PROGRAMME TO SUPPORT

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Acknowledgments

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Introduction

This document presents an analysis and main findings on the transition to the labour market of women on childcare care leave in Moldova. The first chapter describes the framework of maternity, paternity and parental leave policies, childcare and social protection, gender equality and employment policies in Moldova. It shows the complex scenario of policies which points at multiple possibilities of combinations of policies that may be effective in supporting the return of mothers with young children to the labour market, one of the main objectives of recent employment policies in Moldova.

The second chapter presents five experiences found in EU countries that, with varied approaches, support mothers in addressing the barriers they encounter when (even thinking of) returning or entering the labour market. Chapter 3 draws both on the analysis of the Moldovan context and on the experience of the EU countries and identifies seven main challenges and a number of objectives and potential measures for the relevant authorities and other stakeholders to consider in order to increase the participation of women with young children in the labour market in Moldova.

In addition, Chapter 4 proposes three pilot projects that could be promoted by the Ministry for Labour and Social Protection in close cooperation with other stakeholders to advance in the design and implementation of measures to address the multiple and complex needs of mothers to balance their personal and work lives as they re-enter in the labour market.

CHAPTER 1

Family, childcare, social protection, gender equality and employment policies in Moldova

In Moldova, women's activity and employment rates are substantially lower than those of men. Among young women, unmet childcare needs are one of the main causes of women's unemployment, inactivity and the feminization of poverty. Several studies have identified the effects of gaps in Moldova's childcare system on women's employment and have found that greater availability of affordable, high-quality childcare services can improve female participation in the labour force. It can also reduce the number of working mothers in lower-paid jobs (Cambridge Econometrics et al. 2024).

Taking into account that there are large differences in male and female employment paths in the years after childbirth, e.g. mothers are more likely to withdraw from full-time employment over time while fathers typically remain in full-time work, public authorities and employers need to ensure that mothers have the opportunity to return to their former jobs or join the labour market such that they can reconcile their professional, family responsibilities and personal lives as fathers do. There is a large body of national evidence showing that women with children suffer significant pay penalties and that taking time out of the labour force or returning to work part-time may be damaging for career progression. Moreover, many young women, including highly qualified women, are NEETs (not in employment, education or training) and are excluded from economic opportunities.

Employment provides women with access to economic and financial resources, as well as opportunities for personal development. The participation of women in the labour market contributes to increasing family income, reducing the poverty level of women and improving the well-being of the country's population in general. Additionally, the costs of replacing an employee are quite high and the employers' benefit from women returning to work after maternity leave are high as well.

Yet, women often report that the hardest part of maternity leave is the return to work. Whether when returning to their former jobs or other work, mothers re-entering the labour force rarely find the logistical or personal support they need to continue to thrive in a career. The normal stress of work is compounded by childcare logistics, pressure to catch up with their coworkers and a bias against working mothers.

A deeper understanding of the behaviour and employment opportunities of women following the birth of children is imperative. This requires consideration of their previous labour experience, the education level attained, local employment opportunities and the care services available to the family. The additional difficulties of specific groups of women, such as the lone mothers, the low qualified, those living in rural areas or with some disability need also to be addressed. To ensure a functional connection between employers and women having one or more preschool aged children willing to work under flexible terms is key to reach the goal of increasing the employment rate of women aged 25-34 by four percentage points between 2021 and 2026, as stated in the National Employment Programme (NEP) 2022-2026.

This desk review aims to provide insights into the challenges faced by women with children in their return or access to the labour market after the maternity. These challenges are rooted in the policy, legal and employment context and are also related to women's employability levels, including the access to affordable and quality childcare services. The challenges relate to several issues: stereotypes and social pressure that put a greater emphasis on women's role in the family and on men's role at work; career counselling and professional orientation of women towards relatively limited areas of occupation; labour market issues such as employers preferring to hire young men rather than young women; young women being more likely to have poorly paid jobs; and a lack of conditions enabling the conciliation of family with working life (UN. 2021).

The first section of this chapter presents first a brief overview of the legal, policy and institutional background regarding gender equality and employment in Moldova in order to better understand the challenges and identify the objectives and measures to support the participation in employment of women with children. Following a description of recent legal and policy developments in the fields of gender equality and employment, three key issues are analysed: 1) maternity, paternity and parental/childcare leave schemes in Moldova; 2) the provision of childcare; and 3) developments in employment policies that target support for the employment of women. The second section of this chapter analyses the current situation and recent evolution of women's employment in Moldova. Using Labour Force Survey (LFS) data provided by the Moldova National Bureau of Statistics, attention is paid to relevant variables, such as the age, education level, geographical area (urban/rural) and the presence of young children in the family.

1 Legal, policy and institutional context regarding gender equality and employment

The Republic of Moldova has signed and ratified many relevant international legal frameworks pertaining to gender equality and the empowerment of women. Moldova's legislative and normative frameworks in support of gender equality and advancing women's empowerment is relatively strong. By ratifying key documents such as the United Nations Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) and various ILO Conventions, such as the Violence and Harassment Convention, 2019 (No. 190), the Maternity Protection Convention, 2000 (No. 183), Moldova has signalled its dedication to promoting gender equality on multiple fronts. However, it has not yet ratified the ILO Workers with Family Responsibilities Convention, 1981 (No. 156) which points in Article 3 to the responsibility of the state to "enable persons with family responsibilities who are engaged or wish to engage in employment to exercise their right to do so without being subject to discrimination and, to the extent possible, without conflict between their employment and family responsibilities".

According to the World Economic Forum's (WEF) *Global Gender Gap Report* 2024 Moldova scores 0.79 points (out of 1.0) and ranks very high (13th of 146 countries) in view of notable progress in recent years (WEF, 2023). For example, Moldova elected a woman president in 2020 and 40.6 per cent women MPs in 2022. According to the Women, Business and the Law Index 2024, Moldova is one of the two economies in Europe and Central Asia that have scored above 90 for the first time, thanks to reforms enacted (World Bank 2024).[1] Yet, among the ten areas assessed, Moldova shows room for improvement of the legal framework in entrepreneurship, childcare, pensions and safety(World Bank 2024).

The main recent legal and policy developments in this context are as follows:

1. In 2006, Moldova adopted **Law No. 5 on Equality of Opportunities for Men and Women.** This law aims to eliminate gender discrimination and promote equal opportunities in various aspects of life, including employment. By promoting gender equality, this law contributes to a more inclusive and diverse working environment. In Chapter III the state guarantees equal rights and opportunities, as well as equal treatment of women and men, in employment and equal conditions for women and men as regards combining service duties with family obligations.

   Law No. 5 also sets up the institutional framework for ensuring equal opportunities between women and men. The **Government Commission on Gender Equality** is an advisory body established under the government in charge (art. 18) with responsibility for mainstreaming gender across policies, coordinating activities of central and local public authorities, private sector, civil society and international organizations on gender equality issues and developing cooperation and partnerships and analysing national and local plans and programmes and assessing the use of financial resources in the field of gender equality.

   In this institutional framework, the **Ministry of Labour and Social Protection** is the central specialized public administration body that ensures that gender equality policies are implemented in the fields of labour, social protection and demography (art. 19). Various ministries and central governmental agencies designate gender focal points or units responsible for mainstreaming gender perspectives into their policies, programmes, and activities. Local public administration authorities are responsible for ensuring the implementation of the principle of gender equality in policies, programmes, regulations, distribution of funds at the local level, among other tasks, through Gender Units that work closely with communities to implement gender-sensitive initiatives and address local gender disparities (art. 20) (NIRAS 2021).

2. The **2023-2027 Programme for Promoting and Ensuring Equality between Women and Men** was approved in April 2023. It aims to reduce the gender pay gap, increase social protection for

1 For details on the methodology of the index, see World Bank, 2024. The other economy that ranked above 90 is Armenia.

people involved in the long-term care of family members by creating new support services, promote women in management positions and in decision-making, and increase the number of men who promote gender equality (European Commission 2023). It involves central and local public administration authorities, civil society organizations, the private, academic and scientific environment.

The areas of intervention covered by the Programme are:

(a) expanding services to support carers by improving social protection;

(b) reducing the gender gap in pay for equal work or for work of equal value;

(c) eradicating stereotypes regarding the employment of men in feminized areas;

(d) reducing the gap in decision-making at the local and central levels, including among underrepresented groups of women or their groups/organizations;

(e) ensuring wider participation of relevant authorities and institutions in the development and adoption of sectoral policies, instruments and measures aimed at eliminating structural gender inequalities, and their effective implementation;

(f) improving the existing regulatory and institutional framework, including by establishing performance indicators in budget programmes that take into account gender issues;

(g) promoting gender equality in the humanitarian aid sector (humanitarian crises); and

(h) enhancing equal access to quality services in the public and private sectors.

3. **In 2016, Law No. 71 reformed the childcare leave system**, introducing some amendments to the Labour Code/2003, and providing for **paid paternity leave** of 14 days**.** A recent reform expanded it to 15 days in 2023. The objective of the paternity leave is to promote the participation of the father in the care of the newborn child. In addition, the law underlines that “the employer is required to encourage employees to take paternity leave”, and that “the creation by the employer of situations that disadvantage the employee who is taking paternity leave is recognized as discrimination by the employer and is punished in accordance with the law”.

   Law No 71 also includes the commitment to increasing women’s representation in decision-making processes, such that women and men must each make up a minimum of 40 per cent of every political party’s candidates and cabinet nominees. Additionally, the law bans sexist advertising, reflecting a comprehensive approach to combatting gender-based discrimination.

4. The **Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC)**, **Law No. 367 on Alternative Childcare Services** (December 2022) and the accompanying regulations provided grounds for the establishment of formal private childcare services for children aged 0–3 years, extending the age group of children who can benefit from private childcare services by one year. In addition, it assigned responsibility for these childcare services to the Ministry of Labour and Social Protection, (previously the responsibility of the Ministry of Education). In addition, the **National Programme for Childcare Services for Children under 3 Years Old, 2023–2026** was launched, aiming to enhance the availability of childcare services by offering new types of private childcare (see detailed description below).

5. In July 2022, Parliament adopted the Law no. 195 for amending certain normative acts, through which flexible work arrangements were regulated and the benefit period of parental leave was adjusted.

6. In September 2022, the Ministry for Labour and Social Protection launched a **“Family Programme”**, aimed at supporting children and families with children. One goal the Programme is to improve incentives for the return to work of mothers. For this, parents can now choose between receiving the childcare allowance (parental leave) of 90 per cent of the previous income for a period of 12 months, or 60 per cent until the child reaches 2 years or 30 per cent until the child turns 3 years old.[2] Also, Law No. 353 in force from 1 March 2023 modified the calculation of the maternity

2 Previously, parental leave could be taken for up to three years with 30 per cent compensation.

indemnity, stipulating that it should be calculated from the highest parental income. This means that if the father earns more than the mother, the maternity indemnity would be calculated based on his income. Also, from 1 September 2022, it is possible to share childcare leave between spouses (Law No. 195) and the period during which fathers can request the 15-day paternity leave has been extended from 56 days to 12 months. Flexible work schedules have also been introduced, which will allow parents to negotiate working hours and set a schedule that allows them to both work and participate in childcare.

7. It is worth highlighting that labour legislation protects pregnant women, mothers who have just given birth, and breastfeeding mothers. It allows their transfer to an easier job according to their medical certificate and prohibits work that puts their security or health at risk or that can affect their pregnancy or breastfeeding (Labour code, art. 250). Moreover, employers are also obliged to maintain employees' jobs during the period they are on parental leave. (Labour Code, art. 86).

8. In 2022, the **National Employment Programme** (NEP) (2022-2026) and its Action Plan were launched, with the primary goal of increasing the rate of young women's employment by 4 percentage points (see below).

Despite these legislative efforts, women continue to encounter discrimination and face challenges related to their social, economic, and political participation. In the labour market, they face low wages, poor quality of employment, informal employment and labour migration driven by limited domestic opportunities. Women with children have fewer economic opportunities than women without children or men. Women in rural areas face reduced access to facilities, poor quality of services, and lack of employment opportunities, amongst others. Due to the ongoing ageing process determined by low fertility and labour migration, there is a significant share of single elderly women who "survive" in small rural villages, given the scarce opportunities to generate income needed for subsistence (low pensions, heavy land or farm work) (UN Women 2021).

The advancement of gender equality in Moldova is hindered by the persistence of traditional gender norms and subsequent gendered stereotypes. Some 91 per cent of men and 82 per cent of women consider that the most important role for a woman is to take care of the household, while 95 per cent of men consider washing and feeding children as women's responsibilities. In addition, 74 per cent of people partially or fully agree that a child up to the age of 3 may suffer if the mother works (MLSP and UNFPA 2022). Men who try to take childcare leave are sometimes stigmatized by their colleagues, friends and relatives. Consequently, there is pressure on women to take care of children. There are also indications that mothers who send a very small child to a nursery may be stigmatized as bad mothers by their relatives. Thus, the demand for nurseries for children up to 1 year old is weak because most mothers would prefer to stay at home with their babies (CDF 2015).

1.1 The maternity, paternity and parental leave system in Moldova

Insured working women, women with apprenticeship contracts and wives of employees are granted **maternity leave**, including prenatal leave of 70 calendar days or 112 days for pregnancies with three or more children and postnatal leave of 56 calendar days or 70 days in the case of complicated childbirth or the birth of two or more children. Payment of benefits equals100 per cent of previous earnings made by the state social insurance budget.[3] Transfer of the maternity leave period to fathers is allowed in few cases (ILO 2022).

As mentioned above, Law No. 71 passed in 2016 included a 14-day 100 per cent paid paternity leave for which the application period is 56 days after the child is born. However, in 2021, only 16 per cent of fathers received paternity benefits.[4] To encourage fathers to take leave, in 2023 new legislation extended paternity

3 Art. 124 of the Labour Code of the Republic of Moldova No. 154-XV of March 28, 2003.

4 UNFPA news (2022), available at https://eeca.unfpa.org/en/news/young-father-discovers-joy-parenting-moldova-aims-extend-paternity-leave

leave to 15 days and lengthened the application period to one year and with the possibility to take it in full or in 3 periods of 5 days each. After the expiry of maternity leave, partially paid parental leave or childcare leave is granted for childcare up to the age of 3 years with a payment equal to 30 per cent of previous earnings from the social insurance budget if the parent was insured. As described above, the legislation was modified by increasing the allowance up to 90 per cent if the time of the leave is reduced to one year.

Partially paid childcare leave may be taken by both parents alternately in instalments according to their availability, provided that the instalments do not overlap. The leave can also be granted to one grandparent or another relative directly involved in caring for the child, as well as to a guardian. Additionally, there is a possibility to extend childcare leave up to four years, with one additional year of unpaid leave at the request of the parent.[5] If the mother or father was not insured, the childcare leave is paid only up to the age of 2 years of the child.

As per official records dated 1 January 2024, a total of 31,344 individuals benefitted from the birth allowance. Among them, 31,338 were women, while only 6 were men, indicating a significant gender disparity in the utilization of this support system. Furthermore, of the 22,908 individuals who received allowances extended up to the child's third year**,** 17,074 recipients were women and 5,834 were men. These statistics, sourced from the National Social Insurance House (CNAS), underscore the pronounced discrepancy in participation between genders.[6]

As women predominate in taking both this leave and unpaid childcare leave for the care of a child aged 3 to 4 years, employers prefer to employ men. The opportunity to stay out of the labour market for up to four years (it used to be six) may be creating unintended issues for both employers and employees because it may hinder young women from getting a job. It may also lower their working skills and competencies if a long period is spent on childcare leave.

While the Women, Business and Law Index for 2024 gives Moldova's legal framework related to parenthood a score of 100 (out of 100), the supportive frameworks score only 33.3 because fathers are not encouraged to take paternity leave after the birth of a child and sex-disaggregated data on unpaid care work are not published (World Bank 2024).

Furthermore, according to the 2020 Generations and Genders Survey (Ministry of Labour and Social Protection and UNFPA 2022), only 5 per cent of respondents in Moldova agreed that they were able to maintain a work–life balance.[7] Some 70 per cent of women revealed that they were exhausted, especially in families with children. In other words, employed women face an overall higher workload, taking into consideration additional domestic responsibilities on top of working hours.

1.2 The provision of childcare

As noted earlier, the Law on Alternative Childcare Services (No. 367/2022) and the accompanying National Programme for Childcare Services for Children under 3 Years Old, 2023–2026 aim to enhance the availability and use of childcare for 0–3-year-olds. Indeed, under the old system, there was virtually no enrolment of children in formal ECEC below the age of 2 and the scope of informal childcare (nannies) was not known as it was not registered (ILO 2023).

The Law allows the establishment of three formal, private forms of childcare:

i. **Work-based childcare organized by the employer at the workplace**. Employers are keen to provide childcare services as they see its importance. Thus, it is likely that this form of childcare

5 Article 86(2) of the Labour Code of the Republic of Moldova No. 154 of 28.03.2003.

6 See https://cnas.gov.md/tabview.php?l=en&idc=559&t=/Other-social-benefits/Indemnities/Maternity-allowance-for-insured-women-and-wives-supported-by-insured-spouses

7 Ministry of Labour and Social Protection of the Republic of Moldova, National Bureau of Statistics (survey sample) UNFPA, NIDI-GGP (as partner and distributor) (2022), Republic of Moldova – Generations and Gender Survey (2020).

may increase childcare availability. However, experiences from other countries show that this form of childcare is more frequent among larger companies in urban environments.

ii. **Home-based nurseries** organized for a limited number of children at home/temporary residence of the caregiver, usually women (mothers or grandmothers) who take care of few children at the same time in their home. These services are already prevalent in areas outside large cities, as parents have no other means to take care of their children while they are at work.

iii. **Individualized regulated and legalized nanny services**, which are already widespread in urban areas. Usually, nannies do not have qualifications and start their work based on demand from acquaintances. Currently, nanny services are growing in popularity, resulting in more organized childcare provision, for example, through apps, webpages and agencies that help parents to find nannies.

All of these forms of childcare already exist to some extent, but are mostly informal, meaning that providers are generally not trained in early childhood education and care (ECEC). The new Law intends to formalize them, with a view to improving the quality of childcare, as they are foreseen to be established by private childcare providers who hold the necessary qualifications (stipulated by law), are registered as childcare providers, and hold a business license (unless hired through an employment contract) .[8] The **National Programme for Childcare Services for Children aged 0–3** envisages a grant programme for companies to support the establishment of a childcare unit and a business accelerator programme for home-based nurseries for the same purpose.

The implementation of the programme and its direct and indirect effects have been estimated in terms of employment growth: Approximately €93 million would be needed to achieve the programme's goals to expand childcare coverage and attain quality standards. Direct employment created by the investment is expected to be around 2,962 jobs in the education sector, and an additional 8,000 jobs are expected to be created indirectly until 2026. Women are expected to hold 58 per cent of these jobs (Cambridge Econometrics et al. 2024).

These new forms of childcare can fill important gaps in the supply and demand of childcare, provided important obstacles are addressed in the process. First, in terms of supply, Moldovan companies have expressed concerns about the costs, requirements and responsibilities they would face and the potential financial risks and lower profits related to setting up childcare at work, particularly in rural areas. Also, nannies are showing resistance to formal registration. Furthermore, in general terms the childcare profession remains unattractive because of low wages and limited opportunities for further professionalization. On the demand side, while there is general interest in the use of alternative childcare services, the quality of services needs to be assured and the fees affordable. The use of private childcare out of reach for many families. For example, households made of single parents with children (usually lone mothers) have may have particular difficulty to afford private childcare. There are near 26,000 single parent households[9] and over one third of them (34.6 per cent) were below the poverty line in 2023 (Household Budget Survey).

1.3 Legal and policy developments in the area of employment policies

Moldova has been issuing laws, orders, and government decisions in the area of employment policies in line with its Association Agreement with the European Union (EU). In 2017, it adopted a National Employment Strategy (NES 2017–21), with the aim of making employment a central goal in economic and

8 The Law includes provisions, for instance, on dedicated rooms in case of work-based or home-based childcare, on noise pollution, groups sizes, qualified staff, etc. It also regulates individual childcare (nannies), with provisions on qualifications, childcare license, contracts, remuneration and others (ILO 2023).

9 Estimated considering the share of single parent with children households of 2.8 per cent (Household Budget Survey) and the total number of households equal to 26,857, according to the Census 2014.

social policies. As part of the New Employment Promotion Law was introduced in 2018[10] to address the very low labour force participation rate, modernize the labour market and promote active labour market policies. It included skills development and vocational education reforms as well as cut red tape associated with employee leave (Danish Trade Union Development Agency 2024, ILO 2021).

With the expiry of the NES 2017-21, **National Employment Programme (NEP) for 2022 - 2026** and its Action Plan became the key policy instruments. The overall objective of the NEP is to increase labour force participation and stimulate productive employment and decent work for all. This also aligns with first expected outcome of the ILO Decent Work Country Programme 2021-2024 for Moldova to adopt a "new gender-transformative National Employment Strategy (NES) with a focus on young people" (ILO 2021). The first specific objective of the NEP is to **increase the rate of young women's participation in employment and employment by 4 percentage points**. Specifically, the Programme seeks to increase the participation rate of women aged 25-34 from 44 per cent in 2021 to 48 per cent in 2026 and the employment rate of women aged 25-34 from 43.2 per cent in 2021 to 47.2 per cent in 2026.

To this end, the development alternative childcare services at accessible prices in all regions of Moldova was planned, which, as described above, is being addressed through the Law on Alternative Childcare Services of 2022. The target set in the NEP is to increase the share of children up to the age of 3 years in early education from 9.9 per cent in 2020 to 30 per cent in 2026.

The NEP also foresees the development of a dedicated service line within the National Employment Agency for mothers who wish to return to the labour market that provides improvement and retraining, grants for childcare while participating in active labour market programmes and employment subsidies. In addition, attention is paid to ensuring that mothers return to work without losing their position and minimizing "inactivity traps", i.e. where mothers cannot return to the labour market because the cost of childcare is too high. The NEP also anticipates that the duration of the paternity leave for fathers (employees) will be increased to one month, with a coverage of 100 percent from the social insurance budget. Finally, the NEP echoes the need to increase flexibility in the labour market in such a way that it promotes employment without affecting the job quality, which has also been addressed in the framework of the Family Programme.

The NEP also prioritizes the reduction of informal employment from 22.9 per cent in 2021 to 19 per cent in 2026. Indeed, although on the decline, informal employment is still an important segment of the labour market, with around two thirds of the informal workers being men. Most informal workers are own-account workers and contributing family workers (of which women represent near three out of four). The sectors most exposed to informality are agriculture and construction with shares of informal employment above 60 per cent.

As described in the Report on the Implementation in 2023 of the NEP[11], the following activities were carried out in 2023 (Ministry of Labour and Social Protection 2023):

- An Information campaign about alternative childcare services, organized by the Chamber of Commerce and Industry (CCI) with the support of UNFPA and in collaboration with the Ministry of Labour and Social Protection (MMPS).
- Three information guides on alternative childcare for potential service providers (one for each of the alternative possibilities), in partnership with the Development Partnership Centre and the International Labour Organization.
- Approval of the National Programme on Care Services for Children up to 3 years of age, as described above. Regarding the objective of reducing informal employment, the Report highlights changes for the State Labour Inspectorate in 2023, which has been given additional powers, including the right to conduct unannounced visits in cases of undeclared work, under-declared work, human trafficking and labour exploitation as well as the right to impose penalties directly (European

10 Law No. 105/2018 on the promotion of employment and protection against unemployment.

11 Available at: https://social.gov.md/wp-content/uploads/2023/07/Raport-privind-realizarea-in-anul-2022-a-Programului-national-pentru-ocuparea-fortei-de-munca-pe-anii-2022-2026.pdf

Commission 2023). In addition, it has developed a National Programme for the reduction of undeclared work 2024-2025.

As a result, the Implementation Report cites the increase of the participation rate of women aged 25-34 from 45.2 per cent in 2022 to 50.3 per cent in 2023 (+5.1 p.p.) and of the employment rate from 44.4 per cent in 2022 to 47.7 per cent in 2023 (+3.3 p.p.). This evolution has been better than the average of women of all ages (+3.6 p.p., and +2.9 p.p. respectively).[12]

The share of people who had a job in the informal sector did not diminish in 2023 but increased slightly from 22 per cent in 2022 to 23.0 per cent in 2023. In the agricultural sector, informal employment represented 66.6 per cent of total employment (63.4 per cent in 2022), while construction led non-agricultural activities in informal employment with 66.2 per cent. Out of the number of people employed informally, 26.1 per cent were employees and most of remainder self-employed and informal family workers.

2. Women and young mothers in the Moldavian labour market

According to Moldova's official national estimations, the population was 2.5 million in January 2023, which is approximately 1 million less than in 2010. Falling fertility rates and very high emigration levels of the working age population are largely responsible for the drop. If current emigration trends continue, Moldova may lose another 20 per cent of its population by 2050 (Danish Trade Union Development Agency 2023/2024). This has already caused population ageing, employee shortages, and significant brain drain, which has negatively impacted, for instance, the health and education sectors. Lack of adequate data, however, hinders an assessment of the gender dimension of the migration flows (UN 2021).

As a result, Moldova's employed population has diminished during the last decade, resulting in a deficit of qualified labour.[13] Compared to Western Balkan countries, it also suffers from low activity and employment rates and high, although diminishing, gender employment gaps (UN 2021 and ILO 2021).

According to national data for 2023, the share of population aged over 15 years active in the labour market was 45.1 per cent (41.4 per cent among women and 49.5 per cent among men) and the employment rate was 43.1 per cent (39.7 per cent among women and 47.1 per cent among men) (see table 1). The gender participation and employment gaps are 8.1 and 7.4 percentage points respectively, which increase in both cases to 12 p.p. within the 25-34 age bracket.

The are important differences between urban and rural areas: among the population over 15 years, the activity and employment rates in rural areas were 8.1 and 7.5 percentage points lower than in urban areas in 2023, respectively. They are also much lower among women, with less than four out of ten women active in the rural labour market (38.2 per cent, compared to 45.6 per cent in urban areas) and only 36.6 per cent in employment (compared to 43.6 per cent of women in urban areas). Yet, the gender gaps are lower in rural areas: in 2023, the gender activity gap in rural areas was 7.4 p.p., compared with the 9.6 p.p. gender gap in urban areas. The gender employment gaps were 6.9 p.p. in rural and 8.6 p.p. in urban areas (Table 1).

As mentioned above, the gender gap is much higher among the population aged 25-34 (12 p.p.) than the average (8.1 p.p.). This gender gap is also higher in urban areas (14 p.p. for both the gender activity and employment gap) than in rural areas (around 11 p.p.).

12 National Bureau of Statistics - https://statistica.gov.md/

13 As expressed by the Ministry for labour and Social Protection in a note press.

Since 2019, the year prior to the pandemic, the progress in female activity and employment has been sustained and the gender gaps have diminished: the increase of the female activity and employment rates between 2019 and 2023 were equal to 3.2 p.p. for both indicators, and in both cases greater than those for men (2.5 p.p. and 2.9 p.p. respectively). However, this progress is exclusively due to the improvement in urban areas, where the gender activity divide diminished from 12.4 p.p. in 2019 to 9.6 p.p. in 2023 and the gender employment rate gap fell from 11.5 p.p to 8.6 p.p. On the contrary, the gender activity and employment gaps in rural areas increased by 0.4 p.p. and 1.1 p.p., respectively, over these years. Moreover, among women aged 25-49, this progress relates exclusively to women without children (from 62.9 per cent in 2019 to 65.9 per cent in 2022), since the employment rate of women with at least one child aged below 6 declined from 39.4 per cent in 2019 to 37 per cent in 2022 (Table 1).

► Table 1. Activity and employment rates of population over age 15 by sex and area (percentages)

			Rates 2019	Rates 2023	Evolution of rates 2019-2023 (p.p.)	Gender gaps 2019 (Men-Women, PP-)	Gender gaps 2023 (Men-Women, PP-)
Activity rate	Bothsexes	Whole country	42.3	45.1	2.8		
		Urban	49.4	49.8	0.4		
		Rural	37.6	41.7	4.1		
	Men	Whole country	47.0	49.5	2.5	8.8	8.1
		Urban	56.3	55.2	-1.1	12.4	9.6
		Rural	41.2	45.6	4.4	7.0	7.4
	Women	Whole country	38.2	41.4	3.2		
		Urban	43.9	45.6	1.7		
		Rural	34.2	38.2	4.0		
Employment rate	Bothsexes	Whole country	40.1	43.1	3.0		
		Urban	47.0	47.4	0.4		
		Rural	35.6	39.9	4.3		
	Men	Whole country	44.2	47.1	2.9	7.7	7.4
		Urban	53.4	52.2	-1.2	11.5	8.6
		Rural	38.6	43.5	4.9	5.8	6.9
	Women	Whole country	36.5	39.7	3.2		
		Urban	41.9	43.6	1.7		
		Rural	32.8	36.6	3.8		

Source: Moldova National Bureau of Statistics, LFS, 2023. Author's compilation

The presence of children is a key factor in the participation of women in the labour market: in 2022, the employment rate of women aged 25-49 without children aged less than 6 years was 1.8 times that of women with children (65.9 per cent and 37 per cent respectively) (table 2). This penalty is higher in urban areas (1.9 times) than in rural areas (1.7 times). It is well known that paternity has an opposite effect, since the employment rate of fathers tends to be higher than among men without children (1.1 times higher in Moldova 2022).

As a result, in 2023 the number of inactive women due to housework or family care reasons is 131,300 compared to only 6,100 men. This means 21.6 per cent of all inactive women but only 1.6 per cent of all inactive men (table 3). Out of these inactive women, almost one out of three (27.2 per cent) have a low education level (gymnasium), which increases to 41.4 per cent in rural areas, but another 28 per cent have attained higher education, which increases up to 41.3 per cent in urban areas.

► Table 2. Employment rate of persons aged 25-49 years by area, number of children, and sex (percentages)

		2019			2022			Gender Gap 2022 (Men-Women, p.p)
		Both sexes	Men	Women	Both sexes	Men	Women	
Whole country	Total	55.8	58.8	52.9	57.4	60.0	54.9	5.1
	At least one child	50.0	62.5	39.4	49.7	64.6	37.0	27.6
	No children	59.7	56.5	62.9	61.8	57.6	65.9	-8.3
Urban	Total	64.3	71.4	58.2	64.8	70.4	59.7	10.7
	At least one child	56.8	76.2	41.0	56.4	76.6	39.0	37.6
	No children	69.9	68.0	71.7	70.3	66.5	73.9	-7.4
Rural	Total	49.0	49.6	48.5	51.3	51.8	50.8	1.0
	At least one child	44.1	51.0	38.0	43.3	53.0	35.0	18.0
	No children	52.2	48.8	55.9	55.4	51.2	59.7	-8.5

Source: Moldova National Bureau of Statistics, LFS, 2023. Author' compilation

► Table 3. Population15 years and over inactive due to family responsibilities in 2023, by level of education, sex and area (thousands)

	Men			Women		
	Whole country	Urban	Rural	Whole country	Urban	Rural
Level of education - total	6.1	1.7	4.3	131.3	70.0	61.4
Higher	0.8	0.6	0.3	36.6	289	7.8
Secondary specialized	0.4	0.2	0.2	13.2	7.6	5.6
Secondary professional	1.5	0.4	11	24.0	115	12.5
Secondary school	0.8	0.1	0.7	21.1	113	9.7
Gymnasium	2.6	0.5	20	35.7	10.3	25.4
Primary or no education	-	-	-	0.8	0.3	0.4

Source: Moldova National Bureau of Statistics, LFS., 2023 Author's compilation.

Employed women are much better educated than employed men, although less so in technical careers. In 2023, one third of employed women (32.4 per cent) attained a higher-level education, compared to 23 per cent of men; 17 per cent of employed women have a secondary specialized level, compared to 12 per cent of men (table 4). However, the low interest of women in professional secondary studies (only 16 per cent of employed women compared 29 per cent of employed men) reflects the gender roles and stereotype influence on girls and boys. Employed women in rural areas are less educated than employed women in cities, but still much better educated than rural men: only 16 per cent of employed women in rural areas have a higher education level, half of the 32 per cent rate among employed women in cities, but twice as much as the level of employed rural men (8 per cent). On the other extreme, 27.3 per cent of employed women in rural areas attained only a gymnasium level, compared to 8 per cent of women in cities.

► Table 4. Employed population by level of education, sex and area, 2023 (percentages)

	Men			Women		
	Whole country	Urban	Rural	Whole country	Urban	Rural
Level of education - total	100	100	100	100	100	100
Higher	22.9	40.6	8.3	32.4	49.8	16.5
Secondary specialized	11.9	14.9	9.4	16.7	17.9	15.7
Secondary professional	29.0	19.3	37.0	16.2	12.4	19.7
Secondary school	14.9	13.6	16.0	16.5	12.1	20.6
Gymnasium	20.8	11.5	28.4	18.0	7.8	27.3
Primary or no education	0.5	-	0.9	0.2	-	0.3

Source: Moldova National Bureau of Statistics, LFS, 2023. Author's compilation

The share of young women aged 15-24 not in education, employment and training (NEET) is higher than that of young men (16.1 per cent and 11.5 per cent respectively) (table 5). On average, there has been an important reduction since 2019 from 22.8 to 16.1 per cent in 2023, or to 6.7 percentage points. This is a larger reduction than for young men (5 p.p.), meaning that, on average, there has been a convergence process. Yet, the evolution since 2019 among higher educated women in rural areas that are NEET is highly worrisome. In 2023, more than four out of ten women aged 15-24 (42.6 per cent) with high education in rural areas were NEET, which is more than twice the (already very high) ratio of men (20.5 per cent) and 15 p.p. more than in 2019. In this same vein, the share of young women with a professional secondary level of education who are NEET is dramatic, with almost six out of ten such women NEET (57.2 per cent).

Overall, in 2023, 107,500 young women aged 15-34 were NEET and most of them (76,600 women) were family caregivers. This can be explained several factors: stereotypes and social pressure, which puts a greater emphasis on women's role in the family and men's role at work; career counselling and professional orientation of women towards relatively limited areas of occupation; employers preferring to hire young men rather than young women; young women facing integration difficulties when returning to work after childcare leave; young women being more likely to have poorly paid jobs; and a lack of conditions enabling the conciliation of family with working life (UN 2021).

► Table 5. NEET group, aged 15-24 years by level of education, area and sex (percentages)

		2019			2023		
		Both sexes	Men	Women	Both sexes	Men	Women
Level of education - total	Whole country	19.5	16.5	22.8	13.8	11.5	16.1
	Urban	16.1	12.5	19.6	12.4	8.2	16.0
	Rural	21.7	18.9	24.9	15.0	13.9	16.2
Higher	Whole country	18.1	19.0	17.5	19.0	12.7	23.1
	Urban	16.4	21.4	13.4	13.2	8.5	16.0
	Rural	21.5	15.5	27.4	32.3	20.5	42.6
Secondary specialized	Whole country	29.0	23.7	32.9	16.2	15.3	17.0
	Urban	26.4	19.1	31.6	17.6	18.3	17.0
	Rural	31.0	27.1	33.9	14.4	12.0	17.0
Secondary professional	Whole country	43.1	35.2	53.4	33.0	22.9	57.2
	Urban	45.1	33.2	59.0	37.9	26.0	55.0
	Rural	42.3	36.0	50.9	29.9	21.4	59.9
Secondary school	Whole country	11.9	8.9	14.4	8.5	4.7	11.1
	Urban	10.0	9.3	10.6	9.2	3.7	13.2
	Rural	14.0	8.5	18.0	7.2	6.5	7.7
Gymnasium	Whole country	19.5	16.7	23.2	14.5	12.2	16.8
	Urban	13.9	9.5	18.8	10.0	5.2	14.6
	Rural	22.1	19.6	25.4	17.0	15.9	18.1
Primary or no education	Whole country	4.7	3.6	5.9	5.2	6.1	4.1
	Urban	6.5	1.2	14.6	6.6	6.5	6.8
	Rural	3.9	4.9	2.7	4.5	6.0	3.0

Source: Moldova National Bureau of Statistics, LFS, 2023. Author's compilation.

The gender pay gap, measured as the percentage difference between the gross monthly wages of women and men, increased from 15.6 per cent in 2017 to 16.4 per cent in 2019 and 18.3 per cent in 2022 (table 6). The gap is much wider in better-paid sectors like Information and Communication (62 per cent) and financial and insurance activities (48 per cent).

► Table 6. Gross monthly average earnings by economic activity and sex (lei)

	2022			Pay gap 2022 (men-women °/o)
	Both sexes	Women	Men	
0 Economic activities - Total	10,447	9,618	11,381	18.3
A Agriculture, Forestry and Fishing	6,701	6,271	6,852	9.3
B+C+D+E Industry	9,541	8,543	10,442	22.2
F Construction	9,363	8,278	9,520	15.0
G Wholesale and Retail Trade; Repair of Motor Vehic	8,961	8,242	9,745	18.2
H Transportation and Storage	8,795	8,307	8,981	8.1
1 Accommodation and Food Service Activities	6,321	5,953	6,946	16.7
J Information and Communication	27,776	20,376	32,940	61.7
K Financial and Insurance Activities	19,796	17,211	25,483	48.1
L Real Estate Activities	8,180	7,258	8,920	22.9
M Professional, Scientific and Technical Activities	12,035	11,362	12,868	13.3
N Administrative and Support Service Activities	7,716	7,994	7,559	-5.4
P Education	8,446	8,525	8,177	-4.1
Q Human Health and Social Work Activities	11,730	11,113	14,327	28.9
R Arts, Entertainment and Recreation	7,310	6,684	8,182	22.4
S Other Service Activities	11,157	11,290	10,902	-3.4

Source: Moldova National Bureau of Statistics, LFS, 2023. Author's compilation

Women from vulnerable groups have particularly low labour market employment rates. The employment rate among the Roma population is about seven times lower than in the general population (6.4 per cent versus 40.9 per cent). The employment rate of people with disabilities is about four times lower than in the general population (UN 2021).

CHAPTER 2
Support to the return to the labour market for mothers in selected EU countries

As a first step of the project Transitions to the labour market of women on childcare leave in Moldova, nine experiences were identified in EU countries related to support provided by public authorities to (the return to) employment of women with childcare responsibilities, including inactive women. In most of the cases, support came from public employment services and/or gender equality and family services. These nine practices are presented in Table 7 and are briefly described in Annex I. Five are described in more detail in this chapter.

These EU experiences address the various challenges addressed by women re-entering the labour market after long career breaks, such as reduced employability and self-confidence or the specific need to reconcile their labour and family responsibilities. The nine experiences presented highlight different approaches taken and measures adopted, which were often combined to increase their effectiveness (Duell 2023).

Some of the practices are specifically designed for helping mothers of young children to return to the labour market, such as those in Austria and Germany, where the public employment authorities developed support programmes for mothers that included training, coaching, job placement and psychological support, which also supported companies. In Ireland, women receive an economic benefit when returning to work. Other initiatives target families, such as those in Poland. In Hungary, women re-entering work after maternity leave are targeted with wage subsidies, which is complemented by other supportive measures. In Spain, women in rural areas are a key target group. In France, no specific group is targeted, but personal services are provided, notably childcare services that support the employment of women. In Estonia and the United Kingdom initiatives are intended to address the barriers that returning women encounter by raising awareness among employers and supporting them to ease the way back of mothers.

The experiences in Estonia, Germany, Hungary, Ireland and United Kingdom are highlighted below. Given the relevance of parental leave and childcare support for the employment of mothers, all of these policies are described for each country, including goals, target/s, activities and results. A final section of this chapter summarises the conclusions.

► Table 7. Nine country initiatives that support women's re-entry in the labour market

	Subsidies or tax-rebates for employers	In-work benefits	Training, guidance, job placement	Work flexi-bility in companies	Childcare
Austria: Re-entry for the future			X		X
* Estonia: Family-friendly employer label				X	
France, chèque emploi service	X				X
* Germany: Perspective			X	X	
* Hungary: Wage subsidies	X				
* Ireland: Back to Work Family Dividend		X			
Poland: 'Stable Work – Strong Family'			X	X	X
Spain: Women in rural areas			X		
* UK: Returner Programmes			X	X	

** country case described below.*

Five EU country experiences

1. Estonia: Family-friendly employer label

General parental leave and childcare policy context

Maternity leave is granted in Estonia for 100 days. An employed mother can use maternity leave up to 70 days before the child's expected date of birth and 30 calendar days after the child's expected date of birth. The mother's parental benefit is 100 per cent of average earnings, calculated on the basis of employment during reference period, with no upper limit on payments. A mother who is considered a non-active person (not employed) receives the mother's parental benefit for 30 consecutive calendar days starting from the birth of the child (Pall et al. 2022).

When the maternity benefit ends, both parents have the right to take the **parental leave** for up to three-years. Parents can choose how to divide the parental leave between them. It is paid at 100 per cent of personal average earnings with an upper limit of €4,291 per month (equivalent to three times average earnings). For parents who are not on leave and not working, the benefit is paid from the birth of the child for 515 days (altogether with mother's parental benefit and fathers' parental benefit of 575 days). The minimum benefit paid to parents who worked in the reference period is the minimum wage: €725 per month (i.e., in case of very low wages or short work experience). For parents who were not working during the reference period, the parental benefit is paid at a flat rate (benefit rate) of €654 per month (Pall et al. 2022).

Men are encouraged to take up parental leave as they can continue working while receiving the benefit.

The duration of **paternity leave** is 30 calendar days and is compensated at 100 per cent of earnings.

According to the Social Welfare Act, municipalities are obliged to provide a place in early childhood education and care (ECEC) for all children (but there is no individual right to a place), starting from the age of 18 months. Thus, in principle there is no gap between the end of well-paid leave and an ECEC entitlement; however, in practice, not all municipalities are fully able to meet this obligation, and for children between 18 months and three years of age the lack of places in ECEC is an issue (Pall et al. 2022). As a response, municipalities pay a special childcare benefit to working parents who use a private licensed carer or centre, which is viewed as a means to rapidly stimulate the creation of childcare services (ILO 2022).

Description and implementation of the Family-friendly Employer Label programme[14]

The Family-Friendly Employer Label is an initiative of the Estonian Ministry of Social Affairs with partners such as the Estonian Employers' Confederation, PARE (Estonian Human Resource Management Association), the Labour Inspectorate, the Estonian Trade Union Confederation, Tallinn University, the Estonian Human Rights Centre. It is supported by the European Social Fund (ESF) and aimed at facilitating the reconciliation of work and family life.

This initiative aligns with the EU directive 2019/1158 on work-life balance for parents and carers.[15] The Family-Friendly Employer Label has three primary objectives. Firstly, it seeks to promote work-life balance by encouraging employers to adopt flexible working arrangements, such as remote work and adaptable working hours. Secondly, it aims to enhance gender equality in the workplace by ensuring equal opportunities for both men and women, particularly in relation to parental leave and childcare

14 Described at https://tooelu.ee/et/peres%C3%B5bralik#peresobraliku-tooandja-margise-programm

15 Directive (EU) 2019/1158 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 20 June 2019 on work-life balance for parents and carers and repealing Council Directive 2010/18/EU

responsibilities. Lastly, the initiative strives to cultivate a supportive and inclusive workplace culture that prioritizes the well-being of employees and their families.

The programme for the Family-Friendly Employer Label is a multi-stage assessment and consultation process. It assesses the needs of employees and the options available to employers to make their organizational culture more family friendly. Appropriate measures are then adopted by the organization.

Companies or organizations applying for the label participate in the programme for 1.5 to 3 years. During this period, they get advice and help to implement changes from experienced mentors as well as trainings on various topics during implementation of the changes. In addition, they can take part in network events and benefit from the opportunity of sharing experiences with other similar organizations.

The entire process involves several steps:

- **Application submission**: Employers submit an application outlining their family-friendly policies and practices.
- **Initial screening**: The Ministry of Social Affairs conducts an initial review to ensure that basic criteria are met.
- **Detailed evaluation**: A thorough evaluation includes site visits, interviews with employees, and a review of company documents and policies. This phase assesses the practical implementation of the policies.
- **Scoring and label assignment**: Companies are scored based on their performance against the set criteria and awarded a bronze, silver, or gold label accordingly.

The evaluation is based on several key categories and criteria, which include but are not limited to the following:

Work-life balance policies:

- **Flexible working hours**: Availability of flexible working hours to accommodate employees' family responsibilities.
- **Remote work opportunities**: Provisions for remote work to allow employees to manage their work from home.

Parental leave and support:

- **Parental leave policies**: Comprehensive parental leave policies for both mothers and fathers, including paternity leave and support during and after leave.
- **Childcare support**: Assistance with childcare, such as on-site childcare facilities or subsidies for childcare services.

Employee well-being:

- **Health and Wellness Programmes**: Programmes aimed at promoting the physical and mental well-being of employees, such as stress management workshops and health check-ups.
- **Support Services**: Availability of support services such as counselling and financial planning.

Gender equality:

- **Equal pay and opportunities**: Policies ensuring equal pay for equal work and equal opportunities for career advancement for both men and women.

- **Gender balance in leadership**: Efforts to achieve gender balance in management and decision-making positions.

Workplace culture and environment:

- **Inclusive workplace practices**: Policies and practices that promote an inclusive workplace environment where diversity is respected and valued.
- **Employee engagement**: Activities and initiatives to foster a sense of community and engagement among employees.

Following the evaluation, employers and organizations are **categorized into three levels**: bronze, silver, and gold, based on the extent and effectiveness of their family-friendly practices.[16]

Bronze label recognition is awarded to companies where:

- The employer feels the need for a more family- and employee-friendly organizational culture and has taken the first steps on this journey.
- Employee satisfaction is considered important and various measures are implemented to increase it.
- There is no workplace bullying and the working conditions are healthy.

Silver label is awarded to employers where:

- Organizational culture can be made more family- and employee-friendly.
- Organizational management is inclusive and employee autonomy is increased.
- So-called role descriptions are used instead of job-specific work instructions.
- Employees can initiate changes themselves to improve the culture.
- Little bureaucracy, the employer trusts his employees.

Gold label is reserved for companies where:

- The employer has learned how to be family- and employee-friendly and acts consistently.
- Family- and employee-friendly management is implemented unconsciously and by itself.
- Employee recommendation index and loyalty are very high.
- Family friendliness is an important part of the organizational culture.

Outcomes, results and impacts

In 2023, out of 160 company candidates, 20 employers began the family-friendly employer development programme. Considering organizations selected to participate and their employees, the 2023 cohort directly affected 9,600 people across Estonia.[17] Since 2016, numerous organizations have undergone the process, and at present 12 employers who have completed the programme received the bronze label, 46

16 See webpage of the Estonian Ministry at: https://tooelu.ee/et/peres%C3%B5bralik#peresobraliku-tooandja-margise-programm

17 Available at https://news.err.ee/1609314846/ministry-to-spend-120-000-on-family-friendly-employer-award-promoter

the silver label, and nearly 60 the gold label, including by way of example, the Ministry of Environment and the Ministry for Rural Affairs.[18]

While the application and implementation process of the Family-Friendly Employer Label can be resource intensive, particularly for smaller companies, it pays off through enhancing the public image of the companies and making them attractive to potential employees and clients. Participating employers have identified the following benefits for their employees: [19]

- The stress level of employees decreases both at work and in private life.
- The movement of labour decreases.
- The number of work accidents decreases.
- Employee burnout decreases.
- Inequality decreases.
- The health of employees improves and the number of sick days decreases.
- The quality of life of employees and their families improves.
- Employee productivity increases.
- Communication and cooperation between employees and management improves.
- The competitiveness of employees improves.

Similar models to the Estonian Family-friendly Employer Label can be found in other countries: Germany's Career and Family Audit (1998), Slovenia's Family Friendly Certification (2005), Italy's Family Audit Certification (2008), Austria's Work and Family Audit, and Australia's Family Friendly Workplaces. As shown in this report, in Moldova the "*Marca Comerciala*" initiative implemented in close cooperation with the Chamber of Commerce and Industry has recently devoted the 2023 edition to "family friendly companies".

2. Germany: **Perspektive Wiedereinstieg – Potenziale erschließen** (Vocational Reintegration as a Perspective - Tapping potential)[20]

General parental leave and childcare policy context

In Germany, the duration of maternity leave (*Mutterschutz*) is 14 weeks, six weeks before the birth and eight compulsory weeks following the birth (Reimer et al. 2024). It is compensated with 100 per cent of the mean income in the three months before maternity leave, with no upper limit on payment and is usually paid by the mother's health insurance and the mother's employer. The entitlement to maternity leave benefits depends on whether the person was employed and whether she is covered by health insurance.

From week 12 of pregnancy until four months after the birth of a child (including stillbirths), mothers are protected against job dismissal, workplace hazards and, in the case of asylum seekers, from deportation. Fathers are protected against dismissal during parental leave, plus eight weeks before their leave period starts. The right to return to the same or equivalent position is not guaranteed (ILO 2022).

18 This report was first drafted in May 2024.

19 Some stories of employers and employees participating in the family-friendly programme can be found at: https://arileht.delfi.ee/kategooria/120000406/peresobralik-tooandja?fbclid=IwAR3JssEIAPWEBIqtdC4X-wmhncl4kz8FxDTJxdGnj8dSIyU6Mzcu1GkzGss

20 See https://www.esf.de/portal/EN/Funding-period-2014-2020/ESF-Programmes/bmfsfj/perspective-re-entry.html and https://www.perspektiven-schaffen.de/ps-de/fuer-erwerbstaetige-und-wiedereinsteigende/beruflicher-wiedereinstieg

Parental leave in Germany can be taken until the child reaches 3 years of age. It is an individual entitlement, i.e., both mother and father can take the leave at the same time and receive their parental benefits at the same time. The replacement rate varies between 65 and 50 per cent. While there is no statutory paternity leave, German fathers are entitled to two exclusive parental leave benefit months if both parents take at least two months of parental leave.

There is an entitlement to early childhood education and care (ECEC) for all children from the age of 1 year. Thus, there is no gap between the end of well-paid leave, which lasts 12 or 14 months (if at least two months' leave is taken by each parent), and an ECEC entitlement. Yet, many services in some Western federal states still do not offer opening hours that allow for the full-time employment (of both parents), while full-day care has remained the norm in Eastern German states. In 2022, 35.5 per cent of children under 3 years of age were in day care of which only 1.7 per cent were under one year.

Description of the **Perspektive Wiedereinstieg** programme PWE

The programme *Vocational Reintegration as a Perspective* (PWE) was implemented between 2009 and 2021 with the support of the European Social Fund in the programming period 2007-2013 and renewed in the 2014-2020 period as "*Perspektive Wiedereinstieg - Potenziale erschließen*" (Vocational Reintegration as a Perspective-Tapping potential). It was implemented by the Federal Ministry for Family, Senior Citizens, Women and Youth in cooperation with the Federal Employment Service. Across the country, providers and provider associations support women and men with activation, advice and qualification measures in returning to employment that is as secure as possible and has adequate qualifications after a long break in employment due to family reasons. After the end of the ESF-funded programme, the Ministry and the Employment Service continues to give support to returning mothers.

The goal of the PWE programme

The goal of PWE is to promote a substantial and lasting return to a job with mandatory social security coverage after having interrupted work for family reasons. This general goal comprises four specific aims:

1. To make it easier for women to return to work after a family-related employment break, through continuous support of the parents (mostly mothers) returning to work in the form of counselling, skill development and activation.
2. To heighten employers' awareness that by employing such women, they gain experienced employees (both in terms of work and life) who are willing and able to work, are available for work for another twenty years or more because they have finished raising their families and have the skills and qualifications needed to secure a company's future.
3. To encourage men to actively support their wives and partners in their efforts to return to work and supporting the family with taking advantage of household-related services.
4. To support the digital transformation while ensuring that women can engage in gainful employment alongside fulfilling family responsibilities.

Target groups

- **Mothers** who had paused their careers to undertake family caregiving responsibilities, including child rearing and elder care. Over time, the programme was also adapted to include **men** who were similarly pausing their careers for family care duties. The programme is also geared to those in marginal employment, inactive persons, employees requiring support because of caregiving responsibilities, persons with job experience in the field or marginal employment and persons with employment prospects in the personal services and household-related services sectors.

- **Employers and the partners** (mostly fathers or non-biological mothers) are also target groups of the initiative. It should be noted that more than 8,000 companies already offer numerous family-conscious measures as members of the “Success Factor Family” corporate network, promoted by the Federal Ministry for Family Affairs, together with the leading associations of German business (BDI, BDA, DIHK, ZDH) and the German Trade Union Confederation DGB.

Detailed description of activities

The programme offers a combination of coaching, qualification measures, digital tools and household-related services to facilitate the return to work. Across the country, providers and provider associations support women and men with activation, advice and qualification measures in returning to an adequate job after a long break in employment due to family reasons:

- **Skills Development Workshops:** PWE conducts regular workshops aimed at enhancing participants’ professional skills and competencies. These workshops cover a wide range of topics relevant to today’s job market, including:
  - **Technical or industry-specific skills training:** Workshops focus on developing specific technical skills required in various industries, such as digital literacy, software proficiency, and technical certifications.
  - **Soft skills development:** Training sessions aimed at improving participants’ soft skills, such as communication, teamwork, problem-solving, time management, and adaptability.

  These workshops are often facilitated by industry experts, trainers, and career coaches to ensure high-quality learning experiences for participants.

- **Career coaching and mentoring:** PWE offers personalized career coaching and mentoring services tailored to their individual needs and circumstances to assist participants in setting and achieving their career goals. These include:
  - **Individual career assessments**: Assessments to help participants identify their strengths, interests, and career aspirations, enabling them to make informed decisions about their professional paths.
  - **Goal setting and action planning**: Collaborative sessions with career coaches to establish clear and achievable career objectives and develop actionable plans to pursue them.
  - **Resume and interview preparation**: Support with resume writing, cover letter crafting, and interview preparation to help participants effectively showcase their skills and experiences to potential employers.
  - **Networking and relationship building**: Guidance on building professional networks, leveraging social media platforms, and engaging in networking events to expand participants’ career opportunities and connections.

- **Job placement assistance:** PWE assists participants in accessing job listings, recruitment events, and networking opportunities to facilitate their employment search. This includes:
  - **Job matching services:** Matching participants with suitable job opportunities based on their skills, experiences, and preferences, leveraging the programme’s network of partner employers and job portals.
  - **Recruitment events and job fairs:** Organizing or partnering with recruitment events and job fairs where participants can interact with potential employers, submit applications, and attend interviews.
  - **Job search resources:** Providing access to online job boards, career portals, and recruitment agencies to help participants explore a wide range of employment opportunities across various industries and sectors.

- **Psychosocial Support:** In addition to professional development services, PWE offers psychosocial support to address personal and emotional challenges that may impact participants' reintegration into the workforce. This includes:
  - **Counselling and therapy:** Access to licensed counsellors and therapists who provide confidential support and guidance to help participants cope with stress, anxiety, depression, and other mental health issues.
  - **Support groups and peer networks:** Opportunities for participants to connect with others facing similar challenges, share experiences, and provide mutual support in a supportive and empathetic environment.
  - **Work-life balance workshops:** Workshops and seminars focused on promoting work-life balance, use of household-related services in a way that opens scope for a return to work, stress management, self-care, and resilience-building strategies to help participants maintain their well-being while pursuing their career goals.

Digital platforms and tools developed

One key element of PWE is the use of digital tools to provide sufficient digital skills and empowerment to women for self-driving their learning processes towards the return to employment.

- **"PWE@online"** provides flexible, digital-based blended learning opportunities tailored to the needs of individuals returning to the workforce. These combine individual learning with webinars, surveys, online sharing exercises, exchanges, etc. This includes e-learning modules on various topics such as digital competencies and job application processes. Participants can engage in self-paced learning activities on PWE@online, allowing them to customize their learning experience according to their schedule, preferences, and learning objectives. They can access course materials, complete assignments, and track their progress at their own pace. Upon successful completion of training courses and workshops, participants may receive certificates or badges to recognize their achievements and demonstrate their newly acquired skills and competencies to potential employers.
- **JOBBÖRSE** is an online job board platform that connects job seekers with employment opportunities offered by participating employers. It provides a centralized platform where individuals can search for job listings, submit applications, and explore career opportunities across various industries and sectors. The Jobbörse aims to streamline the job search process for participants by offering a user-friendly interface and access to a wide range of job opportunities.
- **Re-entry Calculator** (*Wiedereinstiegsrechner*): is a digital tool designed to assist individuals in calculating the financial benefits of returning to work after a period of absence. It enables users to input their personal and financial information to estimate potential earnings, tax benefits, social security contributions, and other financial incentives associated with re-entering the workforce. The *Wiedereinstiegsrechner* helps individuals make informed decisions about returning to work by providing them with a clear understanding of the financial implications of their employment choices.
- **Checklists**, lists of tips for getting back into work:
  - Checklist: Job search and application, with support to define the desired job profile, assess own competences[21], find suitable job offers, create application documents and conduct interviews.
  - Checklist: Use trade and job fairs to search for a job, with advice on job fair preparation, visit and follow-up.

21 For instance, through the tools Talentkompass NRW or Kompetenzbilanz.

- Checklist: Write a cover letter
- Checklist: Re-entry-friendly companies, with measures that companies can adopt to support the re-entry of (own) employees and/or to implement a general re-entry-conscious corporate culture.
- On the side of companies, PWE includes an interesting tool developed by the Ministry for Equal Opportunities that allows small and medium companies to systematically review their policies and practices in regard to personnel recruitment, working conditions, wages and communication, the Equality check for small and medium-sized companies.

Impacts

One of the main lessons of PWE is the need for cooperation between people and institutions in terms of gender equality and labour market policy. The programme was recognized internationally, including receiving a United Nations "Public Service Award" in 2013, reflecting its effectiveness and innovative approach.

Nearly 17,000 participants were supported during the period 2009-2021. A significant percentage of these participants were women from various professional backgrounds, looking to re-enter the workforce after a family-related career break. Some 65 per cent of the participants were successful in their return to a job or became significantly more employable as a result of the programme.[22]

An evaluation has found that participation of mothers who re-entered the workforce through a local employment agency after having received training vouchers, a key component of PEW, meant a 12-percentage point higher probability of employment and higher monthly earnings of about €210 six years later. This is a very sizeable effect as it reduces the gap between pre- and post-interruption earnings in the counterfactual of not receiving a training voucher by as much as 77 per cent. Furthermore, job quality improved and job stability increased. Job returners who receive training vouchers have a significantly higher probability of working full-time and receiving at least their previous earnings. Moreover, the likelihood of experiencing unstable marginal employment decreases permanently, and participating job returners are more often employed in stable jobs (Doerr 2022).

3. Hungary: Wage subsidies and other initiatives

General parental leave and childcare policy context

Maternity leave payment (*csecsemőgondozási díj – CSED*) can be received by insured mothers (employees and self-employed) for 24 weeks, of which 4 weeks can be taken before childbirth. Taking a minimum of two weeks leave is obligatory. The replacement rate is 100 per cent (with no ceiling), and for the six months following the birth of a child, mothers who had a gainful employment prior to birth are actually better off financially than in the preceding period because personal income tax is payable on the maternity leave payment only and not pension or social security contributions. Maternity leave is exclusively paid to mothers, with some exceptions (Gábos et al. 2023).

Paternity leave (*apát megillető munkaidő kedvezmény*) is available for fathers for five days (seven days in the case of twins) to be taken during the first two months of the child's life. It is compensated at 100 per cent of the father's average daily wage. The duration has been extended to ten days, but the replacement rate for the five additional days is only 70 per cent (Gábos et al. 2023).

22 See https://www.perspektiven-schaffen.de/ps-de/fuer-erwerbstaetige-und-wiedereinsteigende/beruflicher-wiedereinstieg/-perspektive-wiedereinstieg-2009-2021--188318

In Hungary, insured parents can take paid parental/ childcare leave called *Gyermekgondozási díj* (GYED) until their child's second or third birthday under a fully sharable family-based parental leave system, with no reservation of a specific number of weeks of leave for the father. This leave is compensated at a rate of 70 per cent during the two first years, up to twice the minimum daily wage. The third year is compensated with a flat-rate equal to the amount of the minimum pension, approximately €74 per month. In contrast to most other OECD countries, this is not always technically a paid leave of absence, as parents can also combine social security parental benefits with paid work through GYED Extra (more on this below). These measures make it more likely that mothers take the total parental paid leave, which, together with the paid maternity leave, adds up to 160 paid weeks, much longer than the OECD average of 54 weeks (OECD 2022).

Interestingly, women who do not fulfil the insurance requirements but who have completed two semesters at a higher education institution recognized by the state within the two years prior to the birth of the child are also entitled to GYED (*diplomás* GYED) for two years with payments equal to between approximately €425 and €770 monthly, depending on the education level (BA, MA or PhD level) (Gábos et al. 2023).

In addition, uninsured parents are entitled to a flat-rate benefit called *Gyermekgondozást segíto ellátás* (GYES), which is equal to the amount of the minimum pension, or approximately €74 per month, from birth until the child's third birthday (Gábos et al. 2023). Finally, either parent in a family with three or more children under 18 years of age may take leave during the period between the third and eighth birthday of the youngest child (*Gyermeknevelési támogatás*, GYET). Benefit payments are made in the same way as for GYES.

Policies to ease the return to paid employment of mothers

In recent years, Hungary has introduced a **series of policy reforms** aimed at making it easier for mothers with very young children to move into paid work. This responds to both gender equality and labour market concerns caused by shrinking working-age population and labour market tightening, including wage increases (OECD 2022).

Parental leave benefit compatible with work

In 2014, it introduced **GYED Extra** (the earnings-related parental-leave benefit), allowing insured parents in receipt of parental leave benefits to work unlimited hours from the child's first to second birthday, with no loss of benefit. In 2016, the lower age limit was reduced to 6 months. If the parent takes up GYED and works, they can still access public childcare for children under 3 years of age (*bölcsőde*). Also, since 2014, GYED extra ensures that the family can keep receiving the benefit for the first child if a second child is born (sibling GYED) (Gábos et al. 2023).

In a similar vein, an uninsured parent taking GYES cannot work until the child is 6 months old but can then work unlimited hours while still receiving the full benefit until the child's third birthday. If the parent takes up GYES and works, they can still access public childcare for children under the age of 3 years (*bölcsőde*).

As for parents with three or more children under 18 years of age taking GYET, they can work fewer than 30 hours per week, or unlimited hours if the work is done at home. While GYES and GYED Extra are intended to promote childbirth and support reconciliation between work and child-rearing, GYET is considered an acknowledgement of parenthood as paid work and, consequently, recipients are credited with social insurance contributions.

The GYED Extra scheme has been relatively popular. By 2021, about 61,000 workers/parents had made use of GYED Extra, according to data from the Hungarian Statistics Office. The relatively low earnings make part-time work scarcely attractive from a household income perspective. To counteract this, the GYED Extra programme contributes to make part-time employment more viable from a household income perspective. According to the Hungarian Central Statistical Office, while the number of recipients of the GYES for uninsured parents was 115,635 in 2022, there is no information about the amount among them on either full-time or part-time work.[23]

The Job Protection Action Plan: Wage subsidies for disadvantaged groups

Since 2013, Hungary has provided employers with tax breaks for workers returning from paid leave through the **Job Protection Action Plan (JPAP).[24]** The primary goals of the plan are to reduce unemployment, encourage workforce participation among certain categories of workers with low employment rates, including those returning from maternity leave, and stimulate the economy.

The JPAP reimburses employers for some of the wage costs (social security contributions) of eligible employees. The JPAP credit is available for employees who start working (either by returning to their previous job or starting a new job) after they stop receiving childcare benefits or for employees who start working while still receiving childcare benefits. While employers receive a permanent 50 per cent reduction in social contribution taxes (i.e. a 14 per cent contribution, instead of the usual 28.5 per cent) for hiring workers under 25, workers over 55, long-term unemployed and low-skilled workers, there is no contribution payment required for women returning from maternity leave during the first two years and 14 per cent during the third year.

An evaluation carried out in 2019 showed significant employment effects for the JPAP overall, with an increase of 1.2 percentage points in the employment rate three years after its introduction. The impact on returning women could not be assessed, however. The results suggest that targeted tax incentives can be a cost-efficient way of increasing employment in vulnerable groups, such as returning mothers, and it can even be self-financing (Svraka 2019). There are no readily available data on the impact on returning mothers of JPAP, but the Ministry for National Economy claims this programme created jobs for over 40,000 mothers with small children until 2015 (Blaskó et al. 2016).

The JPAP was part of a broader family support strategy, which included other benefits like the **Family Protection Action Plan** introduced in 2019. This broader strategy aimed to create a family-friendly environment through financial incentives, housing support, and childcare improvements.

The JPAP may explain in part the evolution of the employment rate for women. Since 2013, the employment rate of young Hungarian women aged 15 to 39 years has increased by 14.6 p.p. (almost three times as much as the EU-27 evolution of 5 p.p.) and has even surpassed the EU-27 level at 61.6 per cent in 2023 compared to 60.0 per cent for the EU-27. No data are readily available for women with children.

Creation of daycare places

In Hungary, pre-school children under the age of 3 years receive childcare services in day-care nursery settings and, above age 3, in kindergartens. While nursery attendance is not mandatory, kindergarten attendance has been mandatory since 2015 (for at least four hours a day), so that pre-primary childcare enrolment has always been high. However, the offer of public day care services for children under age three is more limited and enrolment rates are low, though increasing.

To support an increase in the childcare offer, Hungary has expanded public early childhood education and care funding over the past few decades. Since 2015, the government has released substantial national and EU funds to local authorities for the creation of new day care places.

In 2017, the government made the nursery care system more flexible. The institutional framework was extended to include mini nurseries. Moreover, in order to better respond to local needs and parents' working hours, day care services beyond institutional settings, such as family nurseries (service-based

23 https://www.ksh.hu/stadat_files/szo/hu/szo0006.html

24 Act CXLVI. of 2012 on the Job Protection Action Plan

care in private homes) or workplace nurseries that provide care independently, in partnership or through a care contract, were included. The government also introduced new requirements obliging local authorities with a population of less than 10,000 to provide public childcare services if at least 40 children under age 3 live in the area and/or if at least five families request access and reinforced funding.

In addition, in 2017 Hungary introduced major changes in the regulation to **support employer-provided childcare**. Workplace nurseries primarily target the children of employees, and the service is available for children between 20 weeks and 3 years of age, with one carer assigned to groups of 7/8 children (and an additional assistant when there are at least 5 children in the group). A workplace nursery may operate primarily in the building where the work is performed, in a property owned by the employer, or a property rented by the employer for this purpose. The changes introduced in 2017 concerned the financial support for operating workplace nurseries, which has been multiplied by 13 (until 2022), the reduction of requirements for employers wishing to offer childcare services compared to other available childcare modes, and the possibility to team up and operate the service jointly with other employers. Importantly, there is a strong focus on training, as carers must undertake 100 hours of specialized training (OECD 2022). In addition, as part of the Family Protection Action Plan the government intended to create 20 000 new nursery places to reach 70 000 by 2022. According to OECD (2022), this target has been met and the nursery places created. Nonetheless, demand for employer-provided childcare seems to remain limited.

Fostering job flexibility

Since 2020, the Labour Code requires that employers offer parents of children under 4 years of age part-time hours (equivalent to half of the standard full-time working day), teleworking or a change in their working hours if requested. Specifically, Section 61 of the Labour Code mandates that employers must honour requests from parents for teleworking, part-time work, a change in the place of work or working hours until their child reaches the age of 4 years, or up to 6 years if the parent has three or more children. Employers are required to respond to such requests in writing within 15 days. If the employer refuses the request, they must provide a justified reason for the refusal. In the event of unlawful refusal or failure to respond, the courts may amend the terms of employment to conform to what was requested by the employee.

4. Ireland: Back to Work Family Dividend (BTWFD)

General parental leave and childcare policy context

Women are currently entitled to 26 weeks of **paid maternity leave** and up to 16 weeks additional **unpaid maternity leave** fora total of 42 weeks leave. A weekly maternity benefit rate of €262 is paid (2023, Köppe et al. 2023). Eligibility for a maternity benefit is dependent on 39 weeks of paid employment and payment of social insurance contributions for a 12-month period immediately prior to the taking of maternity leave.

Men are entitled to two weeks **paid paternity leave** (100 per cent of earnings), introduced in 2017, which may be taken at any time within the first six months following the birth or adoption of a child, but must be taken consecutively. Claimants must have contributed to social insurance but there is no condition on the length of employment.

Parental leave in Ireland is unpaid, lasts 26 weeks and can be taken up until the child's 12th birthday (up to the 16th birthday in the case of a child with disabilities). Parental leave is an individual entitlement that cannot be transferred. In addition, From July 2022, a new **Parent's Leave** entitlement was implemented, giving each parent access to seven weeks non-transferable paid leave of €262 per week. Parent's Leave must be taken in the first 6 years of a child's life and taken after maternity leave, in a block of 5 continuous weeks or two periods of not less than one week. Parents can be on leave together for part of the period (one week) or for the whole period.

The ECEC scheme in Ireland provides education to children from 2 years and 8 months of age. The State pays participating playschools and daycare services a set amount per child to offer the ECEC service. In return, participating centres and playschools provide a pre-school service free of charge to all children within the qualifying age range (ESRI. 2021). According to the OECD (2021), just 18 per cent of Irish households use formal childcare services, one of the lowest rates in the European sample (30 per cent), with an extremely high enrolment rate of pre-primary pupils in private institutions (98 per cent compared with 32 per cent across the OECD). A large proportion of childcare providers in Ireland are child-minders, often sole operators, and only 1 per cent are voluntarily registered (Pobal 2021). A major new National Childcare Scheme (NCS) was launched in 2022 with increased public funding, targeting mostly private delivery and offering two new childcare subsidies. In this scheme, childcare providers (including childminders and school-age childcare services) must be registered with the Child and Family Agency (Tusla) and have a National Childcare Scheme contract with the Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth.

Description of the Back to Work Family Dividend (BTWFD)

Main goals

The primary goal of the Back to Work Family Dividend (BTWFD) programme is to assist families with children in transitioning from social welfare dependency to gainful employment or self-employment. This initiative aims to reduce poverty, promote financial independence, and encourage workforce participation among parents who have been receiving specific social welfare benefits. The programme is designed to provide financial support during this transition period, thereby alleviating some of the economic pressures associated with moving into employment.[25] It was introduced in 2015 to provide work incentives by continuing to pay claimants who find work the full amount of their previous social welfare benefit during the first year of employment, and half of the amount during the second year of employment, regardless of their earnings.

By providing financial support during the transition to employment, the BTWFD programme promotes families' economic independence by aiming to reduce long-term dependency on social welfare, encourage workforce re-entry, which can lead to higher overall employment rates and economic productivity, and provide a more stable environment for children.

The scheme is administered for the Department of Social Protection by staff in the department's network of the Irish Public Employment Service, the INTREO Centres, and Social Welfare Offices.

Target groups

The BTWFD programme targets families with children, particularly those that have been receiving specific social welfare payments, such as Jobseeker's Allowance, One-Parent Family Payment or Jobseeker's Transitional Payment (parents with children aged between 7 and 13 years) because they are in work or start work.

Many recipients of One-Parent Family Payment and Jobseeker's Transitional Payment are women, which reflects the higher rates of single motherhood and caregiving responsibilities among women. The BTWFD programme supports these women in re-entering the workforce (either as employees or as self-employed), which can significantly impact their economic stability and career progression.

25 See https://www.gov.ie/en/service/93cd55-back-to-work-family-dividend/

Detailed description of activities

The BTWFD programme provides a structured financial support system to ease the transition from welfare to work. Key elements include:

- **Weekly Payments:** Families receive a weekly payment based on the number and age of their children. In the first year, the payment is equivalent to the welfare benefit previously received for each child, up to a maximum for four children. In the second year, the payment amount is halved.
- **Duration:** The payments are made for up to two years, ensuring continued support as families stabilize their employment situation.
- **Amount:** From January 2024, the full BTWFD is €46 weekly for a child aged under 12 and €54 for a child aged 12 and over. In the second year, it is reduced to €23 for a child aged under 12 and €27 for a child aged 12 and over.
- **Eligibility Conditions:** Participants must stop claiming primary social welfare payments and must take up employment or self-employment within four weeks of stopping their welfare benefits. The employment must be within the Republic of Ireland.

Outcomes, results and impacts

BTWFD had 2,559 recipients in payment in the first quarter of 2024 (down from 3,037 persons in the same period in 2023), out of which 2,050 were women. The expenditure for 2022 was €11,228 million.[26] It is worth noting that, according to data provided by the Department of Social Protection[27], this is one of the social programmes with lowest number of recipients in Ireland.

An initial analysis dated in 2015 showed that BTWFD improved the financial incentive to work for the beneficiaries during the first year, since they would see their income increase. This positive effect on the financial incentive to work would diminish in the second year of employment when the rates of BTWFD halved (Savage at al. 2015).

An evaluation of the Back to Work Family Dividend is ongoing and will be published in 2024. [28]

5. UK: Returner Programmes and Returner Fund

General parental leave and childcare policy context

The duration of statutory maternity leave in the United Kingdom is 52 weeks, out of which 39 are paid and the remaining 13 weeks are unpaid. All female employees are eligible for 26 weeks of ordinary maternity leave plus 26 weeks of additional maternity leave. Self-employed mothers or mothers who have recently changed jobs are not eligible for the statutory maternity leave or pay but they may be entitled to a maternity allowance during 39 weeks. [29]

It is compulsory that the mother takes leave during the two weeks after the birth (four weeks if they work in a factory) and it can be taken from 11 weeks prior. Up to ten *"keep in touch with work"* days can be spent working for the employer during the period of statutory Maternity leave, without it affecting Maternity leave or pay.

26 See https://assets.gov.ie/266156/f20b1997-df82-4916-bea5-2badf9e982a0.pdf.
27 Department of Social Protection,2024. Quarterly Statistical Report, Quarter 1 2024.
28 As stated in https://www.gov.ie/en/organisation-information/5683a-labour-market-analytics/.
29 Description available at https://www.gov.uk/maternity-pay-leave

This is an individual entitlement for mothers, who, since 2015, can transfer up to 50 weeks and the corresponding amount of pay to fathers/partners if they do not intend to use their full maternity leave entitlements, called statutory shared parental leave.[30] It is also possible that mothers take up this shared parental leave (SPL), since it is more flexible than the Maternity Leave (UK Department of Business and Trade 2023). The SPL is to be taken in one-week blocks of time, that is, it cannot be taken in a day mode or on flexible part-time basis.

However, legislation does provide for 20 optional '*keep in touch with work*' days for employees taking SPL. This provides the opportunity for employees to complete paid work during the leave period, with the possibility of receiving their full salary for that time (up to a maximum of 20 days) provided their employer agrees. Subject to their employers' approval, parents can take alternating weeks and there is provision for parents to take leave together.

Statutory paternity leave in the UK can be taken up by fathers or non-biological parents (i.e. it is available for same-sex parents) for 14 days (2 weeks)[31]. It must be taken once the child is born and must be taken in one continuous period within 56 days (8 weeks) of the child's birth.

In addition, unpaid parental leave can be taken up by mothers and fathers (or non-biological parent) for up to 36 weeks (18 non-transferable weeks each parent). Only four weeks of leave may be taken in any one calendar year for each child per parent, unless an employer agrees otherwise (i.e., the 18 weeks cannot be taken in one continuous period of time) [32], and the leave may be taken until the child's 18th birthday. Their employment is protected during the parental leave, and they are entitled to return to the same or equivalent post of work. It is not available for self-employed parents, but it is for adoptive parents.

The employment of mothers and fathers or non-biological parents is protected against dismissal while women are pregnant and while parents are on maternity/ paternity/ parental leave. Both parents are entitled to return to the same or to equivalent positions after the respective leaves.

Description of the Returner Programmes and the Returner Fund

Main goals

Returner Programmes are programmes targeted at people returning to work after a long break (typically 2 years or more). These initiatives are designed to address the career break penalty, support skill refreshment, and facilitate the return to professional life. They also focus on reducing the gender pay gap and harnessing the talents of experienced professionals who have been out of the job market for various reasons. There are many forms of returner programme, including return to practice and retraining programmes.

Returner programmes were pioneered in the UK in 2014 and their number grew from just three that year to over 40 in 2017, primarily in the financial services, consulting and STEM sectors. The Spring Budget 2017 included £5 million to promote returnships in the public and private sector, through support organizations that take on parents and carers returning after long periods of absence.

As part of this, the Ministry of State for Skills, Apprenticeships and Higher Education and the Government Equalities Office (GEO) set up schemes across the public and private sector to support people to return to work after a break for caring responsibilities. The Returners Fund was launched in 2018 and awarded around £1.5 million to 16 pilot returner projects that would engage and support returners and employers in the private sector. These 16 returner pilot projects were delivered between 2017 and 2021 by training,

30 Available here: https://www.gov.uk/shared-parental-leave-and-pay

31 Or the equivalent number of proportional days of the worker works two or three days a week.

32 Available here: www.gov.uk/parental-leave.

voluntary and third sector organizations.[33] In addition, 9 returner programmes **targeting public sector workers** were launched, including ICT, planning sector, social workers, health professionals or STEM workers. These programmes were managed by the Local Government Association (LGA), Health Education England, and Civil Service HR, on behalf of the GEO. [34]

Target groups

The programmes target returners, who are defined as people with existing work experience who have taken an extended career break for caring, personal health issues or other reasons and who are either economically inactive or working in lower paid, temporary or part-time work or in home-businesses or freelance roles. Returners can be male or female but are predominantly women.[35]

Typically, when considering returning or when they are in the process, returners face barriers that make the return to work daunting. These may include lack of confidence and low esteem, resulting from extended time away from the workplace or the high cost of professional childcare, particularly when employers require flexible or unpredictable working hours. In addition, many returners feel that their skills are outdated, especially in technology-driven roles. And last, but not least, employers often view career breaks negatively, particularly in competitive job markets, which further hinders returners' job prospects. According to recent research, when employers see an employment gap in a résumé (due to care reasons or other), the callback to candidates diminishes by approximately 8 per cent compared to résumés without employment gaps (Kristal et al. 2023).

Detailed description of activities

Returner programmes are typically set up and run by the employer (private or public). Returner programmes offer a supported pathway back into work. There are many forms of returner programme that intend to remove the barriers mentioned above by providing training, mentoring, networking opportunities and support to help people back into the workforce in a way that makes sense for them. They may also involve temporary or permanent placement, labour flexibility, career development. These programmes may be company, industry or region-specific. The experience of the 16 pilot returner projects implemented in the private sector and funded with the Returners Fund has been described and evaluated showing that the delivery models of the projects includes: (SQW 2021)

- **Personalized Support:** This approach provided one-to-one support by providers tailored to the needs and aspirations of individual returners. This support often involved informal conversations, mentoring, career counselling, and practical job search assistance, delivered either in person, by phone, or online. Projects like Carer Support Wiltshire shifted from group sessions to more personalized support due to returner preferences.
- **Cohort Training:** In this model, returners participated in group-based training and employment support activities. Benefits included peer support, where returners could share advice and encouragement. Examples include the Creative Equals project, which conducted a two-week bootcamp, and the Westminster City Council project, which partnered with local training providers. Training programmes varied in duration and intensity, ranging from two-day workshops to ten-week courses.

33 A list of these 16 projects can be found in the report Returners Grant Fund Evaluation (pages 7 and 8). Some of the 16 organisations managing the projects will be mentioned in this case study, such as Carer Support Wiltshire, Creative Equals, Westminster City Council, F1 Recruitment and Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development (CIPD).

34 An evaluation of the Returners Fund, including the 16 pilot projects is available here: Returners Grant Fund Evaluation. Grant Fund Report. In addition, individual evaluations for the Returners Programmes in ICT, Planning Sector, Social Work and Health have been carried out and are available here. No evaluation has been found on the STEM Recharge pilot.

35 Government Equalities Office (2018), "Returner Programmes: Best Practice Guidance for Employers".

- **Employer Placements:** Many projects offered work placement opportunities, both paid and unpaid, viewing them as critical for helping returners become work-ready or transition into permanent roles. Projects such as F1 Recruitment provided practical help to find contract work and permanent roles.

Employers engaged through the projects ranged from small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) to large corporations across various sectors, including education, health and social work, or creative industries. Engagement strategies for employers articulated by the projects included:

- **Promotional Events:** Employers attended events to learn about the benefits of hiring returners and to network with potential candidates.
- **Training and Support:** Some projects provided training to employers on how to adapt their recruitment practices to be more inclusive of returners.

As regards pilot projects in the public sector managed by the Local Government Association (LGA), Health Education England, Civil Service HR, and the Department of Health and Social Care, on behalf of GEO, the following five programmes are worth highlighting:

- **Return to ICT Programme**: Managed by the Local Government Association (LGA) on behalf of GEO, it targeted the public sector ICT workforce and aimed to support up to 90 people looking to return to the ICT sector after taking a career break. Participants were provided with a high-quality training package, to enable them to return to the ICT sector.
- **Return to Planning Programme**: Also managed by the LGA, it aimed to give local councils (as employers) access to a pool of professionals and promote the value of hiring and supporting returners.
- **Return to Social Work Programme**: This programme targeted the recruitment of previously registered social workers who had left the profession in the last 2 to 5 years. These programmes provided a high-quality training packages for people who had left or taken a break from social work so that they could return to social work practice, including support for sourcing placements with local councils. Overall, the programme aimed to offer 200 places for social workers with a 2 to 10 year career break from the profession. The programme would also give local councils (as employers) access to this pool of social workers and promote the value of hiring and supporting returners.
- **Return to Practice Programme** – Allied Health Professionals and Health Care Scientists: Operating between 2017 and 2019, this was a partnership between Health Education England, the Government Equalities Office and the Department of Health and Social Care. The programme funded a social media campaign (#IAmReadyToReturn) and website content, the payment of up to £500 of eligible expenses to returners, a further £500 to cover placement provider costs and support to higher education course providers of £1,000 per student.
- **The STEM Recharge pilot**: Run by Women Returners and STEM Returners, it aimed to provide support and training to technology and engineering returners in the Midlands and the North of England. It also provided support and training for STEM employers on supportive returner hiring and inclusive recruitment practices.

Outcomes, results and impacts

A number of interesting tools have been developed to support both returners and companies interested in implementing these processes.

- A comprehensive toolkit for returners, including advice on how to confront a returning process and a section with resources and links, available here: Returner toolkit: helping you back to work.

- A guide for employers wishing to bring returners to their organizations with a successful programme, with a section devoted to explain the benefits of supporting returners, and with guidelines to design and deliver the programme: Employer guidance: helping people return to work. In addition, another employer's guide called Paths to parenthood: uplifting new mothers at work includes solutions to support employers' strategies based on:
  - building clear policy frameworks,
  - using data to understand the company,
  - fostering a positive and inclusive workplace culture,
  - upskilling the company's managers,
  - embedding flexible work options,
  - fostering employment opportunities,
  - supporting paternity and parental leaves,
  - championing affordable childcare.

According to the evaluation of the 16 projects in the public sector, many returners reported improved confidence in their skills and abilities after participating in skill-building activities and receiving validation from potential employers during placements and networking events. In addition, returners gained new skills and qualifications, such as digital skills, vocational training, and industry-specific certifications, which improved their employability, so that many entered paid employment. Despite the challenges posed by the COVID-19 pandemic, which disrupted many projects, by the end of the Fund, 179 returners had entered paid employment, though this was below the target of 468 (SQW 2021).

On the side of employers, several benefits from participating in the Fund were reported. First, they got enhanced access to a skilled labour pool, where returners were seen as an untapped resource with valuable skills and experience. Employers appreciated the opportunity to engage with a skilled and diverse group of potential employees. The Creative Equals project, for example, helped employers access a pool of highly skilled female returners.

Second, thanks to the guidance provided through the projects, some employers improved their recruitment practices to be more inclusive, such as clearly stating flexible working options in job descriptions and focusing on skills rather than gaps in employment history. The CIPD project created a community of HR practitioners focused on returner issues and flexible working.

In addition, engaging with returners helped employers address gender diversity and retention issues, contributing to a more inclusive workplace environment. Projects like Women Returners emphasized flexible working arrangements to accommodate returners' needs.

Two key lessons learned are highlighted: On the one hand, providing tailored support to returners is essential in addressing the barriers and diverse needs of returners. Projects that offered one-to-one support and tailored training were particularly effective in helping returners build confidence and skills. On the other hand, engaging employers is also vital, and this requires clear communication of the benefits of hiring returners and practical support for integrating returners into the workforce. Building strong relationships with employers and addressing their specific needs and concerns were critical for sustained engagement. Projects like RFEA demonstrated the importance of having dedicated employer engagement teams.

6. Main conclusions from the EU experiences and recommendations for Moldova

The description of the five experiences from EU countries can inspire the way ahead in Moldova and the tools presented can be useful references.

The barriers faced by returning mothers are several. Mothers may have lost employability after long periods of leave and need (re)training, reinforced self-confidence and information. A lack of affordable and high-quality childcare facilities and the cultural presumption that it is exclusively up to mothers to take care of their children can make it difficult to combine care and work. In addition, a non-supportive workplace culture that is not aware of their needs hinder re-entry.

Addressing only one barrier at the time may not be sufficient to attract mothers of young children (back) to the labour market. One of the main lessons of some of the experiences analysed (the German PWE and the Hungary policy-mix in particular) is the need to achieve cooperation between people and institutions in terms of gender equality, labour market, including companies, and care policies. Labour market policies and institutions, including companies, need to mainstream gender equality into their objectives, culture, processes, budgets and programmes in order to duly and effectively address the existing differences between women and men in the labour market. The emerging labour shortages in some countries, including Moldova, is resulting in intensified efforts to increase women's employment. This should be accompanied with this gender equality promotion to be effective, efficient, sustained and fair.

Furthermore, the projects show that providing intense and tailored support to the target groups, both returners and employers, is important to obtain sustained results:

- In the case of returners, projects that offer one-to-one support are particularly effective in helping returners build confidence and skills. In terms of active labour market policies, this approach involves a large array of measures that can involve tailored (up- and re-) skilling adapted to the labour demands as well as information, guidance, mentoring and coaching, active job placement and psychosocial support when needed as was the case in Germany.
- For employers, practical support for integrating returners into the workforce and clear communication of the benefits of hiring them is important. The UK Returners programmes experience shows that dedicated employer engagement teams that build strong relationships with employers and address their specific needs and concerns are particularly effective.

Finally, mothers returning to the workforce need policies that support the care of very young children. Countries are strengthening efforts to provide more and better-quality childcare services at no cost or affordable prices, although they not always achieve it, in particular un rural areas. The strategies are varied, with some countries reinforcing public services, others aiming at encouraging private sector providers, including family nurseries (service-based care in private homes) or individuals, others through economic support to families (as in Hungary), and others supporting companies to set up workplace childcare facilities (also in Hungary).

Fathers (or non-biological parents) are increasingly targeted as a means to encourage mothers' return to the labour market. Getting fathers more engaged in the care of children and supporting mothers in their return to work is a strategy that can in turn contribute to changing employers' views about the responsibilities of mothers and fathers. This can be done through granting or extending paternity leave, although the duration may be too short to achieve any significant impact[36] and allowing fathers to take up paid parental leave, which is possible in many countries but often underused. Some countries

36 Among the countries analysed, Estonia has the longest paid paternity leave with one month duration, the rest of countries have 5-10 or none. In Spain, included in the nine EU experiences in Annex I, the duration of paternity leave is the same and is paid equal as the maternity leave (16 weeks).

encourage fathers to take a part of the parental leave. Germany, for example, gives an additional two months paid leave to the family if the father takes parental leave. In Estonia, men are encouraged to take parental leave by the fact that they can work while receiving the benefit. In addition, other EU countries are supporting alternative images of masculinity, away from hegemonic masculinity and towards a more caring masculinity in which the assumption of care activities becomes a matter of course for boys and men.[37]

As shown, the initiatives in EU countries are very varied and have somewhat different specific goals and targets. In general, they respond to employment, gender equality and/or family wellbeing objectives, although they may be biased towards one of the three. In ideal terms, a balance between the three policy strands should be strived for, so that they mutually reinforce each other in a systemic way, thereby addressing the complex barriers faced by returning mothers and achieving sustained transformations.

37 As an example of such projects, the Austrian project "Men in Care: Workplace Support for Caring Masculinities" aims to promote a gender-equal work–life balance by 'bringing men into care'.

CHAPTER 3

Main challenges, objectives and measures to support the participation in employment of women with children in Moldova

The analysis presented in Chapter 1 on the policy and labour market framework for women highlighted that Moldova faces challenges in integrating or reintegrating a high number of women who are mothers. In addition to gender equality considerations, the low participation of women in the labour market results in a loss of around 20 per cent of potential GDP in Moldova (CDF 2000).

While more highly educated than men overall, women tend to work in worse and lower paid jobs. Also, the share of young women NEETs who are highly qualified is striking and an unfortunate waste of talent. The motherhood penalty in Moldova is high and reflects too long maternity leave and subsequently too long absences of mothers from the workforce, short paternity leave and deeply rooted gender stereotypes. This hampers co-responsibility and an unequal vision of employers on the role of women at work. The availability of high quality, affordable and flexible childcare facilities is another challenge to encourage women to return to work. While the gender equality machinery is strong and has been strengthened in Moldova, the labour market policy response has not yet fully caught up.

In line with the first priority and outcome of the ILO Decent Work Country Programme of a "New Gender-transformative National Employment Strategy" (ILO 2021), innovative and transformative approaches are needed not only to close the distance faced by women to the labour market, but also to close the existing gender gaps in employment, income, labour and social rights and conditions, including the risk of poverty and social exclusion, and participation in the political and economic life.

Challenges, objectives and measures

The next pages identify **seven challenges (in red)** to overcome in Moldova to increase the participation in employment of women with young children, as well as of key **objectives (in blue)** and possible **measures** to design and develop **(in black).** As the first challenge and objective, the transversal elimination of cultural stereotypes is proposed (challenge 1), followed by the need of promotion of a gender equality culture in the field of work and remotion of the difficulties women face when entering or getting back to companies (challenge 2), the effects of the parental leaves system on women's paid work (challenge 3), the specific needs of childcare that families face (challenge 4), the need of the employment system to support women (challenge 5), and to the taxation system (challenge 6). A final challenge relates to the need to closely monitor the women employment rate, and the gender employment gaps in relation with childcare and conciliation policies (challenge 7).

Indeed, one of the main lessons cited earlier in this report is the need to achieve **cooperation between institutions and stakeholders**, including companies, in terms of **labour market and care/ reconciliation of work, private and family life policies**. It is important for these stakeholders to **mainstream gender equality** into their, culture, objectives, processes, programmes and budgets in order to address the emerging labour shortages in the country, which requires effectively address the existing differences between women and men in the labour market.

These challenges, objectives and measures have been shared and discussed with relevant stakeholders through a series of eight interviews conducted in May and June 2024 and within five Focus Groups conducted in August 2024 (see Annex II for details).

1. Prevailing cultural stereotypes that favour inequalities based on gender, assign the caring role of children to mothers and result in an unequal presence of women and men in the labour market

► A key objective should be to change cultural mindsets regarding unpaid care work and the responsibility of mothers and fathers in society at large, in the world of work and among employers. Recommended measures include:

i. **Information and awareness raising campaigns** targeting society in general and employers and fathers specifically that promote the co-responsibility of mothers and fathers with regard to childcare and the benefits of *working* mothers and *caring* fathers.

ii. **Training in gender equality** for public sector staff regarding women who are mothers of young children, especially as it relates to public employment childcare.

iii. Obligation of companies to **adopt gender equality plans** and include training in gender equality related to the world of work, addressing specifically the challenges faced by returning mothers. Initially, large companies[38] would be required to work on gender equality plans and the experience would be assessed. Then, smaller companies would start to prepare and approve their gender equality plans.

iv. Use of **sex-disaggregated and gender sensitive data** to visualize the impact of the care gap and the employment gap for mothers, including the perceptions and attitudes towards care and employment of women, men and employers. The National Statistics Institute and the relevant ministries would be engaged in preparing, publishing and disseminating an annual report.

2. Low awareness and knowledge of companies of the challenges faced by returning mothers and therefore limited capacity to support them in their return

► An objective should be to increase the share of companies that facilitate the return of mothers of young children to their former jobs and/or facilitate the entrance of women to the labour market after their maternity, through:

i. **Raising awareness of companies** about the benefits of engaging mothers in employment on equal terms with fathers **through information and training** so that they can better help women in their return processes, particularly during the first weeks, to facilitate a smooth return and retention of the female talent.

ii. **Support employers with economic incentives to hire returning mothers and/or mothers who have never been at work** through, for example, lowering or exempting them from employers' contributions to social insurance for a certain amount of time.

iii. **Ensure that companies offer flexible work schedules** that allow parents (both mothers and fathers) to adjust their work hours to accommodate their childcare needs. This may include telework, flexible working hours, reduced hours, phased return or other customized arrangements. It is important that this be **offered (and promoted) to both fathers and mothers**, so as to reduce the heavy burden on mothers who generally bear the weight of double duty at work and at home, to contribute to closing gender employment gaps, and to change cultural stereotypes.

38 This could be companies with over 250 workers, for example, or companies with a certain turnover level.

iv. **Encourage, in collaboration with the Employers' Associations** and enhanced awareness and capacity of employers. This can be done through promoting knowledge and experience exchange among companies as regards the facilitation of smooth return of mothers through measures that have proved effective, such as:
   1. the previously mentioned flexible work schedules,
   2. free up- or reskilling training courses for mothers (technical, digital or soft skills training, online or offline) before they return to work or during the first weeks of their return,
   3. in-work childcare,
   4. mentoring, psychological support,
   5. communication with the returning mother during childcare leave so that she is not totally detached from her workplace,
   6. support for transport.

v. **Offer or enhance the possibility for companies to deduct expenses** incurred when facilitating their employee's access to childcare (mothers and fathers), either through setting up in-work childcare facilities or when paying for private childcare services outside the company (see also challenge 4).

3. A maternity/ paternity/ parental leave system that pushes mothers out of the labour market for long periods of time, that favours segregation of roles between mothers and fathers, and that does not support their return

► In line with the good results already achieved regarding the objective of increasing young women's employment set in the National Employment Programme[39], new more ambitious targets for the **young women employment rate and gender employment gap** could be pursued, along with a reduction of average effective parental leave length.

i. For this, the objective that women return earlier to work (e.g. on average after one year maternity/parental leave) could be supported through increased economic incentives, thereby allowing that mothers work while on childcare leave, as foreseen in the Family Programme. For instance, the childcare allowance (parental leave) could be increased from 90 per cent to 100 per cent of the previous income if the aggregate duration of the maternity *and* parental leave is 12 months.

ii. A new leave to help reconcile family and professional life could be considered for the cases when the children get ill, have medical appointments or family emergencies need to be attended. This could involve paid "health days" or "carer's days" per month or year for mothers and fathers of young children.[40] At the same time, fathers should be encouraged take up such leave as a way to counteract existing biases by employers against hiring mothers of young children because of their absences when children get sick.

39 As described in Chapter 2, the specific target of the programme is to increase the employment rate of women aged 25-34 from 43.2 per cent in 2021 to 47.2 in 2026 (thus 4 p.p. increase). In this context, between 2022 and 2023 the employment rate of women aged 25-34 has already increased in 3.3 p.p.

40 This is in line with the EU Directive 2019/11588 on work-life balance for parents and carers, which states that each worker has the right to "carers' leave" of five working days per year (article 6) plus the right to time off from work on grounds of force majeure for urgent family reasons in the case of illness or accident making the immediate attendance of the worker indispensable (article 7). In addition, the Directive states that Member States "are encouraged to introduce (...) a payment or an allowance in order to guarantee the effective take-up of the right by carers, in particular by men (paragraph 32).

iii. More and better-targeted information and awareness about the rights of returning mothers is needed, in particular for women who have been detached from the labour market for a long period. Companies could also be encouraged to better explain the rights and duties of mothers and fathers through internal communication, public information and awareness raising campaigns such as special videos or advertisements).

iv. Improved and effective protection of the employment of working mothers, allowing them to return to their former (or similar) posts of work even when they take a leave longer than one year and engaging the Labour Inspectorate to guarantee this protection.

► In order to increase young women's employment and reduce the gender employment gaps, significantly reducing the care gap is a key approach. This in turn requires a substantial change of mindset regarding stereotypes about the caring role and limited commitment of women among the companies that hire them and on the limited capacity and willingness of fathers to care.

i. To advance in this approach, fathers should be encouraged take up part of the parental leave while the mother also works. The example from Germany, whereby fathers are entitled to two exclusive parental leave benefit months if *both* parents take at least two months of parental leave is one interesting model (see in Chapter 2).[41]

ii. At the same time, awareness raising campaigns targeting employers could contribute to changing employers' views about the responsibilities of mothers and fathers and encourage companies to support fathers to take up a part of the parental leave and childcare responsibilities (in line with the challenge 2).

4. Insufficient availability of affordable, high quality and flexible childcare facilities

Reaching the objective in the National Employment Programme (NEP) of increasing the share of children aged 0-3 years in early education from 9.9 per cent in 2020 to 30 per cent in 2026 could be bolstered through the following objectives and measures:

► Improve the **availability, quality and flexibility of public childcare** facilities through:

i. Adjusting the existing regulation that hinders public formal childcare for children under two years old in nurseries and leads families to hire and pay (often informally) nannies or family nurses.

ii. In this same vein, support the transformation of existing public premises for childcare of children over two years old into nurseries for children under 2 years.

iii. Also, promote expansion of service hours of public childcare facilities to cover the customary working hours of mothers and fathers (until 7:00 or 8:00 PM), also considering the summer and holidays). This could be achieved, for instance, through the creation of a mixed-age group in kindergartens that will be open until 7 or 8 pm.

iv. As a complement to childcare, consider bringing back the former extended day programmes for first, second or third graders in the education system.

41 The current system in Moldova whereby fathers take up paternity leave (with the corresponding paternity allowance) and work at the same time while the mother is the main carer neither supports the return of mothers nor the reduction of the gender employment and care gaps.

- Support the creation of **affordable, high quality and flexible private childcare companies**, including social enterprises, that accept young children (e.g. aged 6 months) and that offer extended and flexible hours and services during the summer and holiday periods:

  i. Private companies should be able to operate under the same conditions as public kindergartens and, in face of insufficient public provision, they should be granted a subsidy equal to what the government pays per child in a public kindergarten.

  ii. In addition, if the price of the private kindergarten exceeds the payment to a public kindergarten and an employer supports the early return of a mother through placement in a private kindergarten, then the employer should receive compensation for all or part of the cost.

  iii. Alternatively (or complementarily), if it is the family who bears the additional cost of the private kindergarten, then the family should be compensated for all or part of the cost, for instance, through personal income tax rebates.

  iv. Special consideration should be paid to guarantee availability of childcare services in rural areas, possibly through state benefits and/or grants that help dynamize and activate the population (in some cases, vulnerable populations, such as refugees).

- Reinforce the **support to companies setting up in-work childcare**, considering differences between large and small companies as well as between urban and rural areas. Additional to reinforced support to companies to set up in-work childcare facilities (see challenge 2):

  i. Reduce excessive red tape and uncertainty for companies regarding responsibilities when setting up alternative childcare services or facilities.

  ii. Promote and facilitate small businesses to establish shared childcare facilities, possibly in collaboration with local public authorities, in both urban and rural environments.

- Improve the **labour conditions of child carers** (including family-based carers and nannies) with a view to increasing the supply of workers, who are mostly women, and the quality of childcare. For this, the following measures could be considered:

  i. Incentives to (potential) care workers for formal insured work with decent labour conditions and adequate training, thereby reducing red tape when (informal and nannies) carers register upon patent.

  ii. Provide certified training courses for carers, in particular specific training for caring for children below 2 years. This ensures that carers can comply with the qualification requirement, which will be in force in 2025 when registering for patent.

  iii. Consider the creation of local registries of care workers (informal and nannies) by local authorities that families can consult to find available, quality providers. Such registries could improve access to services as well as labour conditions. Such registries could be fed information from and be complementary to the national electronic register for childcare services.

  iv. Reduce excessive red tape for informal family-based carers and eliminate the prohibition that family-based nurseries are placed outside of the carer's house.

  v. Within the National Programme for the Reduction of Undeclared Work 2024-2025, include specific campaigns of the labour inspectorate to address undeclared work in the care sector.

- Make good quality childcare services available and affordable for **low-income families**, in particular for single mothers, mothers with disabilities, victims of GBV or refugees through direct (subsidy) or indirect (through tax rebates) support.

5. Limited capacity of the Ministry for Labour and Social Protection (MLSP) and the National Employment Agency (NEA) to address the needs of Moldovan mothers of young children.

More human and economic resources are needed for the announced development in the National Employment Programme of dedicated services for mothers who wish to return to the labour market, consisting of improvement and (re)training when needed, grants for childcare while participating in active labour market programmes and employment subsidies to employers. The MLSP and the NEA should consider the following objectives and measures in particular:

- Train the labour offices' staff in the specific needs and possibilities, with a gender equality view, of women with young children.

- Design and implement, in cooperation with collaborating companies and organizations, such as the Chambers of Commerce (Start-up Academy), training providers and/or NGOs, programmes targeting local employment offices to better provide support to mothers aiming to return to the labour market (either to their former jobs or to new ones) that include, as needed:

    i. Career coaching and mentoring.

    ii. Upskilling and reskilling, through training vouchers endowed with sufficient budget, either accreditable or non-accreditable training, thereby ensuring that childcare services are available for mothers engaging in training.

    iii. Training in digitalization, which should be provided transversally to contribute to reducing the gender digital divide and address obsolescence from long periods out of the labour market in this very rapidly changing field.

    iv. Support to mothers wanting to return to employment as self-employed.

    v. Certification of knowledge and skills acquired through prior work experience and informal learning.

    vi. Job search, guidance and placement support, with a gender equality perspective.

    vii. Information about rights and family planning.

    viii. Psychological support.

  Consider approaching returning mothers at two key moments: first, before the end of the maternity leave, when they need to decide whether they apply for one or two years of parental leave, to inform them about the support and alternatives available to them (economic incentives and support services upon their return); and **second, before the end of the parental leave** to smooth their return and provide the activation services they need.

- Linking to the previous objective and drawing on the experience of employment offices, design and implement programmes to **support companies** hiring workers to understand the benefits of hiring returning mothers and duly supporting them.

- Reinforce efforts to reach out to the significant share of young women with young children who are **NEETs**, of which a relevant share are highly qualified. Profile them by identifying their needs and arrange for adapted set of services.

- Address, in collaboration with relevant partners from the social field (ministries, NGOs, social partners, specifically trade unions, etc.), the specific needs of groups of women with young children that face **intersectional difficulties** in returning or accessing the labour market to reduce inactivity and poverty traps. These groups include, for example, single/ lone mothers, women with disabilities, low- or not- educated women, women in low-income households and/or with low-wages, ethnic minorities.

- Given the relatively high population of women with young children in **rural areas** and in consideration of the limited provision of public employment services in these areas, prepare a **specific plan for mothers to access or return to employment** in rural/remote areas. This should include support to **women' entrepreneurship as a strategic priority**.

6. A social benefits structure that disincentivizes mothers to return to work by creating benefits and/or poverty traps.

- Consider revising and improving the design of benefits and taxation for families with children and working mothers and include, for instance, in-kind or economic benefits targeting working mothers that cover expenses related to childcare (in-work benefits, as in the Irish case in Chapter 2).

7. Monitoring and evaluation of female employment, employment rate and gender employment gaps in relation to progress in the provision of affordable and high-quality childcare facilities and services and gender equality attitudes.

- Including, among the customary indicators, behavioural information concerning companies, women and men, public institutions, etc.

CHAPTER 4

Proposal of three pilot projects

The common objective of the three pilot projects presented in this section is to support mothers of young children to (re) enter the labour market within one year of parental leave, is they wish to do so. According to the analysis carried out and the challenges described above, mothers need: quality, affordable and flexible childcare for their children aged 0-2 (Pilot 1); the support of companies through flexible work schedules and personalized support (Pilot 2); and for many, the support of the employment services (Pilot 3).

The three pilot projects were shared in a workshop in Chisinau on 20 September 2024 with approximately 30 persons from the MMPS, the National Employment Agency (ANOFM) and public employment offices, the Ministry of Education and Research, HR representatives of a selection of companies and trade unions. During the workshop, the three pilot were validated and insightful contributions were added to the initial suggestions. The next pages present the three pilots as they were discussed in the workshop.

Pilot 1: Enhancement and improvement of public childcare facilities

Objective: This pilot aims to address the insufficient numbers of nurseries and of specialists with skills to work with young children, the often-difficult working conditions, low wages and in flexibility in opening hours by improving availability, quality and flexibility of public childcare. A key goal is to enhance public childcare through broadening the offer of services. Specifically, public providers would expand their services to children under 2 years of age and widen their time schedule to cover the usual working hours of mothers and fathers. The pilot would explore the most appropriate solutions regarding additional staff and/or different qualifications, look to improve labour conditions and consider the need for new facilities for younger children.

Stakeholders involved: MMPS, Institute for Continuing Training, Ministry of Education and Research (MEC), Ministry of Economy, public childcare providers, local authorities, parents of children.

Measures:

- Call launched by the MMPS for local authorities in need and willing to expand their public childcare provision to children under 2 years of age and in extend the offer in terms of hours and holidays. In addition to the objective of improving childcare, the call should include the objective of promoting the reduction of gendered care, employment gaps and stereotypes related to the care role of women.
- Selection of 10 public childcare facilities in both urban and rural areas and awarding of grant. The selection criteria should consider a geographical balance between urban and rural areas (for instance, 6 and 4 respectively) and the quality of the project envisaged by the local authorities responding to the call, including:
    a. The approach to gender equality, which could benefit, for instance from the support of experts in gender equality and from training the childcare facility's staff in gender equality issues.
    b. The quality of the services aimed to be provided, i.e., the care programme for young children, the qualifications of the staff, food quality, opening hours, etc.
    c. When needed, activities could also be envisaged to proactively reach out to mothers in the first year of parental leave so as to encourage them to enter or return to the labour market.
    d. The plan to reinforce the existing staff through hiring and/or (re) training of the current workers in caring of children below two years of age and the working conditions of carers in the kindergartens/nurseries.
    e. The plan to adapt the existing premises to the needs of caring of children below 2 years of age.

- The selected local authorities engage in transforming the existing premises so as to adapt (or expand) them for children aged 0-2 years, hire new staff or (re) train the existing staff as needed.
- Monitoring and evaluation, including formative evaluation so as to identify what works and does not work. Monitoring and evaluation should also consider:
    a. The cost effectiveness of expanding the childcare services to children under 2 years and of opening hours.
    b. The impact of the project on the employment of women and the impact on the community and the local area.
    c. A counterfactual evaluation with comparison to public childcare facilities not involved in extending the age of children and opening hours could be considered. Expert support for conducting such an evaluation would be needed.

Pilot 2: Better response by companies to the needs of returning mothers and caring fathers

Objective: This pilot aims to improve support given by employers to mothers returning to work or entering new jobs as well to fathers who are caregivers. In cooperation with employers' associations and with the support of training companies, third sector organizations, childcare providers and experts on employment and gender equality, 10 projects are selected involving companies (large, medium and small) willing to implement measures that improve the attraction, retention and wellbeing of returning mothers as well as the engagement of fathers in caregiving (as a way to support mothers).

Stakeholders involved: MMPS, National Employment Agency (ANOFM), local public authorities, Employers' associations, workers organizations, training and third sector organizations, childcare providers.

Measures:

- The MMSP, in collaboration with the stakeholders involved, mainly the employers' association, develops a guide for employers with best practices to support parents in returning to the labour market highlighting good practices. Success stories of employers who have implemented best practices to support mothers returning to the labour market can be publicized.
- Call launched by the MMPS for stakeholders (employers' associations, training providers, third sector organizations) willing to support companies for the design and implementation of measures for attracting and retaining returning mothers.
- The activities envisaged in the projects could involve the design of packages of services aimed at the attraction and retention of returning mothers (and fathers). This may include, among others, implementation of flexible/remote/hybrid working schedules, (re)skilling training courses, in-work or private external childcare, mentoring, psychological support, communication with the returning mother during paternal leave, transportation of employees' children to school and kindergartens, as well as support to caring fathers.
- Selection of 10 projects that focus on large, medium size and small companies in both rural and urban areas and/or on specific economic sectors (i.e. female/male dominated). The selection criteria should emphasize the quality of the project, considering:
    a. The activities envisaged (active measures such as the creation of childcare facilities, flexible work schedules, remote work, training programmes, etc.) and their potential impact on easing the return of mothers and the caring role of fathers within the companies.

b. The proposed project's approach to gender equality, which could include, for instance, support from experts in gender equality and training of staff in companies in gender equality issues.

c. Whether one of the activities included in the project involves the preparation and adoption of a Gender Action Plan in the companies.

d. The involvement of public local authorities and their support to local companies.

- Monitoring and evaluation, considering:

    a. The impact of the project on the employment, employment gaps and wellbeing of women and men, and on the evolution of gender equality in the companies involved.

    b. The costs and the benefits of the measures adopted.

Pilot 3: Better support of employment offices to the labour market and social protection needs of returning mothers

Objective: This pilot seeks to improve the response of employment offices to the needs of mothers returning to work and enhancing support for fathers involved in childcare. The project will pilot specialized support services within employment offices for 6 months, targeting mothers returning to work and those entering the labour market for the first time (uninsured persons without work experience).

Stakeholders involved: MMPS, National Employment Agency (ANOFM), educational and training service providers, psychological counselling providers, employers' associations, childcare service providers.

Measures:

- Call launched by MMPS and ANOFM: A call directed principally at providers of educational and training services, psychological counselling, employer associations, childcare service providers interested in piloting this specialized support service.

- Selection of 10 local employment offices from the "six growth poles," including two large cities and three districts.

- Design and implementation of programmes for local employment that include:

    - Financial support for mothers who are entering the job market for the first time (uninsured persons without work experience who do not qualify for unemployment benefits) upon their registration with ANOFM.

    - Training for ANOFM specialists to provide targeted support for the pilot's beneficiaries. The activities deployed by ANOFM specialist could involve, as needed:

        i. Career coaching and mentoring.

        ii. Upskilling and reskilling, either accreditable or non-accreditable training, thereby ensuring that childcare services are available for mothers engaging in training.

        iii. In particular, training in digitalization should be provided transversally, so as to contribute to reducing the gender digital divide and possibly the obsolescence after a long period out of the labour market in a very rapidly changing field.

        iv. Support to mothers wanting to return to employment as self-employed.

        v. Certification of knowledge and skills acquired through prior work experience and informal learning.

vi. Job search, guidance and placement support, with a gender equality perspective.

vii. Information about rights and family planning.

viii. Psychological support.

- Monitoring and evaluation, considering:

  a. The impact of different combination of services on the reduction of female unemployment in the local area and the access of mothers to employment.

  b. The stability of the labour insertion and the quality of jobs accessed by mothers (including wages).

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ANNEX I. Nine EU country experiences of support to returning mothers

This annex presents a list of nine experiences identified in EU countries related to the support provided by the public employment services or agencies to (the return to) employment of women with childcare responsibilities (including inactive women). These nine experiences address the various challenges addressed by women re-entering the labour market after long career breaks, such as reduced employability and self-confidence and/or the need to reconcile work and family responsibilities. The nine experiences briefly presented offer a variety of approaches, which are often combined to increase their effectiveness (Duell 2023).

Some of the practices are specifically designed for helping mothers of young children to return to the labour market, such as those in Austria, Denmark, Ireland and the UK. The example from Poland targets families. In Hungary, women returning after maternity leave benefit from wage subsidies. In Estonia, measures target women in rural areas. The French example does not target a specific group, but rather provides personal services, including childcare services, which support the employment of women. Finally, the Spanish initiative is more general, since it is intended to raise awareness in companies about the need to adapt to family needs.

1. Austria: Re-entry for the Future

Re-entry for the Future (*Wiedereinstieg für die Zukunft*) is an Austrian national initiative implemented by the Austrian PES through the women's career centres. It provides compensation to women after parental leave who wish to re-enter the labour market. Women are offered a special PES course entitled 'returners with a future' (Wiedereinstieg mit Zukunft).[42] It provides also support through participation in an apprenticeship or other forms of vocational training tailored to their needs and interests (Sansonetti et al. 2020). It provides assistance as well with job placement, career counselling, and some of the programmes combine this with options for childcare including, if possible, childcare places. Under certain conditions childcare allowance can be granted in some federal states.

The programme goes beyond career guidance and addresses the specific circumstances and difficult situations of the target group, prioritising possibilities of reconciling work and family life, analysis of the client's potential and skills, etc. Specially trained counsellors for returners cater to the needs of this target group; in addition, counselling meetings address the issue of part-time and its impact on lifetime earnings (Federal Ministry for Labour and Economy 2022).

2. Estonia: Family-friendly employer label

The Family-Friendly Employer Label[43] is an initiative of the Ministry of Social Affairs, supported by the European Social Fund aimed at facilitating the reconciliation of work and family life. Since 2016, numerous organizations have received a bronze, silver or gold label, depending on the extent to which they accommodate employees' work-life balance. The current programme runs through 2027.

The programme for the Family-friendly Employer label is a multi-stage assessment and consultation process during which the needs of employees and the options available to employers to make their

42 Arbeitsmarktservice, AMS: https://www.ams.at/arbeitsuchende/frauen/wiedereinstieg-mit-zukunft

43 See https://eige.europa.eu/gender-mainstreaming/toolkits/gear/legislative-policy-backgrounds/estonia?language_content_entity=en and https://www.lm.gov.lv/sites/lm/files/data_content/6.pp1.pdf

organizational culture more family-friendly are assessed and family-friendly measures are adopted in the organization. The label certifies that an employer cares about their employees, values their needs and wishes in balancing working and home life and has made their organizational structure more family-friendly to this end.

In 2023, out of 160 company candidates, 20 employers began the programme. Taking into consideration the participating employers and their personnel, in 2023 some 9,600 people across Estonia benefitted.[44]

The programme is promoted by the Ministry of Social Affairs with partners such as the Estonian Employers' Confederation, PARE (Estonian Human Resource Management Association), the Labour Inspectorate, the Estonian Trade Union Confederation, Tallinn University, the Estonian Human Rights Centre.

3. France: Chèque emploi service universel (CESU)

By providing childcare, mobility help or other services, CESU facilitates job access in the formal sector for the economically inactive. [45] Launched in 2006, it has been since then expanded and refined. The CESU works as a cheque dispensed by an individual to pay for personal services, granting the employer certain tax advantages, such as reductions in social security contributions. It is universal so any household can use it, yet some specific groups are targeted, among which parents with childcare needs.

CESU can be used to hire nationally accredited service providers. CESU facilitates payment, provides economic benefits for the employer of the home-based employee and encourages the declaration of personal services. CESU can finance an array of personal services, such as, personal services for the elderly and people with disabilities, childcare or mobility among others.

CESU is not specifically an employment activation measure, but it can facilitate access to the labour market of women with child or elder care responsibilities to re-enter education or training or seek career opportunities. The CESU offers a model to support this group of people, while also developing a key personal service sector, increasingly in demand in ageing societies.

As of 2017, 2.2 million people in France used CESU for the services of nearly 950 000 personal service workers.

4. Germany: Perspektive Wiedereinstieg – Potenziale erschließen (Vocational Reintegration as a Perspective - tapping into potential)

The programme *Vocational Reintegration as a Perspective* was implemented between 2009 and 2021 with the support of the European Social Fund in the programming period 2007-2013 and renewed in the 2014-2020 period as "Perspektive Wiedereinstieg - Potenziale erschließen" (tapping into potential). It was implemented by the Federal Ministry for Family, Senior Citizens, Women and Youth in cooperation with the Public Employment Service.[46]

The goal of the programme is to promote a substantial and lasting return to a job with social security coverage after having interrupted work for family reasons. Continuous support of the parent returning to work through counselling, skill development and activation remain at the heart of the programme. These services are being complemented by contacting employers (raising awareness for the potential inherent in the target group), the involvement of the partners and support for accessing household-related services. The goal is threefold:

44 Available at https://news.err.ee/1609314846/ministry-to-spend-120-000-on-family-friendly-employer-award-promoter

45 See https://www.servicesalapersonne.gouv.fr/beneficier-des-sap/cesu/cheque-emploi-service-universel-prefinance-qu-est-que-c-est#:~:text=Le%20CESU%20pr%C3%A9financ%C3%A9%20constitue%20un,un%20salari%C3%A9%20%C3%A0%20son%20domicile and https://www.ela.europa.eu/sites/default/files/2021-09/FR%20-%20CESU.pdf

46 See https://www.esf.de/portal/EN/Funding-period-2014-2020/ESF-Programmes/bmfsfj/perspective-re-entry.html https://www.perspektiven-schaffen.de/ps-de/fuer-erwerbstaetige-und-wiedereinsteigende/beruflicher-wiedereinstieg

1. Make it easier for women to return to work after a family-related employment break;
2. Heighten employers' awareness that by employing such women, they gain experienced employees (both in terms of work and life) who are willing and able to work, available for work for twenty or more years in the future, and have the skills and qualifications needed to secure a company's future.
3. Encourage men to actively support their wives and partners in their efforts to return to work.

Near 17,000 participants were supported during the period 2009-2021. Near 65 per cent of the participants were successful in their return to a job or in getting activated.[47] An evaluation found that participation of mothers who re-entered via local employment agency through training voucher meant 12 percentage point higher probability of employment and higher monthly earnings of €210 / $250 US dollar (USD) six years after (Doerr 2022).

5. Hungary: Wage subsidies and other initiatives

In recent years, Hungary has introduced a **series of policy reforms** aimed at making it easier for mothers with very young children to move into paid work.

- Since 2013, Hungary has provided employers with tax breaks for workers returning from paid leave through the Job Protection Action Plan. The programme reimburses employers for some of the wage costs of eligible employees, including mothers with young children. The contribution payment during the first two years is 0 per cent and during the third 14 per cent (instead of 28.5 per cent), While no evaluation of the policy has yet taken place, the Ministry for National Economy claims this programme created jobs for over 40,000 mothers with small children until 2015 (Fazekas and Blaskó, eds. 2016).
- In 2014, it introduced GYED Extra (the earnings-related parental-leave benefit or *Gyermekgondozási díj*), allowing parents in receipt of parental leave benefits to work unlimited hours from the child's first birthday until its second, with no loss of benefit. In 2016, the age limit was lowered to 6 months. The scheme has been relatively popular: by 2021, about 61 000 workers/parents had made use of GYED Extra, according to data from the Hungarian Statistics Office. The relatively low earnings make part-time work scarcely attractive from a household income perspective. To counteract this, the GYED Extra programme contributes to make part-time employment more appealing.
- Since 2015, the government has released substantial national and EU funds to local authorities for the creation of new day care places. In 2017, it introduced requirements obliging local authorities with a population of less than 10 000 to provide public childcare services for children under age 3 in case of existing demand.
- In 2017, Hungary introduced major changes in the regulation to support employer-provided childcare. Since then, the financial allocation for operating employer-provided nurseries has continually increased and simplified set-up rules have been put in place. The operating costs do not increase the corporate tax base, and employers may team up and operate the service jointly. From 2021, the specific amount of the annual operating subsidy has been set at the same level regardless of the type of operator (i.e. non-public employers and public bodies). The government also promotes workplace nurseries through conferences and events for both foreign and Hungarian companies, leaflets and consultations with higher education institutions, and through tenders targeting firms and companies to establish and run work-place nurseries.
- Since 2020, employers have been required to offer parents of children under 4 years of age part-time hours (equivalent to half of the standard full-time working day) if requested, with no option of refusal.

47 See https://www.perspektiven-schaffen.de/ps-de/fuer-erwerbstaetige-und-wiedereinsteigende/beruflicher-wiedereinstieg/-perspektive-wiedereinstieg-2009-2021--188318

6. Ireland: Back to Work Family Dividend (BTWFD)

In Ireland, the Back to Work Family Dividend (BTWFD) helps families with children to move from social welfare into employment. It gives financial support to people with children who stop claiming a jobseeker's payment or a One-Parent Family Payment because they are in work or start work. It was introduced in 2015 to provide work incentives by continuing to pay claimants the full amount of their previous social welfare benefit during the first year of employment, and half of the amount during the second year of employment, regardless of their earnings.

From January 2024, the full BTWFD is €46 weekly for a child aged under 12 and €54 for a child aged 12 and over. In the second year, it is reduced to €23 for a child aged under 12 and €27 for a child aged 12 and over.

BTWFD had 2,702 recipients in December 2022, with 5,583 child beneficiaries. Expenditure for 2022 was €11,228 million.[48]

An initial analysis dated in 2015 showed that BTWFD improved the financial incentive to work for these the beneficiaries during the first year although the positive effect on the financial incentive for work would diminish in the second year of employment when the rates of BTWFD halved.

7. Poland: Stable Work – Strong Family programme

In Poland, former Ministry of Family and Social Policy initiated a pilot project in 2021 called Stable Work – Strong Family.[49] Focused on public employment services, it mainly targets women re-entering the job market post-childbirth. The project aims to create assistance for the unemployed and job seekers, striving to offer systemic solutions.

As reflected in the government's National Action Plan for Employment for 2023, prepared by the former Ministry of Family and Social Policy, a call for pilot projects was launched that addressed: (1) persons excluded from the labour market due to care for children/dependent persons and seniors, in particular parents returning or entering the labour market, (2) women returning to the labour market after childbirth, maternity or parental leave, period of professional inactivity related to raising children, and (3) young people under 30, from the NEET group (i.e. persons not in education, employment or training). Contracts have been signed for the implementation of 71 projects submitted by labour offices, amounting to more than Polish zloty 54.7 million. Pilot projects under the above call are implemented in the years 2022-2023. However, data regarding the project's outcomes remains scarce.

8. Spain: Plan to prevent and reduce long-term unemployment among women in rural areas 2019-2021

The Spanish PES implements measures aimed at advancing equal opportunities in access to employment and specifically at promoting the labour activation of women through measures that support re-conciliation of personal, family and labour life and effective equal opportunities between women and men in the labour market. In this context, Axis 4 of the three-year Plan to Prevent and Reduce Long-Term Unemployment 2019-2021[50], called *Plan Reincorpora-T*, targets long-term unemployed women or women at risk of remaining outside of the labour market and aims to halve the long-term gender unemployment gap. This is a national programme implemented at regional level, preferentially those municipalities with less than 5,000 inhabitants. Measure number 47 is specifically devoted to women in rural areas (*Apoyo a la mujer en el entorno rural*). The programme involves certified training, specifically in ICT and in emerging economic activities, such as those related with the green transition.

48 See https://assets.gov.ie/266156/f20b1997-df82-4916-bea5-2badf9e982a0.pdf

49 Ministry of Family, Labour and Social Policy: https://www.gov.pl/web/family/safe-families-stable-jobs

50 See Plan Reincorpora-T, presentation in English: https://www.sepe.es/SiteSepe/contenidos/personas/encontrar_empleo/reincorpo-rate/PLAN_REINCORPORA-T_PRESENTACION_INGLES.pdf

The authority responsible for the programme is the national PES in cooperation with the Autonomous Regional PES, the Women's and Equal Opportunities Institute, the Spanish Federation of Municipalities and Provinces, NGOs and the social partners. It is funded with national funds (not included in the NRRP).

The Final Report of Reincorpora-T[51] highlights the Measure number 47, targeted at the activation and employment of women in rural areas as a good practice, but it does not content abundant information on the development of the measure.

9. UK: Returner Programmes and Returner Fund

Returner Programmes are programmes targeted at people returning to work after a long break (typically 2 years or more). There are many forms of returner programme, including return to practice and retraining programmes. Returner programmes were pioneered in the UK in 2014, and their number grew from just three that year to over 40 in 2017, primarily in the financial services, consulting and STEM sectors. The Spring Budget 2017 included £5 million to promote returnships in the public and private sector, through support organizations that take on parents and carers returning after long periods of absence.

As part of this, the Government Equalities Office (GEO) set up schemes across the public and private sector to support people to return to work after a break for caring responsibilities. The Returners Fund was launched in 2018 and awarded around £1.5 million to 16 pilot returner projects that would engage and support returners and employers in the private sector. They also delivered returner programmes targeting public sector workers including social workers and health professionals. The 16 pilot projects were delivered by training, voluntary and third sector organizations.

Returner programmes are typically set up and run by the employer. They offer a supported pathway back into work for people who have had a career break, usually of 18 months or more. They provide training, mentoring, networking opportunities and support to help people back into the workforce in a way that makes sense for them. They may also involve temporary or permanent placement, labour flexibility, career development. These programmes may be company, industry or region-specific.

Information produced by different stakeholders, including a forthcoming webinar, follows:

- Returner toolkit: helping you back to work
- Guidance Employer guidance: helping people return to work
- Returners Grant Fund Evaluation, 2021
- Return to work week 13-17 May 2024 (Working Mums)

51 Available here.

ANNEX II: Interviewed organizations and focus groups conducted

List of interviewed organizations

Nr	Name of the Institution/Organization	Person/position	Date of interview
1	Local employment public authority, Ungheni city	Vitalie Vrabie, Mayor of the Ungheni city	4 of June 2024
2	National Confederation of Trade Unions of Moldova	Polina Fisticanu	3 of June 2024
3	National Confederation of Employers	Vlad Camisnchi	4 of June 2024
4	The Gender Equality Platform	Lilia Palii, Administrator	6 of June 2024
5	Public childcare providers (rural and urban)	Aliona Stratu - Director	4 of June 2024
6	Beneficiaries of informal childcare providers/ nannies	Lilia Duca	24 of May
7	Chamber of Commerce and Industry of the Republic of Moldova	Diana Russu	27 of May 2024
8	Sireți village mayor's office	Leonid Boaghi, Mayor + representative of a nurs-ery school in the village	5 of June 2024

List of focus groups conducted

Five Focus Groups have been conducted in July and August 2024 by the external consultant Svetlana Scutelniciuc, which successfully provided reliable, valid, and representative results. Participants shared essential and relevant information, allowing for the collection of high-quality data for further analysis.

- Focus group 1: HR Departments representatives of medium and large companies.
- Focus group 2: Working mothers, including single mothers.
- Focus group 3: Mothers, including single mothers, on childcare leave.
- Focus group 4: Staff from local Labour Offices.
- Focus group 5: Representatives of NGOs supporting women's employment, including refugees, as well as representatives of private childcare organizations.

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