

The Contribution of Early Childhood Education Services in Supporting the Balance Between Work and Family Life

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Abstract

Parents' balancing act between work and life presents a major challenge, especially for those with young children. One of the most significant obstacles they face is finding trustworthy and affordable help. The importance of childcare services for working parents cannot be overstated, as these services provide parents with the flexibility and time needed to continue their careers, while also ensuring the well-being and development of their children.

This article explores the contribution of early childhood education services in supporting the work-life balance and highlights the essential benefits they offer. Additionally, it emphasizes how these services generate flexibility for parents, reduce stress, and facilitate the integration of professional and family responsibilities. Public policies and adequate funding for early childhood education are also analyzed as vital for promoting a more balanced future for families. The findings underscore the necessity for authorities to focus more on structural changes and the development of accessible early childhood education and care services, as well as expanding these services both in rural and urban areas. The article concludes with case studies and concrete examples of best practices, illustrating the importance of early childhood education within the context of work-family balance.

Keywords: child, parent, work-family balance, preschool education services.

1. Introduction

Shifts in the labor market and family structures create a context where parents increasingly struggle to develop successful strategies for integrating professional and familial responsibilities. Early childhood education services play a crucial role in supporting work-life balance, offering multifaceted benefits for children, parents, employers, and society. These services enable parents to pursue their professional careers without compromising their children's development and well-being.

In the current context, where career pressures are increasingly intertwined with personal life, access to nurseries, kindergartens, and other forms of childcare for young children becomes an essential precondition for parental labor market participation without undermining family life quality and children's harmonious development.

2. Literature Review

Scientific literature indicates that work-family conflict involves a series of complex consequences reflected across four dimensions: the professional sphere, the familial domain, physical and mental health, and the socioeconomic realm (Chistruga-Sîncevici, 2021). Work-family balance is essential to support women's dual roles, particularly in attending to their children's development and education during the early years and maintaining the quality of their professional activities (Hijriyani et. al., 2022). It's also noted that a working mother who fails to balance family and work will exhibit poor parenting skills, which will negatively influence child development (Handayani & Munawar, 2015).

Some studies highlight the issue of the "motherhood penalty" due to difficulties in reconciling family life with professional life (Davies & Gaele, 2005), considering that women returning from maternity leave may face lower pay and reduced opportunities for career advancement. As

such, developing childcare services for children aged 0–2 and 3–6 years, alongside the introduction of extended paid parental leave (for up to two years), contributes to reducing the "motherhood penalty" (Budig et. all., 2016).

Therefore, policies promoting high-quality childcare services with flexible hours and affordable costs not only encourage mothers to work full-time but can also ensure a higher level of satisfaction in managing family responsibilities, thus having positive effects on both the labor market and other areas (Arpino & Luppi, 2020). The availability of Early Childhood Education and Care services improves the perception of achieving work-life balance (Matei et. all., 2024).

3. Some Aspects of the Labor Market in the Republic of Moldova

Analysis of employment rate data for the Republic of Moldova and other European countries in 2024, for the population aged 15-64, reveals that the Republic of Moldova has an employment rate of 52.3%, the lowest among all analyzed countries (**Table 1**). This indicates a relatively underdeveloped labor market with a significantly lower level compared to the European average. Countries with the highest employment rates are Iceland (85.3%), the Czech Republic (75.4%), Estonia (75.7%), and Poland (72.5%). These states are characterized by active labor markets with high rates for both men and women. In some countries with high employment rates, such as Iceland, Estonia, and the Czech Republic, there is also a high level of access to preschool education services. This facilitates parents, especially mothers, to successfully combine work and childcare, thereby supporting their flexibility and participation in the labor market. In most countries, men have higher employment rates than women, reflecting persistent gender inequalities in the labor market, with the exception of Finland and Sweden, where the differences are smaller.

	Total	Masculine	Feminine
Republic of Moldova	52,3	53,7	51,1
Austria	74,1	77,5	70,7
Belgium	66,8	70,2	63,3
Czechia	75,4	81,2	69,5
Estonia	75,7	76,2	75,2
Finland	72,6	72,8	72,4
France	69	71,7	66,7
Germany	77,4	80,8	74
Greece	63,3	72	54,7
Hungary	75,1	78,7	71,4
Iceland	85,3	88,1	82,3
Italy	62,2	71,1	53,3
Poland	72,5	77,9	67,2
Portugal	72,8	75,4	70,4
Spain	66,1	70,6	61,6
Sweden	76,7	78,1	75,2

Table 1. Employment Rate in the Republic of Moldova and Other European Countries in 2024 Among the Population Aged 15-64

Source: National Bureau of Statistics of the Republic of Moldova, www.statistica.md; OECD, <https://data-explorer.oecd.org>

The Labor Force Survey conducted by the National Bureau of Statistics reveals that the total employment rate in the Republic of Moldova has steadily increased from 47.6% in 2015 to 60.6% in 2023 for the population aged 20-49 years. This positive trend is observed for both men and women, increasing from 46.8% to 62.5% and from 48.4% to 58.8%, respectively, indicating a general improvement in the labor market integration of young adults. However, the presence of preschool children (0-6 years) contributes to a greater engagement of fathers in the labor force and, conversely, "removes" mothers from the labor market (**Table 2**). Thus, pregnancy, childbirth, breastfeeding, and childcare are difficult to reconcile with work responsibilities.

Data for the years 2015, 2020, and 2023 demonstrate that the existence of a preschool child in the family significantly influences the position of men and women in the labor market.

Individuals without young children have a considerably higher employment rate compared to those with at least one preschool child. For example, in 2023, the employment rate among women without preschool children is 69.4%, in contrast to women with young children, who have an employment rate of only 44.9%, indicating a significant impact of motherhood on their labor market participation.

This marked difference suggests that women face real obstacles in maintaining or resuming professional activity after childbirth, unlike men, who are not only not negatively affected by the presence of young children but even appear to be more professionally active under these conditions. In 2023, men with preschool children have an employment rate of 65.5%, compared to 60.6% for those without children.

This situation is largely explained by the withdrawal of women from the workforce due to the lack of available facilities for young children. The availability of public childcare options is a necessary prerequisite for freeing up mothers' time to engage in paid employment. If they remain confined to family care obligations, they forgo an important source of income and self-fulfillment. In the absence of sufficient solutions, women choose to leave the labor market after childbirth for a longer period than to face working conditions that do not allow them to balance their professional and family responsibilities. Children of this age require more care compared to older children, who are more independent and spend most of the day at school. Therefore, the presence of a preschool child imposes higher costs in terms of the mothers' available time (Chistruga-Sîncevici, 2021).

At the same time, the increase in employed women with at least one preschool child from 2015 to 2023 by approximately 7% may also be due to changes in the provision of allowances and childcare leave. Until 2019, there was only one option – granting the allowance up to 3 years at 30% of the calculation base. Currently, the following options are offered: a) until the child reaches the age of 3 years; b) for a period of 24 months; c) for a period of 12 months. According to Government Decision No. 1478 on allowances granted to families with children, in the case of

the option up to the age of 3 years, the amount of the monthly allowance for raising the child constitutes 30% of the calculation base. In the case of the option for a period of 24 months, the amount of the monthly allowance for raising the child is 60% of the calculation base for the first 12 months and 30% for the next 12 months. In the case of the option "for a period of 12 months", the amount of the monthly allowance for raising the child constitutes 90% of the calculation base. These adjustments were made specifically to stimulate women's participation in the labor market and to limit the period of absence on childcare leave.

	2015			2020			2023		
	Total	Men	Women	Total	Men	Women	Total	Men	Women
Total	47,6	46,8	48,4	51,2	54,9	47,7	60,6	62,5	58,8
Individuals without a Preschool-Aged Child	48,2	42,9	54	53,2	50,7	55,8	65	60,6	69,4
Individuals with at Least One Preschool-Aged Child	46,3	56,1	38,1	47,8	63,3	35,8	54	65,5	44,9

Table 2. Employment Rate of the Population Aged 20-49 in 2015, 2020, and 2023 Based on the Presence of Preschool-Aged Children (in %)

Source: National Bureau of Statistics of the Republic of Moldova, www.statistica.md.

4. The Contribution of Early Childhood Education (ECE) Services in Supporting Parents in Managing the Work-Life Balance

Early childhood education services are a key element in promoting a balance between professional and family life, constituting a fundamental objective in underpinning public policies dedicated to the family. The implications of these services are multifaceted and complex, specifically:

- They facilitate parental labor force participation. Early education services assume a portion of childcare responsibilities, enabling parents to allocate time more efficiently between work and



family, which leads to better organization of daily life. The absence of these services is associated with decreased employment rates and increased difficulties in reconciling the two spheres.

- They promote the participation and retention of women in the labor market. Access to affordable and high-quality childcare and early education services allows mothers to return to work or maintain their jobs after childbirth.

- They reduce gender disparities because care responsibilities no longer fall exclusively on women. Therefore, full participation of women in the labor market supports family economic stability and reduces the risk of social exclusion.

- They support work-family balance by offering concrete support to professionally active parents. An efficient system of early education services constitutes an indispensable resource for working parents, providing them with the assurance that, during working hours, their children benefit from adequate care, supervision, and educational stimulation. The balance between work and family life thus becomes easier to manage, allowing parents to better focus on professional tasks, reducing stress and anxiety associated with childcare during the workday.

- They bring economic benefits for employers by contributing to increased employee retention, productivity, reduced costs associated with personnel turnover because parents can work with less worry about the safety and well-being of their children.

- Reduction of work-family conflict and family-work conflict by providing a safe, organized, and educational environment for children during the parents' work schedule, which reduces stress and pressure on them and diminishes the conflicts generated by simultaneously managing family and professional responsibilities.

- Early education services are a stimulating environment, tailored to the learning and development needs of children. Early participation in education has positive long-term effects on socio-emotional development, health, and socio-economic integration.



- They improve the psychological state of parents and consequently have a greater motivation to work because they trust that their children are cared for in a safe environment.

- Strengthening bonds between parents and children. When parents are less stressed by the pressure of juggling career and childcare, they can be more emotionally present and more involved in the moments spent together with their children.

The aspects presented above reveal that investment in such services brings long-term benefits for families, employers, and society as a whole.

Although essential for child development, preschool education services can sometimes contribute to an imbalance in the professional and family lives of parents, especially in contexts marked by structural deficiencies and limited resources. In this context, the main factors that accentuate this problem are:

- **Limited availability of places in preschool institutions.** In Chisinau, in certain sectors, demand exceeds the number of available places. This access crisis forces parents to choose between reducing their work schedule, seeking help from relatives, or resorting to expensive private services. In 2024, 72 children were assigned to 100 places in early education institutions nationwide. In Chisinau, the ratio is 99 to 100, but in certain sectors of the city, this ratio is even higher, which contributes to parents enrolling their children in kindergartens far from home.

- **Insufficient educational infrastructure for children under 3 years old, namely the reduced number of available nurseries.** Despite the undeniable importance of early childhood education services, access to quality services remains limited for many families. This significant deficit of places in public nurseries creates enormous pressure on young families, who are forced to find alternatives, often costly or suboptimal. Overcoming this challenge requires a concerted effort from authorities, communities, and the private sector to develop and implement innovative and accessible solutions that meet the real needs of families. The availability and accessibility of services are key factors supporting the integration of parents into the workforce.

Analysis of data on the proportion of children enrolled in pre-primary education (up to 3 years) and preschool education (3 years and over) in 2024 highlights the fact that the percentage of children up to 3 years old included in the early education system remains very low. Nationally, only 12.7% of children in this age group are enrolled in forms of pre-primary education, indicating an extremely modest coverage for this crucial stage of child development, and in Chisinau, where the enrollment rate is higher, this share is only 10.1%.

	Total	Chisinau Municipality	North	Center	South	UTA Găgăuzia
up to 3 years old	12,7	10,1	14,1	13,4	14,6	13,7
3 years and over	87,3	89,9	85,9	86,6	85,4	86,3

Table 3. Share of Children Enrolled in Pre-Primary Education (Up to 3 Years) and Preschool Education (3 Years and Over), by Region, in 2024

Source: National Bureau of Statistics of the Republic of Moldova, www.statistica.md.

- **The schedule of preschool educational institutions does not align with the work schedules of parents** working in shifts in sectors such as healthcare, commerce, industry, or other branches of the economy. This reality is particularly challenging for many parents with full-time employment. Parents working night shifts or with extended schedules face difficulties in finding care services that meet their needs, which amplifies the conflict between professional and parental responsibilities. The inability to synchronize the professional schedule with that of kindergartens or nurseries often leads to tense situations and the need to find improvised solutions, which can affect both job performance and the relationship with the child.

- **The high cost of private alternatives.** The lack of qualified nannies or the exorbitant prices of private nurseries are other reasons why many parents are forced to stay at home with their children until they reach the age of three. For families with medium or low incomes, private

childcare options often remain financially inaccessible, dramatically reducing the possibilities of reconciling professional life with personal life.

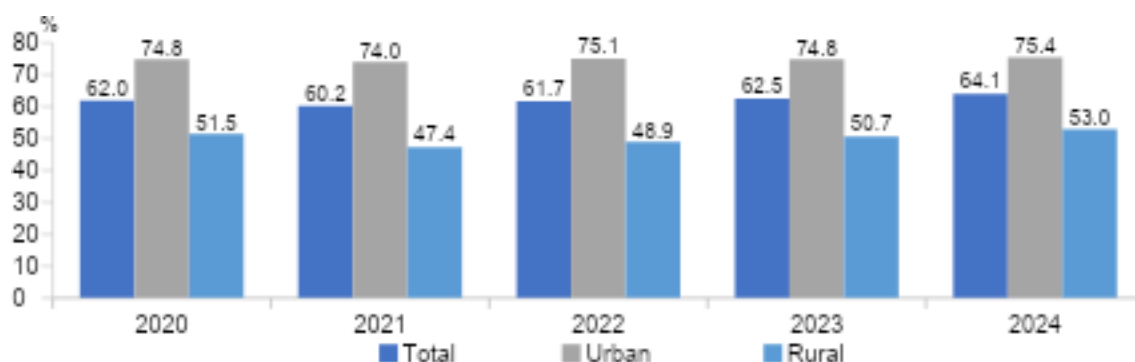


Figure 1. Share of Teaching Staff with Higher Education in Early Education Institutions, by Place of Residence

Source: National Bureau of Statistics of the Republic of Moldova, www.statistica.md.

- **Problems related to the functioning of preschool educational institutions – overcrowding, staff shortages, low levels of staff qualification/training, etc.** These problems make it difficult for children to adapt to these institutions. In early education institutions in the Republic of Moldova, the share of teaching staff with higher education is relatively low, especially in rural areas. This indicates a significant discrepancy between the quality standards of educational services and the academic training level of the staff employed, which can directly affect the quality of early education (Figure 1). The stress generated by separation, fear of the unknown environment, and new habits can lead parents to temporarily suspend their professional activity or redistribute their tasks, disrupting productivity.

- **The selection by parents of a preschool institution with a very good reputation (qualified staff, educational resources, etc.) but located far from home.** In these situations, daily commutes can lead to fatigue, additional transportation costs, and less free time for the

family. As a result, such situations do not facilitate achieving a balance between the two spheres of work and family.

Significant problems are encountered by parents of children with special educational needs, as they are not always accepted and integrated into preschool institutions. Children with disabilities often require adjustments and additional resources to participate effectively in kindergarten activities. These may include specialized personnel, adapted educational programs, or specific equipment. Many kindergartens lack the infrastructure necessary to accommodate children with disabilities. Educators and auxiliary staff must be prepared to work with children with special needs. Thus, it is difficult for many parents to find a suitable kindergarten and maintain a stable job due to the schedule required for their children's care.

Work-life balance can be a significant challenge for parents from single-parent families due to the lack of partner support, which is accentuated when preschool education services have a schedule that does not meet the needs of parents who work full time. This makes it difficult to provide continuous supervision for children.

The difficulties mentioned above indicate that more parents are facing problems in accessing adequate and affordable care that meets the needs of both parents and their children. This aspect constitutes a problem from the perspective of parental participation in the labor market. Thus, due to the reduced level of nursery services and even the lack of the segment of quality services for the care of preschool children, some parents must sacrifice themselves professionally to take care of their children (Chistruga-Sîncevici, 2021).

Some parents who return to work resort to support from grandparents and relatives for the care and education of children. Even if they are free and flexible, exclusive dependence on unpaid care, provided by grandparents, other family members, or friends, can generate problems related to continuity and difficulties in ensuring long periods of care. Thus, formal childcare services may be preferred by some families because they offer continuity and superior quality compared

to other forms of care (Arpino&Luppi, 2020). This once again underlines the need to increase the quality and accessibility of preschool education services.

5. Solutions for Supporting the Work-Family Balance from the Perspective of Developing Preschool Education Services

Following legal framework changes in 2018, early education includes two cycles: pre-preschool education for children aged 0 to 2 years; and preschool education for children aged 2 to 6 (7) years. This change aims to ensure access for children aged 2 years and up to preschool education services, thus contributing to the reintegration of parents into the workforce. Despite this change, the number of nurseries and places in them has not increased, as there is no plan to expand nursery services and to implement these legislative changes.

At the request of parents, local public administration authorities can organize pre-preschool education with funding from local budgets. However, this is not feasible if there are no resources.

Although private preschool educational institutions have been operating in the Republic of Moldova for several years, the legal framework regarding their activity is not clearly and thoroughly established. These institutions, as a rule, operate without registration or with the status of NGOs or development centers.

In the legislation of the Republic of Moldova (through the approval of the Law on Alternative Childcare Services), three alternative forms of childcare were introduced in 2022, which can be organized for children aged 0-3 years: individualized care services – regulated and formalized "nanny" services; family-type care services – mini-nurseries organized for a limited number of children at the caregiver's home/temporary residence; services organized by the employer at the workplace – childcare services provided by the employer to its employees at the workplace.

Preschool educational services function as a key support for reconciling professional and family life in multiple countries, through policies tailored to the diverse needs of parents.

In Denmark, the Børnepasning (Childcare) project influences local authorities to make childcare services available for parents whose work schedules require services outside normal hours and on weekends. The project contributes to extending the operating hours of nurseries and facilitates the reconciliation between professional and family life. The initiative to provide 24-hour childcare services was initiated by Aalborg Hospital and the municipality of Aalborg to meet the needs of nurses and doctors working at the hospital. The institution opened in 1994, being one of the first facilities of this type in Denmark, and since 1998 it has also operated on weekends. This institution is a good example of a solution for childcare for working parents. Older siblings (up to the age of 10) can also be brought in the evening and at night, and parents can put the children to bed or wake them up if this fits with their work schedule (European Institute for Gender Equality, 2014).

In Norway, children are guaranteed a place in nurseries from the age of 1 year, and the majority of operating costs are covered. Parents pay approximately \$190 per month for the first child in kindergarten and less for additional children. Here, childhood is perceived as a period of intrinsic value that should be full of joy and respect. Universal access to kindergartens allows families to allocate time to their careers without worrying about excessive costs (Mader, 2024).

In the UK, starting in September 2025, parents who work at least 16 hours per week may be eligible for 30 hours of funded childcare for their children aged at least nine months, until the start of first grade. If you are not eligible for 30 hours, the child may be entitled to 15 hours of funded childcare each week. All parents with children between 3 and 4 years old in England can access a universal offer of 15 hours of government-funded early education, regardless of the number of hours worked by parents or their salary level (Department for Education UK, 2025).

In Sweden, from the day children turn one, they are entitled to a place in kindergarten, with a modest fee. Most children attend kindergarten at some point until the autumn of the year they turn six, i.e. when compulsory school begins. The effect of this accessible care system is that

most parents in Sweden choose to enroll their children in kindergarten and return to work after parental leave (Swedish Institute, 2025).

In France, nurseries accept children for day care immediately after the end of maternity leave, i.e. from the age of two or three months, and are open for most of the day (between 7:00 and 18:00). Nursery schools (*écoles maternelles*) are a key component of general childcare provision. Services in these institutions are free for parents, except for lunch (Thevenon, 2009). Enrollment requests for *écoles maternelles* for two-year-olds often exceed supply, reflecting the high opinion that French families have of childcare programs, as well as parents' preferences regarding returning to work. The enrollment rate for children aged 3-5 years is 100% in the *écoles maternelles* system. There are also additional services available before and after school hours, during school holidays.

The examples presented above reveal that preschool educational services are a fundamental support for promoting a balance between professional and family life in various countries, being adapted to the diverse needs of parents. The implemented projects and initiatives demonstrate the importance of a flexible and accessible system that ensures both support for parents in critical periods and a quality experience for children.

6. Conclusions

Problems such as limited availability of places, misalignment of schedules with parental needs, high costs, and variable service quality can hinder the achievement of work-family balance. The lack of reconciliation between family and professional life contributes to the emergence of the phenomenon of "deferred motherhood," meaning that more women employed in the labor market are less likely to become mothers at a younger age. Reconciliation problems are factors that prevent couples from having many children, thus contributing to a decrease in fertility rates. A low fertility rate has a negative influence on economic growth as well as on the stability of social protection systems.



In the context of declining labor force, decreasing fertility rates, and aging populations, the adoption of measures and policies to support employees with family responsibilities - accessible and quality care services - constitutes a socioeconomic necessity and an objective of interest for a significant proportion of the population. The existence and accessibility of quality early education services facilitate the participation of parents, especially mothers, in the labor market, contributing to the financial stability of the family and the harmonious development of children. Investments in these services must be supported by clear, transparent, and equitable public policies, as well as adequate funding, to ensure access for all children, regardless of their socio-economic background. The diversity of family and socio-economic contexts requires flexible and locally adapted approaches, taking into account the specific characteristics of communities and the specific needs of parents. Such measures could lead to the harmonization of professional life with family life and, implicitly, to the increase of fertility and employment rates among women.

The balance between work and family life is not only an individual problem, but a societal priority, with profound implications for the well-being of current and future generations. Investing in quality early education services is, therefore, not only support for working parents, but also an investment in the future of society as a whole.

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