICEF, 2019).

138. Sven Silburn and others, “The first 5 years: Starting early”, *Early Childhood Series*, No. 2 (Menzie School of Health Research, 2011).

139. Jennifer Baxter and Kelly Hand, “Access to early childhood education in Australia”, *Research Report No. 24* (Melbourne, Australian Institute of Family Studies, 2013).

140. Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, “Literature review of the impact of early childhood education and care on learning and development”, *Working Paper* (Canberra, 2015); Edward Melhuish, “A literature review of the impact of early years provision upon young children, with emphasis given to children from disadvantaged backgrounds” (London, National Audit Office, 2004).

141. UNICEF, *Family-friendly policies: Redesigning the workplace of the future*.

142. *Ibid.*

143. *Ibid.*

144. Nishank Varshney, Judy A. Temple and Arthur J. Reynolds, “Early education and adult health: Age 37 impacts and economic benefits of the Child-Parent Center Preschool program”, *Journal of Benefit-Cost Analysis*, vol. 13, No. 1 (2022). For instance, the Abecedarian Project and the Carolina Approach to Responsive Education are two such programmes.

145. United Nations Bosnia and Herzegovina and Joint SDG Fund, *Cost-benefit analysis of investments in early childhood development in the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina: Investment case for children* (2023).

BAM 6.9 (around \$3.85) in socioeconomic benefits would be generated by 2052, which represents a return on investment of approximately 590 per cent over 30 years.<sup>146</sup>

Unavailable, limited, unaffordable or inaccessible ECEC poses concerns for children's development and equity. In instances where ECEC services are not easily available or are subpar, children are denied crucial learning opportunities that are essential for their development, which ultimately has implications for their lifelong opportunities and engagement in society, such as educational prospects, future employment opportunities and social interactions.<sup>147</sup> When ECEC services are available but are not fully subsidized or are only partially subsidized, they tend to be accessible only to the families that can cover the cost, which means that vulnerable families may not have access. The ensuing inequality perpetuates disparities, obstructs children's potential societal contributions and reinforces socioeconomic gaps. Unequal access to ECEC poses a significant obstacle to providing optimal learning opportunities for all children, affecting cognitive and emotional growth, and creating a substantial hurdle for overall child development.<sup>148</sup> The lack of access to quality education and avenues for skill development puts children at risk of lagging in their learning and development, while also increasing the risk of social instability,<sup>149</sup> escalated healthcare and social security expenses, and heightened social inequality in the future.<sup>150</sup>

The temporal misalignment between the end of maternal, paternal and parental leave and the beginning of ECEC services is a common issue in the region.<sup>151</sup> Policy gaps between childcare-related leave and childcare services, coupled with the widespread belief that young children benefit greatly from staying at home exclusively with their mothers, prevents children from benefiting from ECEC services and the opportunities it affords young children's peer socialization, learning and development, and prevents caregivers, and mothers specifically, from returning to the labour market. This perpetuates and accentuates gender inequality, reinforcing traditional caregiving roles and influencing children's perceptions of gender roles and responsibilities.<sup>152</sup> In many instances, women often find themselves compelled to remain at home to fulfil childcare duties as a result of traditional gender norms or their family's economic considerations, in an environment where the gender pay gap remains pervasive.

Ultimately, limited access to ECEC services represents missed opportunities for economies and societies in the long run. Investments in high-quality early childhood development programmes can deliver an annual return of 13 per cent per child on upfront costs through better outcomes in

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146. Ibid.

147. Janna van Belle, "Early childhood education and care (ECEC) and its long-term effects on educational and labour market outcomes" (RAND, 2016); UNICEF, *Family-friendly policies: Redesigning the workplace of the future*.

148. United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), *Building and Strengthening the Legal Framework on ECCE Rights: Achievements, Challenges and Actions for Change – Thematic Report* (2019).

149. Jin Chi, "The importance of gender in early childhood education policy", Brookings, 5 November 2018.

150. World Bank, "Not educating girls costs countries trillions of dollars, says new World Bank report", 11 July 2018.

151. UNICEF and UNFPA, *Mapping of gender-responsive family policies in the Europe and Central Asia region*.

152. Henrik Kleven and others, "Do family policies reduce gender inequality? Evidence from 60 years of policy experimentation", Working Paper No. 28082 (National Bureau of Economic Research, 2020).

education, health, employment and social behaviour in the decades that follow.<sup>153</sup> These returns come in the form of reduced social-care costs and increased productivity when children become adults.<sup>154</sup> For children, limited access to ECEC might result in lower earnings as adults, while for caregivers it might entail sacrificing one of their salaries to stay home and take care of their children. When women are forced to choose between work and family obligations, their labour force participation and career advancement are likely to be affected, and economic growth curtailed.<sup>155</sup>



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153. Mark Peters, “Investment in early childhood programs yields robust returns”, *UChicago News*, 12 December 2016.

154. *Ibid.*

155. UNFPA Eastern Europe and Central Asia Regional Office, *The state of gender-responsive family policies in the Eastern Europe and Central Asia region*.

## The costs for women

The lack or limited scope of GRFPs affects women during their most productive years and is particularly pronounced for working mothers. Families are often forced to decide between caregiving responsibilities and financial stability during their peak productive and reproductive years. While both men and women worry about a temporary decrease in earnings, the decision as to who will stay at home is often reinforced by traditional gender roles and social expectations<sup>156</sup> but also rationalized in economic terms.<sup>157</sup> The disparity in wages and the persisting gender pay gap in the region<sup>158</sup> often result in families having to decide to sacrifice women's income over men's,<sup>159</sup> compounding financial hardship and reducing women's future employment and career advancement opportunities.



The landscape of workplace flexibility plays a crucial role in shaping women's career trajectories and perpetuating gender disparities in employment and earnings. Among the 21 countries and territories covered in this report, part-time work, which offers unique benefits to pregnant women and parents, is a prevalent practice in only 14.<sup>160</sup> In Kazakhstan, pregnant women and parents of children under the age of 3 are eligible to work part-time.<sup>161</sup> In Azerbaijan, Ukraine and Uzbekistan, part-time work is restricted to pregnant women or women with children under the age of 14; however, limiting part-time work only to women can exacerbate gender inequalities in the labour market.<sup>162</sup> Ten countries covered have legal provisions in place enabling parents to work from home, such as Czechia, where pregnant employees, employees caring for a child under the age of 15 and employees caring for a dependent may request the right to work outside their workplace.<sup>163</sup> Legal provisions supporting flexible working schedules are in place in seven countries, including North Macedonia, where employers are mandated to support employees in coordinating family and professional obligations through flexible work formulas.<sup>164</sup>

156. Rachel Greszler, "The gender pay gap: Choice, children, and public policy", Backgrounder No. 3599 (The Heritage Foundation, 2021).

157. Mary Blair-Loy and Amy S. Wharton, "Employees' use of work-family policies and the workplace social context", *Social Forces*, vol. 80, No. 3 (2002).

158. UNFPA Eastern Europe and Central Asia Regional Office, *The state of gender-responsive family policies in the Eastern Europe and Central Asia region*.

159. Esteban Ortiz-Ospina, Joe Hasell and Max Roser, "Economic inequality by gender", Our World in Data, March 2024.

160. UNICEF and UNFPA, *Mapping of gender-responsive family policies in the Europe and Central Asia region*.

161. Ibid.

162. Ibid.

163. Ibid.

164. Ibid.

The gender wage gap within households, if left unaddressed, leads to stagnant incomes for mothers in the short term and compromised financial well-being in the long term. The International Monetary Fund suggests that most measures intended for women’s economic empowerment, such as GRFPs, pay for themselves in the long run without additional costs for governments.<sup>165</sup> Indeed, a larger workforce leads to greater economic activity and growth, which generates additional tax revenue for the country.<sup>166</sup>

Joblessness stemming from the absence of GRFPs places a significant financial burden on families and women in particular and limits their active participation in community life.<sup>167</sup> It carries long-term implications for health, mental well-being and social costs, such as an increased risk of poverty and social exclusion,<sup>168</sup> which in turn perpetuate gender inequalities and curtail productivity.<sup>169</sup>

In later stages of life, the absence of GRFPs plays a role in cementing the gender pension gap, which reflects gender disparities in access to economic opportunities and caregiving arrangements throughout the life course.<sup>170</sup> The gender pension gap arises from earnings disparities, career breaks and pension enrolment eligibility. Women typically earn less than men during their working years,<sup>171</sup> are more likely to take breaks from their careers for caregiving responsibilities<sup>172</sup> and frequently fall short of the annual income threshold required for pension enrolment due to lower earnings or participation in part-time or informal work.<sup>173</sup> With populations ageing in the region and women outliving men by up to 10 years, the lack of GRFPs perpetuates gender pension gaps, potentially leading to higher rates of poverty among older women, which will have a financial impact on governments in terms of social and health services.<sup>174</sup>

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165. Fabrizio, Gurara and Kolovich, “Fiscal policies for women’s economic empowerment”.

166. Ibid.

167. Catherine Byrnes and Sharon Lawn, “Disability employment services in Australia: A brief primer”, *The Australian Journal of Rehabilitation Counselling*, vol. 19, No. 1 (2013).

168. Jeanine Braithwaite and Daniel Mont, “Disability and poverty: A survey of World Bank poverty assessments and implications”, *Alter*, vol. 3, No. 3 (2009).

169. Chopra and Krishnan, *Linking family-friendly policies to women’s economic empowerment*.

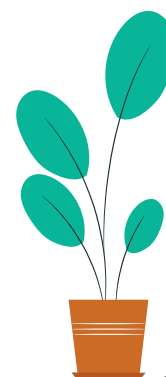
170. Ibid.

171. Eurostat, “Gender pays gap statistics”, 2021. Available at [https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php?title=Gender\\_pay\\_gap\\_statistics](https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php?title=Gender_pay_gap_statistics) (accessed on 10 August 2024).

172. Jorge M. Bravo and José A. Herce, “Career breaks, broken pensions? Long-run effects of early and late-career unemployment spells on pension entitlements”, *Journal of Pension Economics and Finance*, vol. 21, No. 2 (2022).

173. Ibid.

174. Fillo and Negruta, *Keep the Promise*.



## The costs for governments

Governments and national budgets are particularly exposed to the costs – both direct and indirect – of not having GRFPs in place.<sup>175</sup> Direct costs arise from increased demand for social- and health-care services when individuals or families cannot meet their basic needs due to unemployment or lack of access to quality health care, including sexual and reproductive health services.<sup>176</sup> Indirect costs stem from reduced economic activity and growth, in the form of lower-than-optimal revenues. When political hesitancy impedes the prioritization of GRFPs, governments ultimately incur higher direct and indirect costs. While the implementation of GRFPs may entail initial expenses, the long-term benefits, such as the redistribution of the unpaid care burden, enhanced workforce participation, improved employee productivity and morale, reduced turnover and healthier societies, can outweigh these costs.<sup>177</sup>

When women and men are required to stay at home to perform caregiving roles due to a lack of quality and accessible ECEC and limited elder care or disability-related care, their socioeconomic opportunities are dramatically reduced. This shows that a lack of government investment in GRFPs today generates both direct and indirect costs such as increased unemployment assistance costs and lower government revenues and economic growth, respectively. Government investments in GRFP policies, services, jobs and infrastructure to recognize, reduce and redistribute the unpaid care burden are therefore paramount.

Having no GRFPs in place can also negatively affect organizational commitments,<sup>178</sup> increase work-family conflict<sup>179</sup> and reduce job satisfaction, leading to burnout, increased health and absenteeism costs,<sup>180</sup> and higher levels of employee turnover.<sup>181</sup> Due to the competitive business environment, smaller administrative entities with tight budgets, such as cities and municipalities, and small businesses are finding it increasingly difficult to recruit and retain skilled employees without childcare-related leave and flexibility at work.<sup>182</sup> Where such leave policies exist and are funded through social security systems rather than employer liability systems, these risks are minimized.

The lack of GRFPs coupled with insufficient investments in sexual and reproductive health (SRH) can significantly impact a country's human capital and inclusive socioeconomic development,

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175. Fabrizio, Gurara and Kolovich, "Fiscal policies for women's economic empowerment".

176. Stefania Fabrizio and others, "Women in the labor force: The role of fiscal policies", IMF Staff Discussion Note, SDN/20/03 (IMF, 2020).

177. Ibid.

178. Subhasree Kar and K. C. Misra, "Nexus between work life balance practices and employee retention: The mediating effect of a supportive culture", *Asian Social Science*, vol. 9, No. 11 (2013).

179. Alan L. Saltzstein, Yuan Ting and Grace Hall Saltzstein, "Work-family balance and job satisfaction: The impact of family-friendly policies on attitudes of federal government employees", *Public Administration Review*, vol. 61, No. 4 (2001).

180. Varsha Yadav and Himani Sharma, "Family-friendly policies, supervisor support and job satisfaction: Mediating effect of work-family conflict", *Vilakshan - XIMB Journal of Management*, vol. 20, No. 1 (2021).

181. Ibid.

182. Gary E. Roberts, "Municipal government benefits practices and personnel outcomes: Results from a national survey", *Public Personnel Management*, vol. 33, No. 1 (2004).



imposing significant costs on governments.<sup>183</sup> SRH investments include family planning interventions, comprehensive sexual education, SRH services, maternal health interventions and the prevention of sexually transmitted infections, including HIV. When coupled with GRFPs, these investments can improve adolescents' and women's educational attainment, especially for those most at risk of unintended pregnancies and sexually transmitted infections, including HIV, and improve women's control over the timing of births, thereby decreasing the likelihood of unintended interruptions in their career. SRH investments can also improve health outcomes for children, mothers and women overall and can lead to financial savings for individuals and families by decreasing expenditures associated with mistimed or unwanted pregnancies, reduce health costs associated with maternal and child health conditions and increase women's potential earnings through greater educational attainment, labour force participation and productivity.<sup>184</sup>

It is estimated that government spending on family planning services can generate huge savings: for every \$1 spent, \$4.02 is saved. These investments result in economic benefits and enable women to choose if and when to have children.<sup>185</sup> More broadly, barriers originating from the absence of GRFPs and gender-based discrimination in access to health care contribute to health disparities, strain health systems and impact community well-being and economic vitality,<sup>186</sup> all resulting in significant costs for governments.<sup>187</sup>



183. Tess Mpoyi, “Family planning and the gendered impacts of crises on women: An effective tool across sectors to support women’s empowerment and build resilience to shocks”, Population Reference Bureau, 12 May 2021.

184. Rashmi Dayalu and others, *Enhancing Human Capital through Sexual and Reproductive Health Investments and Family Support Policies in Malaysia* (UNFPA Malaysia, 2022).

185. Jennifer J. Frost, Lawrence B. Finer and Athena Tapales, “The impact of publicly funded family planning clinic services on unintended pregnancies and government cost savings”. Available at [https://www.guttmacher.org/sites/default/files/pdfs/pubs/09\\_HPU19.3Frost.pdf](https://www.guttmacher.org/sites/default/files/pdfs/pubs/09_HPU19.3Frost.pdf) (accessed on 10 August 2024).

186. World Health Organization, “Ensuring gender-responsive health systems”.

187. Varshney, Temple and Reynolds, “Early education and adult health”.

## The costs for the private sector

Companies operating without the framework of GRFPs may find themselves entangled in financial, gender-equality and transparency quandaries, fostering conflicts between work and family life,<sup>188</sup> stifling innovation and ultimately prompting a decline in employee retention.<sup>189</sup> The absence of these policies leads to a depletion of skills and disruption in client relationships and imposes substantial financial burdens, encompassing recruitment and training expenses.<sup>190</sup> Failing to adopt GRFPs can also tarnish a company's reputation,<sup>191</sup> casting doubt on its commitment to employee well-being and, consequently, jeopardizing its appeal to customers, prospective hires and investors (see Box 3).

### Box 3. Innovative employer practices are emerging

Savvy organizations are recognizing the imperative of mitigating conflicts between work and family life and championing GRFPs as a strategy to attract and retain top talent. In Bosnia and Herzegovina, a prominent hygiene products company has established a kindergarten in the vicinity of its work premises, which benefits women from rural areas in particular. Another company, with over 9,000 employees, has launched a fund called Heart of the Community, which has an annual budget of BAM 1,000,000 (approximately \$555,000), to provide financial aid to employees and their families during times of illness, exemplifying a systematic commitment to creating a workplace environment that prioritizes respect, value and safety. In Serbia, the Accelerating Innovation and Growth Entrepreneurship Project contributes to growth, competitiveness and access to finance. Fifty-three per cent of the \$1.3 million in grants awarded has been allocated to women.<sup>192</sup> In Kyrgyzstan, 28,000 micro, small and medium-sized enterprises led by women are expected to be supported by the World Bank's \$100 million Emergency Support for Micro, Small, and Medium Enterprises Project.<sup>193</sup>

188. Pelin Kantan, "Family friendly policies in organizations and their effects on work-life balance, work alienation and life satisfaction", *UBT International Conference* (2013).

189. Jacqui Abbott, Helen De Cieri and Roderick D. Iverson, "Costing turnover: Implications of work/ family conflict at management level", *Asia Pacific Journal of Human Resources*, vol. 36, No. 1 (1998).

190. Ibid.

191. Subajini Jayasekaran and others, *Business and family-friendly policies: An evidence brief* (UNICEF, 2019).

192. World Bank, "Serbia Accelerating Innovation and Growth Entrepreneurship". Available at <https://projects.worldbank.org/en/projects-operations/project-detail/P170185> (accessed on 21 August 2024).

193. World Bank, "Emergency Support for MSMEs Project". Available at <https://projects.worldbank.org/en/projects-operations/project-detail/P174028> (accessed on 21 August 2024).

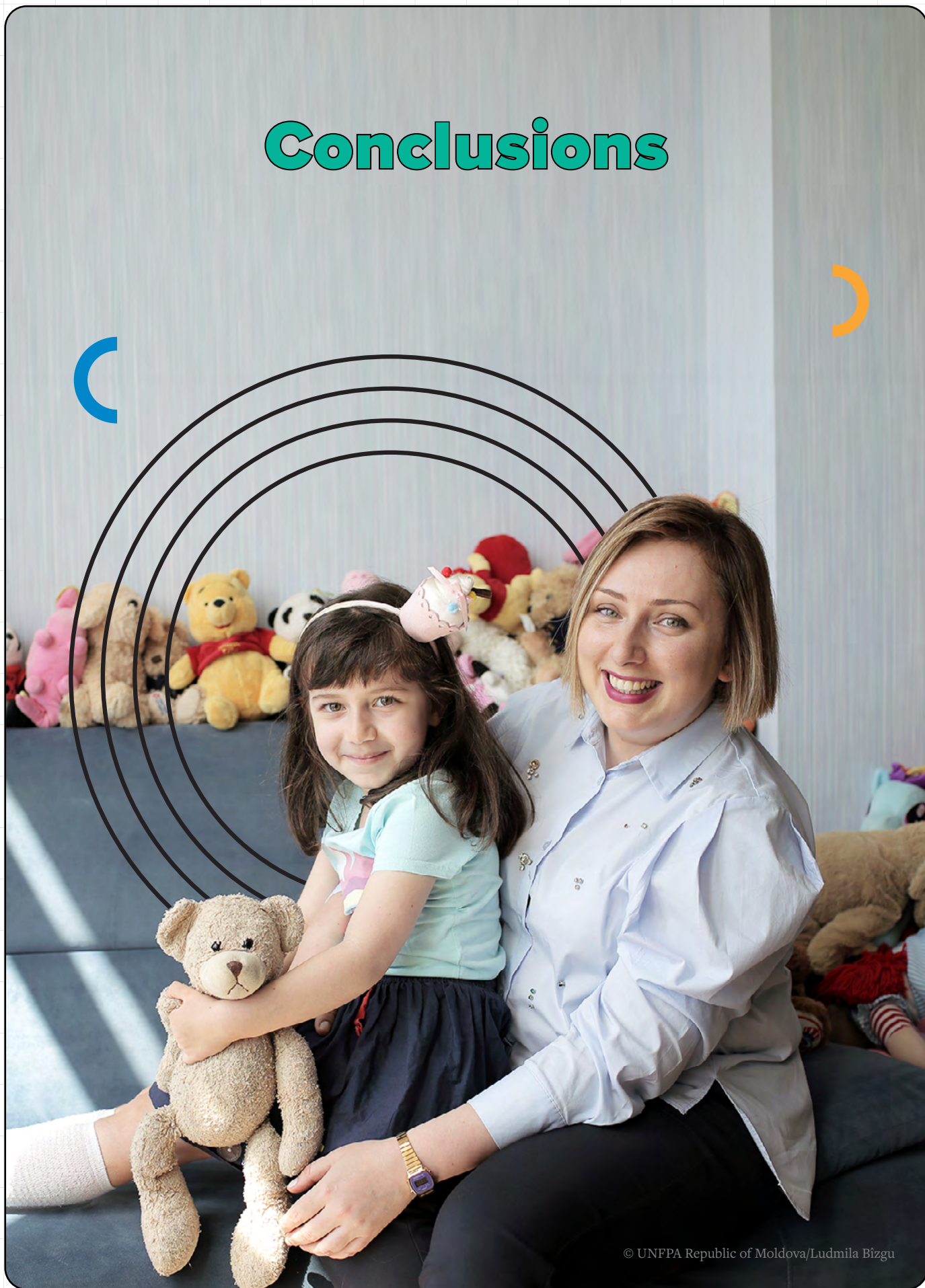
More recently, the COVID-19 pandemic has underscored the vital role of GRFPs in promoting workforce participation and building resilient economies. As the pandemic disrupted traditional work routines and increased the need for caregiving, GRFPs, such as those providing flexible work arrangements, paid sick leave, the right to remote work and accessible ECEC, have become more critical than ever. Decades of underinvestment and neglect in GRFPs has resulted in detrimental consequences for families and exacerbated inequalities.<sup>194</sup> The COVID-19 pandemic has therefore exposed the need for companies to provide valuable support to their employees, including the recognition that employee benefits, especially those centred around care, flexibility and mental health, can be life-changing for their workforce.<sup>195</sup>

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194. UN Women, *UN Secretary-General's policy brief: The impact of COVID-19 on women* (2020).

195. Tim Allen, "The pandemic is changing employee benefits", *Harvard Business Review*, 7 April 2021.

# Conclusions



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As countries and territories across the Europe and Central Asia region increasingly adopt family policies, the imperative to recognize gender-related considerations becomes paramount. Yet, this path is fraught with significant challenges, including deeply rooted social norms that reinforce traditional gender roles. To bring about transformative change, sustained efforts are required, including robust educational initiatives and awareness campaigns that promote positive parenting practices, support the equal sharing of unpaid care and domestic work responsibilities among women and men, and increase access to quality early childhood education and care.

In a region grappling with low fertility, ageing populations, international migration, conflict and displacement, gender-responsive family policies constitute a significant tool for governments and the private sector to adapt to evolving social and economic dynamics, effectively supporting individuals and families throughout their life course, and promoting gender equality. Yet, their full potential remains untapped because they are not always prioritized, or they are sidelined by concerns over perceived high costs.

Social norms around marriage, cohabitation and caregiving are evolving. Men's perspectives on shared family duties are undergoing a transformation, and they are playing an increased role in providing childcare.<sup>196</sup> Despite these shifts, the persistence of the male-breadwinner model continues to stifle women's progress. Lingering gender norms continue to fuel structural gender inequalities, especially in the distribution of unpaid care and domestic work, hindering women's access to education, skills development and employment opportunities, thereby perpetuating gender wage and pension gaps.

Crucial family-centric policies, such as maternity leave, paternity leave, parental leave, breastfeeding support, affordable and quality ECEC services and child benefits, profoundly shape family outcomes, nurturing child development and enhancing parental well-being. Yet, for large numbers of families across the region, many of these legal entitlements and services remain out of reach. The cost of not having GRFPs in the Eastern Europe and Central Asia region is substantial and extends beyond mere financial implications. The absence of GRFPs compels individuals, particularly women, to confront difficult choices that impact their family, career and well-being trajectories. Fostering inclusive, resilient communities demands a holistic policy approach that recognizes unique gender needs and evolving family structures and includes family-centric measures that address gender inequality and gender discrimination. It also requires the removal of discriminatory laws and practices that perpetuate gender inequality and limit women's engagement in all spheres of life.

For governments, the repercussions of a lack of or limited GRFP implementation extend beyond the fiscal realm and include straining health and social services due to reduced economic activity on the part of women, barriers to children's development, diminished potential for economic growth and the perpetuation of intergenerational inequalities. The costs of not implementing

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196. N. van der Gaag and others, *State of the World's Fathers: Centering Care in a World in Crisis* (Washington, DC, Equimundo, 2023).

GRFPs far outweigh the investments required for their implementation, making a compelling case for prioritizing and advancing these policies for the benefit of women, men, families and society as a whole. And as businesses gradually adapt to their employees' diverse needs, public policy has the potential to replicate these benefits universally. Cultivating a workplace culture that prioritizes work-life balance and family support should be standard practice.

Beyond governments and the private sector, the engagement of civil society organizations, feminist and grass-roots movements, and marginalized communities in the design and implementation of GRFPs is essential to shaping responsive policies that address the diverse needs and realities of individuals and families, particularly those who are furthest behind. They play a pivotal role in nurturing this shift by promoting gender equality, offering tools and best practices, and engaging in public policy debates.

Ultimately, robust political will and strengthened stakeholder collaboration, resource allocation, and monitoring and evaluation are imperative for effective GRFP implementation and long-term impact assessment. Embracing gender-responsive family policies is not just a quest for social justice but a strategic imperative for building inclusive and democratically resilient societies.

Appendix

# Framework for developing gender- responsive family policies



The framework for developing gender-responsive family policies is a tool designed to address the complexities of policymaking. The framework is structured around four phases and identifies key steps and responsible actors for the creation of robust and effective policies. It recognizes the crucial role of the following:

- a) government agencies such as national women’s machineries, ministries of health, ministries of labour and social affairs, and ministries of education, science, culture and sport;
- b) civil society organizations (CSOs), by providing valuable insights through their work with communities and families, and helping ensure that policies address the needs of all family members and all types of families;
- c) the private sector, by adopting family-friendly workplace policies and initiatives and championing gender equality within their organizational structures;
- d) research institutions specializing in gender studies, family studies and policy analysis, as they provide essential evidence, including credible datasets; and
- e) families themselves.

## Phase 0. Preparatory phase

In the initial stages of designing gender-responsive family policies, evaluating the availability of both quantitative and qualitative data is crucial. Collaborating with statistical authorities and partners to identify potential data gaps is equally important. Quantitative data can provide measurable and verifiable information, while qualitative data can offer deeper insights into experiences, opinions and motivations. The absence of sex-disaggregated data<sup>197</sup> is a common challenge, prompting many governments to prioritize the collection of such data.<sup>198</sup> Nevertheless, gender statistics extend beyond mere sex-disaggregated data.<sup>199</sup> Merely possessing data categorized by sex does not guarantee that the concepts, definitions and methods employed in data production accurately reflect gender roles, relations and societal inequalities.<sup>200</sup>

In the context of gender-responsive family policymaking, governments often encounter challenges in collecting robust data for gender-responsive family policies due to limited capacities or outdated data collection tools. However, robust datasets and consistent data collection facilitate a deeper understanding of the challenges and opportunities faced by individuals across different age groups. The data collection process should consider the following datasets to inform policies effectively.

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197. Cheryl Doss and Caitlin Kieran, “Three things you need to know about sex-disaggregated data”, CGIAR, 5 May 2014. Available at <https://a4nh.cgiar.org/2014/05/05/three-things-you-need-to-know-about-sex-disaggregated-data/> (accessed on 21 August 2024).

198. Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), *Policy Framework for Gender-Sensitive Public Governance*, 1 September 2021 (C(2021)97); Women’s Democracy Network, *Gender-Responsive Policymaking Handbook* (International Republican Institute, 2020).

199. Ibid.

200. European Institute for Gender Equality, “Sex-disaggregated data”, 2024.



Data type	Description	Data collection point
Demographic data	Age and gender distribution within households, family structures and geographic location	National statistical agencies, census bureaus and demographic research institutions
Economic and employment data	Employment rates, income levels, occupational distribution and gender wage gaps	Labour departments, statistical agencies and research institutions focusing on labour economics
Education data	Educational attainment, enrolment rates and gender disparities in access to education	Ministry of education, educational institutions and research organizations specializing in education
Health and reproductive data	Access to health care, family planning choices, maternal and child health indicators	Health ministries, public health agencies and organizations focusing on reproductive health
Social and cultural data	Cultural norms, societal expectations and prevailing attitudes towards gender roles	Sociocultural research institutions, gender studies centres and community-based organizations
Legal and policy framework data	Existing family-related policies, legal frameworks and their gender responsiveness	Government legal departments, policy research institutions and legal scholars
Data on gender-based violence	Incidence and prevalence of gender-based violence	Law enforcement agencies, social services and organizations specializing in gender-based-violence research
Time use data	The statistical information that measures the impact of work policies on caregiving responsibilities, the availability of parental leave, and the distribution of time spent on paid work versus unpaid care work by men and women	Labour departments, social services and organizations focusing on work-life balance
Public opinion and perception data	Public attitudes towards gender roles, family dynamics and policy preferences	Public opinion research firms, sociological research institutions and polling organizations
Intersectional data	Understanding how gender intersects with other factors such as disability, race, ethnicity and socioeconomic status	Intersectional research institutions, sociological research institutions and community-based organizations

## Local experiences

The attempt to determine cash benefits in Armenia highlights the need for well-planned policies and solid data collection methods.

“We relied on our analytical information but faced limitations with outdated tools like the 1998 Microsoft Access–based social assistance and protection system. This hindered operative analysis, leading to delays in concluding post-data analysis, necessitating manual work. Involving external experts moved the process forward, yet the central challenge persists in collecting, processing and reporting data.”

— Government representative, Armenia

Meanwhile, other governments leverage national statistical and research institutes to enhance the effectiveness of their policies.

Kazakhstan’s Family and Gender Policy Concept 2030 used data from the National Statistics Bureau, research by the Kazakhstan Institute of Social Development and insights from UNFPA and UNICEF. Decisions, such as the decision to introduce flexible work schedules for parents, were based on research, including findings from a national report on Kazakh families.

## Phase 1. Identifying the issues

The data that has been collected should be analysed from a gender perspective to pinpoint the main trends, patterns, gaps and challenges related to gender equality and family policies. Gender analysis provides the necessary data and information to integrate a gender perspective into policies and ensure that they do not replicate harmful gender norms and stereotypes but instead lead to greater gender equality.<sup>201</sup>

The data analysis will in fact enable policymakers to spot trends and identify potential problematic areas that need to be addressed. In the case of GRFPs, these areas could include gender inequality, childcare, elder care, work-life balance, etc. A comprehensive assessment around families' current situation, the challenges they face and the effectiveness of existing policies and best practices from other countries is key.

Key considerations for effective GRFP decision-making	
Engage families in policy development	Individuals and families can provide valuable context and help ensure that policies are effective and relevant. Family representatives, parent-teacher associations and family advocacy groups could be involved in this process.
Foster partnership and participation	Collaboration makes the process more inclusive. Policy creators could engage community organizations, non-profit organizations, local government agencies, trade unions, care agencies and individuals from diverse backgrounds in this process.
Promote equity in research and practice	Apply an equity-centred framework to research. This includes incorporating principles of diversity, inclusion and equity.
Address the obstacles and challenges to implementing GRFPs	Identifying and addressing the barriers and challenges that may hinder the implementation of gender-responsive family policies in the region is essential.
Explore gender-transformative policies	Developing policies that not only address gender inequalities but also aim to transform gender roles and promote gender equality is key.
Engage the private sector	Working with the private sector to promote gender-responsive policies is important. The private sector can provide unique insight into work-related dynamics.

201. European Institute for Gender Equality, "Gender analysis", 2024.

## **Local experiences**

In the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina, the Ministry of Labour and Social Policy identifies and formulates social policy by focusing on social needs, emphasizing understanding and addressing the specific challenges individuals and communities face. Initially, gender considerations are not the primary focus, but, rather, attention is directed towards identifying and responding to social needs. Statistics are collected on both men and women, such as in cases where a single-parent family headed by a woman may be at risk of poverty. Recognition of the different needs of men and women emerges organically as social needs are assessed. However, there is currently no established tracking system or formal protocol to systematically address and ensure responsiveness to gender-specific needs in social policies. While there may be initiatives in this direction, there is a lack of a comprehensive system to incorporate gender considerations into policy development consistently.

“Analysis might necessitate a systemic solution. Further assessment determines if a law or additional measures are needed.”

— Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina Ministry of Labour and Social Policy

## Phase 2. Policy proposal

Policy proposal marks the next significant step. This phase is about crafting policies that are not only gender-responsive but also family-centric, ensuring that they cater to the unique requirements of different family structures. Gender analysis takes the forefront, informing interventions finely attuned to gender dynamics.<sup>202</sup> Policy proposals must take a long-term approach, as families need to be able to plan for the future, and the policies must allow them to do so. And similarly, the effects of these policies will also be long-term; they may not be immediately visible, so governments should include monitoring processes that take this into account to avoid focusing only on immediate costs rather than longer-term benefits.

### Local experiences

In Uzbekistan, a systematic approach to women and family affairs begins with *mahallas* (community associations). Specialized personnel within *mahallas* focus on women's issues, collecting essential data during home visits for strategy development. This data is then reported to districts, from districts to regions, and from regions to the relevant state committee. Proposals are submitted at each level, eventually reaching the Cabinet of Ministers and Parliament, ensuring a comprehensive approach. The Parliamentary Committee on Family and Women oversees this process, covering employment, training and labour relations. The committee also maintains a population needs assessment system by engaging with women through conferences and discussions to identify issues.

These proposals have a significant influence on strategic decisions, ensuring comprehensive attention to women's needs. In Uzbekistan, *mahallas* are widely considered a foundation of modern civil society. The creation of the Mahalla Foundation in 1993 eventually led to legislative and governance reforms that promoted and encouraged public involvement and participation in various sectors. Today, local organizations in Uzbekistan can be grouped into four large categories: (i) grass-roots civil society organizations, (ii) government-organized non-governmental organizations, (iii) research organizations and think tanks, and (iv) professional associations.<sup>203</sup>

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202. Ibid.

203. Asian Development Bank, *Civil society brief: Uzbekistan* (2021).

## Phase 3. Policy adoption

Policy adoption is a coordinated process that involves advocacy and brings together diverse stakeholders. Partnering with civil society organizations, the private sector and other vested interest groups is central to achieving a better development impact, channelling the voices of those affected by policies and creating networks for awareness. These groups can provide support in tailoring messages to specific audiences and building support among affected communities. Moreover, they ensure that local voices and needs are considered in development programmes and help raise awareness through their extensive networks. Excluding these stakeholders can curtail advocacy and limit policy impact.<sup>204</sup>

### Local experiences

Armenia recently made a significant change to its Labour Code by introducing amendments related to breastfeeding breaks.<sup>205</sup> The Armenian CSO interviewed as part of the case study process advocated for this legislative reform in 2021.

“In essence, the provision for breastfeeding was inadequate. Then, we conducted research and highlighted the need for improvements. We used various approaches, including creating accessible media like infographics and engaging with legislators, including the Prime Minister and government representatives. Our advocacy led to adjustments in breastfeeding break policies, making them available to all mothers without needing proof of breastfeeding from a medical doctor. Despite a lengthy three-year process, these changes mark a significant achievement.”

— Armenian CSO

“The key informant interviews for the Bosnia and Herzegovina case study also emphasized that collaboration is the key. The Dajte Nam Šansu (Give Us a Chance) association in Sarajevo put forward suggestions to improve legislation related to support for parents with children with disabilities. The association led the way, with support from the Ministry of Labour and Social Policy throughout the process, resulting in new legislation benefiting parents and their children.”

— Bosnia and Herzegovina, Ministry of Labour and Social Policy

204. OECD, *Policy Framework for Gender-Sensitive Public Governance*; Women’s Democracy Network, *Gender-Responsive Policymaking Handbook*.

205. Interview with the non-governmental organization Point 33 on 10 June 2023.

## Phase 4. Policy implementation

The policy implementation phase involves crafting an action plan with detailed activities, expected outcomes, indicators, timelines, responsibilities and required resources. Cross-sectoral collaboration is essential, necessitating the coordination of resources and efforts across ministries. However, challenges such as policy segregation, leadership gaps, mistrust, poor communication, limited resources and distinct political agendas can impede this collaborative effort.

Implementation also involves the mobilization and allocation of resources. Adequate financial, human and technical resources need to be ensured and allocated to policy implementation, which may require budgeting, fundraising and advocacy efforts. The policy is then operationalized by delivering services and programmes that provide the intended benefits and support to the target groups and beneficiaries. This could include providing cash transfers, subsidies, childcare, education, health and other services and programmes that address the needs and rights of families. Policy implementation is a dynamic process that requires continual adjustments in response to evolving social, economic and political factors. This includes collecting data to evaluate performance, assess impact and identify challenges. Valuable insights from beneficiaries and implementers are obtained through surveys, interviews and focus groups.

## Phase 5. Policy assessment

There remains a noticeable shortage of evaluations concerning the long-term effectiveness of GRFPs. However, to ensure that policies do not exist in isolation and yield the expected results, it is essential to periodically assess their impact on target beneficiaries. This needs to be accompanied by political willingness to amend the policy in case it is found to be ineffective.

### Local voices

“Any programme can face issues over time, causing it to stop working or function only partially. Despite aiming for effective employment solutions, these programmes fail to adequately serve jobseekers and those seeking reintegration into the labour market. We face difficulties in getting people involved in these programmes, leading to [the programmes’] reconsideration or revision. Additionally, we sometimes implement pilot projects to explore new approaches.”

— Government representative, Armenia

Definitions may need refining for effective policy execution. For example, gender pay gap regulations often use “equal pay for equal work”, but this can be ambiguous, as it does not consider the work’s value.<sup>206</sup> The “equal value” concept, considering the nature of the work, the working conditions, the effort involved, and the worker’s responsibilities and required skills, can address this. Trade unions can raise awareness of these issues and support workers facing wage discrimination.

### **Local voices**

“Gender-equality legislation has progressed in defining discrimination types, yet challenges persist. Regulations addressing the gender pay gap, focusing on equal work rather than work value, create ambiguity. Countries should develop a methodology aligned with ILO Convention 111.<sup>207</sup> The absence of a standardized method for measuring and evaluating work values currently makes proving wage discrimination challenging.”  
— Trade union representative, Georgia

Continuous adaptation and improvement of gender-responsive family policies is needed to effectively address evolving challenges and ensure fairness and equality. The policy assessment phase is not just about evaluating the outcomes of policies but also about making necessary amendments and adaptations. It is about looking at policies in their entirety, understanding their impacts and making informed decisions to ensure that they are indeed beneficial for families.

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206. European Commission, “EU action for equal pay”.

207. ILO, Discrimination (Employment and Occupation) Convention, 1958 (No. 111). The ILO’s Convention No. 111 provides a framework for addressing discrimination in employment and occupation, including on the basis of sex. It calls for equality of opportunity and treatment in employment or occupation. To effectively implement this convention and address wage discrimination, countries should develop a methodology that aligns with its principles. Yet, the absence of a standardized approach for measuring and assessing work values makes it difficult to substantiate wage discrimination claims.



# Checklist for gender-responsive family policies

In alignment with the five policy phases described above, the checklist that follows serves as a simple tool to facilitate the design of gender-responsive family policies. It provides a list of steps and key actions that should be considered in the design, implementation and assessment of gender-responsive family policies.



## Phase 0. Preparatory phase

- Evaluate data availability and collaborate with statistical authorities and partners to identify potential data gaps.
- Map the policy context to understand the current policy landscape, including existing gender-responsive family policies, legal frameworks and institutional structures.
- Create an inclusive data collection plan to engage women and men equally in data collection.
- Collect gender-relevant data and research.
- Ensure that all relevant datasets are accessible and consulted (e.g. demographic data, economic data, caregiving data, etc.) to inform policies effectively.

## Phase 1. Identifying the issues

- Identify the key issues that the policy needs to address, such as gender inequality in caregiving roles and child and family benefits.
- Gather specific, locally contextualized and up-to-date data on the current situation, including by bringing researchers, evaluators and data analysts on board to be involved in conducting research and evaluations.
- Consider engaging families in the process to make it more inclusive.

## Phase 2. Policy proposal

- Based on the data collected, conduct a gender policy analysis to understand how the policy might impact different genders.
- Organize consultative processes engaging different stakeholders and ensure that mechanisms for clear cross-ministerial collaboration are in place.
- Include gender considerations in all policy components to ensure that they are gender-responsive.
- Develop a policy proposal based on the research and data collected.

## Phase 3. Policy adoption

- Develop an advocacy plan by carefully considering the target audience and the policy landscape.
- Expand networks to engage with other government agencies, civil society organizations and community groups.

## Phase 4. Policy implementation

- Develop a detailed implementation plan, including roles and responsibilities, timelines and resources.
- Secure funding for policy implementation.
- Create and use adequate monitoring tools.
- Train implementers to ensure that they understand their roles and responsibilities.

## Phase 5. Policy assessment

- Conduct an evaluation by analysing the data collected through monitoring to assess the effectiveness of the policy and identify areas for improvement.
- Document and share good practices and lessons learned to inform future policy development.
- Disseminate the findings and use them to inform future policy development.

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