

One Size Fits Few: The Evolution of the European Union's Work–Life Balance Agenda over Three Decades

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The article analyzes the evolution of the European Union's work–life balance agenda over the past three decades, focusing on key policy initiatives that have established minimum standards for care-related leaves, services, labor market protection, and flexible working arrangements. To assess how well the EU policy framework recognizes and responds to the care responsibilities of diverse families, the analysis applies a conceptual framework that foregrounds often-overlooked elements of policy design: inclusiveness, flexibility, and complementarity. The findings reveal that, while the European Union's agenda has gradually broadened, progress remains cautious, fragmented, and uneven. Binding instruments continue to prioritize “standard” workers and “average” families, while the (complex) needs of lone parents, migrant families, carers facing illness or disability, and those in precarious employment are addressed, if at all, through non-binding measures. The persistent undervaluation of care, limited recognition of fathers' roles, and siloed policy approaches weaken coherence and fail to provide meaningful support for diverse work–care arrangements.

Key words: European Union; policy complementarity; policy inclusiveness; policy flexibility; work–care policies; work–life balance.

Introduction

Work–care policies have gained increasing prominence on the European Union's agenda over recent decades, with expanded minimum standards for carers'

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labor market protection, care-related leaves, flexible working arrangements, and an increased focus on care services, including the care workforce. This policy nexus aims to guide the development of work–life balance measures across member states, ensuring essential care-related rights across Europe. EU initiatives such as Directive 2019/1158 on Work–Life Balance also aim, albeit cautiously, to encourage a more balanced sharing of care and work responsibilities between women and men. Yet these initiatives often have a narrow focus and tend to fall short in adequately addressing the multiple and intersectional inequalities in employment and care (Chiericato 2020; Dobrotić 2022a). The European Union’s “one-size-fits-all” approach to work–life balance has been criticized for prioritizing employment, having adverse redistributive effects, and weak feminist principles (for review, see Dobrotić 2022a; cf. Cantillon and Van Lancker 2013; Saraceno 2015). Concerns persist that this approach overlooks the diverse care needs of parents and carers, particularly those facing disadvantaged employment conditions and complex family situations, such as individuals in nonstandard employment, lone-parent or same-sex families, and those affected by serious illness, disability, and/or migration-related challenges.

While scholarship increasingly highlights that many parents and carers face barriers in accessing care-related leaves and services due to policy design flaws in member states, such as overly strict eligibility criteria and exclusionary approaches (cf. Pavolini and Van Lancker 2018; Dobrotić and Blum 2020; EIGE 2020; Marynissen, Wood, and Neels 2021; Dobrotić 2022b), the European Union’s policy framework still requires further elaboration. This is especially critical amid population aging, growing labor market deregulation, and increasingly diverse family situations (Gabel 2024), all of which accentuate persistent gaps in the recognition and resourcing of different care responsibilities and arrangements within EU policy initiatives (Chiericato 2020). When such gaps are already embedded in the European Union’s minimum standards, there is a risk of further exacerbating existing inequalities in employment and care across Europe. The need to assess whether, and to what extent, different work–care responsibilities and family situations are acknowledged and resourced also aligns with the European Union’s growing emphasis on resilience (Bártová et al. 2023), an agenda that increasingly places the responsibility onto families to adapt to challenges and “build resilience.” Within the broader work–life balance policy framework, this underscores the need to critically assess the extent to which EU-level policies respond to the lived realities of diverse families, to ensure that all parents and carers are adequately supported in navigating challenges related to care and employment.

Given this context, this article analyzes the European Union’s work–life balance agenda, focusing on key policy initiatives that have shaped and established minimum standards for care-related leaves and services, as well as labor market protection and flexible working arrangements for those with caring responsibilities since the early 1990s, when work–care issues began to gain prominence at the EU level. The central research question guiding this analysis is: *To what*

extent does the European Union's work–life balance policy framework recognize and respond to the care responsibilities of different families? To address this question, this article employs a conceptual framework that moves beyond the conventional focus on the gendered distribution of care-related rights and the “generosity” of the European Union's work–care policy instruments—typically discussed in terms of leave duration and benefit levels in the Europeanisation literature (cf. [de la Porte, Larsen, and Szelewa, 2020](#); [Dobrotić 2022a](#); [de la Porte et al. 2023](#); [Pircher, de la Porte, and Szelewa 2024](#); for an exception, see [Chiericato 2020](#)). It broadens this perspective to develop a more comprehensive understanding of the adequacy of the EU's policy framework, incorporating not only gendered distribution and generosity but also the flexibility of available provisions. In addition, it draws particular attention to “the more ‘silent’ elements of policy design” ([Dobrotić 2022b](#), 283), such as policy inclusiveness and policy complementarity.

This broader lens enables a more nuanced assessment of gaps in the recognition and resourcing of care responsibilities across different employment and care situations within the European Union's work–life balance policy framework over the past three decades (1992–2024), as well as the framework's responsiveness to the ongoing socioeconomic challenges faced by families. As this approach necessitates an intersectional lens, this article also contributes to a growing body of literature that highlights normative assumptions around gender, sexuality, class, ethnicity, and other social dimensions embedded in policy-making, demonstrating how existing policies often fail to equally recognize and support all individuals and families (e.g. [Williams 2018](#); [Hankivsky and Jordan-Zachery 2019](#); [Chiericato 2020](#); [Dobrotić 2022b](#)). By revealing the multiple, interdependent inequalities, and stratification processes embedded within the European Union's policy framework, this analysis also offers a critical assessment of its limitations, particularly regarding the extent to which EU policies support, or fall short in supporting, families' resilience amid ongoing challenges across Europe.

Work–care policy inclusiveness, adequacy, and complementarity

Analyzing the extent to which diverse families and their needs are recognized in work–care policy designs requires engagement with multiple policy instruments (i.e. care-related leaves, care services, and flexible working arrangements) and an acknowledgment of their inherently multidimensional nature ([Ciccia and Verloo 2012](#); [Dobrotić and Iveković Martinis 2023](#)). Such an approach enables a more comprehensive assessment of how responsive these policies are to the complex realities of different family situations (e.g. lone parenthood, children's disability, precarious employment, economic fragility). Yet it also poses conceptual and analytical challenges, demanding a critical lens that spans

multiple policy instruments and moves beyond the policy elements typically discussed in the literature (e.g. leave duration, payment levels, or early childhood education and care (ECEC) availability; Moss, Koslowski, and Duvander 2019; Yerkes and Javornik 2019; Dobrotić 2022a). This broader perspective requires attention to often-overlooked aspects of policy design, such as entitlement principles and eligibility criteria that are more indicative of policy inclusiveness (Dobrotić and Blum 2020; Dobrotić 2022b), as well as the coherence across different policy instruments (e.g. the alignment of parental leave policies with ECEC provision; Plantenga and Remery 2005; Saraceno and Keck 2010). Foregrounding policy multidimensionality is therefore essential not only to reveal how care is understood and conceptualized in policymaking, but also to illuminate how policymakers envision the distribution of policy resources across social groups and shape the ways in which care and employment are arranged and navigated by families across different social groups.

When considering diversity, the inclusiveness of social rights emerges as a critical dimension of policy that requires careful consideration. This entails assessing the extent to which provisions are accessible to all parents and carers regardless of their employment, citizenship, or other factors related to family, gender, health, or intersecting identities (Blum and Dobrotić 2021). Yet, work–care policy inclusiveness entails more than acknowledging different care or employment situations. It also demands evaluating whether existing rights effectively address the specific needs of groups such as lone parents or parents of children with disabilities (Dobrotić and Iveković Martinis 2023)—that is, whether all are adequately resourced to meet work–care challenges (León 2024). This understanding bridges the concepts of inclusiveness and adequacy in social rights, recognizing their interconnectedness and joint significance in policy design.

Adequacy in work–care policy is typically discussed around the needs of “average” dual-earner families, focusing heavily on ECEC availability and leave policy elements such as duration and benefits level, sometimes summarized under the concept of “leave generosity” (e.g. Ray, Gornick, and Schmitt 2010). While examining these alongside entitlement principles and eligibility criteria—key measures of inclusiveness—enables an assessment of how well policies support diverse families (see Dobrotić 2022b; Kaufman et al. 2022), the notion of adequacy requires broader conceptualization. For example, leave policy scholarship highlights the importance of well-paid, moderately long leave for both parents as critical in maintaining a sustainable relationship between work and care (Moss and Deven 2020; Dobrotić 2023). Because such provisions alone may be insufficient to meet the diverse and complex needs of families, the flexibility of entitlements is also accentuated in this article as potentially critical in supporting parents and carers through key transitions, such as entering or exiting employment, adjusting working hours to accommodate care responsibilities (Daly 2023), or responding to unforeseen circumstances (e.g. sudden illness in a family). Although the effectiveness of flexible provisions remains unclear (Dobrotić 2023), measures such as flexible working, adaptable care services

hours, and leaves that can be taken part-time or transferred between carers can be seen as integral components of an adequate and inclusive work–care policy design, especially when the diversity of family situations is taken into account.

Importantly, everyday experiences of parents and carers are shaped not only by individual policies but also by how these policies intersect, either facilitating or hindering work–care navigation. This underscores the relevance of policy complementarity, which highlights the need for coherence in how different policies interact and “speak to each other” (Moss 2005; Plantenga and Remery 2005; Saraceno and Keck 2010; Daly 2023; León 2024). Given the multidimensional nature of work–care policy, contradictions in design and outcomes are common (Ciccia and Verloo 2012), making coherence across instruments (e.g. parenting leaves, ECEC services, and flexible working arrangements) essential to achieving “an equitable and sustainable relationship between care, employment and gender” (Moss and Deven 2020, 434). These contradictions are not only practical but also normative, reflecting different societal values surrounding families, gender, and care responsibilities (Ciccia and Verloo 2012). An intersectional lens adds further complexity by moving beyond gender-focused analyses to consider how care policies affect families differently across various dimensions of diversity, including class, ethnicity, disability, and other axes of identity (see Williams 2018; Hankivsky and Jordan-Zachery 2019; for work–care policy, Dobrotić 2022b). Such a perspective is vital for assessing the adequacy of work–care policy frameworks in addressing the lived realities of diverse families.

Building on this multidimensional and intersectionality-sensitive framework, the development of the European Union's work–life balance agenda is analyzed in the following sections to assess the extent to which the care needs of different families are recognized and resourced. The analysis highlights not only the gendered foundations of the European Union's policies but also their limited responsiveness to diverse family situations. It also examines the extent to which key EU policy initiatives on employment, care, social inclusion, and gender equality are integrated and mutually reinforcing, thereby ensuring that all parents and carers receive adequate support in balancing work and care responsibilities.

Analytical framework and methodology

This article analyzes key EU work–life balance policy documents—including directives, recommendations, communications, resolutions, strategies, and position papers (see the [Supplementary Appendix](#))—spanning over three decades (1992–2024) of legislative and policy efforts to establish and expand minimum standards in core work–care policy areas such as care-related leaves, labor market protection, and flexible working arrangements of carers, ECEC, and long-term care (LTC). The analysis includes both binding (“hard law”) and nonbinding (“soft law”) instruments, reflecting the European Union's dual role in shaping

member states' policies through direct regulation as well as through mechanisms of social learning and policy diffusion (Zeitlin 2009). The latter is particularly relevant where specific targets are introduced, such as the Barcelona targets (2022/C 484/01) for ECEC provision (Weishaupt 2009). Given the different legal mandates of "hard" and "soft" instruments, the analysis distinguishes between documents that shape the broader work–life balance agenda of the European Union (e.g. recommendations) and those that establish binding obligations requiring transposition into national legislation (i.e. directives).

In tracing the evolution of EU-level thinking on work–care policies, particular attention is given to shifts in the framing and design of EU initiatives. Rather than providing a detailed examination of each policy area or benchmarking work–care policies against an ideal type, the analysis centers on the overarching policy approach to acknowledging and resourcing care-related rights for diverse families. Therefore, central to this analysis is an exploration of how care has been conceptualized at the EU level over time, and how different groups of parents and carers have been positioned within the European Union's evolving work–life balance framework, particularly in terms of the recognition of their diversity and the resourcing of their specific needs.

The documents were analyzed using thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke 2006, 2022) and coded in NVivo. The coding, focused on work–care policy provisions, was guided by three overarching policy dimensions identified in the conceptual framework (policy inclusiveness, policy adequacy, and policy complementarity), and was conducted at the level of specific policy provisions or recommendations (e.g. articles/sections specifying eligibility criteria, leave generosity, flexible working, or related conditions). A declared policy purpose was also coded to gain a deeper insight into the underlying policy intentions driving EU work–life balance initiatives over time, which allowed for situating developments in policy inclusiveness, adequacy, and complementarity within broader shifts (if any) in overall framing of work–care policies at the EU level. The analysis focused on an explicitly articulated rationale attached to provisions or set in justificatory sections of the documents (e.g. "aims to ...", "in order to ...", "to promote ..."), capturing stated policy goals such as supporting caregiving, promoting gender equality, ensuring health and safety, securing job protection, or facilitating work–life reconciliation.

Among the three policy dimensions, *policy inclusiveness* captures the extent to which EU policy instruments recognize and support the care needs of diverse families. In operational terms, this involved: (1) identifying the target population (i.e. to whom the policy is addressed and whether there are any explicit or implicit exclusions), and (2) assessing the extent to which specific needs for additional support are recognized (e.g. those of lone parents, parents with disabilities). This serves to identify potential gaps in policy coverage and capture the extent to which EU policies are responsive to the varied caregiving realities across Europe.

Policy adequacy reflects the scope of support offered and pertains to both (1) the scope and structural features of the provisions advocated at the EU level and (2) key policy elements that reflect generosity (e.g. the duration of care-related leaves and associated benefits), flexibility, and the gendered distribution of provisions (e.g. the extent to which policies facilitate smoother transitions between employment and care through mechanisms such as taking leave in piecemeal form, transferring leave between parents or carers, or adjusting working hours and service hours to accommodate caregiving responsibilities). Considered alongside inclusiveness, this dimension enables an assessment of how well the needs of all families are addressed within the EU policy framework. It is important to note that, rather than assessing adequacy against a single normative model of “best practice,” this analysis focuses on the extent to which families are resourced and whether significant gaps exist in the support provided across different family situations and needs.

Policy complementarity analysis involved identifying whether, and to what extent, a given provision or policy document refers to other policy area(s) or addresses interconnections across distinct “policy siloes” (e.g. the joint consideration of parenting leaves, ECEC, and flexible working arrangements in the context of childcare provision). This provides insight into whether policy is developed through fragmented or poorly aligned measures, which may undermine the overall effectiveness of work–care support, or through more coherent and integrated approaches that are more likely to meet the complex and interrelated needs of families.

Analysis

Key trends in the overall framing of work–care policies at the EU level

Over the past three decades, the overall framing of work–care policies at the EU level has evolved from a focus on the “reconciliation between paid work and family” or “reconciliation of family and professional life” toward a broader “work–life balance” agenda. This evolution, particularly evident in recent initiatives such as the European Pillar of Social Rights (COM/2017/0250) and Directive 2019/1158 on Work–Life Balance, is often regarded as “progressive” due to its gender-neutral and inclusive framing extending beyond care and family responsibilities to include community involvement, leisure, self-care, training, and other aspects of life (cf. [Chiericato 2020](#); [Karamessini 2023](#)). However, this expanded framing has not been translated into binding policy instruments, which continue to prioritize work–care measures, particularly those focused on the early years of a child’s life. For example, paid family leave was featured in the European Parliament Resolution TA(2016)0338 on Work–Life Balance and has gained prominence in recent strategies (e.g. Gender Equality Strategy—COM(2020)152; European Care Strategy—COM(2022)440), signaling a gradual shift away from traditional leave categories such as maternity, paternity, and parental leave developed to support

parental care in early childhood (see Dobrotić, Blum, and Koslowski 2022) toward a broader understanding of leaves that encompasses diverse care responsibilities across the life-course. Yet specific, binding provisions beyond parental care remain limited (e.g. five unpaid days of carers' leave; see Table S1), let alone those rooted in a broader conceptualization of care (e.g. self-care leave).

A similar pattern is evident in initiatives related to care services. Concrete targets—at the level of recommendation—have been set only for ECEC through the so-called Barcelona targets (set in 2002 and revised in 2022; 2022/C 484/01), while no equivalent goals have been established for LTC, which has only recently gained some policy prominence (see Table S1, section b). Moreover, while recent policy documents increasingly acknowledge care as a life-course responsibility, care continues to be primarily framed in terms of economic costs and is often portrayed as a barrier to workforce participation (e.g. European Care Strategy—COM(2022)440). This framing aligns with the European Union's long-standing emphasis on employment-centered policy instruments (cf. Hunt and Wallace 2004; Saraceno 2015). Namely, the European Union's work-care measures have traditionally been anchored in health and safety regulations, reinforcing an employment-contingent policy logic within which care appears primarily as an ancillary obligation attached to employment rights, rather than as a distinct and relational field of social provision that recognizes both caregivers and care receivers as policy subjects. EU care-related policy instruments have predominantly addressed “working parents” and “male and female workers,” rather than referring to “mothers,” “fathers,” or “carers” in their own right. This employment-focused approach persists even after the Amsterdam Treaty (1997), which expanded the European Union's competence in social policy, with the target population sometimes framed as “workers with care responsibilities” (Table S1, section a).

Female employment and gender equality—primarily in the public sphere—are recurring themes across nearly all policy documents, remaining core objectives of the European Union's work-life balance agenda. The principle of equal treatment between men and women is typically understood as ensuring women's equal opportunities to remain in the labor market and protection from gender-based discrimination, while the equalization of caregiving responsibilities has received limited and delayed attention. Explicit recognition of fathers' caregiving roles has emerged only in recent policy initiatives and is beginning to be translated into concrete policy instruments such as nontransferable parental leave and paternity leave (e.g. with Directive 2019/1158 on Work-Life Balance, see Table S1, sections a–b), reflecting a cautious shift toward shared parental responsibility. Somewhat broader perspectives are evident only in nonbinding “soft” instruments (e.g. Gender Equality Strategy—COM(2020)152; European Care Strategy—COM(2022)440; European Child Guarantee—2021/1004), which articulate aspirations for member states to address gender inequalities in both private and public life. These include calls for well-paid leave, affordable high-quality ECEC, and other essential services, measures to close the

childcare gap (i.e. the period between the end of well-paid leave and the start of a legal entitlement to ECEC), and initiatives to tackle gender-based violence and intersectional disadvantages (Table S1, section b).

At a general level, there is some recognition of care as a broader social responsibility, and the scope of concrete work–care policy instruments is gradually expanding. However, this recognition remains largely confined to soft instruments (Table S1), leaving certain dimensions of work–care policy—particularly those extending beyond early childhood—vague and underdeveloped. Moreover, specific groups of parents and carers, such as those in precarious employment, without a coparent, or facing serious health-related challenges, remain largely beyond the reach of binding EU-level policy instruments. These persistent gaps in addressing care needs across the life-course and in acknowledging the diverse circumstances of families and their varying employment and care situations are explored in greater depth in the following sections.

The inclusiveness of the EU's work–life balance policy framework

As outlined in the analytical framework, the inclusiveness of the European Union's work–life balance policy is assessed from two key perspectives: (1) the target population (i.e. who the intended “audience” is, including eligibility criteria and overt exclusions related to concrete policy instruments), and (2) the recognition and resourcing of specific needs for parents and carers with heavier care responsibilities (e.g. the recognition of a need for an additional support for lone parents or families facing serious illness or disabilities).

Selective policy logic: implicit and explicit exclusions. An examination of the *target population* reveals four key points that underscore explicit and implicit exclusions in EU work–life balance policies. First, since Directive 92/85/EEC on Maternity Leave, which institutionalized the first care-related measures at the EU level, “hard law” has primarily focused on “pregnant” or “breastfeeding workers” and “working parents,” reflecting a strong emphasis on labor market protection. This focus is also evident in the nature of the concrete policy measures, which are primarily designed to safeguard employment and the health of (female) workers, rather than to recognize care as valuable in its own right (e.g. fourteen weeks of maternity leave, protection from night work and hazardous jobs, prohibition of dismissal; Table S1, sections a–b). A cautious shift toward more comprehensive care rights has emerged through parental leave provisions; however, this shift occurred without adequate valorization of care (see section titled “Policy adequacy in the European Union's work–life balance policy framework”) and continues to target a narrowly defined population of workers.

This brings in the second point: exclusions persist within EU-level policy instruments. Entitlement to parenting leaves is primarily tied to “traditional employment,” revealing the European Union's limited responsiveness to growing labor market hybridization (see Gabel 2024). For instance, Directive 96/34/EC on Parental Leave leaves self-employed parents outside the scope of EU

parental leave provisions. Similarly, Directive 2019/1158 on Work–Life Balance defines its scope as covering “all workers who have employment contracts or other employment relationships,” including part-time workers, fixed-term contract workers, or agency workers. Yet self-employed parents are not explicitly mentioned, leaving a significant gap that may be replicated in member state policies.¹ Belgium, for example, illustrates this exclusion clearly, as the self-employed are not entitled to parental leave (Dobrotić et al. 2024). Moreover, because Directive 2019/1158 on Work–Life Balance leaves the definition of employment contract or relationship to the discretion of member states (Bednarowicz 2020), groups such as on-demand workers, platform workers, trainees, and domestic workers may also be excluded (Chieregato 2020). Notably, nonstandard forms of employment have received increased attention since the mid-2010s, but primarily in “soft” instruments. For instance, European Parliament resolutions (P8_TA(2016)0338 and P8_TA(2016)0226) acknowledge the precarious nature of such arrangements and highlight disparities in entitlements between standard and nonstandard workers, including the self-employed and those on zero-hour contracts (see Table S1, section a).

The exclusions are evident not only across employment statuses but also within them. This selective logic is most apparent in directives regulating parenting leaves. For example, Directive 1992/85/EZ on Maternity Leave and Directive 96/34/EC on Parental Leave allow member states to restrict leave eligibility by requiring a work or service qualification period of up to one year. This implies, and signals to member states, that maternity and parental leave do not have to be default entitlements for all workers, even those with “standard” employment contracts. Subsequent directives (2010/18/EU and 2019/1158) have upheld these conditions (Table S1, section b), despite increasing precarity in European labor markets (see Hewison 2016; Kalleberg 2018). Notably, while paternity leave, first introduced in 2019, is not subject to such eligibility conditions, accessing paternity benefits still requires six months of prior employment (Table S1, section b).

The primary focus of the European Union’s work–life balance agenda on “working parents,” or more precisely, certain categories of employees, raises further concerns about inclusiveness and the underlying policy logic, bringing in the third point: the European Union’s standard for parenting leaves and other policies is shaped around the needs of employed parents, especially those in stable, “standard” employment, and the extent to which these instruments are relevant for parents in nonstandard or precarious employment across member states remains vague and ambiguous (cf. Chieregato 2020), while economically inactive or marginally active parents and carers are largely overlooked. In this sense, care rights at the EU level remain “a set of contingent privileges, ultimately depending on one’s economic means and market exchange value” (Somers 2016, 15). This reinforces the argument that, when both the explicit and implicit purposes of the legislative frameworks are considered, the work–life balance agenda primarily serves employment goals, framing care-related

rights as “employment policy—as job-protected entitlements” (Doucet 2021, 228) rather than as universal rights.

Fourth, exclusions relate not only to labor market position but also to gender and family inequalities. Notably, both binding and nonbinding EU documents have increasingly adopted gender-neutral language. On the one hand, policy instruments typically rely on gender-neutral terms such as “employed parents,” an approach that is formally inclusive but may, when interpreted and implemented within national contexts—particularly in those within strongly gendered care regimes—continue to position mothers as primary caregivers, thereby reinforcing gendered expectations (cf. Frericks 2012). A notable exception is the recent development surrounding Directive 2019/1158 on Work–Life Balance, which more explicitly emphasizes fathers’ caregiving responsibilities (Table S1, sections a–b).² On the other hand, there has been a notable shift toward greater recognition of family diversity, signaled by the adoption of the term “second parent” to refer to the birth-giving parent’s partner. This term first appeared in the Communication COM(2017)252 on Work–Life Balance as part of supporting evidence on the growing uptake of leave by fathers and second parents and has since gained traction. For instance, the 2023 thematic report on the transposition of Directive 2019/1158 on Work–Life Balance (Corte-Rodríguez 2023) consistently employs the term “second parent,” particularly in discussions of paternity leave. While this move toward gender-neutral language may enhance inclusiveness by acknowledging diverse family situations (Kaufman et al. 2022), it can also obscure within-category variation that could be policy-relevant, depending on how the category is embedded in member states’ policy designs. For example, in the case of same-sex parent families, the specific situations of same-sex male couples or multiparent families may not be explicitly engaged with in policy instruments when the umbrella term “second parent” is used without further specification, or when it is treated only as a functional equivalent to “father” within paternity leave discussions. Viewed from the perspective of the “three Rs” in feminist care economics (recognition, reduction, redistribution; Elson 2017; Doucet 2023), this points to the recognition challenges: The extent to which legislative frameworks make visible who performs care work, under what conditions, and whose care needs are acknowledged—including those of both caregivers and care receivers—across different families serves as an indicator of the degree of inclusiveness embedded in the policy design.

In parallel, softer policy instruments reveal a more recent and gradual shift away from traditional designations such as maternity, paternity and parental leave, in favor of broader terms like “paid family leave” (e.g., Gender Equality Strategy—COM(2020)152; European Care Strategy—COM(2022)440). This may reflect not only greater recognition of family diversity, but also a broader understanding of care responsibilities, extending beyond parental care for children to include a wider range of familial caregiving, such as care provided by adult children for elderly parents or other dependent individuals (as vaguely supported by the carers’ leave introduced by Directive 2019/1158 on Work–Life Balance). While a

life-course approach has become more visible, EU policy engagement with the specific challenges of multigenerational caregiving—which disproportionately affect women—remains limited, especially in relation to the increasingly salient challenges faced by the “sandwich generation,” that is, carers providing concurrent care for younger and older generations (see [Thissen et al. 2023](#)).

The (lack of) consideration of the needs of families with heavier care responsibilities. As conceptualized, inclusive policies not only recognize different families (including their employment) situations but also *address the unique family needs and situations by ensuring additional support where necessary* ([Dobrotić and Iveković Martinis 2023](#); [León 2024](#)). Concerning this second aspect of policy inclusiveness, the recognition of family specificities at the EU level varies across families and over time and remains primarily confined to “soft law” ([Table S1](#), section a). For example, while since 2000, adoptive parents have been generally treated similarly to birth parents in “hard” policy instruments, situations involving the absence of a second parent or the presence of same-sex parenthood are frequently overlooked. Lone parents—typically referred to as “single parents”—have been acknowledged rhetorically since the earliest policy instrument, the Directive 92/85/EEC on Maternity Leave. However, this recognition was not translated into concrete measures that would equalize their entitlements with those of two-parent families. For instance, there are no EU-level provisions enabling lone parents to access the portion of parenting leaves typically allocated to a second parent or to share leave with another close person. Some recognition of same-sex parenthood is visible in Directive 2019/1158 on Work–Life Balance, which extends the scope of paternity leave to the “equivalent second parent,” “if and insofar they are recognized as such under national law” ([Chierigato 2020](#)). While this marks a step toward acknowledging same-sex parenting, it also reflects the limits of EU competence in family law by explicitly conditioning access to the entitlement on national legal recognition of LGBTIQ+ families.

Families facing adverse health conditions or disability receive limited attention in binding EU instruments, despite more generous provisions in some national systems (see [Dobrotić and Iveković Martinis 2023](#)). A notable early instance appeared in the 2010 European Parliament position paper (COD(2008) 0193), which linked disability to the need for additional maternity leave: “The care of disabled children presents a particular challenge for working mothers, which should be recognized by society. The increased vulnerability of working mothers of disabled children means that they should be granted additional maternity leave; this Directive should lay down the minimum period of such leave.” While this signals some acknowledgment of the heavier care responsibilities associated with disability and marks an attempt to address disability-related care needs, it does so through a maternity leave lens that may position care in these situations primarily as a maternal responsibility, rather than a shared parental or societal concern. The limited EU engagement when it comes to families facing adverse health conditions or disability is also reflected in the first binding policy

instrument that explicitly addressed the care needs of dependent family members and came nearly a decade later—Directive 2019/1158 on Work–Life Balance which introduced five days of unpaid carers' leave and the right to request flexible work for care-related reasons. The limited scope of these entitlements continues to reflect a low EU commitment to the valorization of care (see the section titled “Policy adequacy in the European Union's work–life balance policy framework”).

While disability conditions affecting children receive more prominent attention across various “soft” EU instruments, especially recent ones addressing children's well-being or education, this recognition again does not translate into concrete EU-level rights. Instead, it typically takes the form of policy recommendations that are not accompanied by measurable targets or dedicated financial instruments, limiting their capacity to drive substantive policy change in member states (Weishaupt 2009). Exceptions include, at least to some extent, the Barcelona targets (2022/C484/01) and the European Child Guarantee (2021/1004). Lastly, attention to disadvantaged groups typically emerges within broader EU strategies, especially those focused on children (e.g. EU Strategy on the Rights of the Child—COM(2021)142, Gender Equality Strategy—COM(2020)152). However, even here, such concerns are generally framed as motivations for improved policy rather than translated into concrete entitlements. This is especially apparent in documents centered on children's well-being, where there is also no clear link between disadvantaged parents and their entitlement to, for example, parenting leaves or support services. This also underscores the fragmented and siloed nature of EU policies, where children's care needs are addressed in isolation from the rights and entitlements of parents and carers, rather than approached through an integrated framework (see section titled “Policy complementarity in the European Union's work–life balance policy framework”).

Policy adequacy in the EU's work–life balance policy framework

A focus on policy adequacy enables a closer examination of (1) the scope and structural features of EU-level provisions and (2) the key policy elements that reflect the generosity (e.g. payments attached to care-related leaves, the availability, and affordability of services), gendered distribution, and flexibility of provisions. Combined with the inclusiveness aspects discussed in the previous section and the positioning of provisions along the “hard-to-soft law” continuum, this provides deeper insight into how well different families are resourced to balance care and employment.

The scope of EU-level provisions. Structurally, “hard law” has concentrated on setting minimum standards for labor market protection and parenting leaves—beginning with maternity leave and later expanding to include parental and paternity leave. Directive 2019/1158 on Work–Life Balance broadened this scope to include carers' leave and the right to request flexible working arrangements for care needs. In contrast, care services remain largely within the realm

of “soft law,” with concrete targets established only for ECEC through the Barcelona targets (2022/C 484/01). Initially, these targets focused on expanding access to ECEC, urging member states to provide near-universal coverage, particularly for pre-school-age children. More recent revisions (i.e. revised Barcelona targets, 2022/C 484/01) reflect a broader view of care services design, incorporating elements such as minimum care hours, quality standards, the closure of the childcare gap, and the need for after-school care (with later recognition that care extends beyond early childhood). These revised targets, alongside the European Child Guarantee (2021/1004), also place a stronger emphasis on care services’ affordability and inclusiveness (Table S1, section b), indicating a more comprehensive recognition of care needs and the diverse circumstances of families.

LTC has only recently gained prominence within the EU’s work–life balance agenda, with policy attention centered mainly on workforce-related issues (e.g. European Care Strategy—COM(2022)440; Recommendation on access to affordable high-quality long-term care—2022/C 476/01). Key concerns include investment in the care workforce and improving employment conditions within the sector, reflecting growing awareness of the sector’s structural weaknesses and labor shortages across member states. Importantly, LTC is conceptualized as a form of social service intended to support older individuals and those facing frailty or illness to live with dignity.

Generosity and flexibility of EU-level provisions. Regarding the generosity of care-related leaves—key policy instruments enshrined in the European Union’s “hard law”—parenting leave provisions remain limited even after recent reforms (Table S1, section b), falling short of the standards associated with well-paid leave that would enable a smooth transition between care and employment for all parents and facilitate fathers’ involvement in care. In the leave policy literature, adequate payment is often defined as income replacement approaching 80 percent or more of previous earnings (cf. Gornick and Meyers 2003; Javornik and Kurowska 2018; Dobrotić 2022b). Yet, when parental leave was first introduced under Directive 96/34/EC on Parental Leave, there was no requirement for payment, allowing member states to maintain unpaid entitlements and reinforcing the perception of care as a private rather than a societal responsibility. While Directive 2019/1158 on Work–Life Balance mandates that two nontransferable months of parental leave should be paid (Table S1, section b), it does not set a minimum payment level, undervaluing care within the EU policy framework and leaving ample room for cross-country variation (see, e.g., de la Porte et al. 2023). More recent “soft” initiatives (e.g., the revised Barcelona targets, 2022/C 484/01) explicitly call for adequate parental leave compensation lasting at least twelve months; however, a broader consensus remains elusive, as reflected in most member states’ policy designs which tend to provide adequate compensation only for maternity leave periods (Dobrotić 2023).

This pattern is even more pronounced in the case of carers' leave, which remains defined as unpaid at the EU level (Table S1, section b), despite more generous provisions in some member states (Dobrotić and Iveković Martinis 2023). This lack of EU-wide consensus on the need for financial support during care-related leave periods underscores the ongoing challenge of establishing a stronger EU-level commitment to recognizing care as a shared societal responsibility, reflecting a broader and persistent tendency to treat care work as secondary to labor market participation (cf. Saraceno 2015). Notably, Directive 1992/85/EC on Maternity Leave recommended remuneration equivalent to sick leave payments, likely influenced by a health-related job protection rationale historically developed around the image of the male worker. This logic is further reaffirmed in Directive 2019/1158 on Work–Life Balance, in which only paternity leave (i.e. typically a male entitlement) is mandated to be paid at the level of sickness benefits. It is also important to highlight here that although the goal “with feminist potential (‘sharing family responsibilities between women and men’)” (Stratigaki 2004, 30) started to be translated into EU policy through parental leave directives (e.g. nontransferable parental leave months in 2010 and paternity leave in 2019, cf. Directives 2010/18/EU and 2019/1158 in Table S1, section b), the absence of mandated well-paid leave, combined with a small share of fathers-only entitlements in the overall design of parenting leaves and their weak inclusiveness (as discussed in the previous section) have rendered such measures too limited to drive substantial change in gendered care practices at the member state level. Transposition practices of EU directives further confirm this limitation (see de la Porte et al. 2023).

The notion of flexibility is addressed across three key areas: parenting leaves, flexible working arrangements, and ECEC provision, predominantly through “soft” policy instruments. Parental leave is the main exception where flexibility in the allocation and use of entitlements is explicitly embedded in directives (Table S1, section b). Since Directive 1996/34/EZ on Parental Leave, flexibility has been increasingly promoted as a tool for enhancing work–life reconciliation, particularly to support a smooth return to labor market. The flexibility element has also been mandated for adjustments to working time or conditions (e.g. transfer to daytime work) in cases concerning the health of pregnant workers since the Directive 1992/85/EEC on Maternity Leave. By contrast, broader flexibility in working arrangements for care purposes (e.g. remote work, flexible working schedules, reduction in working hours) is less clearly addressed and is framed merely as a right to request, subject to the employer's discretion (see Directive 2019/1158). Part-time work or reduced working hours has also been promoted as a tool to ease tensions between paid work and care responsibilities, especially in Communication COM(2017)252 on Work–Life Balance,³ which frames it as a potential lever for enhancing women's labor market participation. However, this framing is contested due to persistent occupational segregation and the concentration of women in part-time roles associated with poorer labor market outcomes (Matteazzi, Pailhé, and Solaz 2017). These concerns are also

acknowledged in more recent EU initiatives (e.g. Gender Equality Strategy—COM(2020)152, European Care Strategy—COM(2022)440), particularly given the overrepresentation of part-time workers in the care sector.

Concerning care services, flexibility is primarily discussed in “soft” instruments (e.g. 1992/241/EEC Council Recommendation on Childcare, the revised Barcelona targets—2022/C 484/01, European Care Strategy—COM(2022)440), mostly in terms of the operating hours of ECEC and how well these align with parents’ working hours. While these instruments acknowledge the need to adjust ECEC hours to better support work–care reconciliation, they lack specific guidance on how to implement flexible or extended hours, as well as on considerations related to child well-being (e.g. the appropriate number of hours a child should attend ECEC). Moreover, they offer no clear guidance on the provision of complementary or adjusted childcare services, especially with respect to diverse family needs and situations or support for the workforce. Consequently, flexibility in ECEC remains relatively underdeveloped, and even less so in the context of LTC, where it is largely absent from discussion.

Policy complementarity in the EU’s work–life balance policy framework

Policy complementarity, assessed as the presence of the integration and interlinkage of policy areas and instruments, remains an underdeveloped aspect of the European Union’s work–life balance policy framework (see [Table S1](#), section c). Although policy areas such as employment protection, care-related leaves, flexible working arrangements and care services are deeply intertwined in practice, they tend to be treated in siloes at the EU level. This fragmentation may stem from the EU’s institutionally fragmented structure, as well as from distinct policy objectives guiding each area. For instance, parenting leaves primarily aim to retain parents (especially mothers) in the labor market and protect them from discrimination. In contrast, policies targeting disadvantaged children focus on ensuring equal opportunities for all children, often by encouraging member states to increase their participation in ECEC (cf. Directive 2019/1158 on Work–Life Balance, European Child Guarantee—2021/1004). While these objectives are not mutually exclusive, they tend to be pursued in isolation, without acknowledging their interdependence. In practice, this disjointed approach can perpetuate policy gaps such as the childcare gap, that is, the gap between the end of well-paid leave and the start of a child’s entitlement to ECEC (see [Moss, Koslowski, and Duvander 2019](#); [Dobrotić 2022b](#); [León 2024](#)), particularly when ECEC places are limited.

It is also notable that while the preparatory work behind recommendations and directives often recognizes the complexity of care needs and advocates for coordinated solutions (e.g. European Care Strategy—COM(2022)440 or Recommendation on the Barcelona targets for 2030—2022/C 484/01 explicitly calling for addressing the childcare gap by setting clearer goals related to access, quality, and the alignment of services with parenting leaves), this seldom translates into concrete policy instruments. Instead, this acknowledgment remains

within the scope of “soft law,” which over time has increasingly engaged with complex needs by making cross-references or jointly considering multiple policies within a single initiative. Recent policy initiatives—especially in the post-European Pillar of Social Rights period—seek to bridge traditionally siloed domains such as employment, care, gender equality, and social inclusion and ask for the coordinated deployment of measures addressing time, money, services, and flexibility (Table S1, section c). While mostly non-binding, these initiatives are valuable as they reflect an ongoing policy discourse and may signal future legislative developments. They can also inspire policy learning across member states.

Notably, a more integrated approach is particularly evident in child-centered initiatives; that is, initiatives focused on policies related to children are more likely to discuss multiple policy instruments in a coordinated manner. For example, the 1992 Council Recommendation on Childcare (92/241/EEC) recognizes in its preamble that “child-care methods, parental leave and maternity leave are part of a whole which enables people to combine their family responsibilities and occupational ambitions.” Article 2 further elaborates on “special leave for employed parents with responsibility for the care and upbringing of children,” while Article 4 acknowledges the importance of parenting leaves. This foundational framing is developed further in the 2013 Recommendation *Investing in Children* (2013/112/EU), and more recently in the European Child Guarantee (2021/1004), which promotes coordination between income support and in-kind services such as ECEC, education, housing, food provision, and healthcare. Importantly, it also underscores the necessity of adapting ECEC systems to diverse working patterns, thereby highlighting the interdependence of labor market dynamics and care infrastructure. Further, initiatives such as the revised Barcelona targets (2022/C 484/01) and the European Care Strategy (COM(2022)440) frame gender equality in the private sphere as contingent upon the availability of accessible and affordable care infrastructure, as well as increased involvement of fathers in care, linking care policy more directly to gender equality objectives. These examples illustrate a more integrated understanding of work–care policy and underscore the importance of coordinating core care-related instruments, such as well-paid parenting leaves and affordable and quality ECEC, with broader social services (e.g. education, healthcare, housing) to provide comprehensive and adequate support for families, especially those who are dealing with complex needs such as due to long-term health conditions, migration status, or other reasons.

Conclusion

A comprehensive assessment of three decades of EU policy initiatives related to work–care policy development reveals an evolving yet cautious trajectory. While the EU's work–life balance agenda has gradually broadened its scope, introducing minimum standards for care-related leaves, care services, labor market

protections, and flexible working arrangements for parents and carers, progress has been incremental and slow. EU-level standards remain inadequate, marked by the persistently low valorization of care, limited recognition of fathers' caregiving roles, and a narrow focus on enabling women's labor market participation. There is scant recognition of complex and intersecting disadvantages faced by lone parents, migrant families, families facing serious illness or disabilities, as well as those in non-standard, precarious, or no employment.

These findings underscore multiple, interdependent inequalities, and stratification processes embedded in the European Union's policy framework, which continues to delimit who is recognized as a policy subject (inclusiveness) and the extent to which care is substantively resourced across different family situations (adequacy). In doing so, the analysis resonates with earlier critiques of the employment-centered structuring of care within EU work-care policy (e.g. [Saraceno 2015](#)) and extends them by showing how policy logics oriented toward the "average" worker or family affect families unevenly, producing differentiated patterns of inclusion and exclusion across care needs and employment situations. The findings also indicate persistent weaknesses in policy complementarity, reflected in the limited development of an integrated work-care policy infrastructure and weak coordination across policy domains (cf. [Plantenga and Remery 2005](#)). A persistent "two-headed" policy approach, rooted in employment, and centered on the ideal of the "average worker," continues to constrain the European Union's capacity to address the diverse needs and circumstances of families. At a general level, these limitations are evident in three key aspects. First, a clear divide along the "hard-to-soft law" continuum persists. Binding instruments primarily address the care needs of "standard" workers (e.g. through provisions such as parenting leaves or flexible working arrangements), while the more vulnerable position of those in precarious or non-standard employment, or families with heavier care demands who may require augmented support (e.g. lone parents, or those caring for children or adults with serious illness or disabilities) are acknowledged, if at all, only in non-binding initiatives. Namely, even within this "softer" policy framework marked by limited reach in member states ([de la Porte, Larsen, and Szwela 2020](#); [Dobrotić 2022a](#); [de la Porte et al. 2023](#)), notable gaps remain, with some families, such as migrant or multiparent families, still largely invisible. This "hard-soft" divide is also visible across policy areas: care for children has attracted more comprehensive and earlier EU-level attention, including clearer targets and more developed regulatory and coordination instruments (e.g. the revised Barcelona targets and parenting leave standards), whereas LTC remains more weakly institutionalized at the EU level and has only recently begun to be addressed, predominantly through soft-law instruments.

Second, although the post-European Pillar of Social Rights period has brought increased recognition of care as a broader social responsibility and a more explicit life-course-oriented understanding of care, the practical acknowledgment of care remains limited, especially beyond early childhood. The prevailing employment-oriented approach sidelines the intrinsic value of care and fails

to address the growing diversity of families' needs and labor market realities across Europe. Third, EU-level care-related entitlements remain closely tied to stable labor market participation, reinforcing the notion of care as a job-protected entitlement rather than a universal social right (see Doucet 2021). As a result, nonemployed parents and those at the margins of the labor market—particularly mothers—and their children are structurally excluded from many care-related provisions, leaving many reliant solely on unsupported parental care and with little, if any, public support. Care rights thus function less as guaranteed entitlements and more as contingent privileges linked to labor market attachment.

While recent non-binding initiatives (e.g., the revised Barcelona targets—2022/C 484/01) make some effort to bridge traditionally siloed policy domains like employment, care, gender equality, and social inclusion and promote a more coordinated deployment of measures addressing time, money, services, and flexibility, these ambitions have yet to materialize in concrete EU-level policy instruments or practices. Complementarity across different policy areas and initiatives thus remains an underdeveloped aspect of the European Union's work–life balance policy framework, with limited coordination and coherence across different policy areas. The lack of coordination and integration may create additional gaps between people's lived realities and the support provided, resulting in fragmented and insufficient support for families navigating work and care responsibilities. These policy siloes thus only weaken the coherence and effectiveness of EU efforts, undermining the goal of a sustainable relationship between employment and care.

Notes

1. Although there are instruments specifically targeting self-employed individuals, such as Directive 2010/41/EU on equal treatment between men and women engaged in an activity in a self-employed capacity, these do not address caregiving responsibilities. Policy instruments like parental or paternity leave are excluded, with only maternity leave mentioned within the framework of equal treatment of men and women.
2. Fathers' caregiving responsibilities were explicitly mentioned for the first time in Directive 2006/54/EC on equal treatment of men and women in employment and occupation, which mentioned paternity leave. Yet, the directive was primarily aimed at protecting female workers from gender-based discrimination, and it did not focus on fathers' caregiving responsibilities. As such, fathers were not granted specific care-related rights.
3. In Directive 97/81/EC on Part-time Work (97/81/EC), the work–life reconciliation aspect of part-time work is only briefly mentioned.

Supplementary material

Supplementary material is available at *Social Politics* online.

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Data availability

The data underlying this article are available in EUR-Lex, the official website of the European Union for the European Union Law at https://eur-lex.europa.eu/browse/institutions/council.html?root_directives=root%3Ddirectives.

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