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the European Union

MAPPING CARE-RELATED POLICIES, SERVICES AND PRACTICES IN EASTERN PARTNERSHIP COUNTRIES

EU4 **GENDEREQUALITY**
REFORM HELPDESK

FEBRUARY 2024



This publication was produced in the framework of the “EU 4Gender Equality Reform Help Desk” project, funded by the European Union and implemented by NIRAS. The Reform Helpdesk aims to ensure effective and equal results for women and men in six Eastern Partnership countries – Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus**, Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine – by expanding the use of gender analysis in decision-making and reforms.

[**The project does not provide support to the Government of Belarus; it only supports the EU Delegation and civil society].

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INTRODUCTION

A growing body of evidence demonstrates that economies are more resilient, productive and inclusive when they reduce gender inequalities and actively support women's equal participation in all spheres of life. The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) affirm that women's economic empowerment is essential for sustainable development.¹ Achieving gender equality and women's empowerment is integral to each of the 17 global goals.

Worldwide, women are responsible for 75% of all unpaid care and domestic work. Recognising, reducing and redistributing their unpaid care and domestic workload is essential to enable women to take advantage of opportunities to develop their skills through education and vocational training, to pursue employment and entrepreneurship, and to have leisure time.

In Eastern Partnership (EaP) countries, unpaid care and domestic work is the predominant cause cited for the gender gap in employment.² Women spend 2.7 times more than men on unpaid work, on average, and the COVID-19 pandemic further increased this gendered divide.³ Over 90% of all parental leave is taken by women.

This **policy brief presents a mapping of care-related policies, services and practices** in six Eastern Neighbourhood countries: Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus,⁴ Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine.

¹ OECD Policy Dialog on Women's Economic Empowerment, <https://www.oecd.org/development/gender-development/OECD-First-Policy-Dialogue-Womens-Economic-Empowerment.pdf>

² Unpaid Care Work, Policy Brief, UN Women, 2022

³ *The Impact of the Covid-19 Pandemic and War on Gender Issues in Armenia*, Eurasia Partnership Foundation, Yerevan, 2020; United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women, *Rapid Gender Assessment of the COVID-19 Situation in Georgia*, UN Women, Tbilisi, 2020; United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women, *Rapid Gender Assessment of the COVID-19 Situation in Ukraine*, UN Women, Kyiv, 2020.

⁴ In line with the Council Conclusions of 12 October 2020

This mapping focuses on four areas that are particularly important for understanding the landscape and promoting women's economic empowerment:

1. **Early childhood care and education, and other long-term care provision.**
2. **Parental leave policies.**
3. **Flexible working arrangements.**
4. **Complementary gender equality policies and initiatives.**

Efforts to achieve gender equality in these areas need to be complemented with the provision of social protection, decent work and business opportunities for women and men, as well as promotion of women's leadership and political participation. Occupational segregation, the gender pay gap and gender-based violence also need to be addressed. The exploitation of domestic workers is another area that requires attention.

It is important to note that the purpose of this brief is not to rank countries. Its purpose is to highlight what we can learn from available data about the challenges that exist, and how these can be overcome.

and in light of Belarus's involvement in Russian military aggression against Ukraine, recognised in the European Council Conclusions of February 2022, the EU has stopped engaging with representatives of Belarus' public bodies and state-owned enterprises. Should there be a change of the context this may be reconsidered. In the meantime, the EU continues to engage with and, where possible, has stepped up support for non-state, local and regional actors, including within the framework of this regional project.

KEY EU COMMITMENTS AND PLANS

National governments in the Eastern Neighbourhood region have introduced policies and taken steps to advance women's economic empowerment, including care-related policies. Donors and international communities have also dedicated resources to promoting gender equality and women's economic empowerment. Although several commitments and plans are in place, there is room to align them further with EU policies and strategic documents.

The **EU Gender Action Plan III** (GAP III) is a comprehensive plan to promote gender equality in EU external action by focusing on all thematic areas relevant to gender equality. The GAP III includes a focus on supporting universal social protection systems; **recognising, reducing and redistributing unpaid care and domestic work**, including by supporting more gender-responsive budgeting; challenging gender norms within the household and the labour market; recognising men and boys' responsibilities; and fostering legislative developments, such as the introduction of paid paternity leave. The GAP III notes that women and men should equally share care responsibilities and have access to adequate social protection, public services, and financial and business opportunities.⁵

The **Joint Staff Working Document: Recovery, Resilience and Reform – Post-2020 Eastern Partnership Priorities**⁶ emphasises that partner countries (together with the EU and its Member States) will:

- promote gender equality and women's empowerment in all policy areas, support

⁵ European Commission (2020): EU Gender Action Plan III.

⁶ Joint Staff Working Document: Recovery, resilience and reform: post 2020 Eastern Partnership priorities. https://www.eeas.europa.eu/eastern-partnership/joint-staff-working-document-recovery-resilience-and-reform-post-2020-eastern-partnership-priorities_en

the fairer sharing of domestic work and care responsibilities between women and men, and take measures to unleash the potential of women in the labour force by ensuring work-life balance for women and men through the equal sharing of care responsibilities;

- increase the number of women in the workforce and help them to move from informal to formal parts of the economy; and
- tackle occupational and sectoral segregation, while simultaneously seeking to reduce the gender pay gap.

Additional measures to improve access to childcare and other basic social services, among others, will also be mobilised to boost women's employment.

The **EU Directive on Work-Life Balance for Parents and Carers** (2019) emphasises that work-life balance policies should contribute to the achievement of gender equality by promoting women's participation in the labour market, the equal sharing of caring responsibilities between men and women, and the closing of the gender gaps in earnings and pay.

EU Member States should take into consideration that the equal uptake of family-related leave by women and men also depends on other appropriate measures, such as the provision of accessible and affordable childcare and long-term care services. These which are crucial to enable parents, and other persons with caring responsibilities, to enter, remain in, or return to the labour market.⁷

The **EU Care Strategy** (2022) stresses that affordable and accessible high-quality care services offer clear benefits for people of all ages.

⁷ 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. <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=CELEX:32019L1158>

Participation in early childhood education has a positive impact on children's development and helps reduce the risk of social exclusion and poverty later in life. Long-term care empowers people who, as a result of old age, illness and/or disability, depend on support to pursue daily activities, to maintain their autonomy and live with dignity.⁸

To address these issues, the European Commission has proposed targets and concrete actions to support Member States in increasing access to high-quality and affordable care services, while improving working conditions and work-life balance for carers.

In addition to the EU Care Strategy, the **Council Recommendations on Early Childhood Education and Care** (2022) recommend that Member States support a level of availability of early childhood education and care (ECEC) services that is compatible with children's well-being and development, and which allows for the meaningful labour-market participation of parents, especially mothers, while also allowing for gender-equal parental choice in the use of these services.⁹

Structural inequalities in the economy are not only caused by gender stereotypes, but also by factors including location (i.e. residing in rural vs urban areas, or residing in remote locations), limited access to public transportation in rural areas across the Eastern Partnership region, and limited childcare facilities. That is why the Council recommends paying attention not only to territorial coverage, but also the need for reasonable commuting times, including

⁸ Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions on the European Care Strategy, 2022. <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=CELEX:52022DC0440>

⁹ Council Recommendation of 8 December 2022 on early childhood education and care: the Barcelona targets for 2030 (2022/C 484/01). [https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=CELEX:32022H1220\(01\)](https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=CELEX:32022H1220(01))

for parents using active mobility and public transport, when organising early childhood education and care.

The **EU Gender Equality Strategy 2020-2025** stresses that improving the work-life balance of workers is an important way of addressing gender gaps in the labour market. In addition, it urges Member States to ensure quality solutions, for instance for childcare, that also reach less populated areas in Europe.¹⁰

CHALLENGES OF COMPARING REGIONAL DATA

The findings presented in this policy brief are based on available data and assessments on gender equality across the Eastern Neighbourhood region. However, data availability and comparisons pose some methodological challenges. Where countries use standardised tools and methodologies – such as time use surveys (TUS), definitions, and time reference periods during data collection and processing – it is possible to compare regional data. However, countries often adapt methodologies to meet their own specific needs. The lack of comprehensive and internationally agreed concepts on the care economy also affects the comparability of statistics, research and policymaking within this domain.

It is also important to note that any data on women's economic empowerment and the care economy should be assessed alongside a qualitative assessment of the country context. It is risky to rely solely on statistics without local context because there are instances where the actual situation in a country is unfavourable to gender equality, despite seemingly positive statistics.¹¹

¹⁰ A Union of Equality: Gender Equality Strategy 2020-2025. <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=CELEX:52020DC0152>

¹¹ Hot Topics for Women's Economic Empowerment in the Eastern Partnership (EaP). NIRAS. Agora Global. 2023.

EARLY CHILDHOOD CARE AND EDUCATION, AND OTHER LONG-TERM CARE PROVISION



Photo source: EU Neighbours East Flickr database

The **equal sharing of care responsibilities at home** is crucial, as is the availability of childcare, social care and household services, particularly for single parents.¹² Insufficient access to quality and affordable formal care services is one of the key drivers of gender inequality in the labour market.¹³ Investing in care services is, therefore, crucial to support women's participation in paid work and their professional development. It also has potential to support job creation for both women and men. The Council's Recommendations¹⁴ set the following targets for early childhood education and care for EU Member States:

- at least 45% of children below the age of 3 are in early childhood education and care; and

¹² Eurofound, 'Striking a balance: Reconciling work and life in the EU', 2018.

¹³ Hoffmann, F., & Rodrigues, R., 'Informal carers: who takes care of them?', Policy brief, April 2010, European Centre for Social Welfare Policy and Research, Vienna.

¹⁴ Council Recommendation of 8 December 2022 on early childhood education and care: the Barcelona targets for 2030 (2022/C 484/01). [https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=CELEX:32022H1220\(01\)](https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=CELEX:32022H1220(01))

- at least 96% of children between the age of 3 and the starting age for compulsory primary education should participate in early childhood education and care.

The landscape of **early childhood education and care** in the Eastern Neighbourhood countries reflects disparities in its affordability, accessibility and quality. Childcare is receiving increasing attention in almost all the countries, with national governments and donors focusing on improving supply. At the same time, however, it is not clear to what extent supply-led solutions alone can counteract the lack of demand. In both rural and urban areas, childcare demand is affected by parents' financial resources, transport options, awareness and social norms – particularly the norm that childcare is regarded as the responsibility of mothers.

In rural areas especially, factors such as distance, financial resources and women's high levels of unemployment mean that many

women are not actively searching for childcare services. In terms of supply, all six countries largely rely on public preschools or childcare facilities, and there are challenges in terms of their quantity, quality, accessibility, and perceptions surrounding them. The insufficient number of available facilities results in high staff-to-children ratios, short operating hours, and limited opportunities for training and capacity building for teachers and caregivers. It is not possible to estimate the proportion of children involved engaged in early childhood education and care because statistics across the region are fragmented and not comparable.

State-run facilities often face challenges in meeting demand, particularly in rural areas. There are high levels of disparity in the availability and use of formal childcare based on income, location (urban vs rural) and limited existing facilities for children with disabilities and other special needs. For example, of all childcare and preschool educational institutions in Azerbaijan (both state and private nurseries and kindergartens), around one-third are in rural areas.¹⁵ As a result, fewer than 25% of children of kindergarten-age are involved in preschool education. In Georgia, according to the Public Defender's 2022 Parliamentary Report, many kindergartens cannot cover the entire contingent of children of preschool age.¹⁶ Issues related to infrastructural/physical limitations and geographical accessibility persist.¹⁷

States recognise the challenge and are working to enhance the quantity and accessibility of childcare facilities. For example, at the end of 2023, Georgia's Ministry of Infrastructure initiated the construction of 330 new kindergartens and the renovation of 555 existing ones, with EUR 453.40 million allocated

¹⁵ 726 institutions out of 1 844 in total; State Statistical Committee of the Republic of Azerbaijan, 2021.

¹⁶ The Situation of Human Rights and Freedoms in Georgia 2022, Public Defender's Office.

¹⁷ Thematic Research Report of the Education and Science Committee of the Parliament of Georgia.

to this initiative from the state budget.¹⁸

State-run facilities in Eastern Neighbourhood countries provide extracurricular activities for children outside of regular school hours. These facilities offer a range of programmes, such as sports, arts, cultural enrichment and academic support.

Private providers contribute to the supply of childcare services, although private services and facilities are not affordable for everyone.

Alternative provisions that can make childcare more accessible include **employer-supported childcare**. Private sector provision is emerging in Ukraine¹⁹ and Moldova²⁰ through a small number of private childcare facilities. In December 2022, the Parliament of Moldova sought to facilitate the use of childcare for 0–3-year-olds by adopting the Law on Alternative Childcare Services, which allows for the establishment of three formal, private forms of childcare: (i) work-based childcare, (ii) home-based nurseries, and (iii) individual nanny services.

To analyse the current childcare situation and impact of the new legislation, the International Labour Organization (ILO) commissioned a market systems analysis in 2023. This explores how alternative forms of childcare may affect the supply of and demand for childcare, childcare's supporting functions, and the overall rules and regulations governing the childcare sector.²¹ It concludes that the mere introduction of alternative forms of childcare will not resolve gaps between supply and demand.

¹⁸ Infrastructure Ministry to build 330 new kindergartens in Georgia. Georgia Online, 31 January 2023. <https://georgiaonline.ge/georgia/52270/infrastructure-ministry-to-build-330-new-kindergartens-in-georgia>

¹⁹ Early Childhood Workforce initiative, June 2018, Supporting the early childhood workforce at scale – Preschool Education in Ukraine.

²⁰ ILO, *Strengthening childcare provision in Moldova through public and private efforts: opportunities and constraints*, 2023.

²¹ *Ibid.*

Key barriers to overcome include childcare providers' (lack of) awareness of their responsibilities and financial opportunities, challenges for childcare providers in understanding and complying with regulations, financial support for parents to access new forms of private childcare, and quality assurance of childcare provision aligned with international standards.

The **ongoing conflict in Ukraine** has further strained the country's care economy, particularly in terms of access to education and childcare services. According to the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF), 5.7 million children have had their schooling interrupted due to Russian military aggression against Ukraine, exacerbating existing disparities in access to education.

In total, the war has damaged an estimated 10% of Ukraine's educational infrastructure,²² including schools and kindergartens. This has disrupted the lives of millions of children, while shifting the burden of care work onto women. Before the conflict, preschool education coverage was 76.8% in urban areas and 54% in rural areas. The destruction of educational infrastructure has exacerbated existing disparities, particularly in conflict-affected regions. According to the Ministry of Education and Science, as of February 2023, 70 preschools were destroyed and 1,031 damaged, further limiting access to early childhood education and care services.

²² 10% of Ukraine's educational infrastructure was damaged by Russian shelling. How much damage has the Russian Federation caused to Ukrainian education. Forbes Ukraine. <https://forbes.ua/money/10-osvitnoi-infrastrukturi-ukraini-postrazhdali-vid-obstriliv-rosii-skilki-zbitkiv-nanesla-rf-ukrainskiy-osviti-20042023-13147>

In some countries, there is **limited knowledge about the relevance of formal pre-primary childcare**. There are concerns about the quality of available facilities, and mothers who use formal childcare for young children face **social stigma**. While there is variation across Eastern Neighbourhood countries, many families do not opt for formal childcare for children under 5 years old, and especially not for children under 2 years old. The lack of childcare facilities for children under 2 years old is a pressing problem across the region. For example, in Belarus, only 15% of children who attended preschool in the 2020/2021 academic year were up to 2 years old. This low coverage is linked to social norms and a lack of infrastructure for 0–2-year-olds.²³

An aging population is likely to lead to greater demand for long-term care. Yet, **overall service provision for eldercare is limited**, including support for home-based (informal) eldercare, which is the most common practice in the region. Institutional care for the elderly is largely viewed as unacceptable in most Eastern Partnership countries. Stereotypical beliefs persist, holding that women are responsible for eldercare and caring for family members with disabilities. There is extremely limited financial support for caregivers who live with persons with disabilities.

In Ukraine in recent years, the private sector has been actively developing and advertising long-term care services. In 2021, there were 91 operational communal facilities for the elderly, but only 42 were legally registered. The rest have been operating illegally, which has caused a range of incidents. The cost of long-term care varies from EUR 122.60 to EUR 441.50 per month – a high price compared to the average pension in Ukraine of EUR 131.22.

²³ State for people. Why values and public opinion matter to social policy and how to bring it closer to the "ideal" / Ed. A. Chubrik and N. Shcherbina. – Minsk: IPM Research Center (electronic publication), 2021.

PARENTAL LEAVE



Photo source: EU Neighbours East Flickr database

All six Eastern Partnership countries have adopted statutory provisions for **maternity leave**. Most grant working mothers with newborns maternity leave of 18 weeks (Azerbaijan, Belarus, Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine), while Armenia grants them 20 weeks of leave. Legislation in Azerbaijan, Belarus, Moldova and Ukraine allows for the transfer of maternity leave to fathers only in exceptional circumstances, such as the mother's death, imprisonment, illness or abandonment. This legal provision is absent in Armenia.

During maternity leave, working mothers with newborns can expect to receive 100% of their previous earnings in Azerbaijan, Moldova and Ukraine. Armenia, Belarus and Georgia provide mothers with 100% of maternity leave benefits up to a certain ceiling.

In four countries, the duration of **paternity leave** is 14 calendar days (Azerbaijan, Belarus, Moldova and Ukraine). Fathers in Armenia are entitled to 5 days of paid leave within 30 days

of the birth of their child.²⁴ Fathers receive 100% of their previous earnings in Moldova, while Azerbaijan, Belarus and Ukraine only grant unpaid paternity leave. There is no legal provision for paternity leave in Georgia.

Self-employed fathers do not have access to paternity leave benefits in any of the six countries. Self-employed women have access to maternity benefits in five countries, but not in Armenia. In Ukraine, for example, officially registered self-employed women (private entrepreneurs) have the right to receive cash assistance during pregnancy and childbirth if they have paid a single social contribution. The amount depends on the number of days of vacation and the amount of social security paid by the woman entrepreneur.

Only a minority of fathers take paternity leave in Eastern Partnership countries. In 2019, the share of men who had taken paternity leave after the birth of their most recent varied from

²⁴ Armenia introduces paternity leave. ARMENPRESS, 16 September, 2020. <https://armenpress.am/eng/news/1027789/>

17.6% in Moldova to 14.3% in Armenia, 10.9% in Azerbaijan, 10.6% in Belarus, 8.2% in Georgia and 6.2% in Ukraine.²⁵

Legal provisions on **parental leave** are in place in all Eastern Neighbourhood countries, whereby both parents are eligible for parental leave. Parents in Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Moldova and Ukraine are entitled to parental leave of 156 weeks — that is, until their child reaches the age of 3. In Georgia, parents are entitled to parental leave of 86 weeks. In Armenia, a woman can take unpaid maternity leave up to three years after the birth of her child and retain her position in the workplace. In Azerbaijan, there are various stipulations of parental rights, including additional time off if required. A woman with two children under 16 years old is entitled to extra days of paid leave; a woman with three or more children under the age of 16 is entitled to 5 days of additional paid leave; a woman or single father with children under 16 years old is entitled to 14 days of unpaid leave per year.

In Georgia, both parents can decide how to distribute 604 calendar days of parental leave. Social security pays 100% of the employee's average salary from the previous three months, capped at EUR 348.80 per month, for the first 200 days of leave. Georgian employees are also entitled to 12 weeks of unpaid parental leave per year until their child is 5 years old. Parents in Moldova can opt to receive either 30% of their previous earnings during three years of parental leave, 60% for the first 12 months and 30% for the following 12 months, or 90% for the first 12 months. In Belarus and Ukraine, both parents have equal rights to parental leave, allowing them to take unpaid leave following maternity leave until their child turns 3 years old, and their position must remain secure until their return.²⁶

²⁵ Anna Onyshchenko and others, *Baseline Study on Gender Norms and Stereotypes in the Countries of the Eastern Partnership* (Istanbul, UN Women and UNFPA, 2019)

²⁶ Maternity and Paternity Leave Around the World in 2023. <https://www.deel.com/blog/maternity-and-paternity-leave-around-the-world#15-weeks-+>

Taking parental leave often means losing income, as workers' full salary seldom is replaced. The fact that women's average salary is lower than men's, coupled with stereotypes about care work being a women's responsibility, may explain why over 90% of persons who take parental leave in Eastern Partnership countries are women. For instance, about 1% of fathers take parental leave in Belarus,²⁷ as do 3% in Ukraine.²⁸ In Azerbaijan, between 2015 and 2020, fathers did not take official parental leave to care for their children.²⁹

Adoptive parents are entitled to parental leave in all six countries. In Armenia, persons who adopt a newborn are entitled to paid leave from the date of adoption or guardianship until the baby is 70 days old. In Azerbaijan, women employees who adopt a child under 2 months old are entitled to 56 calendar days of social leave. In Belarus, persons who adopt a child or are appointed guardians of a child under 3 months old are entitled to 70 calendar days from the day of adoption or guardianship. In Georgia, employees who adopt a child under the age of 10 are entitled to paid leave based on their average salary. In Moldova, persons who adopt a newborn straight from the hospital or are appointed guardians of a baby are entitled to a paid adoption leave starting from the first day of adoption until 56 days from the birth of the child (or 70 days in case of multiple adoptions). In Ukraine, an employee who has adopted a child is entitled to a one-time paid leave of 56 calendar days and 70 calendar days if they adopt two or more children, excluding holidays and non-working days.³⁰

²⁷ How often fathers in Belarus take parental leave? Belta+, 15 May 2022. https://www.belta.by/society/view/chastotli-ottsy-v-belarusi-hodjat-v-dekret-501986-2022/?utm_source=yxnews&utm_medium=desktop

²⁸ UNFPA (2020). The role of men in childcare [in Ukrainian].

²⁹ Official response letter of the Ministry of Labor and Social Protection of the Population dated January 15, 2021, according to Yulia Guriyeva.

³⁰ Maternity and Paternity Leave Around the World in 2023. <https://www.deel.com/blog/maternity-and-paternity-leave-around-the-world#15-weeks-+>

FLEXIBLE WORKING ARRANGEMENTS



Photo source: EU Neighbours East Flickr database

Opportunities for **flexible working arrangements** can help parents and carers maintain an adequate work-life balance. These can include remote working arrangements, flexible working schedules or a reduction in working hours.


Entitlements related to flexible working arrangements vary across countries. Legal provisions regulating part-time work – either through a shorter work week or a shorter work day — are available in Armenia, Azerbaijan, Moldova and Ukraine. In Armenia, pregnant women and working parents with children under 1 year old can be entitled to part-time work. In Ukraine, fathers and mothers may combine part-time work with parental leave. In Moldova, mothers and fathers with children up to 10 years old are eligible to work part-time. A specific legal provision in Moldova entitles mothers and fathers of children between 3 and 6 years old to work part-time.

Some countries have legal provisions in place that enable parents to **work from home**. In Moldova, this entitlement targets mothers

and fathers of children between 3 and 6 years old, while in Belarus it is aimed at mothers and fathers of children under 16 years old. In Ukraine, mothers and fathers on parental leave may work from home to earn an additional income. In Moldova, employers can establish, with the employee's written agreement, individual labour contracts involving flexible working time, if this possibility is stipulated in the entity's internal regulations or in the collective or individual labour contract. The duration of the work day may also be divided into two segments: a fixed period, when the employee must be at their workplace, and a variable (mobile) period, when the employee chooses the hours when they will arrive and leave, while respecting the normal duration of the work day.³¹

Georgia's Labour Code defines **part-time work** rules. Accordingly, a part-time employee is an employee whose standard working time is less than the average operating time of a comparable full-time employee.

³¹ UNFPA, The State of GenderResponsive Family Policies in the Eastern Europe and Central Asia Region, 2023.



Parties to a labour contract in Georgia can also agree on the employee working from home and on a flexible work schedule, which is not defined in detail by the legislation and can be determined by the parties' agreement.³² According to Georgia's Law on Public Service, officers may enjoy the right to part-time work for health reasons or for raising a child under 1 year old, as well as during pregnancy. Although there are no detailed rules regarding remote work and other flexible working conditions in the Law on Public Service, it is possible to agree on different rules based on the institution's bylaws and agreements. Regulations regarding remote work were only in effect during the COVID-19 pandemic to prevent the spread of the virus.

While legislation in the Eastern Neighbourhood countries allows for flexible working arrangements, the **implementation** of these policies varies among employers. Real practice depends on individual company policies and practices. Some sectors, notably the information technology (IT) sector and the creative industries, are more inclined to offer flexible working options. Women and men engaged in certain types of professions, such as healthcare personnel or construction workers, have no real opportunities to work from home. However, there is limited available data on the prevalence of flexible working arrangements across the broader economy in the region.

³² Organic Law, Labour Code of Georgia, Art. 16.

COMPLEMENTARY GENDER EQUALITY POLICIES AND INITIATIVES



Photo source: EU Neighbours East Flickr database

With respect to legal and policy frameworks, Eastern Neighbourhood countries have made important progress in **passing legislation and adopting policies to advance gender equality**. Equality between women and men is included in the Constitutions of all six countries, and anti-discrimination laws have been adopted in Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine. All countries have a specific National Action Plan on Gender Equality, although implementation often depends on donor support.

In Ukraine, the State Strategy for Ensuring the Equal Rights and Opportunities of Women and Men,³³ adopted by the Cabinet of Ministers of Ukraine (CMU) in August 2022, and the subsequent National Strategy on Reducing the Gender Pay Gap,³⁴ underscore government efforts to reshape the landscape of caregiving responsibilities and promote a more balanced


distribution of care work between women and men.

Eastern Partnership countries have also recently launched solutions to address challenges to **women's economic empowerment**. Examples include women's entrepreneurship programmes in Moldova, and "Parent Smart Companies" initiatives in Belarus and Ukraine, among others. Azerbaijan has developed social assistance programmes to ensure the provision of social protection of the population. Since 2006, low-income families, including women-headed households, are entitled to targeted social assistance programmes.

The **Fathers School programme** to engage men in childcare and domestic work has been implemented in the framework of the EU4Gender Equality: Together against Gender Stereotypes and Gender-based Violence Programme, funded by the EU and jointly implemented by the United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and Women's Empowerment

³³ See: <https://www.kmu.gov.ua/en/news/uriad-ukhvalyv-stratehiu-vprovadzhennia-hendernoi-rivnosti-u-sferi-osvity-do-2030-roku>

³⁴ Ibid.



(UN Women) and the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) in Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine.

In Georgia, large-scale campaigns related to **labour rights and care work** have been launched through **MenCare** Georgia, an initiative set up in 2014. The initiative stems from the findings of the 2014 study, «Men and Gender Relations in Georgia,» which underscored the unequal distribution of gender roles within Georgian society. In response to its findings, MenCare Georgia launched a multi-faceted campaign to promote positive masculinity, active fatherhood, violence prevention and equitable responsibilities within families. MenCare Georgia's efforts are made possible through the collaboration of UNFPA and the NGO Care Together, with the financial support of the EU and the Government of Sweden.³⁵

In various regions and municipalities across Ukraine, service providers offer support for employees returning from parental leave and for addressing the challenges of **balancing work and caregiving responsibilities**. One such initiative is the “**Welcome Back Kit**”. This kit includes flexible working arrangements, such as telecommuting options or adjusted work schedules. It often also includes specialised training sessions designed to update employees on the latest developments in their respective fields of practice. Several employers in Ukraine have taken proactive measures to address the childcare needs of their employees by establishing dedicated children's rooms at their premises. These rooms serve as safe and nurturing environments where employees can leave their children under the supervision of qualified professionals while they focus on their work.

³⁵ See more information: <https://mencare.ge/>

WAYS FORWARD

Investing in care-related services, policies and programmes contributes to societies that value care work, and advance women's empowerment and gender equality. Formalising and investing in the care economy also promotes job creation, economic growth and sustainable development.

Care services should be accessible, inclusive and affordable for everyone. This requires investments from by governments, the private sector and the donor community.

In this context, challenging and changing stereotypes about gender roles is especially important. This includes promoting parental leave policies and raising awareness of the importance of women and men sharing care and domestic work. In line with the goals of the EU Care Strategy, the Council Recommendations on Early Childhood Education and Care (2022) and the Directive on Work-Life Balance for Parents and Carers (2019), this policy brief **recommends the following ways forward.**

FOR EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION AND CARE:

- Provide early childhood education and care to at least 33% of children under 3 years old, and to at least 90% of children between 3 years old and the mandatory age for primary education.
- Make early childhood education and care services available in ways that allow children to participate in them for at least 25 hours per week.
- Promote the availability of early childhood education and care services, or of complementary services, before and after regular working hours, as appropriate, to accommodate parents' working hours and their need for work-life balance.

- Provide sufficient territorial coverage of early childhood education and care services – across urban and rural areas, affluent and disadvantaged neighbourhoods, regions and outermost regions.
- Ensure that the net cost of early childhood education and care is reasonably proportionate to other household expenses and disposable income, paying particular attention to low-income households, including low-income single-parent households.
- Remove obstacles to equal access to early childhood education and care for all children, without discrimination.
- Facilitate affordable, accessible and high-quality out-of-school care for children in primary school (after-school and holiday cover), including children with disabilities or with special educational needs.

FOR LONG-TERM CARE:

- Ensure that long-term care is timely, comprehensive and affordable to secure a decent standard of living for people with long-term care needs.
- Increase the offer and mix of professional long-term care services (home care, community-based care and residential care).
- Close territorial gaps in access to long-term care, roll-out accessible digital solutions in the provision of care services,

and make sure that long-term care services and facilities are accessible for people with disabilities.

- Ensure quality criteria and standards for long-term care providers.
- Support informal carers, who are often women and relatives of care receivers, through training, counselling, psychological and financial support.
- Mobilise adequate and sustainable funding for long-term care.
- Fund parental and paternity leave cash benefits through national social protection systems.
- Provide self-employed mothers and fathers with maternity, paternity and parental leave cash benefits.
- Make it possible for parents and caregivers to engage in part-time work, remote work, or have flexible schedules.
- Collaborate with the private sector to promote gender equality in the workplace and support work-life balance.

FOR WORK-LIFE BALANCE FOR PARENTS AND CARERS:

- Provide parents with the right to an adequate allowance while on parental leave.
- Increase maternity leave cash benefits to 100% of women's previous earnings for at least the first 18 weeks.
- Extend the paternity leave period to a minimum of 15 days and raise paternity leave cash benefits to 100% of the father's previous earnings.
- Set the minimum period of parental leave which cannot be transferred from one parent to the other in order to encourage fathers to take parental leave.
- Set a payment or allowance for the minimum non-transferable period of parental leave that guarantees a decent living standard.
- Ensure that parental leave is universal and accessible. Make maternity, paternity and parental leave available to adoptive and same-sex parents.

These efforts can contribute to improving policy measures that **support women's economic empowerment and work-life balance for both women and men, in all their diversity**, in the Eastern Partnership countries.

To ensure the successful implementation of the proposed care policy measures, **gender-disaggregated statistics and gender-responsive budgeting** should also be promoted through an inter-ministerial and intersectoral collaborative approach. Social media-based and other forms of **information campaigns** can also help shift mindsets by encouraging people to value and redistribute unpaid care work from women to men, and from families to other stakeholders in society.



**Funded by the
European Union**

This publication was produced with the financial support of the European Union. Its contents are the sole responsibility of Niras and do not necessarily reflect the views of the European Union.



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