



ACCESS TO EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION AND CARE AND WOMEN'S ECONOMIC EMPOWERMENT IN UKRAINE

National study

The report was prepared by national consultants from the Ukrainian Centre for Social Reforms: Dr. Oleksandr Tsymbal, Dr. Yaroslav Ostafiychuk, Dr. Maryna Ohay, Dr. Oleg Yarosh, Dr. Maria Krymova, and Dr. Boris Krimer.

The report was completed under the technical supervision of UNICEF specialists: Tetiana Grytsenko, Gender Programme Officer; Clara Bastardes Tort, Gender Programme Manager; Carlota Rego, Social Policy Manager; and Dilara Avdagic, Education Specialist, with expert support from ILO specialists: Iryna Vitoniuk, National Project Manager; Larysa Savchuk, Gender and HIV Focal Point; and María José Chamorro, Gender and Formalization Specialist.

The report also benefited from substantial contributions from numerous UNICEF and ILO colleagues, including Tetiana Astakhova, Toby Fricker, Tetyana Kononenko, Maryna Mochykina, Clara Camille J. Decamps, and Taisiia Melnyk from UNICEF, as well as Laura Addati, Mia Touma, Magnus Berge, and Iulia Drumea from ILO.

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The Steering Committee brought together representatives of

- Ministry of Economy, Environment and Agriculture of Ukraine
- Ministry of Education and Science of Ukraine
- Ministry of Social Policy, Family and Unity of Ukraine
- Ministry for Communities and Territories Development of Ukraine
- Office of Government Commissioner for Gender Equality Policy
- Office of the President of Ukraine
- Parliament Committee on Education, Science and Innovation
- Parliament Committee on Social Policy and Protection of Veterans' Rights
- Parliament Sub-Committee on compliance with international obligations in human rights protection and gender policy
- Association of Employers' Organizations of Ukraine
- Federation of Trade Unions of Ukraine
- Civil society organizations
- UN Women

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Foreword

Limited access to childcare services — further exacerbated by the destruction of infrastructure, population displacement, and ongoing security risks — significantly constrains the ability of parents, particularly women, to engage in employment or return to work after a career break. These challenges are compounded by limited availability of flexible working arrangements, persistent gender stereotypes, the unequal distribution of care responsibilities within households, and gaps in support systems for families with children. As a result, economic participation declines, labour shortages deepen, and economic recovery and growth are adversely affected.

For the Ministry of Economy, Environment and Agriculture of Ukraine, this issue is an integral part of a broader employment policy agenda. It is not solely a matter of access to childcare services, but of removing one of the key structural barriers that prevent a significant share of the working-age population from fully participating in the labour market. In this context, the development of care infrastructure should be regarded as an economic priority: it facilitates labour market re-entry, supports household incomes, reduces the prevalence of informal employment, and expands the available labour supply.

Access to childcare services is a fundamental precondition for the realization of the right of parents — particularly women — to decent work. It also necessitates a more equitable distribution of care responsibilities within families, contributing to the reduction of the gender pay gap and the advancement of gender equality in the labour market. This approach is fully aligned with the Employment Strategy of Ukraine until 2030, which prioritizes the removal of barriers to labour market participation, the promotion of flexible working arrangements, and the strengthening of inclusive labour market.

The findings and recommendations of this study will serve as a basis for further dialogue among the Government, the private sector, and international partners on practical solutions that enable families to reconcile work and care responsibilities, while supporting the economy in mobilizing a larger share of the population into productive and formal employment.

The Ministry values its partnership with UNICEF and the International Labour Organization, which contributes to the development and implementation of integrated, evidence-based, and inclusive policies for the sustainable development of Ukraine.

Oleksii Sobolev

Minister of Economy, Environment and Agriculture of Ukraine

Executive summary

Context and purpose

Ukraine is enduring a full-scale war that has deepened a socioeconomic crisis and put a spotlight on a critical question: **How can mothers of young children engage in paid work while their children receive proper care?** The war has greatly exacerbated a longstanding childcare shortage, as many preschools have closed or been repurposed as shelters for safety. Even before the full-scale war, affordable, high-quality early childhood education and care (ECEC) services were limited; today, the gap is critical.

However, this is not the only constraint. Women with children face multiple, interconnected barriers across childcare availability, labour market conditions, social protection design and social norms. The study confirms that improving childcare alone, without addressing these broader structural and institutional factors, will have limited impact on women's economic empowerment.

In effect, many women with infants and preschool-aged children are kept out of the workforce not by choice, but by circumstance. This situation undermines women's right to decent work and children's right to care, and it poses a serious challenge to Ukraine's recovery and development.

The purpose of the study is to examine barriers and identify effective, evidence-based pathways to expand opportunities for women with children under the age of 7 to participate in the labour market without compromising the care and development of their children.

It is grounded in a rights-based and gender-responsive approach, recognising that enabling women's economic empowerment and redistributing unpaid caregiving are both economic priorities and state obligations under international and EU-aligned commitments.

The study adopts an intersectional lens, recognising that women with young children are not a homogeneous group. Barriers differ across income levels, rural and urban locations, displacement status, family structure, and disability. Effective solutions must therefore be targeted and inclusive, ensuring that no group is left behind.

By investigating the connections between childcare, social norms, family economics, social protection and employment, the study aims to inform advocacy, reform dialogue and decision-making on how to build a more family-friendly and gender-equal Ukraine. In the context of wartime recovery and EU accession, investing in care systems emerges as both an urgent necessity and a strategic economic investment.

Methodology overview

To provide a comprehensive evidence base, the study employed a mixed-methods research design that captured both broad trends and personal experiences. A nationally representative survey of 3,639 parents and carers of children under seven was conducted across all regions of Ukraine under government control. The household survey fieldwork was conducted from August through September 2025, and it also included comparative groups, in particular mothers of children aged 7–9, women expecting or planning a child and caregiving grandparents. This quantitative survey provides statistical insights into mothers' employment status, childcare access, and related economic conditions.

In parallel, qualitative research was carried out, including focus group discussions with mothers, fathers, and other carers, and in-depth interviews with employers, government officials and experts. These qualitative components captured nuanced perspectives on cultural norms, workplace practices and daily caregiving realities behind the numbers. Research activities were adjusted to the realities of the war: data collection included internally displaced families and used remote methods where necessary, all while adhering to UNICEF and ILO ethical standards. By triangulating quantitative data with personal testimonies, the study builds a reliable and rich picture of the challenges and opportunities for women's economic empowerment in Ukraine's current context.

Chapter 1. Policy context for women's economic empowerment

Global standards and national commitments form a crucial backdrop. Ukraine has ratified or aligned with numerous international and EU frameworks that uphold the right to work and support rights related to care.

These include United Nations conventions on women's rights and children's rights that oblige States to support working parents (for example, by ensuring access to maternity protection and childcare), as well as the Sustainable Development Goals which link gender equality with the availability of childcare. As a candidate for EU membership, Ukraine is also expected to meet European Union directives and benchmarks, notably the EU Work-Life Balance Directive and the Barcelona targets on ECEC coverage, which set standards for parental leave, work-family balance and childcare accessibility.

Domestically, the government has reflected these norms in its strategies, such as the State Strategy for Ensuring Equal Rights and Opportunities for Women and Men (2022–2030) and the Strategy for Closing the Gender Pay Gap (2023–2030), which prioritise expanding childcare services and enabling women's full participation in the economy.

However, gaps remain between policy and practice. **Ukraine's legal framework has historically provided generous parental leave** – up to three years per child with job protection, which affirms the importance of care, but has also contributed to very long career breaks for mothers. In practice, many women stay on extended unpaid leave because affordable and quality daycare is unavailable or because social expectations pressure them to remain at home. Fathers, by contrast, rarely take parental leave, reflecting gender norms not yet fully addressed by policy.

The lack of public ECEC options, combined with insufficient incentives for shared parental responsibilities, has meant that **formal commitments have not translated into equality on the ground**. Strengthening the policy framework, by aligning laws with international standards (e.g., ILO Conventions No. 156 and No. 183) and enforcing non-discrimination and work-life balance measures, is recognised as a pathway to change. The report also points to the need to link leave policy with an ECEC entitlement from the end of leave, so that returning to work is feasible in practice, not only in law.

In summary, Chapter 1 highlights that Ukraine's existing commitments strongly endorse improving access to ECEC and promoting women's employment; the task ahead is to implement and fund these commitments in ways that actively redistribute care responsibilities and uphold women's economic rights.

Chapter 2. Economic situation of families and mothers' employment

The economic conditions of households with young children and the structure of the labour market affect mothers' employment. The findings reveal a cycle of constrained choices and financial strain.

Employment and inactivity vary strongly by the age of the child. Overall, **only 35 per cent of mothers with children aged 0–6 are employed**, meaning nearly two thirds are economically inactive. Employment is especially low among mothers of children aged 0–2. Only 13 per cent are employed, while 85 per cent are economically inactive. Among mothers of children aged 3–6, employment rises to 54 per cent, while 43 per cent remain economically inactive. Fathers' outcomes differ sharply. **Among fathers of children aged 0–6, 94 per cent are employed**, and only about 3 per cent are unemployed or economically inactive.

The data also show a significant untapped labour reserve. Among economically inactive mothers of children aged 0–6, about 28 per cent report that they want to work but have not reached the job search stage. This indicates that the **employment gap does not stem from a lack of education, skills, or ambition among women**. Instead, it reflects structural barriers discussed throughout the report that prevent many mothers from transitioning from care-related inactivity to active job search. Almost all mothers who actively sought work were able to find a job, and only 2 per cent of jobseekers remained unemployed. This suggests that the binding constraints arise earlier, at the stage of entering the labour market rather than in securing employment. When childcare is available and supportive policies are in place, mothers are eager to work.

For now, **families with young children face serious financial vulnerability when mothers cannot work**. Families with children rely heavily on wages, while households without children have more diversified income sources. About 72 per cent of income for families with young children comes from salaries, compared to around 54 per cent for households without children. This means that if a mother is forced to stop working, the family loses a large share of income. The study also finds very limited financial buffers. In 2023, only 1 per cent of families with young children had savings sufficient to cover one year of basic needs, while about 15 per cent had savings that would last less than one month. Nearly one in five families with children under seven carried debts.

Poverty has risen sharply. Experts estimate that **child poverty rose** from 43 per cent in 2021 to 65 per cent in 2022. Many families can no longer afford necessities or early education activities for their children.

Single-mother households are especially hard hit. The report finds that 48 per cent of them have monthly incomes below UAH 15,000 (roughly USD 360), compared to 14 per cent among two-parent families. With limited savings and scarce social support, these families are at high risk of hardship when mothers have no earnings. This economic pressure interacts with childcare constraints and workplace conditions, locking many mothers out of paid work.

Workplace factors compound the issue. **Flexible working arrangements and employer-supported childcare remain limited**. Discrimination and bias also shape decisions. Thus, 61 per cent of women consider prejudice against hiring mothers of young children to be very widespread. Mothers also report that hiring refusals are often attributed to having a small child. In the survey, 74 per cent of mothers of children aged 3–6 who reported hiring refusals cited the presence of a small child as the reason given by employers. Such bias, along with the lack of family-friendly workplace practices, discourage or disadvantage mothers seeking jobs.

The findings also highlight the importance of aligning social protection with childcare provision. Evidence shows that cash transfers can reduce poverty and support caregiving, but without accessible childcare they may unintentionally reinforce women's economic inactivity. Integrated systems that combine income support with accessible services are more effective in enabling mothers to return to work.

In summary, Chapter 2 paints a picture of economic pressure and systemic barriers. Without accessible childcare and supportive employers, many mothers are effectively locked out of paid work, to the detriment of their families' income security and the country's economy.

Chapter 3. Social norms and family dynamics

Social norms, gender roles, and family dynamics strongly shape women's economic opportunities. The research finds that entrenched expectations about motherhood and fatherhood influence individual decisions and reinforce structural barriers.

Norms that frame childcare and domestic work as women's responsibility place strong pressure on mothers and discourage fathers' involvement. In the survey, 69 per cent of out-of-work mothers of infants reported that the **belief that a mother must devote herself fully to childcare was a main reason they were not looking for a job**. Among women with children aged 3–6, this share was 47 per cent.

Mothers report feelings of guilt or fear of social disapproval if they return to work while their children are still small. Fathers and community members often reinforce these expectations. **More than half of men surveyed agreed that women should not work outside the home when children are young**, while 18 per cent of men stated directly that they do not want a woman to be employed.

These norms have tangible effects. Women face a double responsibility when they work and still carry most caregiving. This overload reduces well-being and limits career progression. Survey findings show that only 10 per cent of women's time is available for rest, and around **18 per cent of women report having no time for rest at all**. This constant overload leads to stress and burnout, further affecting women's health and career longevity.

Meanwhile, traditional notions of masculinity can deter fathers from taking on more caregiving. Activities like taking parental leave or even doing daily daycare drop-offs are sometimes viewed as “unmanly,” creating stigma for fathers who might otherwise be willing to share care responsibilities.

Care is often redistributed not to fathers or ECEC services, but to extended family, especially grandmothers. A large share of families relies on grandparents frequently, and most families with children under two use no external childcare at all, reflecting limited availability, affordability, and trust in services.

While norms remain restrictive, the study finds **growing openness among parents to more equal sharing of care**. This creates a window for policy and behavioural interventions to shift norms in practice, especially when supported by enabling services and workplace policies.

In summary, Chapter 3 concludes that while traditional social norms remain a fundamental barrier underpinning women's unequal share of caregiving responsibilities and limited employment, there is momentum for change. By promoting and normalising shared caregiving, through gender-responsive family-friendly policies, public campaigns, and positive role models, Ukraine can begin to reshape family dynamics so that both women and men can balance work and care more equally.

Chapter 4. Early childhood education and care services

The availability, accessibility, affordability and quality of ECEC services are central to enabling parents, especially mothers, to participate in the workforce. The study finds that ECEC services remain insufficient and uneven, with war-related constraints adding layers of disruption.

Security and shelters shape whether ECEC services can operate in person. In January 2023, about half of preschools operated remotely or in a mixed format. By April 2025, this declined to 9 per cent operating remotely and 13 per cent in a mixed format. In Kharkiv, Zaporizhzhia and Kherson oblasts, all preschools operate remotely but restoration continues. By early 2025, 565 kindergartens had been repaired and 293 shelters constructed or equipped, while major shelter needs remain.

Access varies by geography and displacement patterns. While overall capacity pressures in some cities eased due to demographic decline, **overcrowding persists in large cities, western regions and some rural areas**. The highest reported overcrowding in urban kindergartens is in Ivano-Frankivsk region at 110 children per 100 places. Waiting lists remain a marker of unmet demand. In 2023, 19.5 per cent of children aged 3 to 5 were on waiting lists for ECEC admission. For parents of children with disabilities or special educational needs (SEN), **finding suitable inclusive ECEC services is even more challenging**, as specialized support and accessible facilities are limited.

A core gap is the **severe shortage of services for children under three**, which directly delays mothers' return to work. Only one in seven places in urban ECEC facilities and one in ten in rural facilities is available for children under three. Of 986,000 places in 2024, only 152,000 were for children under three. Coverage is low by European standards. Before the full-scale invasion, coverage for children under three remained around 18 per cent, while overall ECEC coverage in 2024 was 73 per cent.

While affordability remains a consideration for many families, particularly in situations where public childcare options are limited, recent legislative changes have expanded access to financial support. Subsidy schemes such as eYasla (effective from 2026), and eSadok (effective from 2028), are now in place to support childcare needs for parents in full-time formal employment.

Access to ECEC is also influenced by factors beyond availability and cost. **Some parents encounter challenges related to limited information about available services**, and administrative procedures that would require a support to navigating the system of existing financial support.

The report shows that **these constraints are even more acute for vulnerable groups**, including low-income families, single parents, displaced families, and families raising children with disabilities or special educational needs. For children with disabilities or SEN, barriers are particularly severe and include limited accessible infrastructure, insufficient specialized staff, and concerns about stigma, exclusion, and the quality of support. Ensuring inclusive, respectful, and high-quality services is critical not only for access, but also for building families' trust in the system.

In summary, Chapter 4 highlights that without significant improvements in the ECEC system, including ensuring safety in wartime, rebuilding and expanding infrastructure, and reducing costs, the ECEC sector will continue to fall short of its vital role. That role is not only to educate and nurture young children, but also to enable parents, mothers in particular, to exercise their right to work and provide for their families.

Integrated analysis

Bringing together the findings, the study confirms that women's economic exclusion during early childrearing is driven by a system of interdependent constraints. Childcare gaps, affordability barriers, long leave design, limited workplace flexibility, discrimination, weak service navigation and entrenched gender norms reinforce each other. Addressing any single constraint in isolation will not be sufficient.

The stakes of inaction are high. **Ukraine risks deeper labour shortages and slower recovery** if a large share of mothers remain outside the labour market. Household poverty, especially among single-parent households, will remain elevated and children will lose opportunities linked to early learning, socialisation, and development. The report also frames progress on childcare, work-life balance and gender equality as relevant to Ukraine's EU accession pathway.

Conversely, the benefits of action are significant. Expanding ECEC services and family-friendly policies can increase employment, household income, and tax revenues, while strengthening children's development and future human capital. A **comprehensive care economy approach that combines services, policies, workplace measures, social protection and social norms change delivers the strongest impact** on women's employment, child development and long-term economic growth.

Evidence shows that investments in childcare and family-friendly policies yield high economic returns. The ILO estimates that **each dollar invested in childcare policies and services can generate about USD 3.76 in global GDP by 2035** by narrowing gender gaps in employment and pay.

UNICEF ECD Investment Case modelling suggests that expanding access to ECEC could **enable up to 350,000 parents, primarily mothers, to re-enter the labour market by 2030**. Such an expansion would not only benefit families but also help address Ukraine's labour supply challenges. The ILO Care Policy Investment Simulator estimates that investing in universal childcare services could **generate nearly 177,600 jobs by 2030**, including about 159,100 direct childcare jobs and 18,500 indirect jobs in non-care sectors. These projections highlight the significant economic gains from policies that support mothers' employment and expand childcare services.

Critically, such measures also **advance gender equality and women's rights**. When ECEC services are accessible and affordable, women have greater freedom to choose work, and the norm that childcare is a shared responsibility becomes more attainable in practice. This can gradually shift perceptions. As more fathers take leave or adjust work for family, it normalises shared caregiving, and as more mothers remain in or re-enter the workforce, the gender gaps in employment and leadership can begin to close.

In short, **addressing childcare and women's employment is a win-win for women, children, families, and the nation's prosperity**. The study therefore points to a clear conclusion: tackling the intertwined challenges requires coordinated, multifaceted action, and the payoff for doing so will be a stronger, more equitable Ukraine.

Recommendations

The study identifies opportunities for coordinated action by national government, local authorities, employers' and workers' organizations, international partners and civil society. It adopts a care economy approach that treats childcare not as a private responsibility but as essential social and economic infrastructure. Expanding women's employment requires simultaneous investment in services, policies, workplace practices and shifts in social norms.

1. National policies and investments in care

At the national level, there is a clear opportunity to position ECEC as essential infrastructure for recovery, labour supply and EU alignment. Treating childcare as part of economic and social infrastructure can support women's employment, strengthen family well-being, and contribute to long-term human capital development.

The central government can lead through a comprehensive strategy and stronger family-friendly legislation aligned with international standards and grounded in social dialogue. Opportunities include designing and implementing integrated care policies and systems that support decent work and gender equality. This includes strengthening **parental leave** design and introducing stronger incentives for fathers' caregiving. Parental leave should be adequately paid, linked to previous earnings, and financed through public or compulsory social insurance systems. Introducing a non-transferable use-it-or-lose-it portion for fathers can encourage shared caregiving. Linking parental leave with a guaranteed ECEC entitlement from the end of maternity, paternity, or adoption leave can help ensure that the transition from leave to employment does not translate into forced inactivity for parents.

Further progress can come from strengthening legal **protections for parents and carers in the labour market**. Reviewing legislation to reinforce protection against workplace discrimination and to establish enforceable rights to request flexible working arrangements can help parents remain connected to employment. Ukraine's alignment with EU directives offers a clear pathway. Full implementation of the EU Work-Life Balance Directive and relevant ILO Conventions and Recommendations can embed these rights within national legislation and bring policy frameworks closer to EU standards.

Alongside legal reforms, **expanding public investment in adequate, accessible, affordable and quality ECEC** represents a major opportunity. This includes investment in infrastructure and safety, such as reconstruction of facilities damaged by war, construction of shelters and safe rooms, ensuring access for children with disabilities, improved staffing levels, and strengthened quality assurance systems. Investments can support accessibility for children with disabilities and special educational needs, including barrier-free infrastructure, adapted learning environments, and trained educators able to provide inclusive early childhood education.

Affordability remains a critical dimension. Increasing **inclusive financing mechanisms** can help ensure that families are able to use available services. Expanding childcare subsidies, vouchers, or cost-sharing schemes, alongside widening eligibility for programmes such as the Municipal Nanny or eYasla, can reduce financial barriers and enable more parents to enter or remain in employment. Aligning social protection with childcare expansion is critical. Financial support mechanisms should be designed to complement, not substitute, access to services, ensuring that parents can enter employment without losing income security.

Another opportunity lies in strengthening the regulatory environment for diverse forms of childcare provision. Improving licensing, monitoring, and quality assurance for **alternative ECEC models**, including smaller community-based or home-based services, can support safe expansion of childcare options while encouraging providers to formalise their services.

Effective **national coordination** can support these efforts. Establishing an integrated care strategy that connects childcare expansion with parental leave, labour market participation, and social protection policies can help align actions across ministries responsible for education, social policy, labour and finance. Clear targets and monitoring mechanisms can guide implementation, including progress toward the Barcelona childcare coverage targets by 2030 and other EU aligned benchmarks.

Finally, national level initiatives can contribute to **shifting social norms around caregiving**. Public awareness efforts that highlight the value of ECEC and promote shared parenting can reinforce policy reforms.

Showcasing fathers who take paternity leave, employers that support family-friendly workplaces and communities that invest in childcare can help reshape expectations and strengthen acceptance of more equal caregiving roles.

Taken together, these opportunities position the national level to create an enabling environment through family-friendly legislation, sustainable financing, service infrastructure, clear regulation, and public engagement that recognises the value of care and advances gender equality by enabling women's employment as a driver of inclusive development.

2. Local innovations and service delivery

Local authorities are at the frontline of service provision and play a critical role in expanding childcare access in ways that respond to the realities of their communities. Municipal and subnational governments are well positioned to test flexible solutions, respond to displacement-related pressures and adapt services to local labour markets and family needs.

A key opportunity lies in **mapping local demand and identifying service gaps**. Local authorities can assess where shortages of ECEC places are most acute, including areas affected by displacement or population shifts caused by the war. This data can guide more effective planning and help municipalities prioritise neighbourhoods or rural settlements where additional childcare services are most urgently needed.

With clearer information on demand, municipalities can **optimize the use of existing infrastructure**. Underused public spaces such as schools, community centres, libraries, or cultural facilities can be repurposed or expanded to host childcare services, provided they meet safety standards, including access to air raid shelters where required. In areas with dispersed populations or small numbers of children, local authorities may also explore mobile or rotating childcare services, where trained educators visit remote communities on scheduled days.

Local governments can also pilot more **diverse and flexible childcare formats** that respond to different working patterns. These may include part-time nursery groups, extended-hour programmes, seasonal or holiday childcare, and community-based playgroups. Such formats can help families who work part-time, shift work, or non-standard hours to access childcare that fits their schedules.

Partnerships represent another important pathway for expanding supply. Municipalities can **collaborate with employers, civil society organizations, and private providers** to establish new childcare services where public provision alone cannot meet demand. For example, local authorities may provide premises or facilitate permits, employers or international development partners may contribute financing, and NGOs or private operators may deliver services. Public-private and community partnerships of this kind can help expand ECEC capacity more rapidly while sharing costs and expertise.

Targeted support for vulnerable families is also essential. Local authorities can reserve subsidized childcare places for low-income households, single parents and families facing economic hardship. Additional measures may include transport support for families living far from ECEC institutions, outreach through social workers or community councils, and closer links between childcare services and other social support programmes. These approaches can help ensure that groups such as internally displaced families, families of veterans, Roma communities and families raising children with disabilities are able to access available services.

Improving access to information is a practical and low-cost intervention. Local authorities can establish centralized information platforms or designate social workers to guide families through available childcare options and support services.

Local expansion of ECEC services also creates an opportunity for municipalities to strengthen decent work conditions for the childcare workforce across centre-based, home-based and partnership models. In line with ILO Policy Guidelines on decent work for ECEC personnel, municipalities can use licensing, contracting and financing mechanisms to promote written contracts, fair remuneration aligned with pay equity principles, manageable workloads, and access to social and labour protection, including maternity protection. Attention to safe and healthy workplaces, including occupational safety and health measures and protection from violence and harassment, can further support staff retention, service quality and the sustainability of ECEC services.

Finally, local governments have an opportunity to strengthen the sustainability of childcare services through **local planning and financing**. Treating ECEC as a core municipal service can help secure more predictable funding, whether through dedicated budget allocations, local education funds, or partnerships with national programmes. Successful local models can also generate practical lessons that inform national scale up and contribute to broader care economy reforms.

Through flexible service design, targeted support and innovative partnerships, local authorities can expand ECEC access, improve service quality and help more parents participate in the labour market.

3. Engaging employers and family-friendly workplaces

Employers and employer organizations play an important role in shaping a labour market that enables parents to participate fully in paid work. Companies have practical opportunities to reduce barriers that keep many mothers out of employment while supporting more equal caregiving between women and men.

One key area of action lies in **strengthening the role of employers' organizations in social dialogue with workers' organizations and policymakers** to help design practical work-family measures that reflect both business realities and workers' needs. This can include promoting flexible working arrangements, non-discrimination practices and employer-supported childcare solutions, particularly through models accessible to small- and medium-sized enterprises. Employers' organizations can also raise awareness of the business case for family-friendly policies by sharing evidence on improved retention, productivity and employer reputation, while ensuring that employees are informed about available public support.

Another key area of action lies in **strengthening family-friendly workplace policies** within companies. Expanding flexible work options such as adjustable working hours, remote or hybrid arrangements, part-time schedules and predictable shift planning can make it easier for parents to combine employment with care responsibilities. These measures often require limited financial investment yet can significantly improve employee retention, well-being, and productivity.

Workplace cultures also influence how **care responsibilities are shared**. Employers can contribute to more equal participation by normalising fathers' uptake of paternity and parental leave. Clear internal policies, leadership support, and visible examples of male employees taking leave can help create an environment where shared caregiving is accepted and encouraged. Practical measures such as breastfeeding rooms and child-friendly facilities at the workplace can further support parents of young children.

Employers also have an opportunity to strengthen **fairness in recruitment and career progression**. Bias-aware human resources practices and transparent recruitment and evaluation procedures can help prevent discrimination against parents, particularly mothers. Training for managers and HR staff can address assumptions about women's commitment to work after childbirth and ensure that employees with care responsibilities are assessed on equal terms.

Supporting women who return to work after a career break represents another important pathway. Companies may introduce structured return-to-work programmes, mentoring schemes, or short-term training opportunities that help mothers rebuild professional networks and update skills after parental leave. Such initiatives help ease the transition back to employment and signal that career progression remains possible after time spent caring for children.

In addition, employers, particularly large firms or employer networks, may contribute directly to **expanding childcare access**. This can include partnerships with ECEC providers, financial contributions to community childcare services, or support for childcare vouchers or subsidies that help employees manage care costs. In contexts marked by labour shortages and workforce mobility, such initiatives can also strengthen an employer's ability to attract and retain skilled workers.

Through these actions, employers can help create workplaces where family responsibilities do not limit career opportunities. Supporting parents in the workforce represents not only a social commitment but also a strategic investment in human capital, workforce stability and long-term productivity.

4. Workers' organizations and social dialogue

Workers' organizations represent an important partner in shaping labour market and care policies that reflect the realities of workers with family responsibilities. They can contribute to strengthening **awareness of parental rights and protections** through practical information campaigns on maternity and paternity leave, parental leave, job protection, breastfeeding breaks and the right to request flexible working arrangements. Legal aid, helpdesks and support for pregnancy and caregiving-related disputes, including for internally displaced workers, can help prevent discrimination and strengthen the enforcement of existing rights. Through collective bargaining and participation in national and local social dialogue, workers' organizations can also promote flexible working arrangements, protections for parents returning from leave and employer support for childcare.

Over time, workers' organizations can play a broader role in **advancing care economy reforms through social dialogue**. This includes supporting public investment in childcare, strengthening parental leave provisions and promoting decent working conditions for care workers. They can also contribute to programmes that support women's return to work after care breaks through re-skilling, mentoring and returnship opportunities, particularly for displaced women and single mothers. By promoting family-friendly workplace agreements that go beyond legal minimum standards and by encouraging cultural change that normalises shared caregiving, including men's use of parental leave, workers' organizations can help position care as a shared social responsibility linked to decent work and gender equality.

5. International partners and civil society collaboration

International organizations, donors and civil society actors are important partners in advancing childcare expansion and women's economic empowerment in Ukraine. In the context of recovery and reconstruction, there is a strong opportunity for international development partners to prioritise investments in childcare and the broader care economy as part of humanitarian and development assistance.

One key contribution lies in **supporting reconstruction and service expansion**. International partners can help finance the construction and rehabilitation of ECEC facilities, particularly in war-affected regions and underserved communities where infrastructure has been damaged or destroyed. Investments that strengthen social infrastructure alongside physical reconstruction can help ensure that recovery efforts support families, labour market participation and long-term human capital development.

International partners can also provide **technical assistance for policy development and system strengthening**. This may include support for the design of an integrated national care strategy, development of monitoring and data systems, and alignment of national frameworks with EU standards and international conventions. Organizations such as UNICEF, the ILO, the EU, the World Bank and bilateral donors are well positioned to mobilize resources, share global experience and support institutional capacity to implement care economy reforms.

Another important area of collaboration involves **scaling up innovative childcare models and strengthening the care workforce**. Development partners can support programmes for alternative ECEC formats. Investment in workforce development, including training and professional development for childcare workers, can also help expand service quality and availability, while supporting the care workforce with skilled and decent jobs.

Civil society organizations bring a complementary role grounded in **community engagement** and accountability. Women's rights organizations, parent associations, and local NGOs often work closely with families and can identify gaps that formal systems may overlook. They can contribute by delivering community level childcare initiatives such as playgroups, toy libraries, and caregiver cooperatives, particularly in areas where public services remain limited. Partnerships can also support system navigation and outreach, ensuring that families, especially vulnerable groups, are aware of and able to access available services.

Civil society actors also play an important role in **promoting social norm change**. Through public communication, community dialogue, and partnerships with local leaders and media, they can help promote positive narratives around shared caregiving, involved fatherhood and the developmental value of ECEC. Grounding these efforts in parents' lived experiences helps ensure that policy reforms resonate with the realities families face.

Finally, sustained collaboration across sectors can **strengthen coordination and accountability**. Multi-stakeholder platforms that bring together government institutions, employers' and workers' organizations, international partners, and civil society can help align efforts, share evidence, and monitor progress. Such forums can support policy dialogue, encourage innovation, and ensure that ECEC expansion remains a shared national priority within Ukraine's broader recovery and EU integration agenda.

Overall, the report's core message is that Ukraine can unlock women's economic participation by building an integrated care system that combines accessible childcare, supportive labour market policies and practices, inclusive social protection and more equal social norms, with targeted support for vulnerable families and inclusive design for children with disabilities and SEN. Coordinated reforms can deliver immediate gains in mothers' employment and household income, while strengthening child development, human capital, and long-term recovery outcomes.

Introduction

Relevance of the study

In the midst of a full-scale war that erupted in February 2022, marking a dramatic escalation of the armed conflict that began in 2014, and amid a deep socioeconomic crisis, Ukraine faces an urgent question: **how can we enable mothers of young children to work while ensuring adequate care for their children?** The challenge is immense.

Many women with infants and preschool-aged children remain out of the workforce because they cannot find affordable, quality early childhood education and care (ECEC)¹ services. This long-standing shortage of childcare options, more so now that the war has forced many preschools to close or be repurposed, leaves mothers with little choice but to shoulder unpaid caregiving at home.

Social norms add another hurdle: caregiving is still often seen as “women’s work”, and some employers are reluctant to hire or retain mothers of young children. The result is a dual loss – women’s rights and economic opportunities are curtailed, and families and the economy lose out on the skills and talents of countless women at a critical time for Ukraine.

Addressing this situation is not just a matter of social policy, but a matter of rights and equality. A rights-based, gender-transformative approach is needed – one that recognises unpaid care work, upholds the rights of both women and children, promotes decent work in and through the care economy, and actively challenges unequal gender roles so that parenting responsibilities are shared across society by the state, communities, employers and families alike.

Access to high-quality, affordable, adequate and accessible childcare is a proven strategy for gender equality. Globally, it is recognised that providing quality ECEC services enables women to participate in the labour market on an equal footing with men.

Ukraine has committed to international and European standards that recognise the right to work and supports rights related to care. These include **UN and ILO frameworks and international standards** to support working parents through childcare services, ensure equal treatment for workers with family responsibilities, value unpaid care, promote decent work for ECEC personnel, and guarantee access to quality early childhood development for all children. Ukraine has also endorsed global targets under the Sustainable Development Goals that link childcare, gender equality and child development.

As part of its EU accession path, Ukraine is aligning its policies with **EU work-life balance standards**, including parental leave for both parents and access to flexible working arrangements, as well as childcare coverage benchmarks set by the updated **Barcelona Targets** for 2030. Together, these commitments establish a clear framework for shared caregiving, women’s equal participation in the labour market and long-term investment in human capital, with detailed implications discussed in later chapters.

Ukraine’s own national strategies reinforce these goals. **The State Programme on Equal Rights and Opportunities for Women and Men**, along with other reforms under Ukraine’s EU integration agenda, explicitly prioritises improving support for families, expanding childcare services and creating conditions for women’s full economic participation.

Investing in integrated and coherent care policies and systems, including childcare and family social support, along with family-friendly workplace policies and working arrangements that support work-life balance, is not only social policy – it is sound economic policy. International experience shows that care policies benefit everyone: women, children, families, employers, and the nation as a whole.

Organizations like UNICEF and the ILO highlight a package of **care policies** that includes: maternity protection, paid parental leave for both mothers and fathers, support for breastfeeding, affordable quality childcare services and family-friendly working arrangements for parents. Such measures recognise the diversity of family situations and help balance work and home life in ways that **benefit children** through better care and early education, **parents** through improved work-life balance and financial stability and **employers** through a more productive and loyal workforce.

Strengthening the **care economy**² is an investment in economic growth. When Ukraine invests in childcare, it creates jobs, often filled by women, allows more parents, especially mothers, to engage in paid work, and raises household incomes and tax revenues. In short, investing in the care economy is a win-win strategy: it supports families' well-being and drives economic recovery.

All of these factors, namely Ukraine's war-time realities, its international and domestic commitments and the growing evidence of the benefits of childcare, point to the same conclusion. **Improving access to early childhood education and care, enabling women's full participation in the economy, and creating decent care jobs and infrastructure are not optional endeavours. They are urgent and necessary steps for Ukraine's future.**

This is not only about upholding the rights of women to work and the rights of children to receive care and early education; it is also about harnessing Ukraine's full economic potential at a time when every bit of talent and productivity is needed for recovery. Removing the barriers that keep mothers out of the workforce will help drive economic growth, strengthen social cohesion and accelerate progress toward Ukraine's development goals. In light of this, the current study was undertaken to find practical solutions to this pressing challenge.

Goal and objectives

The **purpose** of the study is to identify effective ways to expand opportunities for women with children under seven to participate in the labour market without compromising the care and development of their children.

This entails examining and addressing all the major barriers that mothers of young children face:

institutional barriers, such as gaps in laws or public policies, **economic barriers**, like the high cost or lack of childcare services, and **social barriers**, such as prevailing stereotypes about gender roles and workplace cultures that are not supportive of parents.

The study was guided by the **hypothesis** that improving the ECEC system alone, without simultaneously transforming gender stereotypes and addressing institutional and economic constraints, would have only a limited effect on women's economic empowerment. The findings confirmed this hypothesis.

The study recognises that **real progress will require simultaneous action on multiple fronts**. These are improving childcare services and infrastructure, enacting supportive policies, including on parental leave, flexible work and social protection, and transforming social attitudes about parenting and work. Simply put, expanding women's economic opportunities as mothers cannot succeed if any one of these areas is neglected.

Importantly, the research takes an **intersectional perspective**, acknowledging that women with young children are not a homogenous group. Mothers' experiences and needs can differ greatly depending on their circumstances. For instance, low-income families may struggle more with the cost of private childcare, rural families often have fewer services available than those in cities, and single mothers or displaced women (such as those who have had to flee conflict-affected areas) may face additional challenges in finding work or childcare.

Therefore, the study looks at various sub-groups of women, including by income level, place of residence (urban vs. rural), family structure and other factors, to ensure that solutions address the diverse realities on the ground. They must be targeted and tailored as well as comprehensive, so that no group is left behind.

In sum, supporting mothers of young children to work by expanding childcare and promoting equal caregiving is a shared responsibility and a smart investment that will pay dividends in Ukraine's economic stability and social well-being.

Report roadmap

To address these issues comprehensively, the report is structured into four main chapters:

- 1. Chapter 1. Policy context for women's economic empowerment:** Reviews global trends and international standards on childcare and work-family balance, and analyses Ukraine's policy framework and commitments (including national laws, strategies and EU integration efforts) aimed at expanding economic opportunities for women with children.

2. **Chapter 2. Economic situation of families and mothers' employment:** Examines the socioeconomic conditions of households with young children, the employment status of mothers and workplace factors (such as employer practices and support measures) that facilitate or hinder the combination of motherhood with paid work.
3. **Chapter 3. Social norms and family dynamics:** Explores cultural attitudes, gender roles and the distribution of care responsibilities within households. This chapter shows how traditional norms around motherhood and fatherhood influence parents' choices and challenges. It also identifies shifts toward more equal sharing of care in some families.
4. **Chapter 4. Early childhood education and care services:** Assesses the current availability, accessibility and quality of early childhood education and care in Ukraine. It highlights gaps in the childcare infrastructure, including regional disparities and impacts of the war, and evaluates how these gaps affect families' options for childcare.

Finally, the report outlines **practical steps for each key stakeholder** to drive change. It provides a roadmap showing how the national government, local authorities, employers and community partners can work together to build a more family-friendly and gender-equal Ukraine.

By taking these steps, Ukraine can ensure that having a child is no longer a barrier to women pursuing fulfilling careers and that every child across the country receives the care and early education they deserve.

Methodology

The study applied a mixed-methods design, combining quantitative and qualitative research, to capture both the big picture and personal experiences of families with young children.

By triangulating findings from a national survey, focus group discussions, in-depth interviews and desk research, the methodology provides a comprehensive understanding of the situation. Quantitative data offer statistical evidence on women's employment, childcare access, and related barriers, while qualitative inputs ensure that the voices and lived realities behind the numbers are heard.

Methodology at a glance:

- **Mixed methods:** The study combined quantitative and qualitative approaches to ensure both broad statistical representation and in-depth personal insights.
- **Desk research:** An extensive desk review of national statistics, policies and prior studies established context on family economics, gender norms and the ECEC system.
- **Qualitative research:** Two rounds of 8 **focus group discussions** with mothers, fathers and other carers, and 30 **in-depth interviews** with stakeholders (e.g., employers, officials, experts) captured nuanced perspectives on childcare and work.
- **National survey:** A representative survey of **3,639 respondents**, 2,577 women and 1,062 men (parents and other carers of children 0-6), across all 5 macro-regions of Ukraine (government-controlled areas) provided quantitative data. The sample was drawn using stratified random sampling and is accurate to about ± 2 per cent margin of error for key indicators.
- **Wartime adjustments:** Fieldwork was conducted during the war, so **safety protocols** and **flexible methods**, namely remote interviews where necessary, were used. The sample and data collection were adjusted to include internally displaced families and account for regional population shifts, while adhering to UNICEF and ILO ethical standards throughout.

Desk research

As a foundation, the research team carried out an extensive **desk review** of existing data and literature.

This phase had **two main purposes**:

1. to define and quantify the target population for the survey, which are families with preschool children, segmented into ages 0–2 and 3–6
2. to synthesize available evidence on the broader context influencing early childhood education and care and parental employment in Ukraine

Key topics examined included:

- **Socioeconomic conditions** of households with young children.
- **Labour market participation** of women and men with care responsibilities, including employment rates, job types, working conditions.
- **Gender norms and stereotypes** around parenting and work, including expectations on mothers and fathers.
- **ECEC services**, including its current state, accessibility, quality and inclusiveness.

This desk research drew on data from national statistics (the State Statistics Service of Ukraine), administrative records and studies by Ukrainian research institutes, UN agencies, and others. The team analysed these sources both quantitatively and qualitatively (e.g., content analysis of policies and discourse) to identify trends and gaps. The insights from the desk review informed the design of the field research tools (questionnaires and discussion guides) and provided a baseline context for interpreting the findings.

Focus group discussions

To delve deeper into attitudes and norms, the study conducted **focus group discussions** with parents and carers of young children.

These discussions were done in two rounds for maximum benefit:

- **Initial round** was conducted after the desk research to refine hypotheses and shape the survey questionnaire.
- **Second round** was conducted after preliminary survey analysis to validate the results and ensure they resonated with people's lived experiences.

Groups included:

- Mothers of infants aged 0–2 and mothers of preschoolers aged 3–6
- Fathers of infants aged 0–2 and fathers of preschoolers aged 3–6
- Mothers of slightly older children aged 7–9 – to compare experiences after the preschool years
- Mothers of children with disabilities or special needs aged 0–6
- Grandparents actively caring for grandchildren aged 0–6

Each focus group consisted of 6–10 participants, providing a comfortable setting for discussion. Importantly, the sample reflected all five macro-regions of Ukraine (western, eastern, northern, southern and central) and included both urban and rural communities. Participants ranged in age from young adults (18–29) to middle-aged (30–45) and older carers (over 45), and included people in vulnerable situations (for example, single mothers, internally displaced parents and mothers whose spouses were mobilized for military service). This diversity ensured that the conversations captured a wide spectrum of experiences and social contexts.

Format: Sessions lasted about 80–120 minutes and were held either in person or online, depending on security conditions and the location of participants during wartime. Professional moderators led the groups using a structured discussion guide that covered topics such as daily childcare arrangements, challenges in balancing work and child-rearing, access to and perceptions of ECEC services and prevailing social norms about motherhood and fatherhood. Participants were encouraged to share personal stories and viewpoints in a respectful environment. All sessions were audio-recorded (with consent) and later transcribed for analysis.

Ethical standards: Participation was voluntary and based on informed consent, and all respondents were assured of confidentiality. These measures helped create a safe space for candid dialogue. Insights from the focus groups were later triangulated with survey findings to deepen the interpretation of results and to ground the study's conclusions in real-life experiences.

In-depth interviews

To incorporate expert and stakeholder perspectives, the research also carried out **in-depth interviews** with individuals who have first-hand knowledge of the issues from various angles.

The stakeholders interviewed included:

- Employers from different sectors and company sizes to understand workplace policies and attitudes toward employees with young children (8 interviews)
- Employment services and recruiters to discuss labour market trends and challenges for parents returning to work (4 interviews)
- ECEC service providers to gauge the availability and quality of childcare options (4 interviews)
- National government officials to provide insights on current policies, reforms and institutional support for childcare and working parents (3 interviews)
- Local authorities and community leaders to discuss community-based services and local initiatives for families (4 interviews)

- NGO representatives to highlight the needs of disadvantaged mothers, including single, low-income, or conflict-affected (2 interviews)
- Psychologists and child development experts to discuss the developmental needs of young children and the support required for their carers (2 interviews)
- Parents with unique caregiving experiences, including individual mothers or fathers with particularly challenging situations, such as raising children with disabilities or educational special needs, or single parenting multiple young children (3 interviews)

Format: These one-on-one in-depth interviews typically lasted about 80–100 minutes each. Depending on the respondent's location and preference, interviews were conducted either face-to-face or remotely (via phone or video call). An interview guide was tailored for each type of stakeholder to steer the conversation through key themes while still allowing open-ended insights. For example, employers were asked about workplace flexibility and hiring practices; government officials about policy measures and gaps; and parents about their personal coping strategies.

Ethical standards: Participation was voluntary and based on informed consent, and anonymity was guaranteed for all interviewees to ensure they could speak freely. Interviews were recorded (with permission) to aid accurate transcription and analysis, and data were stored securely.

National survey

The centrepiece of the study's quantitative component was a **national survey** that generated statistically representative data on families with young children. This household survey targeted parents of children 0–6, with additional comparative groups included for a fuller picture. Fieldwork for the survey was conducted between August and September 2025 across government-controlled areas of Ukraine.

The **survey's objective** was to measure employment situations, childcare arrangements and access to ECEC services across Ukraine, providing hard numbers to complement the qualitative findings.

Sample design: The survey covered women and men in government-controlled areas of Ukraine who are of working age and have childcare responsibilities. The **primary target population** was mothers and fathers (aged 15–49) with children in two key age brackets: infants/toddlers aged 0–2 and preschoolers aged 3–6. In addition, several **comparative groups** were included in the sample to contextualize the experiences of target families – these included mothers of slightly older children aged 7–9, women who were expecting or planning to have a child and grandparents who are actively caring for grandchildren aged 0–6.

In total, the survey successfully completed **3,639 interviews** with eligible respondents nationwide. This sample comprised 2,547 respondents in the target groups (parents of children aged 0–6) and 1,092 in the comparative groups mentioned above.

The sample was designed to be representative of all major regions of the country. Participants were drawn from all five macro-regions (western, eastern, northern, southern and central), and the coverage included both urban and rural areas. Notably, the survey was limited to areas under Ukrainian government control due to the war, so it did not sample in territories outside of government control or people who had left the country. However, internally displaced families within government-controlled Ukraine were captured by the random sampling in their host communities.

To ensure representativeness, the study used a stratified multi-stage random sampling approach. The research team relied on up-to-date population data from sources such as United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF)³, United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA)⁴, the Institute for Demography and Quality of Life Studies of the National Academy of Sciences of Ukraine⁵ and the State Statistics Service⁶. These data were used to stratify the country by region and by urban and rural areas. Within each stratum, the team then randomly selected smaller areas, households and individuals.

Quota controls were applied at the final selection stage to guarantee the sample had the proper balance of respondents by key characteristics, for example ensuring a proper mix of mothers and fathers, different age groups and regional distribution in line with the population.

Thanks to the large sample size and rigorous sampling method, the survey results can be generalized with a high level of confidence: the margin of error is approximately ± 2 per cent for the main indicators (at a 95 per cent confidence level). In other words, the findings give a very close approximation of what would be found if all eligible families in Ukraine's government-controlled areas were surveyed.

Data collection methods: To adapt to security challenges due to the war, the team used a hybrid data collection strategy focused on face-to-face interviews wherever possible, with remote options as needed for safety.

Most interviews were carried out through face-to-face visits to households, using tablet-based questionnaires. Trained interviewers travelled to randomly selected homes and conducted computer-assisted personal interviews, meaning they asked the questions in person and entered responses directly into a tablet. This method improves accuracy through built-in skip patterns and validations, and it allowed the survey to proceed even in areas with unreliable paper mail or internet.

For some hard-to-reach participants, such as those in areas with active security concerns or who were not available for an in-home visit, the team conducted interviews by telephone or online. These remote interviews helped ensure that displaced persons or those in temporarily inaccessible locations could still participate.

Fieldworkers followed a random-route procedure to select households in each sampling cluster (essentially a random walk pattern starting from a defined point) and applied the quotas to select respondents within households.

Interviews were conducted in the respondent's preferred language (Ukrainian or other, as appropriate) to make participation as comfortable as possible. Each interview typically took around 40 minutes, covering a wide range of topics.

Survey content: The questionnaire was developed collaboratively by the research team, drawing on insights from the desk review and initial focus groups to ensure relevant issues were included. All interviewers, whether in-person or remote, followed the same standardized questionnaire script.

It covered the following key areas:

- **Family profile:** Number and ages of children, household income, and basic demographics.
- **Employment status:** Mothers' and fathers' work situations, job types (formal/informal, part/full-time), leave status, and job-seeking behaviour.
- **Family-friendly policies:** Awareness and use of maternity/paternity leave, flexible work and local childcare support.
- **Childcare arrangements:** Who provides care (parent, relative, kindergarten, nanny), with attention to changes due to the war.
- **Gender norms:** Beliefs about parenting roles, leave preferences and employer attitudes toward parents.
- **Access to ECEC services:** Use and availability of ECEC (public/private), and barriers such as cost, distance or lack of places.
- **Service quality and inclusiveness:** Parents' views on service quality, safety and inclusion of children with disabilities or special needs.
- **Alternative care:** Interest in non-traditional options like home-based care, nannies, workplace crèches or municipal subsidies.

Quality control and ethics: The study prioritised data quality and ethical standards, especially in wartime conditions. All methods underwent review by UNICEF, ILO and partners, and interviewers received thorough training, including on ethics and sensitive topics.

The questionnaire was piloted and refined before fieldwork began. Data collection used electronic tools with built-in checks, and supervisors conducted random verification calls. In the end, 31 invalid questionnaires were excluded after quality checks. Non-response was carefully tracked, and statistical weights were applied to adjust for sample design and ensure representativeness by region, age and sex. All data were handled confidentially and stored in accordance with international data protection standards.

Participation across all methods was voluntary and based on informed consent. Respondents could skip questions or withdraw at any time. No personal identifiers were collected. These safeguards built trust and protected participants during a highly sensitive period.

Study limitations

While the methodology was robust, several limitations stem from the wartime context:

- **Limited access:** Research was confined to areas under Ukrainian government control. Families in non-controlled areas or abroad were not included. Sporadic security issues also disrupted some interviews. Flexibility in methods helped, but some areas remained unreachable.
- **Displacement and representation:** Large population shifts due to displacement of people fleeing conflict zones affected regional representation. Updated population estimates and adjusted weights were used to include internally displaced persons, but regional comparisons should be interpreted cautiously due to uneven displacement impacts.
- **Response biases:** Crisis conditions may have influenced how openly respondents answered, especially on sensitive topics. It's possible that some groups may be underrepresented. Interviewers were trained to build trust and ensure confidentiality, but some degree of social desirability bias is inevitable in any survey.

Despite these constraints, the use of mixed methods, multiple data sources and context-sensitive adaptations ensured a reliable evidence base. The study accounts for these limitations in interpreting findings.

CHAPTER

1



POLICY CONTEXT FOR
WOMEN'S ECONOMIC
EMPOWERMENT

Chapter 1.

Policy context for women's economic empowerment

This chapter explains how global frameworks and European standards translate into Ukraine's national obligations and policy choices. It focuses on ECEC and work-family balance as a dual agenda: a best start for every child and equal economic opportunities for women and men.

1.1. Global trends and international standards

Across the world, governments increasingly recognise that childcare, care systems and work-life balance policies are essential for gender equality, economic growth and children's development.

Care responsibilities remain a major barrier to women's economic inclusion globally. The ILO⁷ estimates that in 2023, 708 million women cited unpaid care and domestic responsibilities as the reason for being out of the labour force, compared to 40 million men. This gap highlights the scale of unequal care responsibilities and shows why policy responses must address both care services and the social norms that shape caregiving roles.

In response, governments and employers' and workers' organizations increasingly view investment in the care economy as central to advancing decent work and gender equality. International frameworks emphasize integrated care policy packages that combine time, income security, rights and services. These include accessible childcare services, adequately paid parental leave financed through social protection or public funds, family-friendly workplace arrangements and protection from discrimination related to care responsibilities. Together, these measures support the right to work⁸ and children's rights to protection and care necessary for their well-being⁹.

Early childhood education and care sits at the centre of this agenda because it delivers multiple benefits at once. For children, it supports early development, reduces inequalities and builds human capital. For parents, it enables women and men to combine paid work with caregiving, reduces the motherhood penalty¹⁰ in employment and supports a more equal sharing of care. Investment in childcare also generates broader economic returns through higher female labour force participation and job creation in the care economy.

However, ECEC services alone are not sufficient. Structural and cultural factors continue to shape how care responsibilities are distributed. Persistent gender stereotypes that position women as primary caregivers and men as breadwinners limit women's labour market opportunities and discourage equal sharing of responsibilities. Even significant expansion of ECEC infrastructure may have limited impact if social expectations continue to push women to prioritise unpaid care over paid work.

Global evidence therefore points to the need for a comprehensive approach. Expanding ECEC must be complemented by adequately paid parental leave for both parents, labour protections including for informal workers, flexible working arrangements and efforts to challenge discriminatory norms. The report frames this as an inseparable link. Modern ECEC must both support children's development and create conditions for parents to combine work with family responsibilities.

Global commitments

Recent international developments have accelerated progress towards stronger care systems and reinforced the central role of care in advancing decent work, gender equality, and sustainable development. Across the global policy agenda, care is increasingly recognised not as a private matter alone but as a shared societal responsibility that requires coordinated public policy, investment and social dialogue.

What do these global commitments mean for Ukraine? They establish that providing ECEC and facilitating work-family balance are not optional. They are obligations linked to women's and children's rights and to sustainable development. In essence, they set minimum expectations for children's development and well-being, affirm that women should not have to choose between work and family, and emphasize that men must also be enabled to take an active role in care.

International human rights framework establishes the strongest global commitments on care, work and gender equality.

The Convention on the Rights of the Child obliges States to develop institutions, facilities, and services for the care of children and calls for public measures that support parents in fulfilling care responsibilities¹¹. Article 18 specifically emphasizes the need for services that assist working parents in raising children.

Similarly, the **Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW)** requires States to eliminate discrimination in employment and to take measures enabling women to reconcile family responsibilities with work, including through the provision of childcare facilities¹².

The **Beijing Platform for Action** further identifies childcare provision, elimination of gender stereotypes and equal sharing of care responsibilities as essential to women's economic empowerment.

International labour standards translate these rights into concrete obligations within the world of work. They provide governments, employers and workers with guidance on how to ensure that workers with family responsibilities can participate fully in employment.

ILO Convention No. 156 on Workers with Family Responsibilities, ratified by Ukraine in 2000, requires measures enabling workers with family responsibilities to engage in employment without discrimination and without conflict between work and family responsibilities as far as possible. It calls for the development of childcare and family services, awareness raising on gender equality in caregiving, and measures such as vocational training and flexible working arrangements to support workers returning to employment after care-related interruptions. Recommendation No. 165 complements this framework by promoting parental leave¹³ for either parent, leave to care for sick dependants, equal treatment for part-time and temporary workers, and supportive tax, social security and community services.

ILO Convention No. 183 on Maternity Protection, although not yet ratified by Ukraine¹⁴, establishes modern international standards for maternity protection. It requires at least 14 weeks of maternity leave, with 6 weeks postnatal, cash benefits of at least two thirds of previous earnings and funded through social insurance or public funds. It also guarantees protection against dismissal, the right to return to the same or equivalent job after leave, breastfeeding breaks, nursing facilities and workplace safety measures, and protection from discrimination related to pregnancy and maternity. Recommendation No. 191 suggests extending maternity leave to at least 18 weeks with full pay and promoting post-maternity parental leave for either parent without losing employment or benefits.

These standards are reinforced by broader social protection instruments, including the **Social Protection Floors Recommendation No. 202**, the **Social Security Convention No. 102**, and the **2021 International Labour Conference Resolution on Social Protection**, all of which emphasize gender-responsive systems and income security during maternity, paternity, and parental leave. They affirm that motherhood must not cost women their jobs or health and that men and society share responsibility for care.

Global development frameworks further reinforce the importance of care systems for sustainable development. The **Sustainable Development Goals (SDG)** explicitly link gender equality and the expansion of care services. SDG target 5.4 calls for recognising and valuing unpaid care and domestic work through public services, infrastructure, social protection, and the promotion of shared responsibility within households. SDG target 4.2 calls for access to quality early childhood development, care, and pre-primary education for all girls and boys by 2030. These targets position investment in care services as central to both gender equality and children's development.

Recent international policy developments have significantly strengthened global momentum around the care economy.

A major milestone was reached in June 2024 when the **International Labour Conference** adopted the Resolution concerning decent work and the care economy. For the first time, governments and employers'

and workers' organizations reached a global tripartite agreement recognising the care economy as central to achieving gender equality, social justice and decent work. The Resolution provides a shared understanding of the care economy and introduces the **ILO 5R Framework for Decent Care Work**: recognise, reduce, redistribute unpaid care work, and reward and represent care workers.

The broader United Nations policy agenda also increasingly highlights the care economy. The **UN Secretary General's report Our Common Agenda** calls for large-scale investment in the care economy as part of a renewed social contract. The **UN Global Accelerator on Jobs and Social Protection for Just Transitions** includes investment in the care economy as a pathway for advancing decent work and quality care services.

Recognition of care has also expanded in global governance. In 2023, the **United Nations Human Rights Council** adopted a resolution on the centrality of care and support from a human rights perspective. The UN General Assembly proclaimed 29 October as the International Day of Care and Support. In 2024, the **UN Commission for Social Development** adopted a resolution promoting care and support systems for social development, recognising unpaid care work as essential to social and economic progress and calling on governments to create enabling environments for care systems and to redistribute unpaid care work more equally.

Global partnerships have also contributed to advancing care agendas. The **Global Alliance for Care**, launched in 2021 by Mexico and UN Women, now brings together more than 280 members to promote policy action on care systems worldwide.

Regional and multilateral forums have reinforced these priorities. The **Tashkent Declaration**¹⁵ adopted at the World Conference on Early Childhood Care and Education in 2022 calls for at least one year of free and compulsory pre-primary education for all children. The **G20 Leaders' Declaration** committed to addressing the unequal distribution of unpaid care work between women and men, while the **G7 Labour and Employment Ministers' Declaration** committed to promoting high-quality care-related jobs.

Regional initiatives such as the **European Care Strategy**, the **ASEAN Comprehensive Framework on Care Economy**, and the **Buenos Aires Commitment** and the **Tlatelolco Commitment** adopted by the Regional Conference on Women in Latin America and the Caribbean further emphasize expanding access to quality care services and improving conditions for care workers and care recipients.

Together, these instruments establish a growing global consensus that strengthening care systems, expanding childcare services, and enabling work-family balance are essential for gender equality, decent work and sustainable development.

European family-friendly policy framework

Ukraine's EU candidate status, granted in June 2022, initiated the process of aligning national legislation with the European Union acquis and the European Pillar of Social Rights.

The **EU acquis** provides a strong legal framework to protect parents and caregivers and promote gender equality in the labour market. Through directives and policy instruments, it establishes minimum standards on maternity protection, parental and paternity leave, carers' rights, and flexible working arrangements. Together, these measures aim to support work-life balance, encourage a more equal sharing of care responsibilities, and strengthen women's continued participation in employment.

The **European Pillar of Social Rights** further reinforces these principles. It affirms that children have the right to affordable and high-quality ECEC, that parents have the right to work-life balance, and that women and men must have equal opportunities in the labour market. These principles are integrated into EU monitoring tools and increasingly guide reform agendas in EU candidate countries.

Global and EU practice increasingly treats family-friendly policies as an integrated package that enables parents to balance paid work and caregiving, while advancing child well-being and gender equality. UNICEF promotes this approach as central to child rights, women's economic empowerment and shared parental responsibility¹⁶.

Across countries, family-friendly policy frameworks typically combine four mutually reinforcing pillars:

1. Paid leave for both parents
2. Flexible and supportive working arrangements
3. Affordable, accessible and high-quality ECEC services
4. Social protection and financial support for families with children

1. Paid leave for both parents

Paid leave policies for both parents represent a central element of this framework. UNICEF emphasizes sufficient paid leave for all parents and carers, including those in informal employment, to care for young children. This includes maternity, paternity, adoption, parental, carers' and emergency leave¹⁷.

Common types of leave for parents and carers in EU policy frameworks include:

Maternity leave

- Granted to a mother before and after childbirth.
- At least 14 weeks under EU law.
- Paid through state or social security systems.
- Applies to both employees and self-employed women.
- Guaranteed under Pregnant Workers Directive 92/85/EEC, Self-Employed Workers Directive 2010/41/EU.
- Supported by international standards, including ILO Convention No. 183 on Maternity Protection, the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW), and the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights.

Paternity leave

- Granted to fathers or partners of the birthing parent in connection with childbirth.
- At least 10 working days, typically non-transferable.
- Paid through state or social security systems.
- Designed to promote fathers' involvement in early childcare.
- Guaranteed under the Work-Life Balance Directive 2019/1158/EU.
- Supported by international commitments to gender equality under CEDAW and the Beijing Platform for Action.

Adoption leave

- Granted to adoptive parents following the adoption of a child.
- Often mirrors maternity and paternity leave provisions.
- Covers both parents, including single adopters.
- Supported by EU equality legislation and by international child rights obligations under the Convention on the Rights of the Child and CEDAW.

Parental leave

- Granted to either parent for childcare after maternity, paternity, or adoption leave.
- At least 4 months per parent under EU law.
- At least 2 months must be non-transferable.
- Can be taken until the child reaches the age of 8.
- Increasingly flexible and paid in many EU countries.
- Guaranteed under the EU Work-Life Balance Directive 2019/1158/EU.
- Aligned with ILO Convention No. 156 on Workers with Family Responsibilities.

Carers' leave

- Granted to workers caring for a seriously ill or dependent relative.
- At least 5 working days per year.
- Recognises unpaid care responsibilities beyond early childhood.
- Guaranteed under the EU Work-Life Balance Directive 2019/1158/EU.
- Supported by international labour standards promoting work-family balance, e.g., ILO Convention No. 156.

Emergency leave

- Granted for urgent family situations such as illness or accidents.
- Short-term and job protected.
- Recognised under the EU Work-Life Balance Directive 2019/1158/EU.
- Linked to the broader protection of workers with family responsibilities under ILO Convention No. 156.

Ukraine broadly mirrors this structure. Current entitlements include 18–20 weeks of paid maternity leave, 14 days of paid non-transferable paternity leave, 8–10 weeks of paid adoption leave and unpaid parental leave (called childcare leave) until a child reaches three years of age, or six with medical need. Paid additional leave of 10–17 days per year applies to specific family situations. Job protection during parental leave is guaranteed. While the framework supports working families, gender gaps and financing constraints remain.

Across Europe and Central Asia, parental leave exists in 68 countries, with durations ranging from a few months (e.g., Belgium, Luxembourg) to three years or more (e.g., Finland, France, Norway and Ukraine)¹⁸. In 46 countries, parental leave is at least partially paid and linked to previous earnings. For example, Lithuania offers flexible options of 18 or 24 months of leave with varying replacement rates (60 per cent of previous earnings for 18 months or 45 per cent for 24 months)¹⁹.

Evidence from post-Soviet EU member states shows that **paid parental leave of up to around 18 months, particularly when shared between parents, supports child development while encouraging mothers' return to work**. Increasingly, countries introduce paid non-transferable leave reserved specifically for fathers. This use-it-or-lose-it approach, promoted by UNICEF, the ILO and the OECD²⁰, has proven effective in increasing fathers' participation in caregiving and redistributing unpaid care work.

Countries such as Sweden²¹ and Spain²² illustrate these policy approaches. Sweden provides 480 days of parental leave per child, with 240 days allocated to each parent and 90 days reserved as non-transferable leave. Of the total, 390 days are paid at around 80 per cent of previous earnings and 90 days at a flat rate. This design has contributed to high uptake among fathers, with around 82 per cent of fathers taking parental leave.

Spain grants equal, fully paid and non-transferable leave to both parents. Each parent is entitled to 16 weeks of leave, increasing to 19 weeks from 2025, while single parents may access up to 32 weeks. The first six weeks are mandatory immediately after birth or adoption. As a result, nearly 75 per cent of fathers now take the full leave entitlement. These policy designs significantly increased fathers' uptake of leave and contributed to shifting social norms around caregiving.

2. Flexible and supportive working arrangements

Flexible and supportive working arrangements are another key pillar of family-friendly policy. UNICEF and the ILO emphasize measures such as flexible working hours, remote work, part-time options without career penalties, and breastfeeding support as essential for helping parents reconcile paid work and caregiving.

Many working mothers identify inflexible working arrangements as a major barrier to remaining in employment, particularly when trying to continue breastfeeding after returning to work. Supportive workplace policies are therefore critical for parents of infants and toddlers and help sustain breastfeeding during the transition back to work.

International standards also address these needs. **ILO Convention No. 183** recognises breastfeeding breaks as working time and requires appropriate workplace conditions for nursing mothers²³. WHO and UNICEF similarly recommend supportive workplace environments that allow mothers to breastfeed or express milk safely and with dignity²⁴.

At the EU level, the **Pregnant Workers Directive 92/85/EEC** establishes key protections for pregnant and breastfeeding workers, including paid time off for prenatal medical examinations, protection from dismissal during pregnancy and maternity leave and mandatory risk assessments with adapted working conditions where needed. Many EU countries incorporate these requirements into labour legislation to protect the health of mothers and children and support women's continued labour market participation²⁵.

The **EU Work-Life Balance Directive 2019/1158/EU** grants parents and carers of children up to the age of eight the right to request flexible working arrangements such as remote work, reduced hours, or adjusted schedules, with employers required to consider these requests²⁶. Legal entitlements help normalise flexibility and protect workers from discrimination related to care responsibilities. Governments also use incentives, including tax benefits or public recognition schemes, to encourage employers to adopt family-friendly practices.

Remote and flexible working arrangements gained wider acceptance during the COVID-19 pandemic and remain highly relevant. For parents, they reduce commuting time and allow care responsibilities to be shared more easily. In Ukraine, flexible working arrangements are particularly important given school disruptions, security risks and periods of online learning in affected regions. However, such practices remain limited in many workplaces, particularly in the private sector. Many women continue to face stigma related to motherhood at work, highlighting the need for stronger regulatory frameworks and incentives to promote family-friendly employment practices.

3. Affordable, accessible and high-quality ECEC services

Accessible early childhood education and care services form the third pillar of family-friendly policy. ECEC covers regulated education and care from birth to the start of compulsory schooling²⁷. High-quality and affordable ECEC services support children's development, reduce inequalities and enable parents to participate in the labour market²⁸.

Access to reliable ECEC strongly influences mothers' employment. Globally, women with young children have employment rates 12 to 14 per cent lower than women without children, while men's employment is largely unaffected by parenthood. Among couples with children, gender gaps in labour force participation widen sharply. The difference in labour force participation between men and women reaches 36 per cent among couples with children, compared to 23 per cent among couples without children²⁹.

In many countries, however, **a childcare policy gap persists between the end of paid leave and the start of guaranteed ECEC services**³⁰. According to the ILO, this gap exists in 150 out of 176 countries and averages 4.2 years, exceeding five years in 89 countries³¹. During this period, families must arrange care privately, which disproportionately affects low-income households and often delays mothers' return to work.

Expanding ECEC supply has a proven positive effect on women's employment. OECD evidence shows that **reducing childcare costs through subsidies is among the most effective measures to increase female labour force participation**³². At the same time, UNICEF stresses the importance of quality³³. Parents must trust ECEC services. Quality standards therefore need to address safety, staff qualifications, child-to-staff ratios, learning environments and inclusiveness while allowing flexibility for diverse service models.

Many countries are therefore diversifying ECEC provision. Alongside public kindergartens, systems increasingly include private nurseries, home-based childcare, community playgroups, employer-supported childcare and flexible or part-time services. **ECEC diversification helps reach families with non-standard working hours and different care needs**^{34,35}. International guidance emphasizes that all models should be integrated into the public system and subject to common quality standards, monitoring, and public oversight.

Employer-supported ECEC illustrates this potential. **Workplace childcare can strengthen staff retention, productivity and women's return to work.** The underlying principle is that no parent should be prevented from working because of a lack of ECEC and no child should be denied early education and care because of income or location. This principle is grounded in the Convention on the Rights of the Child and aligns with Ukraine's commitments.

Recognising the importance of care services, the European Union has strengthened its policy focus on the care economy. The **European Care Strategy**, adopted by the European Commission in 2022, aims to ensure accessible, affordable, and high-quality care services, while improving working conditions in the care

sector³⁶. It encourages Member States to expand ECEC, strengthen long-term care services, and improve training, social dialogue and occupational safety for care workers.

The Strategy is closely linked to the updated **Barcelona Targets**, which set EU goals for ECEC coverage by 2030:

- 45 per cent of children under three
- 96 per cent of children aged three to the start of compulsory schooling

The **EU Child Guarantee** complements these efforts by calling on governments to ensure that children in vulnerable situations have access to free or affordable, high-quality ECEC. The initiative focuses on children at risk of poverty or exclusion and promotes inclusive childcare systems that support children's development, while enabling parents, especially mothers, to participate in employment.

In March 2026, the European Commission approved the **EU Gender Equality Strategy 2026–2030**, which further strengthens this agenda³⁷. The strategy aims to expand access to affordable, high-quality ECEC and long-term care services, strengthen rights to family leave and flexible working arrangements, improve working conditions in the care sector and encourage greater participation of men in caregiving.

The **Council Recommendation on High-Quality ECEC Systems**, adopted in 2019, complements these initiatives by providing guidance on improving the accessibility, affordability, quality and inclusiveness of ECEC systems. This recommendation remains an important reference for EU candidate countries such as Ukraine.

ECEC is widely recognised as a public good with strong economic and social returns. Public financing should therefore play a central role, complemented where appropriate by private investment, donor support and targeted grants. Financing systems must remain transparent, results-driven, and focused on closing gaps in access and quality, particularly for underserved groups.

However, many countries still fall short in investing in ECEC even as demand continues to grow. Public spending often remains below the **recommended level of 1 per cent of GDP**^{38,39,40}. Globally, the investment gap is estimated at around 1.5 per cent of GDP⁴¹. Achieving universal access to ECEC services is projected to require additional annual expenditures of about USD 1.6 trillion by 2030 and USD 291 billion more by 2035.

To close this gap, international organizations recommend prioritising public financing to ensure equity, expanding fiscal space through tax and budget reforms, improving cost efficiency and results monitoring, diversifying funding sources while maintaining strong public leadership, strengthening social dialogue among stakeholders, and planning for long-term sustainability in the context of demographic change, migration and crisis recovery. Evidence-based policymaking is essential to align investment with current and projected demand and ensure that resources produce lasting and equitable impact.

Investment evidence also plays a critical role in policy prioritisation. The ILO estimates that **each dollar invested in ECEC and parental leave can generate about 3.76 dollars in global GDP by 2035** through increased female labour force participation, job creation in the care economy and reductions in gender pay gaps.

4. Social protection and financial support for families with children

Social protection and financial support for families with children represent the fourth pillar of family-friendly policy packages. Family-friendly systems include both cash and in-kind measures that help offset the costs of raising children. These measures include birth grants, child allowances, childcare subsidies, and targeted benefits for vulnerable families⁴². UNICEF emphasizes that no family should fall into poverty because of childbirth.

Many countries provide a one-time birth grant together with ongoing monthly benefits for young children. In Ukraine, existing measures include a birth grant and targeted support for larger families and specific groups. Programmes such as the Municipal Nanny subsidy, introduced in 2019, aim to reduce childcare costs by reimbursing part of the expenses for private childminders, although uptake has been uneven.

Evidence shows that cash transfers reduce child poverty and support caregiving, but they are most effective when combined with accessible ECEC services. Without affordable childcare, transfers alone may discourage employment. OECD and UNICEF highlight that **childcare subsidies and service provision are among the most effective drivers of mothers' employment**⁴³.

Many European countries therefore combine financial support with strong childcare and parental leave systems as part of their social protection frameworks. These investments are increasingly viewed as a strategy to strengthen human capital, support gender equality and promote inclusive labour markets. Aligning social protection with family-friendly policies means combining income support with accessible services so that parents can choose to work without risking family well-being. When well designed, such measures not only prevent hardship but also facilitate a faster return to employment and strengthen family income and economic growth.

For EU enlargement countries, including Ukraine, these frameworks provide both guidance and benchmarks. Progressive alignment with EU standards on ECEC services, parental leave, and family-friendly work policies can support gender equality, strengthen labour market participation and improve children's development outcomes.

Achieving these benchmarks in Ukraine will require sustained investment in care systems, greater sharing of parental responsibilities and continued efforts to transform gender norms. Progress in these areas can generate substantial long-term benefits for the country's human capital, labour market participation and inclusive economic recovery.

In summary, global evidence shows that early childhood education and care, parental leave, flexible working arrangements, and social protection form an integrated policy framework that supports children's development, enables parents to balance work and caregiving and advances gender equality. International human rights instruments, labour standards and EU policy frameworks establish clear expectations for governments to provide accessible childcare, protect parents in the labour market and promote shared caregiving between women and men. Recent global trends increasingly treat care as a public good and a key component of economic and social policy. A comprehensive care economy approach that combines services, time policies, workplace flexibility and financial support has proven most effective in expanding women's labour force participation, reducing gender inequalities in unpaid care, and strengthening human capital. For Ukraine, aligning with these international standards and policy directions provides both a legal obligation and a strategic opportunity to build a modern, inclusive and resilient ECEC and family policy system.

1.2. Ukraine's commitments and legal framework

Ukraine's legal framework for gender equality and support to families with young children builds on international commitments and a growing body of national reforms. It is relatively well developed, but implementation remains uneven, particularly under war conditions.

International commitments adopted by Ukraine

Ukraine's international obligations set the direction for rights-based, gender-equal family policies.

Key milestones and what they mean for women with young children:

1956. ILO C100 – Equal Remuneration Convention

Ukraine ratified C100⁴⁴ in 1956. The country committed to ensuring the application of the principle of equal pay for men and women workers for work of equal value.

1961. ILO C111 – Discrimination (Employment and Occupation) Convention

Ukraine ratified C111⁴⁵ in 1961. The country committed to pursuing a national policy that eliminates discrimination in employment and occupation and promotes equality of opportunity and treatment for all workers.

1981. Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW)

Ukraine ratified CEDAW⁴⁶ in 1981, along with its optional protocol in 2003. The country committed to eliminate discrimination against women in all spheres, including employment, social protection and family life. This supports legal equality for mothers in the labour market.

1991. Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC)

Ukraine ratified CRC in 1991, committing to support parents in child-rearing and ensure access to childcare services for working parents.

1995. Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action

Ukraine endorsed the Beijing Platform for Action in 1995, and agenda that frames unpaid care work and women's economic empowerment as core equality issues. Ukraine committed to support policy shifts toward shared caregiving and public investment in service.

2017. Declaration on Trade and Women's Economic Empowerment

Ukraine joined the Buenos Aires Declaration on Trade and Women's Economic Empowerment in 2017⁴⁷, which highlights the link between trade policy and women's economic empowerment and encourages governments to integrate gender considerations into trade and economic policy.

2019. Sustainable Development Goals

President of Ukraine issued Decree No. 722/2019 validating SDGs of Ukraine until 2030⁴⁸. This embeds SDG targets into national policy direction, including SDG 5.4 on unpaid care work and SDG 4.2 on early childhood development and pre-primary access.

2000. ILO C156 – Workers with Family Responsibilities Convention

Ukraine ratified C156⁴⁹ in 2000. The country committed to adopting policies and measures that enable workers with family responsibilities to access and remain in employment without discrimination and to reconcile work and family life.

2020. Biarritz Partnership for Gender Equality

Ukraine joined G7 Biarritz Partnership for Gender Equality⁵⁰, a high-level platform focused on closing gender gaps in care, employment, safety and leadership. This strengthens accountability for reforms that matter for mothers' employment and fathers' caregiving.

2020. Generation Equality Action Coalitions

Ukraine joined the Generation Equality Action Coalitions⁵¹, a global initiative that advances gender equality across key areas, including ending gender-based violence, promoting economic justice and rights, and leveraging technology and innovation for gender equality.

2020. Equal Pay International Coalition

Ukraine joined the Equal Pay International Coalition⁵², a global partnership that aims to close the gender pay gap and promote the principle of equal pay for work of equal value.

2022. Convention on Preventing and Combating Violence Against Women and Domestic Violence (Istanbul Convention)

Ukraine finally ratified the Istanbul Convention in 2022, signalling dedication to gender equality and women's rights. The Convention addresses one of the significant barriers that often keep women out of economic life – gender-based violence and lack of safety. The implementation (e.g., funding shelters, training law enforcement) is now a priority, though challenges remain due to resource constraints and the war's impact on social services.

2022. EU Candidacy

EU candidacy launched a structured process to align Ukraine's laws with EU standards on work-life balance, parental leave, childcare and non-discrimination. The challenge is turning alignment into enforceable rights and funded services.

National legal framework

Ukraine's legal and policy framework is relatively developed. Practical delivery remains constrained by weak accountability for discrimination, limited coordination across institutions, and underfunded state and local programmes. This limits real change for mothers returning to work and for families needing services.

National gender equality strategies:

State Strategy for Ensuring Equal Rights and Opportunities for Women and Men 2022-2030

The State Strategy for Ensuring Equal Rights and Opportunities for Women and Men by 2030⁵³ sets the overarching framework for equality across sectors. Impact depends on whether ministries and hromadas (local administrative units) translate it into funded programmes and measurable targets.

Strategy for Implementing Gender Equality in Education 2022-2030

The Strategy for Implementing Gender Equality in Education by 2030⁵⁴ is relevant for early learning quality, inclusive preschool and addressing stereotypes early. Implementation often depends on local capacity, teacher training and safe infrastructure.

National Strategy for Closing the Gender Pay Gap 2023-2030

The National Strategy for Closing the Gender Pay Gap by 2030⁵⁵ directly affects mothers' lifetime earnings and pension security. It needs enforcement tools, pay transparency and employer compliance.

Strategy for Demographic Development for 2024-2040

The Strategy for Demographic Development of Ukraine by 2040⁵⁶ creates an entry point to link family support with women's employment and childcare expansion. It's important that a demographic framing doesn't slide into pronatalist messaging unless paired with women's rights, services and decent work.

Together, these strategies create a coherent policy architecture for advancing gender equality. Their real impact depends on consistent financing, clear accountability and translation into concrete measures at sectoral and local levels. For women with young children, progress will hinge on whether commitments move beyond strategy documents to enforceable rights, accessible services, and decent work opportunities. Without this shift, the gap between formal commitments and lived realities will persist.

Labour law reforms and protections:

2017. Abolition of a large list of prohibited professions for women

Ukraine abolished a list of about 458 professions prohibited for women, leaving only a few exceptions, such as the provisions of ILO Convention No. 45 that prohibit engaging women in underground work in mines. This removed a formal barrier to women's employment and earnings.

2022. Procedure for imposing fines for anti-discrimination violations

Ukraine approved a procedure for imposing fines for anti-discrimination violations. This created an enforcement tool. In practice, discrimination cases rarely reach courts as the main claim. Labour disputes more often focus on wages and reinstatement. This suggests under-reporting, low trust, or weak remedies.

The European Commission⁵⁷ recommended changes that would shift the burden of proof to employers in discrimination cases. This is important for mothers, who often face discrimination linked to pregnancy and childcare responsibilities.

2022. Law on labour relations under martial law

The Code of Laws on Labour of Ukraine remains the core framework for labour relations in the country⁵⁸. The Law on the Organization of Labour Relations under Martial Law⁵⁹ protects pregnant women and women with children under one year from night work without consent and provides safeguards for persons with disabilities where health risks exist.

At the same time, the law expanded employer discretion. Employers may impose probation on groups previously exempt, including pregnant women and single mothers, and transfer employees without consent in defined cases. This increases exposure to unfair treatment and job insecurity, particularly for mothers.

These changes raise concerns regarding international labour standards on protection from arbitrary dismissal and fair labour relations. For women with young children, heightened job insecurity discourages return to work and weakens household stability.

2023. Ban on sexism and gender stereotypes in advertising and job ads

The amendments to the law on advertising introduced a ban and fines for gender stereotypes and sexism in advertising and job ads. In 2024⁶⁰, complaints rose sharply, from 16 in 2023 to 107 in 2024. It signals higher awareness and reporting. Enforcement remains limited during martial law because labour inspections and supervisory powers face legal restrictions. Without inspections, the deterrent effect weakens.

2024. Regulation of domestic worker's labour

The law on the regulation of domestic workers' labour⁶¹ establishes a legal framework for domestic work by formally recognising domestic workers in labour legislation, requiring written employment contracts and notification to the State Tax Service, defining their rights and working conditions (including working time, rest, pay and social protection), and clarifying employers' obligations to ensure compliance with labour and social insurance regulations.

Alongside laws and national strategies, Ukraine applies secondary legislation and methodological tools that support the integration of a gender perspective into policymaking and public administration. These instruments define approaches for incorporating the principles of equal rights and opportunities for women and men into collective agreements and labour arrangements⁶², assessing the gender impact of sectoral reforms⁶³, and introducing gender and human rights-based approaches at the level of territorial communities⁶⁴. A separate area concerns the conduct of gender audits within organizations⁶⁵. To strengthen institutional capacity, a short-term professional training programme on conducting gender audits in state authorities and local self-government bodies has been approved⁶⁶.

The creation of family-friendly workplaces is also addressed through requirements to establish childcare rooms in institutions and organizations⁶⁷ and to provide facilities for breastfeeding. Labour legislation provides specific guarantees for women after childbirth⁶⁸. Women with children under the age of 1.5 are entitled to breaks for feeding the child at least every three hours, with a minimum duration of 30 minutes. These breaks are counted as working time and are fully paid.

These provisions establish the legal basis for combining childcare with professional activity. However, implementation remains uneven due to limited oversight, varying levels of awareness, and difficult operating conditions for enterprises, particularly small businesses, under martial law.

In the long term, improvements to Ukraine's labour legislation should be closely linked to the country's European integration course. The implementation of key EU directives in the field of labour law is a necessary condition for overcoming existing gaps in ensuring equality and non-discrimination of women with children in the labour market.

Social leave entitlements for parents:

Ukrainian term	EU equivalent	Duration	Eligibility	Payment and funding
Pregnancy and childbirth leave	Maternity leave	70 days before birth and 56–70 days after birth. Unused pre-birth leave can shift to after birth.	For mothers	Paid Funded by social insurance
Birth leave	Paternity leave	Up to 14 days	For fathers (male carers)	Paid Funded by employer
Adoption leave	Adoption leave	56–70 days	For one parent	Paid Funded by social insurance
Childcare leave	Parental leave	Granted after maternity (paternity or adoption) leave until the child turns 3. Extendable to 6 in special cases.	For any parent (carer)	Unpaid Job protected
Additional leave	Carers' leave ⁶⁹	10–17 days per year	For one parent with 2+ children under 15, a child with disability, an adopted child, or an adult child with a disability since childhood	Paid Funded by employer

Key parental leave reforms:**1991. Expanded protections beyond mothers**

In 1991, the Labour Code was supplemented with Article 186-1⁷⁰, which extended specific guarantees to fathers raising children without the mother, including in cases where the mother is undergoing long-term treatment in a medical institution, as well as to guardians and custodians. In 2010, these guarantees were further extended to foster parents. This reflects diverse family situations and aligns with UNICEF priorities on the protection of children's rights.

2021. Equalization of childcare leave rights for mothers and fathers

Child-related leave is regulated primarily through the Code of Laws on Labour and the Law on Leave.⁷¹ Ukraine's 2021 amendments⁷², introducing 14 days of paid paternity leave and equal childcare leave rights for fathers and mothers, reflect growing alignment with EU standards. This supports shared caregiving in law. In practice, take-up depends on income replacement, workplace norms, and employer behaviour.

2022. Extension of equal childcare leave rights to fathers in the military

This improved coverage during wartime, when many families face separation and unstable caregiving arrangements⁷³.

2023. Women's choice on when to start maternity leave

These changes allowed women to determine the start date of maternity leave if there are no medical contraindications⁷⁴. This can support women's autonomy and continuity of employment, especially when combined with annual leave.

2025. New family support law, effective from 2026

Parliament adopted amendments⁷⁵ to support families with children and help parents balance work and caregiving. Key changes include:

- Birth support increases to a one-time payment of UAH 50,000 for any child (used to be UAH 41,280). The right to receive the benefit is granted to one of the child's parents or to a guardian with whom the child permanently resides. An application for this benefit is submitted to the Pension Fund of Ukraine (PFU) or through the e-Maliatko service. If a child is born while the mother is abroad, the woman must submit legalized birth documents issued by the authorities of the country of residence to the PFU. For children under full state care, the benefit is credited to a deposit account and may be used after the child reaches the age of majority.
- Baby Package becomes more flexible and can be ordered from 36 weeks of pregnancy (used to be available only after childbirth). Parents will be able to choose between a cash benefit equal to three subsistence minimums for children under six years of age (8,451 UAH in 2026) or an in-kind package.

- Prenatal support is introduced for uninsured pregnant women in the amount of 7,000 UAH per child. Military personnel, police officers, and other special categories are entitled to 100 percent of their average monthly monetary allowance. The benefit will be paid for 70 days before childbirth and 56 days after childbirth, or 70 days after childbirth in cases of complicated delivery or the birth of twins or triplets. Women affected by the Chernobyl nuclear accident are entitled to support for 180 days of leave.
- A childcare allowance for children under one year of age is being introduced in the amount of 7,000 UAH per month, while families raising a child with a disability will receive 10,500 UAH, applying a coefficient of 1.5.
- eYasla (eNursery) for ages one to three, UAH 8,000 per month, or UAH 12,000 for a child with disability, for a parent who returns to full-time work. eYasla programme was launched to support mothers or other legal representatives who return to full-time employment after a child reaches the age of one. It forms part of a broader policy to help balance work and parenthood and provides financial compensation for childcare costs for children aged one to three. The programme is available to parents who were caring for the child and resume full-time work, while excluding foster parents and institutional guardians. Childcare services can be provided by registered private providers or public and municipal educational institutions. The monthly benefit amounts for families raising a child with a disability, and is paid until the child turns three.
- eSadok (eKindergarten) for ages three to six, and for children with special educational needs (SEN) up to seven or eight, planned for 2028. The eSadok programme aims to support parents of children aged three to six when a community cannot provide a full-day kindergarten place. In such cases, families will receive a monthly benefit of 8,000 UAH, similar to the e-Yasla programme. Unlike e-Yasla, the payments will be financed from local budgets rather than the state budget. The benefit will be available only to parents in full-time employment and will end once the child is enrolled in a kindergarten or reaches the age of six.
- School Student Package, a universal UAH 5,000 one-time payment for first-graders. Oversight of the targeted use of funds will be carried out by the National Social Service. Applications can be submitted via Diia or the Pension Fund of Ukraine. Applications for first-grade pupils for the 2026/27 school year will open in summer 2026.

New government programmes form a continuous system of support for families, covering the period from a child's birth to school age, and aim to develop high-quality educational services and strengthen community capacity.

Recent reforms represent important progress in supporting women's return to work after childbirth and strengthening the link between care, employment and social protection. They provide more predictable early cash support for families at the time of childbirth and extend new coverage to uninsured women, reducing the risk of extreme vulnerability. The reforms also send a strong policy signal: **combining paid work and childcare requires active public support, not only private solutions**, and women's return to employment after childbirth is a public priority. Importantly, they recognise formal employment as the key pathway to ensuring decent working conditions and generating the tax revenues and social security contributions needed to sustain the social protection system over time.

In addition, eligibility for eYasla and eSadok is currently limited to parents who personally provided childcare and then returned to full-time employment. In practice, this tends to benefit primarily women who were formally employed before childbirth. Women who are job-seeking or who have been economically inactive for longer periods may struggle to qualify, particularly in the absence of sufficiently developed retraining, adult education and labour market reintegration programmes to support their return to work.

Finally, linking support exclusively to full-time employment may unintentionally exclude parents engaged in part-time, flexible or informal work. These are common realities for mothers of young children. Addressing this design challenge will be important to avoid reinforcing existing labour market inequalities and to ensure that low-income families and women furthest from employment are not left behind.

Overall, Ukraine provides a wide range of leave entitlements. The main gaps relate to pay (e.g., paid childcare leave), incentives for fathers (e.g., use-it-or-lose-it non-transferable quota) and enforceable flexibility rights.

Early childhood education and care reform

2019. Municipal Nanny programme started to reimburse childcare costs

Eligibility has narrowed and expanded across years, with expansions in 2024 for IDPs and for families in communities where preschools cannot operate safely^{76,77}. Support can stop once kindergartens resume,

which creates instability⁷⁸. From 2026 onward, eYasla and eSadok introduce broader instruments, but with strong conditions linked to full-time employment.

2024. New preschool law and reform initiatives

A new Law on Preschool Education⁷⁹ was adopted, replacing the 2001 law. It modernises system organisation, roles and responsibilities, quality assurance, financing and licensing, including alternative service models. It also strengthens previously underregulated areas, including parental involvement, teacher training, and clearer rules for the licensing and operating alternative providers⁸⁰.

At the same time, the law declares important guarantees, such as equal access to free preschool education and safe, healthy learning environments, but it does not always define enforceable mechanisms. There is still no statutory entitlement to a place for children under three and no mandate to monitor participation in compulsory preschool, which leaves gaps in enforcement and in guaranteed access to ECEC.

Also, decentralized financing leaves hromadas with uneven capacity, creating geographic inequality in access and quality. Rigid secondary rules and infrastructure requirements can block flexible, lower-cost service models. Evaluation requirements are vague and there is no clear legal obligation to correct identified disadvantages⁸¹.

2025. Sector reform acceleration

The Ministry of Education and Science launched a reform of early childhood education, including the development of a Strategic Framework and an investment agenda⁸². A large partner alliance launched “First Steps Forward” support to transform preschool education, including UNICEF, ILO and other international partners.

ECEC reforms are central to UNICEF’s and ILO’s agenda because they influence both children’s early development and mothers’ ability to remain in or return to employment. Expanding recognition of alternative ECEC models can widen access to early learning, play and support from trained staff, while giving families more options that fit different working patterns.

Ukraine has launched important reforms, yet access to services, financing and enforcement remain uneven. The current system does not consistently enable mothers’ timely return to work, especially for families with children under three. War-related disruption, shelter shortages and local budget constraints deepen regional disparities, especially in areas closer to the frontline. Although cooperation with employers and community actors is recognised in policy discussions, incentives for employer-supported childcare and family-friendly workplaces remain limited, and ECEC development often competes with urgent security and macroeconomic priorities.

Ensuring that rights translate into real opportunities will require clearer service entitlements and stable financing arrangements, including transparent budget formulas and co-financing models that protect access for children under three and vulnerable families. Stronger implementation mechanisms, clearer accountability, predictable funding and improved communication with local communities are equally important. Progress will also depend on closer alignment across parental leave, flexible work arrangements, social protection, labour rights and childcare provision so that families can realistically combine employment with care responsibilities.

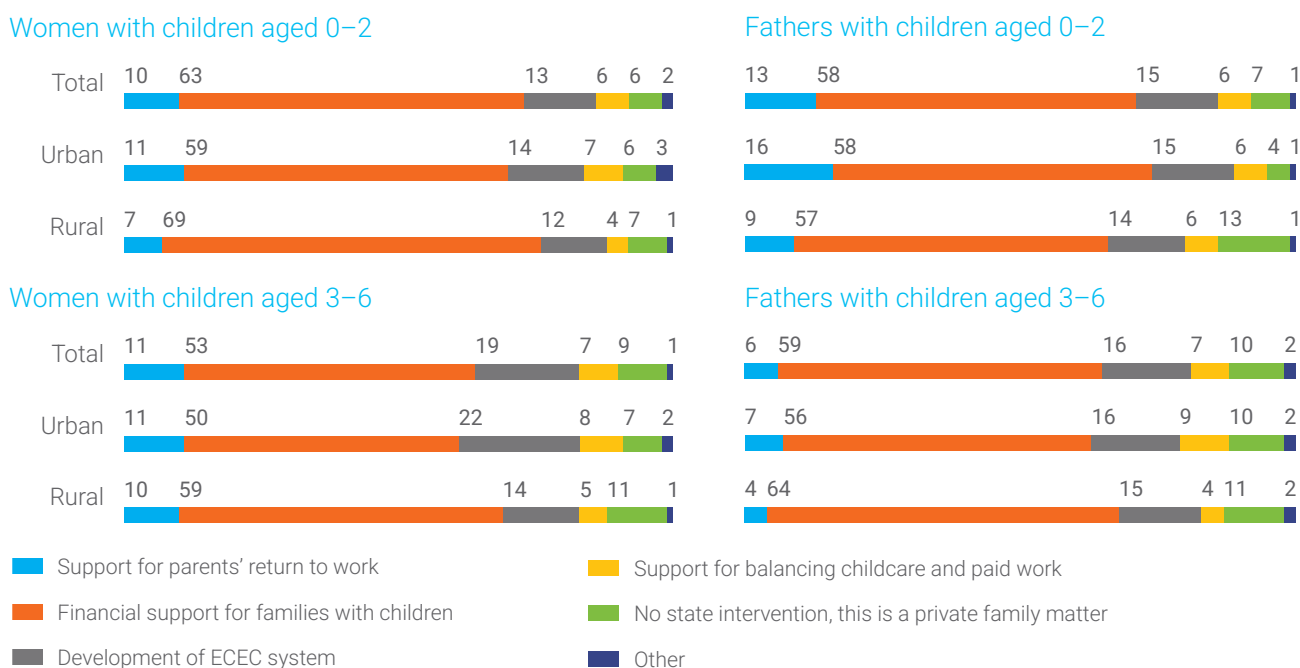
In summary, Ukraine has established a broad legal and policy framework to support gender equality, family well-being, and access to early childhood education and care. This framework draws on international human rights commitments, EU integration requirements, and national reform initiatives. It includes gender equality strategies, labour protections, parental leave entitlements, social protection measures and recent reforms of the ECEC system. However, the effectiveness of this framework depends on implementation, financing, and institutional coordination. War conditions, decentralised service provision and uneven enforcement continue to limit access to services and protections, particularly for mothers with young children and families in vulnerable situations. Strengthening accountability, expanding childcare access, ensuring stable funding, and aligning labour, social and education policies will be critical to translate formal commitments into practical support for working families.

1.3. Parents' and employers' perceptions of family-friendly policies

Parents' perspectives: what families need most

Our survey shows a clear message from parents of children aged 0–6. The data reveal that **financial support for families is seen as the top priority for state policy** by most parents. This preference is strongest among mothers of children aged 0–2, rural residents, mothers with multiple children and single mothers (Figure 1.1). These groups face higher economic vulnerability and fewer employment options, so immediate cash support is seen as the most urgent form of help.

Figure 1.1. Parents' priorities for state support for families with children aged 0–6, %



Notably, the **importance of financial assistance rises with family size**. Among mothers with one child, 57 per cent prioritised financial support. This share increased to 63 per cent among mothers with three children and reached 86 per cent among mothers with four children.

Urban mothers of children aged 3–6 show a different pattern. **More urban women prioritise ECEC services compared to rural women**. Financial assistance remains important for them at 50 per cent, but almost one in four prioritises expanding ECEC services. This reflects persistent access constraints in cities, including long waiting lists and shortages of kindergarten places.

In rural areas, limited availability of local jobs weakens the practical benefit of childcare services. When employment opportunities are scarce, access to childcare does not translate into paid work, making cash support a more relevant priority for families.

In urban areas, where labour demand is higher, access to childcare is a stronger priority because it directly enables women's participation in paid work.

The survey also shows clear differences by employment status. **Employed mothers were more likely to identify the development of ECEC as a top policy priority** than non-employed mothers, at 21 per cent compared to 15 per cent. Regional differences are also pronounced. Respondents from the eastern region, where ECEC systems have suffered severe damage due to military hostilities and where preschool institutions in some areas are not operating at all, more frequently prioritised the development of these

services. The same pattern is observed in the western region, where systems are under pressure due to better demographic dynamics and a large inflow of internally displaced persons.

Men are more likely than women to oppose state involvement in childcare and to frame it as a private family matter. This attitude is especially pronounced among rural parents of children aged 0–2, where nearly twice as many of men as women believe that the state should not interfere in child rearing.

These attitudes are rooted in persistent gender norms. Many men continue to see themselves primarily as breadwinners rather than caregivers. As a result, childcare is often viewed as a private responsibility of women rather than a shared societal and policy concern. This reduces men's support for family-friendly policies and limits recognition of the broader social and economic value of childcare services.

Addressing this gap requires more than expanding services. **Policy communication must actively reframe childcare as a public concern** that benefits children, mothers fathers, and society as a whole. It must also challenge stereotypes that position care as women's work and engage fathers directly as caregivers and stakeholders in family policy. Shifting norms alongside policy reform is essential, particularly at the community level.

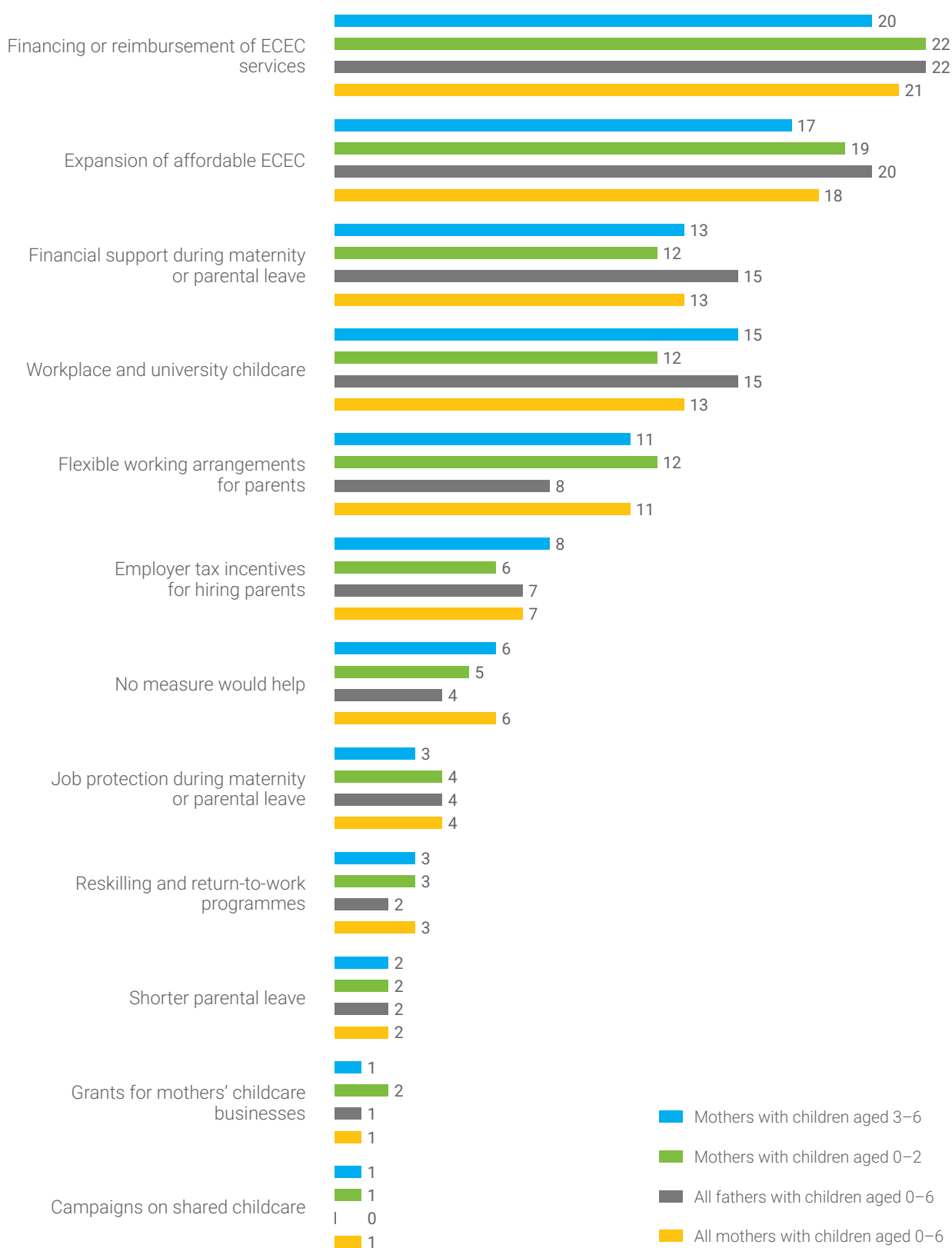
Around **one in ten parents prioritise policies that encourage faster return to work**. Overall, survey findings align with other national studies⁸³. Families increasingly value immediate, tangible support, which reflects prolonged economic instability, reduced trust in institutions, and the impact of full-scale war on household incomes. This underscores the need to combine income support with quality ECEC services and family-friendly labour market practices. These measures must work together, not replace one another.

When asked **how state policy should support mothers' employment**, parents most often pointed to:

- Financial compensation for childcare costs, the most popular option among both mothers and fathers – around 21 per cent.
- Expansion of accessible ECEC services, 20 per cent of men, 18 per cent of women.
- Financial support during maternity or parental leave, 15 per cent of men, 13 per cent of women.
- Workplace-based childcare provision, most often mentioned by mothers of children aged 3–6.
- Support for flexible forms of employment, especially for mothers of children aged 0–2, 12 per cent of their responses.

Together, these options account for about two thirds of all responses, suggesting strong demand for measures that directly support combining paid work and childcare, such as ECEC services and financial relief. Men's and women's views on this issue are largely aligned (Figure 1.2).

The option "Nothing will help" was chosen by a small minority (6 per cent of mothers and 4 per cent of fathers), which suggests broad recognition that public policy can improve work-family balance.

Figure 1.2. Parents' priorities for state policy measures to support mothers' return to work, per cent

Views of parents of children with disabilities and SEN

Focus group discussions reveal the **most severe barriers among families raising children with disabilities or special educational needs (SEN)**. Most mothers in these families cannot engage in regular paid work because specialized services and inclusive care are largely unavailable. Care responsibilities fall almost entirely on families, often on mothers, with minimal respite or institutional support.

Participants stressed that their children require individualized care. In practice, state guarantees remain largely formal. **Service delivery is not designed to free parents' time for paid employment.** As a result, care is provided mainly through families' own efforts rather than clear and accessible public mechanisms.



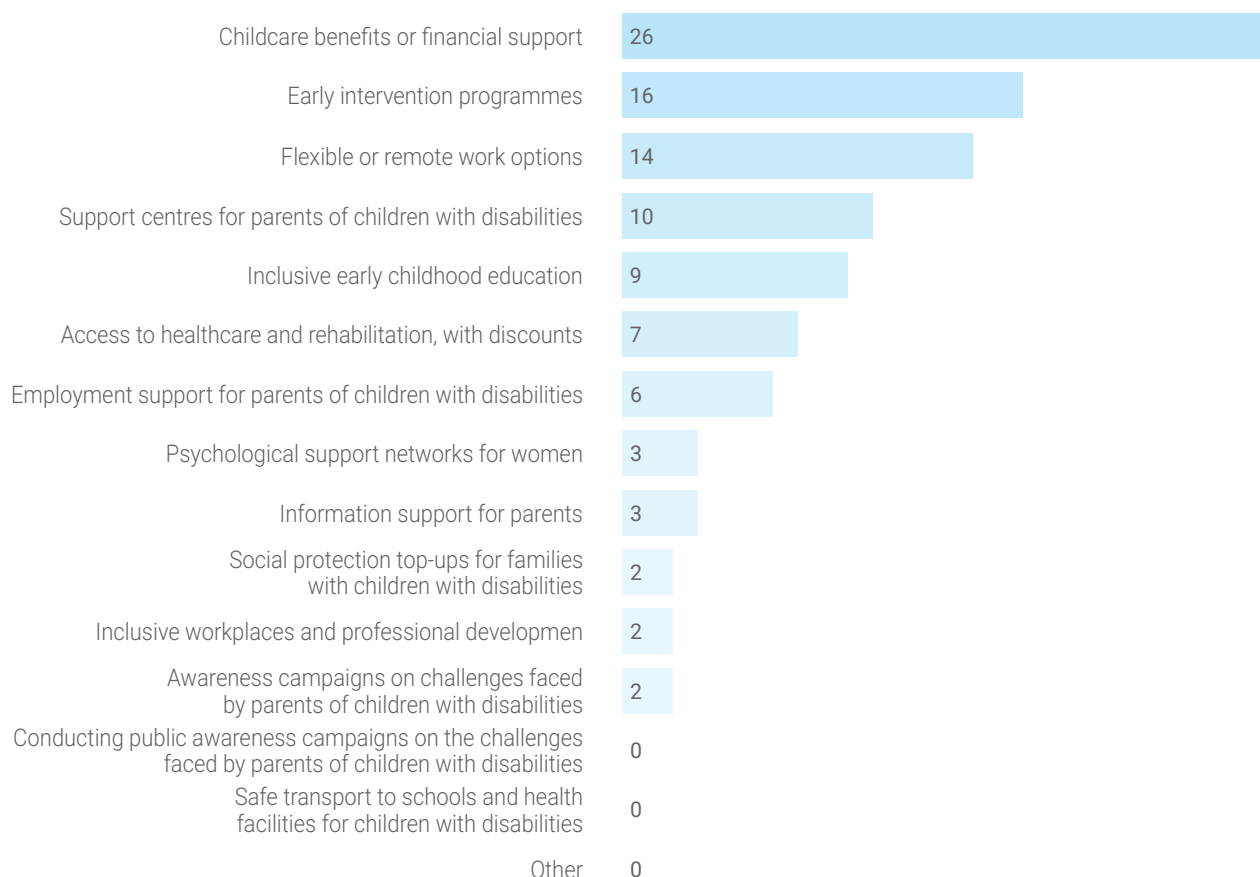
The best thing for a child is, of course, to be in a comfortable environment all day, and for a mother, to be able to work. But until you find an environment where your child feels happy and can develop, you can lose a lot of time. Mothers who constantly take their children to rehabilitation or additional classes spend all their time on this and are effectively unable to work.

Mother of a child with a disability

When asked **what would help their professional and personal development**, these mothers most often cited (Figure 1.3):

- Financial support
- Development of specialized services and infrastructure
- Flexible working arrangements

Figure 1.3. Mothers' priorities for additional state actions to support their professional and personal growth, per cent



These answers reflect the key barriers faced by these families: limited resources, the difficulty of combining care and work and insufficient access to institutional support.

For these families, general family policy support is insufficient. Without inclusive services and respite solutions, broader measures do not translate into real employment opportunities.

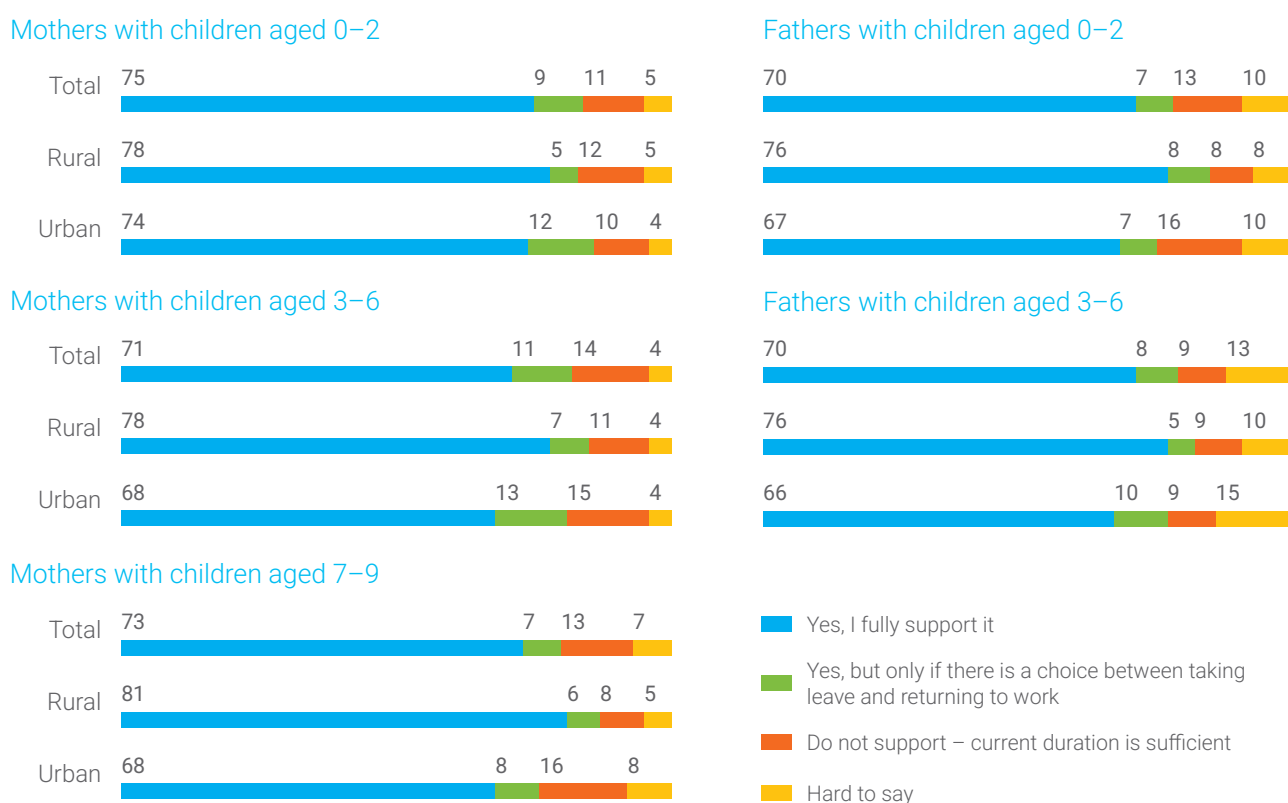
Views on maternity and parental leave

International experience shows that women's return to work depends not only on labour market conditions, but also on how parental leave is designed. The balance between leave duration, level of pay and access to ECEC services is critical. **Well-designed systems support women's timely return to employment while ensuring adequate care in a child's early years.**

Leave that is too short can undermine breastfeeding and early bonding. Leave that is too long often disrupts women's careers and widens gender gaps in employment, pay and pensions. **Policies that require part of the leave to be shared between mothers and fathers are especially important**, as they promote a more equal distribution of care responsibilities within families⁸⁴.

Most women and men support extending maternity leave to allow six months of exclusive breastfeeding. Support is strongest among mothers of younger children. Urban mothers of children aged 3–6 express more mixed views, with some preferring choice between extended leave and earlier return to work: 15 per cent consider the current duration to be sufficient, while another 13 per cent support an increase only if there is a choice (Figure 1.4). This reflects diverse employment needs and childcare constraints.

Figure 1.4. Mothers' support for extending maternity leave from 140 to 250 days to allow 6 months of exclusive breastfeeding, per cent



Focus group discussions show **strong resistance to early return to work**, such as 3–6 months after childbirth. Many mothers believe staying with the child is best for early bonding and breastfeeding. Fathers are often perceived as less capable caregivers, reflecting persistent gender norms.

During the discussions, mothers also emphasized the **importance of a minimum period of continuous mother-child contact**. Participants generally agreed that combining childcare and paid work before the

child reaches about 1.5 to 2 years of age is unrealistic. After that stage, most mothers considered returning to work feasible, although they stressed that the transition should be gradual and adaptive and take into account the individual needs of each child.

In their view, the ideal policy combination would **allow mothers to focus fully on the child during the first 1.5 years**, supported financially by the father, the state, or a combination of both. After this period, if ECEC services are available, mothers could gradually return to work with flexible schedules and would no longer require social benefits.

As one participant explained:



Give a woman the first 1.5 years to focus on caring for her child without worrying about how the family will survive or make ends meet. After that, she will return to work more calmly and productively. Right now, the situation is neither one thing nor the other. Social support is minimal, and finding a stable job is still difficult. It only creates unnecessary stress and wasted energy.

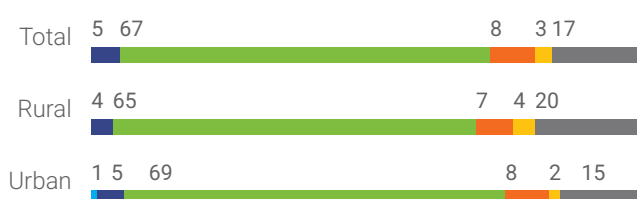
Mother of a 2-year-old

On parental leave length, survey data show conservative preferences. **Most parents support maintaining leave up to three years** or even extending it. Around 20 per cent of mothers of children aged 3 to 6 consider it appropriate to extend leave to six years (Figure 1.5). This share rises to more than one third, at 35 per cent, among non-employed mothers. Only a small share favours shorter leave.

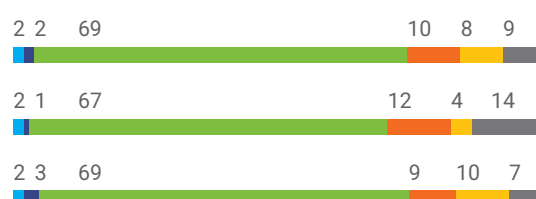
Notably, parents in rural areas are more likely than those in urban areas to support extending the duration of parental leave. This may reflect more persistent traditional views that position women primarily as homemakers, caregivers and children's educators.

Figure 1.5. Parents' preferred duration of parental leave, per cent

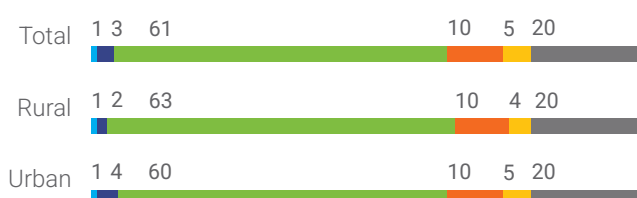
Mothers with children aged 0–2



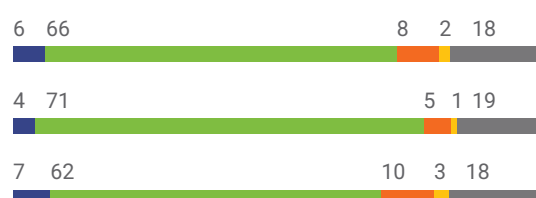
Fathers with children aged 0–2



Mothers with children aged 3–6



Fathers with children aged 3–6



Up to age 1 Up to age 2 Up to age 3 Up to age 4 Up to age 5 Up to age 6

Focus group discussions with mothers highlight strong preferences for parental care in the first years of life, alongside conditional openness to ECEC services as children grow older.



Up to the age of two, a child should stay with their family. I know that in other countries it is common to send very young children to state institutions. But I believe a child should be with their parents until the age of three, except in certain cases. And when my child is between 3 and 6, I will be happy to enrol them in kindergarten.

Mother of a 2-year-old

I think it is not a good idea for mothers to return to work too soon. You can work from home for a few hours a day, but it's better for a child to stay with their mother until they are two. If finances allow, it's best to wait until then.

Mother of a 4-month-old

Mothers can go back to work once breastfeeding ends. The child can then stay with a nanny, grandmother or in kindergarten. I was ready to send my child to kindergarten at 18 months, but because of the war, I had to stay home longer.

Mother of a 4-year-old

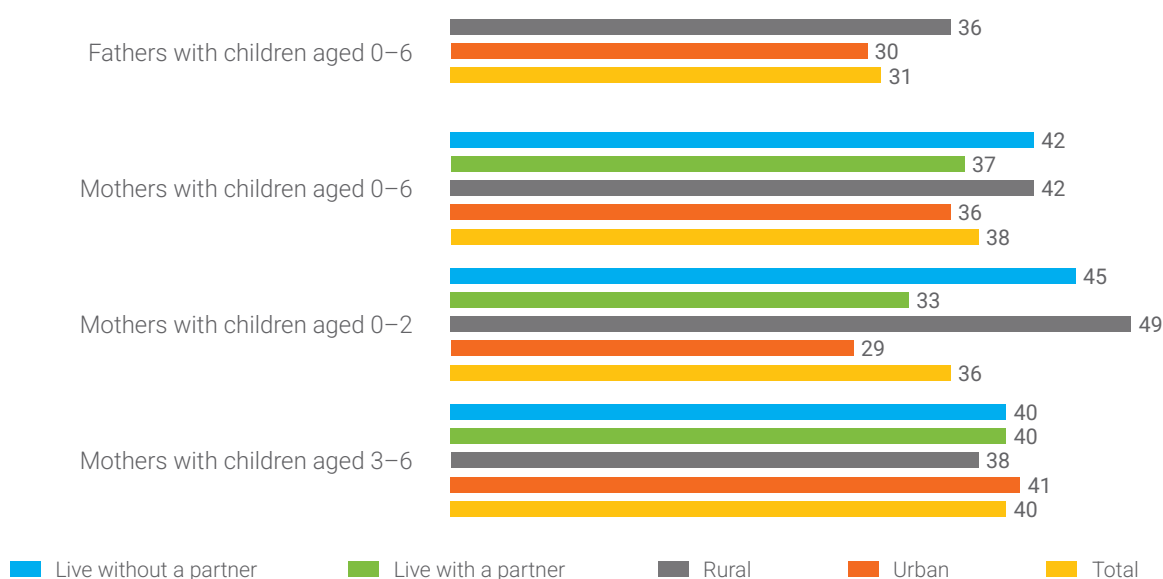
Although parental leave is unpaid, many women view its existence as a safety net, even if they do not plan to use the full period. The full-scale war complicated the situation: the closure of kindergartens and the need to ensure the safety of children forced some mothers to stay on leave longer than they had originally planned.

When asked **under what conditions they would accept shorter parental leave**, most parents pointed to a clear set of requirements. These include:

- Access to a well-paid job
- Flexible working hours
- High-quality and safe ECEC services
- State financial support upon return to work

This suggests space for dialogue on reform, but only if compensatory measures are credible.

At the same time, 38 per cent of women and 31 per cent of men with children aged 0–6 said they would **strongly refuse to shorten leave under any circumstances**. This view was most common among rural residents with children aged 0–2 and among single mothers (Figure 1.6).

Figure 1.6. Share of parents who strongly oppose reducing parental leave from 3 to 1.5 years, per cent

Resistance to shorter leave is also higher among non-employed mothers, at 44 per cent, compared to 29 per cent among employed mothers. Strong opposition is particularly pronounced in the central region, at 52 per cent, and the eastern region, at 45 per cent.

Experience with ECEC services appears to shape attitudes. Among mothers who have used ECEC services, only 30 per cent strongly oppose reducing leave, compared to 47 per cent among mothers without such experience. This suggests that direct experience helps mothers see how access to quality childcare can support combining paid work with caregiving.

Legal changes introduced in 2021 equalized fathers' and mothers' rights to childcare leave. Awareness is now high, and social attitudes have shifted.

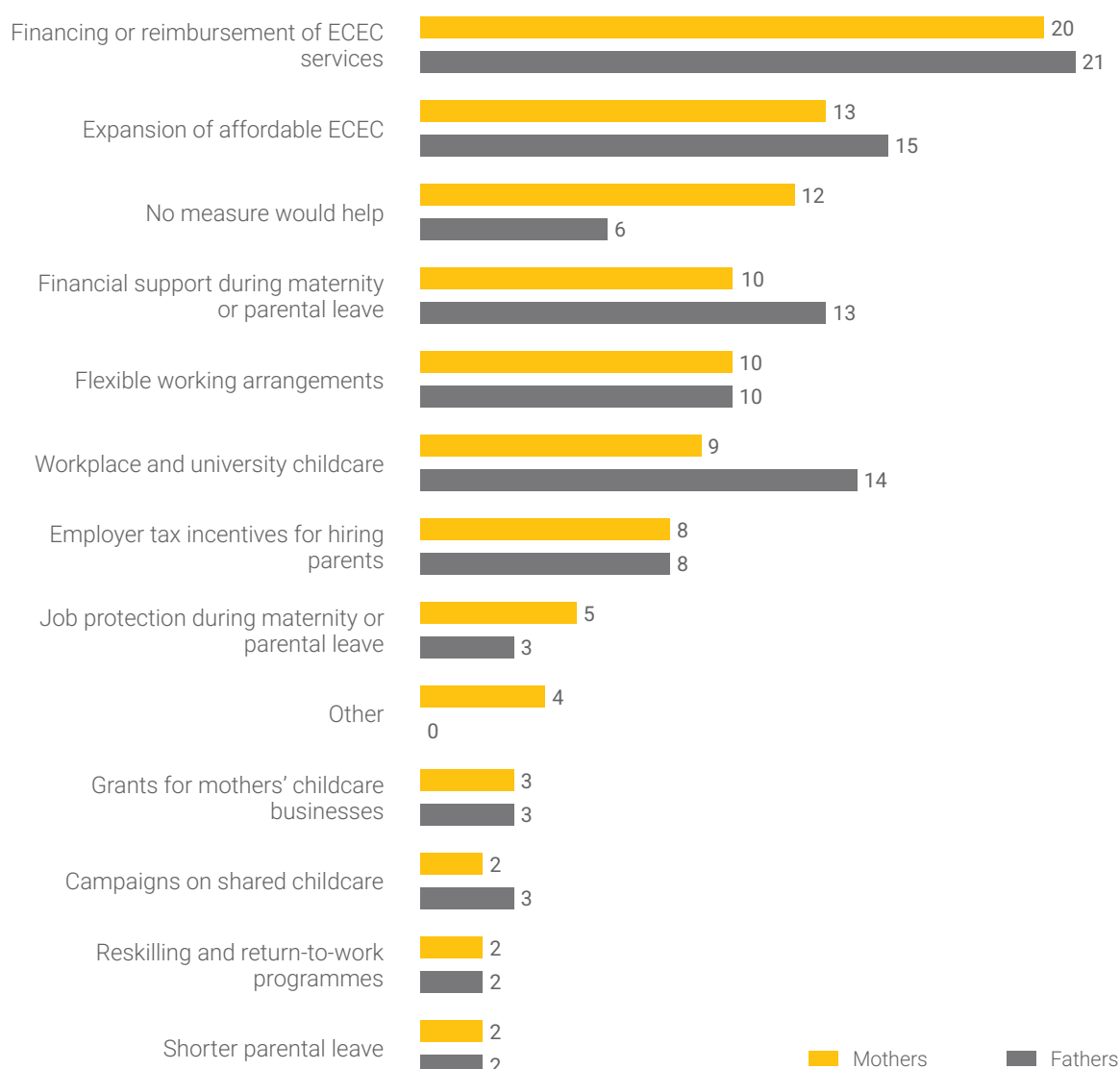
Most women and men, 90 per cent and 80 per cent respectively, are aware of fathers' entitlement to childcare leave. Public acceptance is high, with only 6 per cent of respondents expressing negative attitudes.

Half of fathers report a willingness to take at least one month of leave, representing a substantial increase compared to 2020⁸⁵.

Despite this acceptance, **fathers' actual uptake of parental leave remains low**⁸⁶. This gap reflects structural barriers, including unpaid leave, workplace norms and weak incentives. It also points to the need to further challenge gender stereotypes and to introduce measures that support a more equal sharing of care responsibilities.

Parents identify the **strongest incentives for fathers' involvement** as:

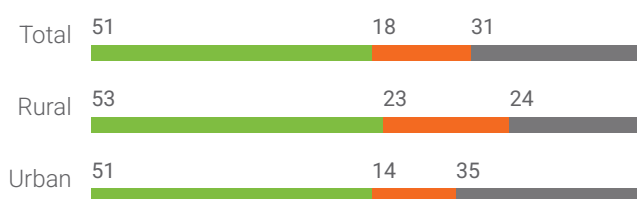
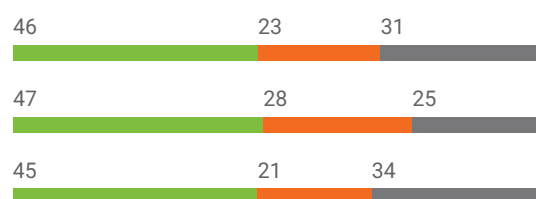
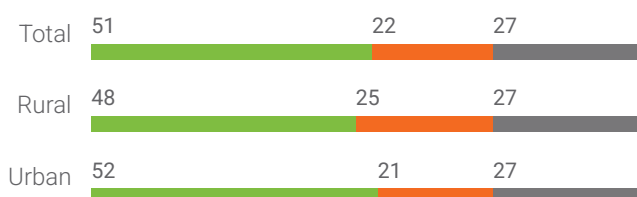
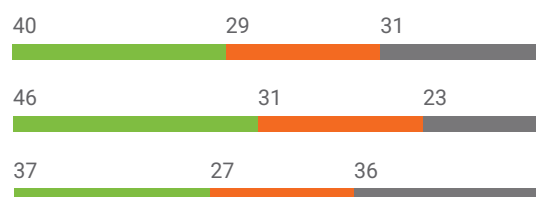
- Financial support during parental leave
- Affordable childcare services
- Flexible employment for both parents (Figure 1.7).

Figure 1.7. Parents' priorities for state policy measures to encourage fathers' participation in childcare, per cent

Mothers of children aged 7–9 more often point to employer incentives, such as benefits or tax breaks for companies that employ parents with young children.

At the same time, **a notable share of women express scepticism about the possibility of change.** Nearly 13 per cent of mothers with children aged 0–2 and 3–6 and 10 per cent of mothers with children aged 7–9 believe that no measures would help. **This view is more common in rural areas than in urban settings.** Among women with children aged 0–2, 17 per cent in rural areas selected this option compared to 11 per cent in cities. This pattern further corroborates earlier findings on the stronger persistence of gender stereotypes around caregiving roles in rural communities. Among men, the proportion of those who believe that no measures will help is lower at 6 per cent, likely reflecting uncertainty rather than firm opposition.

About half of respondents support introducing non-transferable leave quotas for each parent, pointing to recognition of the unequal share of childcare responsibilities carried by women and the need for greater involvement of men. **Support among women rises with family size.** It stands at 49 per cent among women with one child, 55 per cent among women with two children, and exceeds 70 per cent among women with three or more children. Around 30 per cent of respondents remain undecided, which suggests information gaps rather than firm opposition (Figure 1.8).

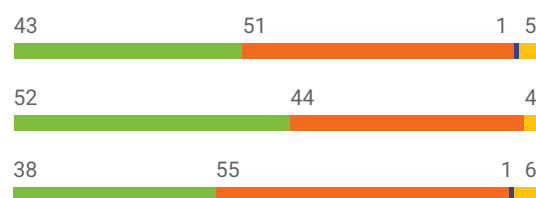
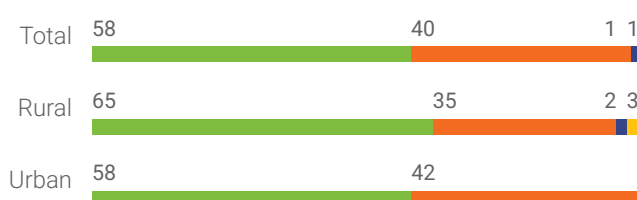
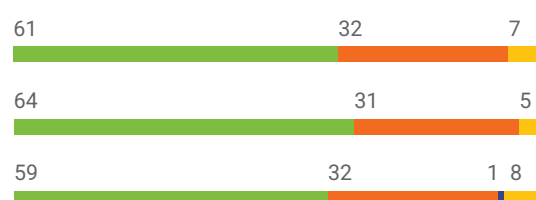
Figure 1.8. Parents' attitudes toward sharing parental leave between mothers and fathers, per cent**Mothers with children aged 0–2****Fathers with children aged 0–2****Mothers with children aged 3–6****Fathers with children aged 3–6**

Positively Negatively Hard to say

Clear regional differences are observed. **In the western and southern regions, the majority of both women and men expressed a positive attitude towards non-transferable quotas.** In other regions, support does not exceed half of respondents. This likely reflects greater familiarity in the western and southern regions with similar practices common in European countries, linked to higher levels of labour migration abroad.

About 20 per cent of respondents expressed a negative attitude. Opposition is more common among rural residents, particularly mothers with children aged 0–2, at 23 per cent compared to 14 per cent in urban areas. Negative views are also more prevalent among women raising children without a partner. Regardless of the child's age or place of residence, **negative attitudes towards mandatory sharing of parental leave are consistently more common among men than among women.**

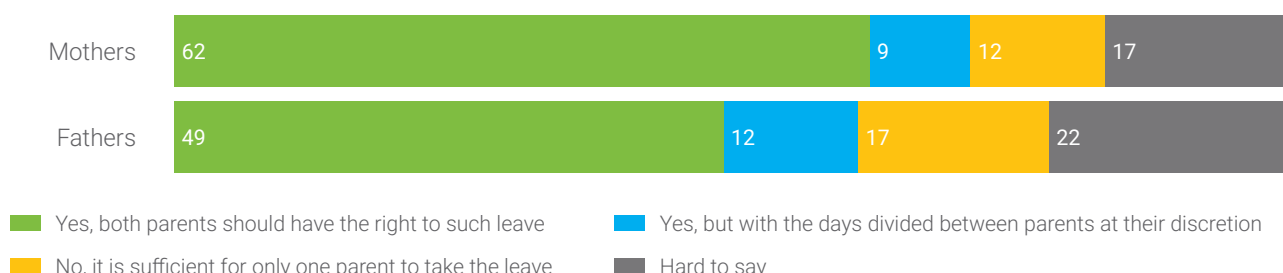
Among supporters, **most favour equal sharing of parental leave.** At the same time, a significant proportion lean towards a 70 to 30 split in favour of mothers. On average, this model is supported by about 39 per cent of respondents. **The highest rate, 55 per cent, is observed among urban men with children aged 0–2.** Support for a 30 to 70 split in favour of fathers or for other arrangements remains minimal (Figure 1.9).

Figure 1.9. Parents' preferences for sharing parental leave between parents, among respondents who support shared leave, per cent**Mothers with children aged 0–2****Fathers with children aged 0–2****Mothers with children aged 3–6****Fathers with children aged 3–6**

50% mother, 50% father 70% mother, 30% father 30% mother, 70% father In another way

Support for giving adoption leave to both parents is also strong, though many respondents remain undecided due to limited personal relevance (Figure 1.10).

Figure 1.10. Parents' support for providing adoption leave to both parents, rather than to only one parent as is currently the case, per cent



Employers' perspectives: support with limits

Focus group discussions and the survey show that **women place strong emphasis on flexible working arrangements**, including remote work, flexible hours and support for breastfeeding. These measures are seen as core elements of family-friendly policy. Mothers who have access to remote work describe it as one of the most effective ways to combine paid employment with caregiving.



It so happened that I could work remotely. There are no obstacles to my work now. I can work from anywhere. My employer has taken care of this because I am a valuable employee to them. We are aligned on this issue.

Mother of a 1-year-old

The scope for flexible work largely depends on employer practices and on how effectively government policy encourages family-friendly approaches. In in-depth interviews, **most employers reported that maternity leave does not pose a major challenge**. In large companies, temporary absence due to maternity leave is treated as normal. At the same time, **employers tend to oppose extending maternity or parental leave**, viewing longer leave as excessive paternalism and a potential driver of higher tax burdens.



The maternity and parental leave is long enough as it is. Increasing it will affect the economy and harm a society that is not ready to pay high taxes.

Employer, HR

The main barrier to women entering the workforce is not the duration of leave, but the lack of external childcare. If the state invests in kindergartens or subsidizes the private sector, it will really help.

Employer, IT

Most employers argue that the main barrier to women's employment is lack of childcare services, not leave duration. They support expanding access to childcare through public kindergartens or partnerships with private providers.

Many employers report offering flexible schedules and remote work, which they see as the most practical support for employees with young children. Additional benefits, such as covering childcare costs or hiring nannies, are rare. One-off payments, gifts for children or limited leave benefits are generally framed as corporate loyalty measures rather than standard employment practices.



Women are most attracted by flexible schedules and the ability to shift their workload throughout the day. This is even more important than health insurance or bonuses.

Employer, IT

I had an employee who started at 9 a.m. because she had to take her child to kindergarten. She still fully met her quota. This shows that a flexible schedule does not harm productivity.

Employer, healthcare

From parents' perspective, such examples remain exceptions. **Mothers report widespread discrimination in hiring and at work**, especially in the private sector. Employers often avoid hiring mothers due to concerns about sick leave, replacements and dismissal restrictions.

In summary, parents' and employers' perspectives highlight strong demand for family-friendly policies but also reveal differences in priorities and expectations. Parents most often emphasize financial support, accessible and affordable childcare, and flexible work arrangements as essential conditions for combining paid work and caregiving. At the same time, many families remain cautious about reforms that could reduce existing leave protections and continue to favour longer parental leave and family-based care in early childhood, reflecting economic constraints and persistent gender norms. Employers generally accept existing guarantees but are more reluctant to expand leave entitlements, placing greater emphasis on improving childcare infrastructure and maintaining labour market flexibility. Overall, the findings suggest that parents view current measures as insufficient, citing limited state support and experiences of workplace discrimination, while employers highlight service provision as the main priority. Advancing family-friendly policy will therefore require an integrated approach that combines income support, accessible and inclusive ECEC services, stronger incentives for fathers' caregiving, and enforceable workplace practices that enable families to balance work and care.

CHAPTER

2



ECONOMIC SITUATION OF
FAMILIES AND MOTHERS'
EMPLOYMENT

Chapter 2.

Economic situation of families and mothers' employment

This chapter examines the economic realities faced by families with young children in Ukraine and how these conditions shape mothers' participation in the labour market. It identifies key economic barriers and enabling factors that affect women's employment opportunities.

2.1. Economic vulnerability of households with young children

Families with young children were among the most economically vulnerable groups in Ukraine even before the full-scale war. The war sharply deepened this vulnerability. For many families today, a single shock, illness, job loss, displacement can push them into crisis. Behind the figures are parents struggling to provide stability for their children in extremely fragile conditions.

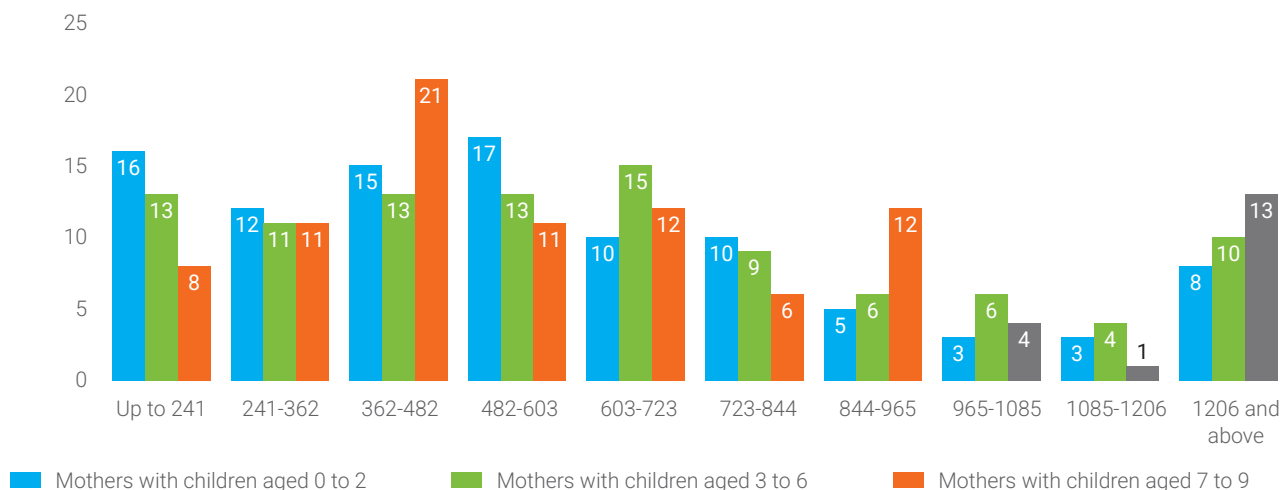
Income insecurity, amplified by war

Before the war, **families with children already had weaker economic positions than households without children**⁸². In 2021, their per capita expenditures were only about three quarters of those of households without children.

Although nominal incomes rose slightly compared to 2020, real income growth in comparable prices was minimal. Households with children saw an average real increase of only UAH 987 (roughly USD 35 at the time), compared to UAH 1,808 (about USD 65 at the time) among households without children. This slower income growth widened the gap in income security and left families with children more exposed to economic shocks.

The war magnified these inequalities. **Families with young children now face higher costs, disrupted jobs and reduced access to services, all at once.** This has direct consequences for women's economic empowerment, since financial pressure and care demands tend to fall most heavily on mothers.

Our survey shows a widespread income strain. Most families with children under 10 live on less than UAH 25,000 (about USD 600) per month, while more than one quarter of families with children aged 0-6 survive on less than UAH 15,000 (roughly USD 360) per month (Figure 2.1).

Figure 2.1. Families' total monthly income over the last three months, USD

Families with children depend heavily on wages. Around 72 per cent of their income comes from paid work, compared to about 54 per cent for households without children. This makes them especially vulnerable to job loss, reduced hours or unstable employment. When work disappears, there are few buffers.

Households with young children have very limited financial reserves, undermining their resilience in volatile conditions. In 2023, **only 1 per cent of families with young children have savings sufficient to cover one year of basic needs**, while about 15 per cent have savings that would last less than one month⁸⁸. At the same time, nearly **one in five families with children under seven carry debts**, compared to just over one in ten households without children, further constraining their ability to absorb shocks⁸⁹.

The **war has triggered a dramatic surge in child poverty**, particularly among families with young children⁹⁰. Experts estimate that child poverty rose from 43 per cent in 2021 to 65 per cent in 2022⁹¹. UNICEF data confirm that around 65 per cent of children were living in poverty in 2023⁹².

According to our survey, **material deprivation is especially high among families with children aged 3–6**. One in five children cannot afford paid activities in childcare or early education. Around 11 per cent cannot host friends at home or afford summer recreation. In practical terms, this means many young children miss opportunities for learning, play and social interaction at a critical stage of development due to household poverty.

A detailed analysis of household composition shows that the **key factor shaping financial stability for families with children aged 0–9 is the presence of a partner**. Among single women, 48 per cent of families have monthly incomes below UAH 15,000 (roughly USD 360), compared to 14 per cent among two-parent families. So, the **burden is heaviest for single-parent families**, most of them headed by women. These mothers carry full responsibility for both income and care, often with limited support. They report greater difficulty affording adequate nutrition and basic needs for their children. Social assistance plays a larger role here, but still rarely compensates for the loss of a second income or access to affordable childcare. This points to the need for targeted support to single mothers.

Income inequality has widened sharply. In Ukraine, the Gini coefficient⁹³ increased from 0.237 in 2021 to 0.461 in 2023, nearly doubling over two years⁹⁴. This rise in inequality has likely worsened the economic situation of households with children aged 0–6, who are among the most affected⁹⁵.

Regional disparities reinforce these inequalities. **In eastern and southern regions affected by hostilities, families report greater difficulty paying for utilities** and accessing health and education services⁹⁶. In 2023, maternal and newborn healthcare coverage remains high nationally (89 per cent) but drops significantly in conflict-affected areas (e.g., Donetsk and Kherson)⁹⁷.

Because local governments finance about 90 per cent of social services, shrinking local budgets have translated into uneven access to kindergartens and healthcare. Many rural or war-torn communities have seen childcare centres close or struggle. Moreover, in villages, the risk of low income is 1.5 times higher than in cities. Where a family lives increasingly determines what support their child receives.

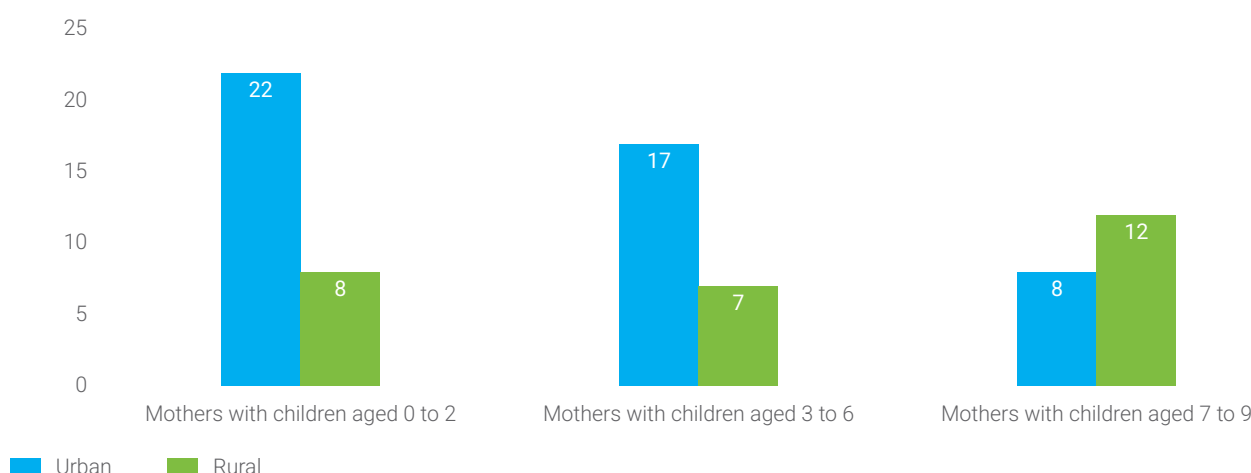
Housing insecurity and displacement

Housing has become a major source of financial stress. The **war has damaged or destroyed at least 2 million homes**, around 10 per cent of the housing stock, forcing many families into rental accommodation and increasing financial pressure.

Families with children live in more constrained housing conditions, with roughly half the living space per person compared to households without children. In 2023, the average household had 2.62 rooms, yet households with children faced clear overcrowding, with only 0.83 rooms per person compared to 1.63 in households without children⁹⁸. Housing costs further intensify this pressure. In 2024, 42 per cent of households spent more than 30 per cent of their income on housing, exceeding the affordability threshold⁹⁹. For families with children aged 0–6, even in two-parent households, the additional burden of renting often becomes critical.

Our survey data show a clear **rise in renting among families with young children, especially in urban areas**. In 2025, the share of rented housing among households with children aged 0–9 ranged from 8 to 22 per cent in cities and from 7 to 12 per cent in rural areas, depending on the age of the child (Figure 2.2).

Figure 2.2. Share of mothers with children aged 0–9 living in rented accommodation, per cent



This trend is closely linked to displacement following the full-scale invasion. In 2025, internally displaced women made up around 11 per cent of those with children aged 0–2, compared with 8 per cent among those with children aged 3–6 and about 7 per cent among those with children aged 7–9.

Internally displaced families account for a large share of renters, particularly among families with children under three. Among households with children who rent housing, IDPs account for at least 23 per cent across all age groups, rising to 40 per cent for families with children aged 3–6 and 54 per cent for those with children 0–2. In urban areas, this concentration is even stronger, with three out of five families with infants who rent housing being IDPs (Table 2.1).

Table 2.1. Share of mothers living in rented housing, per cent

Type of locality	IDP status	Mothers with children aged 0–2	Mothers with children aged 3–6	Mothers with children aged 7–9
Urban	Yes	60	35	24
	No	40	65	76
	Total	100	100	100
Rural	Yes	29	58	21
	No	71	42	79
	Total	100	100	100
Total	Yes	54	40	23
	No	46	60	77
	Total	100	100	100

Displacement increases costs, instability, and stress, and often disrupts access to childcare and employment. For mothers, this combination can make sustained work nearly impossible.

Social assistance

Ukraine's social assistance system is complex and fragmented, particularly for child and family benefits. Families must navigate multiple programmes with different eligibility rules, application procedures and institutions, which creates administrative barriers and reduces take-up. Existing evidence suggests that coverage remains limited. In 2023, **only about 28 per cent of families with children received any form of social assistance**, indicating significant gaps in the reach and accessibility of child and family benefits¹⁰⁰.

Ongoing reforms aim to consolidate social support programmes, such as the Basic Social Assistance Pilot, and to introduce more comprehensive support for children of working mothers under Law No. 4681-IX¹⁰¹. However, administrative barriers and gaps in coverage continue to limit their effectiveness.

Our survey shows that **even when assistance is received, its financial impact is limited**:

- On average, benefits cover only 4–5 per cent of family budgets
- For families with children 0–2, the share rises to about 7 per cent
- For families with children aged 7–9, it drops to around 1 per cent

These amounts do not offset childcare costs or lost income due to caregiving. This reinforces UNICEF's message that income support must be paired with affordable ECEC services to break cycles of poverty.

For single-parent families, social assistance plays a larger role. Such families account for one in four households with children aged 0 to 9. For them, benefits cover up to 18 per cent of income when children are under three and around 14 per cent in households with children aged 3 to 6. This underscores both the critical role of social assistance and its clear limits in ensuring economic security.

Psychosocial stress

Economic hardship and war-related shocks significantly intensify psychosocial stress for families with young children. UNICEF research shows that about **one third of families report signs of psychosocial distress among children**, including anxiety, sleep problems, withdrawal or behavioural changes¹⁰².

This reflects daily realities shaped by displacement, fear for relatives at the front, loss of loved ones, disrupted routines, and prolonged uncertainty. For young children, such stress undermines emotional security and healthy cognitive and social development.

Parents, especially mothers who already undertake most care responsibilities, absorb this stress alongside financial pressure. Worry about children's safety, limited access to psychosocial and educational services, and the constant need to adapt to unstable conditions take a toll on parents' mental health and capacity to cope. The war has exposed a gender paradox.

Even women who are economically active face rising care burden. In 2024, women entrepreneurs spent an average of 56 hours per week on childcare, up from 49 hours before the war¹⁰³.

This reflects destruction of childcare and social infrastructure, increased care needs during war and limited income from entrepreneurship under crisis conditions.

Without accessible care services, even successful women struggle to sustain economic activity. This shows how gaps in care infrastructure undermine women's empowerment across income levels.

For many families, this reduces the ability to seek, maintain, or increase paid work. Mothers may delay returning to employment, reduce working hours, or withdraw into informal and precarious work to manage children's needs.

In this way, psychosocial stress interacts with economic hardship, reinforcing a vicious cycle in which poverty, care responsibilities and reduced employment opportunities for women deepen each other, with long-term consequences for both child well-being and women's economic empowerment.

In summary, families with young children in Ukraine face severe and growing economic vulnerability, which the full-scale war has further intensified. Low and unstable incomes, limited savings, rising housing costs, displacement, and uneven access to services have deepened child poverty and widened regional inequalities. These pressures affect households broadly but fall most heavily on mothers, particularly single mothers and internally displaced families, who must combine caregiving with increasingly fragile employment opportunities. At the same time, the limited reach and modest scale of social assistance provide only partial protection against these risks. Economic hardship also interacts with psychosocial stress and the collapse or disruption of care infrastructure, further constraining women's ability to work. Overall, the findings show that strengthening income security, expanding affordable childcare, and supporting family-friendly employment are essential not only for protecting families but also for enabling women's economic participation and supporting children's development in wartime and recovery.

2.2. Employment of women with preschool-aged children

Across Ukraine, the years when children are youngest coincide with the most fragile stage of women's economic lives. Caring for preschool-aged children often means interrupted careers, delayed entry into stable employment or prolonged reliance on flexible and lower-paid work. These patterns were already present before the full-scale war and have since intensified, as families face greater caregiving demands alongside economic and security shocks.

Analysis highlights not only persistent gender gaps in employment, but also how care responsibilities shape employment choices, job quality and income. At the centre of this analysis are care-related decent work deficits, where the lack of affordable childcare, flexible workplaces and adequate support forces women to absorb the costs of care through reduced earnings and limited career progression. Understanding these dynamics is essential for advancing child well-being, household resilience and women's economic empowerment.

Motherhood penalty and fatherhood bonus

As of February 2024, about 3.23 million women and men in Ukraine reported having children aged 0–6, representing 21 per cent of the population aged 18–45¹⁰⁴. Women account for 55 per cent of this group and men 45 per cent (Annex B, Tables B.1 and B.2). While the average age of mothers and fathers is similar, 31 and 32 years respectively, the age structure differs significantly. Nearly half of women with young children are under 29 (44 per cent), compared to only 28 per cent of men (Annex B, Tables B.3 and B.4).

This means many **women enter motherhood very early in their working lives**, often within three to five years of completing education. Men, by contrast, typically have closer to a decade to establish themselves in the labour market before taking on intensive care responsibilities. This timing difference has lasting consequences for careers and earnings.

These patterns contribute to what research describes as the motherhood penalty and the fatherhood bonus. The **motherhood penalty** refers to the economic disadvantage women often experience in the labour market after becoming mothers. It includes lower pay, slower career progression and reduced employment opportunities compared with childless women and men. The **fatherhood bonus**, in contrast, refers to the tendency for working fathers to receive a wage advantage or more favourable evaluations than non-fathers. Fathers are often perceived as more stable, committed or deserving workers.

The intensity of these outcomes is closely linked to gaps in care policies and services. When accessible childcare, parental leave and family-friendly workplace arrangements are limited, parents must absorb the care deficit through unpaid work. The longer this care policy gap persists, the more unpaid care work is carried by families, particularly mothers. This intensifies motherhood penalties in employment, pay, leadership opportunities and pensions and contributes to persistent inequalities, poverty and social exclusion¹⁰⁵.

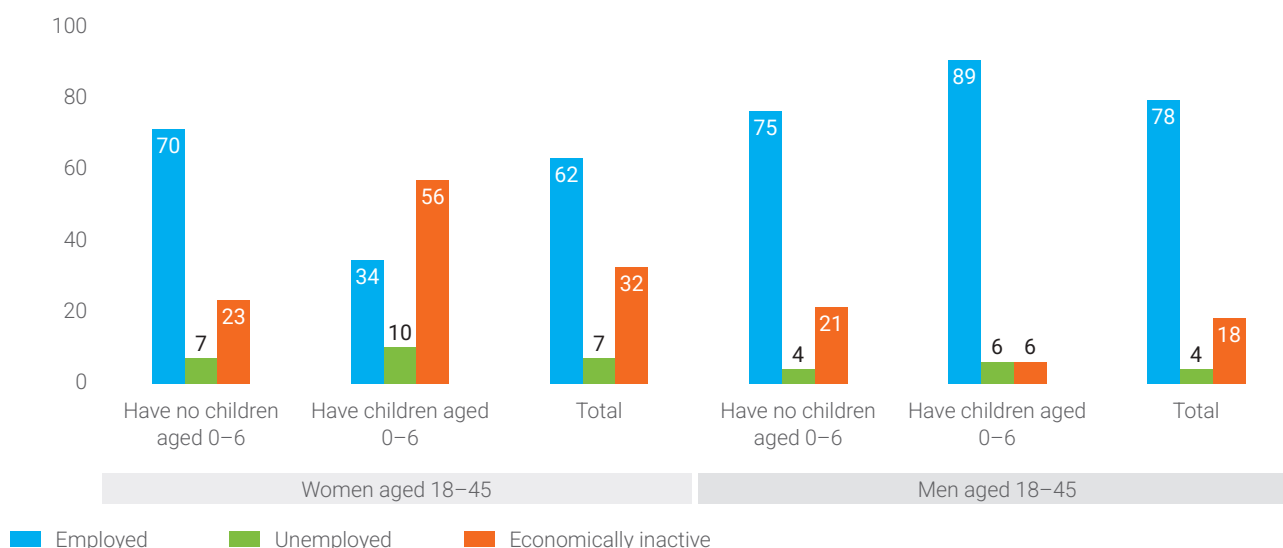
Data reveal stark gender gaps in the labour market. **Among women aged 18–45 with children under seven, the employment rate is only 34 per cent**¹⁰⁶. This is less than half the rate among women without young children, which stands at 70 per cent. At the same time, **56 per cent of mothers of young children are economically inactive**, meaning they are neither employed nor seeking work, compared to 23 per cent among women without young children.

Men show the opposite pattern. **Men, both with and without children aged 0–6, have higher employment rates and lower inactivity** than women in the same age groups (Figure 2.3). For men aged 18–45, having young children is associated with stable or even higher labour market participation.

All this data paints a clear picture. In Ukraine, **having a young child sharply reduces women's employment, while men's employment remains stable or increases**. Parenthood translates into a motherhood penalty and a fatherhood bonus. This reflects how care is organized and supported, not a lack of effort on the part of mothers.

Under current conditions, motherhood often leads to a short-term or long-term withdrawal from the labour market, not because women lack skills or motivation, but because care responsibilities and insufficient support systems continue to fall primarily on mothers rather than being shared equally between parents.

Figure 2.3. Employment status of women and men aged 18–45, by presence of children aged 0–6, per cent

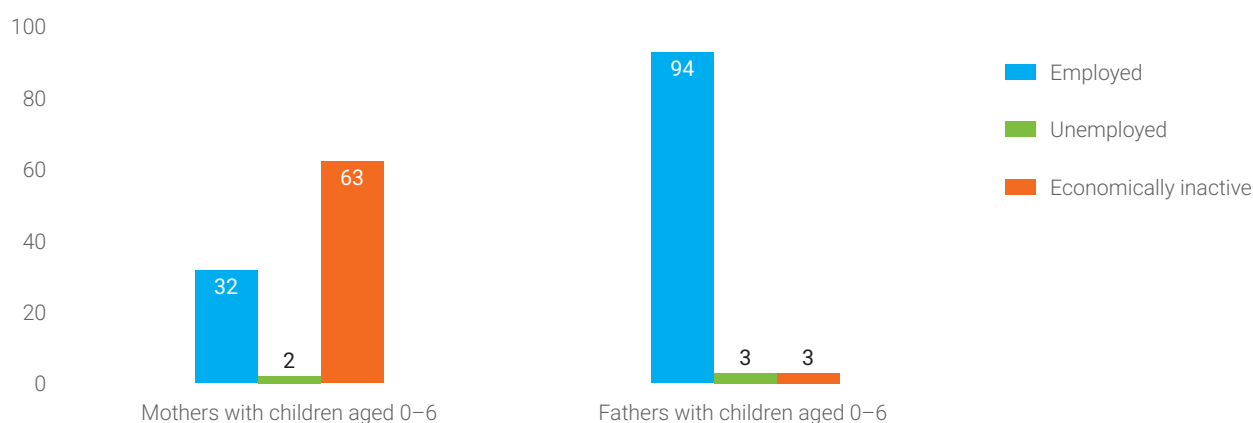


Source: UNICEF, Nationwide Sample Survey of the Socioeconomic Status of Households in Ukraine (2024).

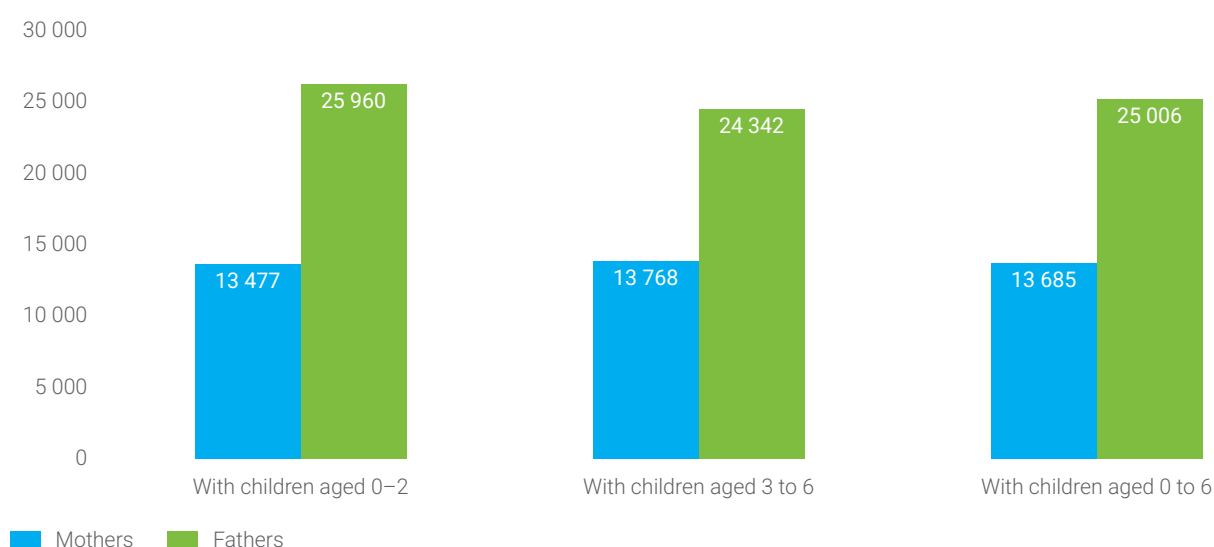
<https://www.unicef.org/ukraine/en/documents/socio-economic-status-of-households>

Our survey confirms that this situation has changed little over time. Employment among women with children aged 0–6 increased only marginally, from 34 per cent in early 2024 to 35 per cent by mid-2025. This limited progress underscores that women's underrepresentation in the labour market during early childcare reflects deep structural constraints rather than short-term or cyclical factors.

Figure 2.4. Status of women and men with children aged 0–6 in the labour market, per cent



These labour market dynamics translate directly into income gaps. According to our survey, women with children aged 0–6 earn on average about UAH 13,704 (USD 330) (Figure 2.5), far below the national average of UAH 26,500 (USD 640) in July 2025¹⁰⁷. This is also almost half of the average income of surveyed men with children aged 0 to 6, which stands at UAH 25,009 (USD 603).

Figure 2.5. Average monthly earnings of mothers and fathers with children aged 0–6, UAH

This income gap is closely linked to vertical¹⁰⁸ and horizontal¹⁰⁹ gender segregation in the labour market. Most employed mothers with children aged 0 to 6 are concentrated in lower-paid service and clerical occupations and remain underrepresented in better-paid manual and technology sectors. This persistent occupational and hierarchical gender segregation reinforces the income gap and intensifies the financial constraints associated with motherhood.

Our survey confirms this occupational segregation, showing that **nearly two thirds, 67 per cent, of mothers with young children work in just three groups:**¹¹⁰ technicians and associate professionals, service and sales workers and clerical support workers (Table 2.2). Mothers of infants are more likely to work as technicians or associate professionals, often reflecting opportunities for remote work or self-employment. As children grow older, mothers shift towards service, sales and clerical roles that typically require on-site presence.

The occupational profile of men with children aged 0 to 6 differs sharply. Apart from technicians and associate professionals, where men and women are represented in similar shares, other occupational groups show strong gender divergence. **Men are twice as likely to work as managers**, at 16 per cent compared to 8 per cent among women. They are also heavily concentrated in industrial and manual occupations. **Workers in different industries account for 37 per cent of employed men with young children**, compared to only 5 per cent among women.

Table 2.2. Occupational distribution of parents of children aged 0–6, per cent

Occupational groups ¹¹¹	Mothers with children aged 0–2	Mothers with children aged 3–6	Mothers with children aged 0–6	Fathers with children aged 0–2	Fathers with children aged 3–6	Fathers with children aged 0–6	Parents with children aged 0–6
Service and sales workers	19	26	25	13	5	8	15
Technicians and associate professionals	29	22	23	19	23	22	22
Clerical support workers	14	20	19	10	6	8	14
Professionals	12	14	14	5	9	7	12
Managers	10	8	8	18	15	16	12
Elementary occupations	11	5	6	3	1	2	4
Skilled, craft and manual workers, and machine occupations ¹¹²	5	5	5	32	41	37	21
Total	100	100	100	100	100	100	100

Sectoral patterns reinforce this picture. **Mothers of children aged 0–6 are most often employed in wholesale and retail trade, education, health and social work and other services** (Table 2.3). These are also the sectors to which mothers most commonly return after maternity leave. While these sectors often provide relatively higher levels of social protection, they are associated with lower average wages.

Fathers show a very different profile. While wholesale and retail trade, including repair of motor vehicles and motorcycles, also employs 22 per cent of fathers, **fathers' employment is far more concentrated in construction, transportation and storage**. This sector accounts for 31 per cent of fathers' jobs, compared to only 6 per cent of mothers' jobs. **Manufacturing is another area where fathers significantly outnumber mothers**, employing 15 per cent of fathers with young children versus 8 per cent of mothers.

Only a small minority of mothers work in traditionally male-dominated sectors such as construction, transportation, and manufacturing. By comparison, the construction, transportation and storage sector alone employ more than one third of fathers with young children.

This pattern shows how parents' employment remains strongly gender segmented. Mothers are concentrated in feminised and lower-paid sectors, while fathers are more present in physically demanding but better paid sectors. These sectors also tend to offer limited flexibility, which makes them difficult to combine with intensive care responsibilities.

Table 2.3. Sectoral employment distribution of parents with children aged 0–6¹¹³, per cent

Economic sectors ¹¹⁴	Section numbers	Mothers with children aged 0–2	Mothers with children aged 3–6	Mothers with children aged 0–6	Fathers with children aged 0–2	Fathers with children aged 3–6	Fathers with children aged 0–6	Parents with children aged 0–6
Wholesale and retail trade, repair of motor vehicles and motorcycles	G	19	23	22	26	19	22	22
Education	P	13	14	14	1	9	6	10
Human health and social work	Q	6	14	13	1	1	1	6
Other service activities	S & T	10	8	8	0	1	0	5
Manufacturing	B, C, D & E	10	8	8	13	16	15	11
Financial and insurance activities Real estate activities Professional, scientific and technical activities	K, L & M	8	7	7	2	2	2	4
Administrative and support service activities	N	9	5	6	4	4	4	5
Construction. Transportation and logistics ¹¹⁵	F & H	6	6	6	27	33	31	19
Accommodation and food service. Arts, sports, entertainment and recreation	I & R	10	5	6	3	2	2	4
Information and communication	J	4	4	4	6	5	5	5
Agriculture, forestry and fishing	A	4	3	3	7	6	7	5
Public administration and defence; compulsory social security	O	1	3	3	10	2	5	4

Together, these occupational and sectoral patterns show that the motherhood pay gap is not only about whether women work, but also about where they work and under what conditions. Reduced working hours, limited access to higher-paying sectors and persistent occupational segregation combine to produce a wage penalty for mothers and a wage bonus for fathers, reflecting structural barriers rather than differences in effort or commitment.

Labour market position of parents of young children

Looking more closely at labour market status reveals how strongly employment depends on the child's age.

Among women with children aged 0–2, only 13 per cent are employed, 2 per cent are seeking employment, and 85 per cent are economically inactive.

Among women with children aged 3–6, about 54 per cent are employed, 3 per cent are seeking employment and 43 per cent are economically inactive.

Overall, **almost two thirds (63 per cent) of women with children aged 0–6 are economically inactive**¹¹⁶. The first three years after childbirth are particularly restrictive. Only about one in eight mothers works during this period. Employment rises sharply once children are older, which underlines the importance of ECEC availability and quality for enabling mothers' return to work.

Table 2.4. Labour market status of women and men with children aged 0-6, per cent

Category	Labour market status	Partner status		Total with children
		without partner	with partner	
Mothers with children aged 0–2	Employed	17	11	13
	Seeking employment	0	2	2
	Economically inactive	83	87	85
Mothers with children aged 3–6	Employed	62	51	54
	Seeking employment	1	3	3
	Economically inactive	37	46	43
Mothers with children aged 0–6	Employed	42	32	35
	Seeking employment	1	2	2
	Economically inactive	57	66	63
Fathers with children aged 0–2	Employed (including as part of defence forces)	90	95	95
	Seeking employment	4	3	2
	Economically inactive	6	2	3
Fathers with children aged 3–6	Employed (including as part of defence forces)	92	94	94
	Seeking employment	0	4	3
	Economically inactive	8	2	3
Fathers with children aged 0–6	Employed (including as part of defence forces)	92	94	94
	Seeking employment	1	4	3
	Economically inactive	7	2	3

Partner status shapes outcomes differently for women and men. **During infancy, single mothers are more likely to work than mothers with partners**, at 17 per cent versus 11 per cent, largely out of financial necessity. As children grow older and care demands ease, partnered mothers catch up and even surpass single mothers in employment rates.

The position of men with young children in the labour market differs sharply from that of women. The **vast majority of fathers are employed, at 94 per cent**. Only 3 per cent are seeking work or are economically inactive. Economic inactivity among men with young children is therefore rare and typically temporary.

An important additional insight is that the labour market itself is not the main obstacle once women start searching for jobs. **Almost all mothers who actively sought work were able to find a job.** Only 5 per cent of jobseekers remained unemployed, which represents about 2 per cent of all women with children under seven. This suggests that the main barriers lie earlier, in the transition from inactivity to job search.

Economic inactivity does not mean lack of interest in work. Among economically inactive women with children aged 0–6, **about 28 per cent report that they want to work but have not reached the job search stage** (Figure 2.6). This points to persistent barriers to combining work and childcare, including limited childcare availability, low expected wages and incompatible working conditions.

This group represents a significant potential labour reserve. The analysis suggests that **removing these barriers could raise employment among mothers of children aged 0 to 6 above 50 per cent**, compared with the current 35 per cent.

At the same time, **about 72 per cent of inactive mothers report that they are not ready to return to work**, particularly those with children aged 3–6 (Figure 2.6).

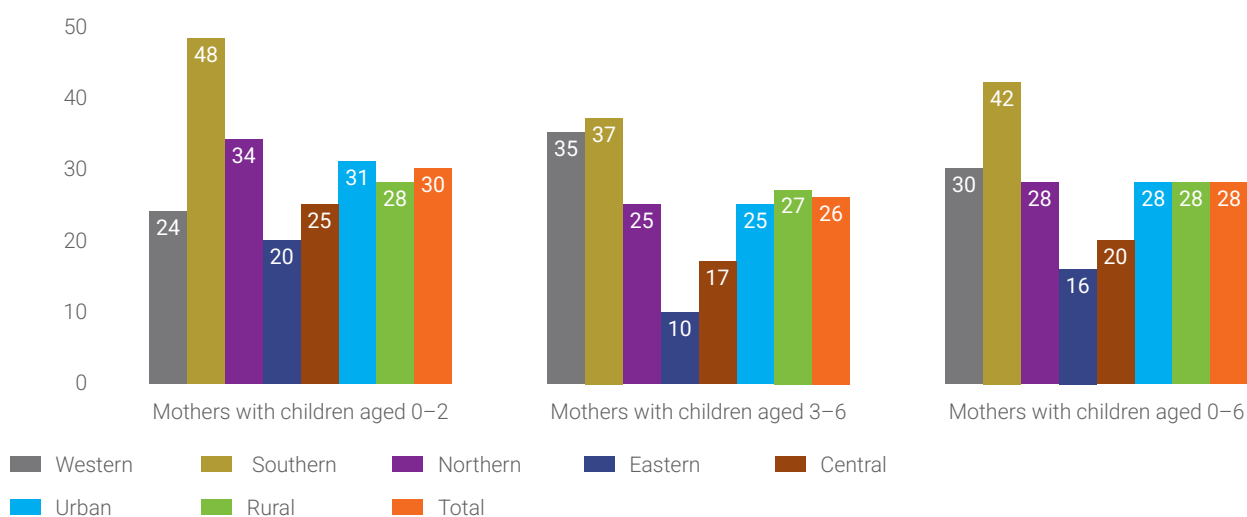
This reveals two distinct patterns (Annex B, Table B.5-B.7):

Involuntary inactivity, where women want to work but face structural constraints. Chosen inactivity, where women prioritise caregiving under existing economic and social conditions.

Both patterns have policy implications. The first signals unmet demand for employment and services. The second reflects prevailing norms, household decision making, and levels of trust in childcare and labour market conditions.

Importantly, long-term withdrawal is not the prevailing expectation. Overall, 87 per cent of economically inactive mothers who were economically inactive at the time of the survey say they plan to return to the labour market in the future. Of these, 64 per cent intend to resume work before their children reach the age of seven. This indicates strong medium-term attachment to the labour market and underscores the importance of timely childcare expansion and family-friendly work arrangements.

Figure 2.6. Share of economically inactive mothers of children aged 0–6 who want to work, per cent



Employment adaptive strategies during early childcare

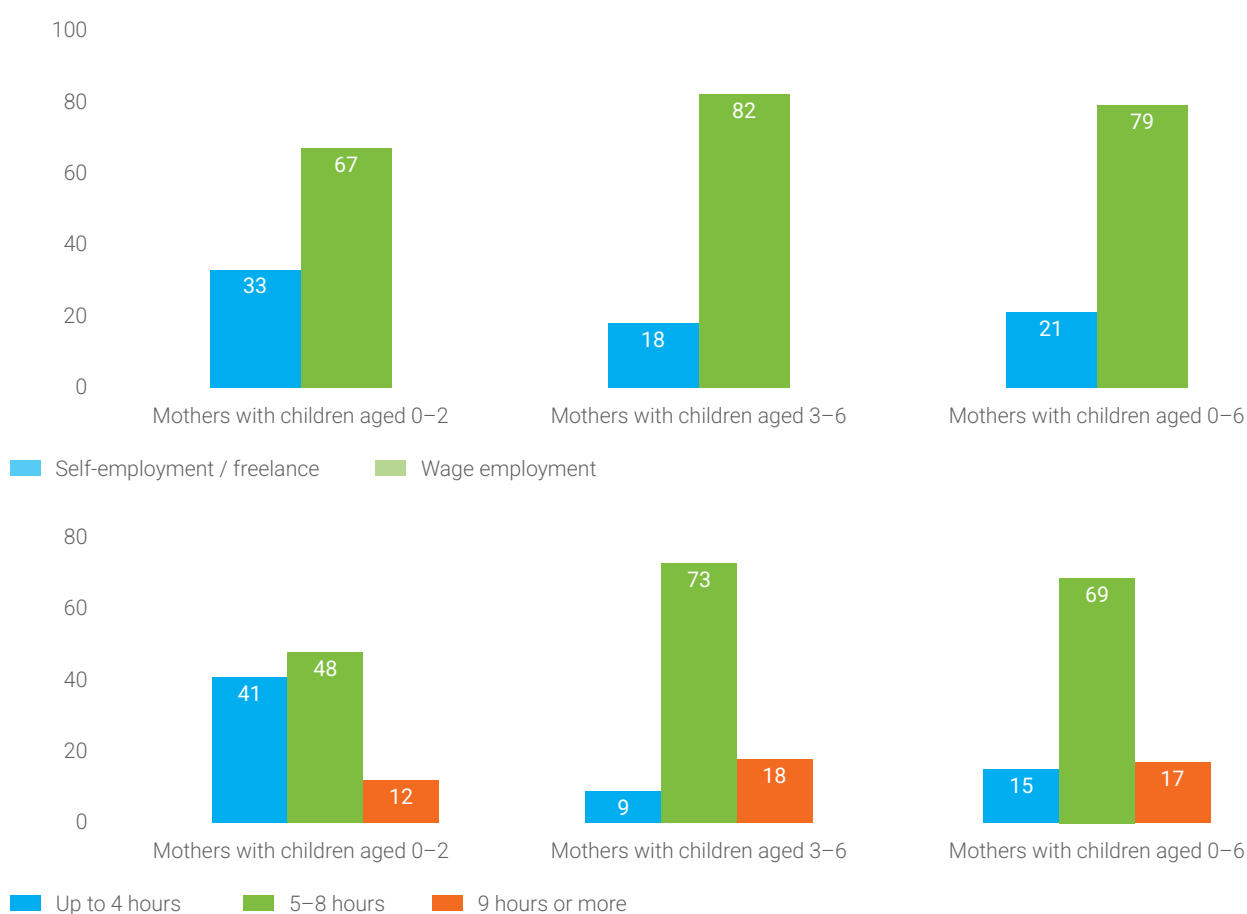
Beyond whether mothers work, care responsibilities strongly shape how they participate in the labour market. They actively adapt their employment to reconcile paid work with caregiving, often at significant personal cost.

As our survey shows, **most working mothers are wage employees, at 79 per cent overall**. At the same time, the younger the child, the higher the share of self-employment¹¹⁷. Among mothers with the youngest children, 33 per cent are self-employed (Figure 2.7). As children grow older, wage employment¹¹⁸ becomes more common, reaching 82 per cent among mothers of children aged 3–6.

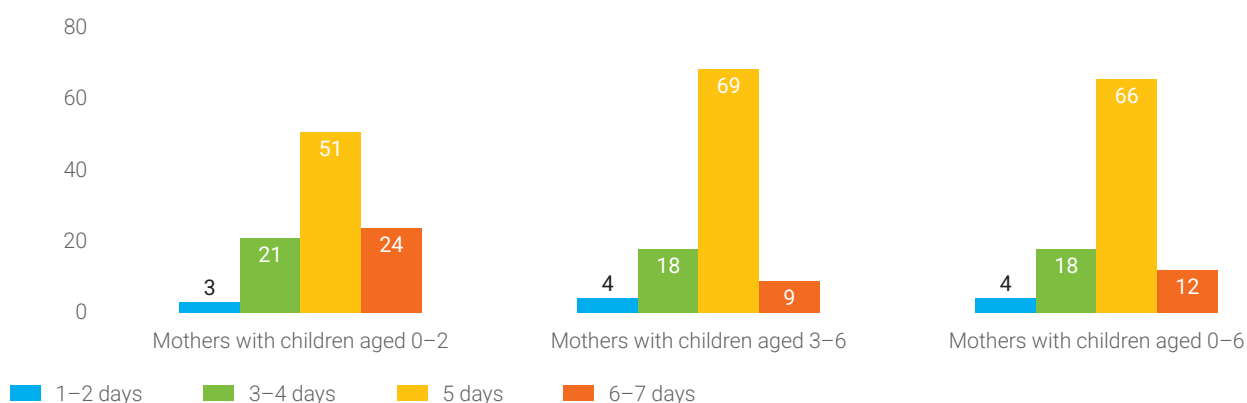
This pattern suggests that **self-employment function as a temporary strategy during early childcare**. It reflects limited access to formal jobs compatible with care responsibilities and the relative flexibility of home-based work, rather than entrepreneurial ambition. As children grow older and care demands ease, reliance on self-employment declines, indicating a return to standard forms of employment.

Working time shows a similar dynamic. Among mothers of children aged 0–2, only 48 per cent work 5–8 hours a day, while 40 per cent work less than 4 hours on average (Figure 2.7). The situation changes markedly for mothers of children aged 3 to 6. In this group, almost 73 per cent work 5 to 8 hours a day, and only 9 per cent work less than 4 hours. This illustrates how **time-related underemployment can serve as an adaptive response during the most care-intensive period**, gradually giving way to standard working hours as care responsibilities decrease.

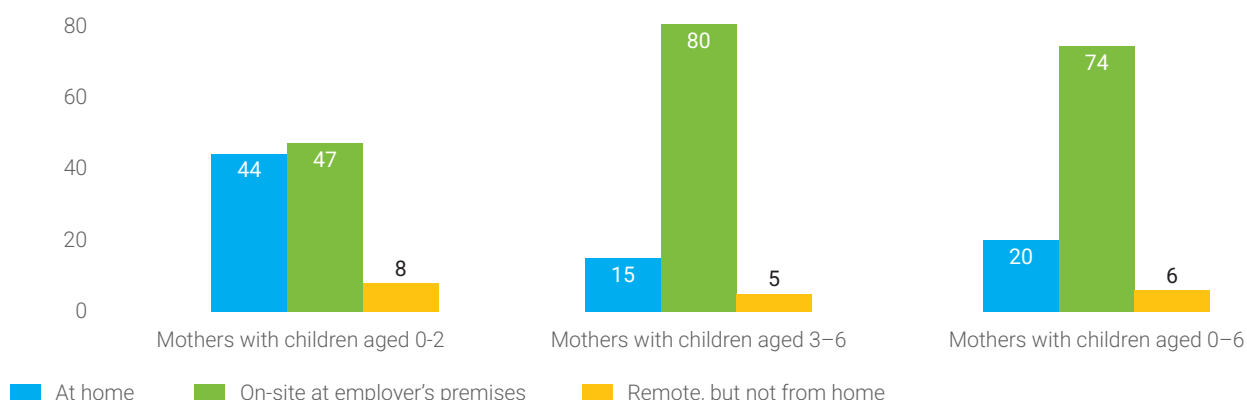
Figure 2.7. Employment type (top) and working day duration (bottom) of mothers of children aged 0–6, per cent



Weekly schedules further illustrate this adaptation. **Just over half of mothers of infants work a full five-day week**. By ages 3–6, this rises to 69 per cent (Figure 2.8). Many mothers report fragmented or stretched schedules, spreading short working hours across six or seven days to fit around caregiving. This **informal flexibility compensates for the lack of institutionalised family-friendly working arrangements** and can be physically and mentally exhausting.

Figure 2.8. Work week duration of mothers of children aged 0-6, per cent

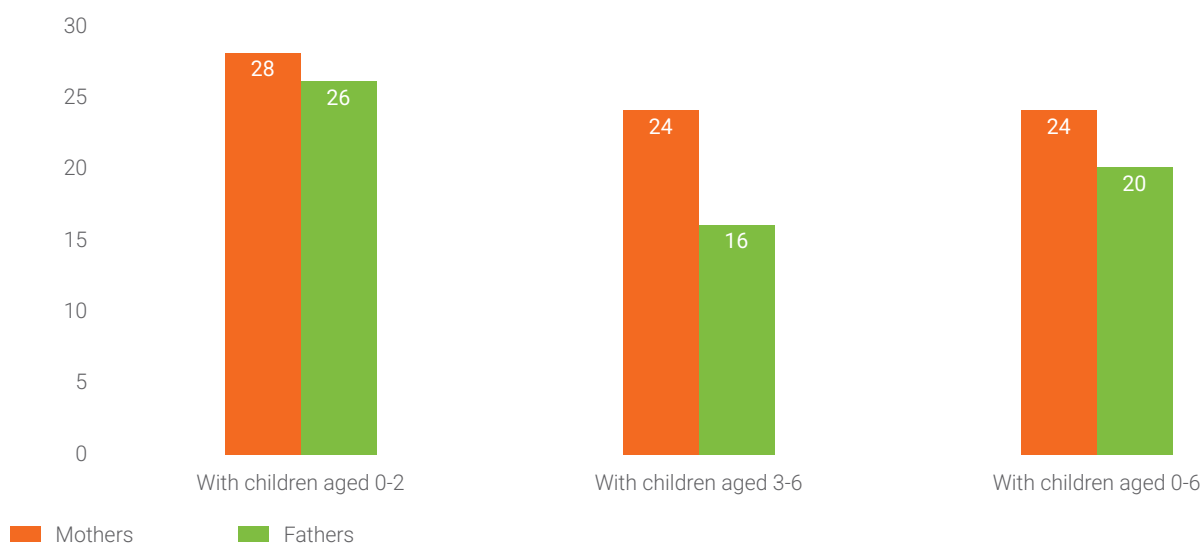
Work location is also critical. **Almost half, 44 per cent, of mothers with children under three work from home**, compared to only 15 per cent of mothers of children aged 3-6 (Figure 2.9). Working from home closely correlates with self-employment, indicating that **only relatively few mothers manage to secure remote work within formal employment relationships**.

Figure 2.9. Workplace location of mothers of children aged 0-6, per cent

The **overall rate of informal employment¹¹⁹ among working mothers is 24 per cent**, which is close to the national average. Informality is higher among mothers of infants, at 28 per cent, and declines as children grow older (Figure 2.10). At the same time, a gender gap persists across parents of preschool-aged children. The widest gap is observed among parents of children aged 3 to 6, where 24 per cent of mothers are informally employed, compared to 16 per cent of fathers.

This points to a broader structural issue, namely **limited access to stable, secure and family-friendly formal jobs**, alongside unfavourable conditions for formal entrepreneurship for parents of young children. Informal employment among parents of preschool-aged children does not function as a closed labour market segment for a specific group. Rather, it often serves as an accessible hybrid arrangement that offers flexibility and lowers the costs of labour market participation in the absence of formal jobs that accommodate family needs.

At the same time, a particularly **vulnerable segment of informal employment includes casual work or work on family household plots in rural areas** and small towns, where such arrangements often become a necessity due to the lack of jobs within reasonable commuting distance. The policy implication is to prioritise reforms in formal workplaces, making formal jobs more flexible and family friendly, instead of focusing only on formalisation.

Figure 2.10. Informal employment among mothers and fathers of children aged 0-6, per cent

Together, these findings reveal a consistent pattern of adaptive strategies. During the first years of a child's life, women combine reduced hours, proximity to home, flexible schedules, and often self-employment to remain attached to the labour market. As care demands ease, employment gradually normalises, with longer hours, greater mobility, and more secure contracts.

These strategies demonstrate mothers' resilience and determination to balance paid work and caregiving.

At the same time, they come at a cost, including lower income, reduced job security and slower career progression. In this way, early childcare years become a critical period in which the motherhood penalty is reinforced and long-term inequalities in earnings and career trajectories take root. This is not a lack of ambition. It is a rational response to constrained options.

What shapes mothers' willingness to work

Several factors influence whether economically inactive mothers want to work.

Education plays a clear role in shaping women's attachment to the labour market. Our survey shows that **women with vocational or higher education are much more likely to express a desire to work** than those with incomplete secondary education, reflecting higher expected returns from employment (Annex B, Table B.5).

Among economically inactive women with children under three, 32 per cent of those with vocational education and 30 per cent of those with higher education report wanting to work, compared with 27 per cent among women with secondary education and only 15 per cent among women with incomplete secondary education. A similar pattern holds for mothers of children aged 3–6, where 30 per cent of women with vocational education and 27 per cent with higher education express a desire to work, compared to 21 per cent among women with secondary education. These differences underscore the protective role of education in sustaining women's labour market aspirations, even during intensive caregiving periods (Annex B, Table B.5).

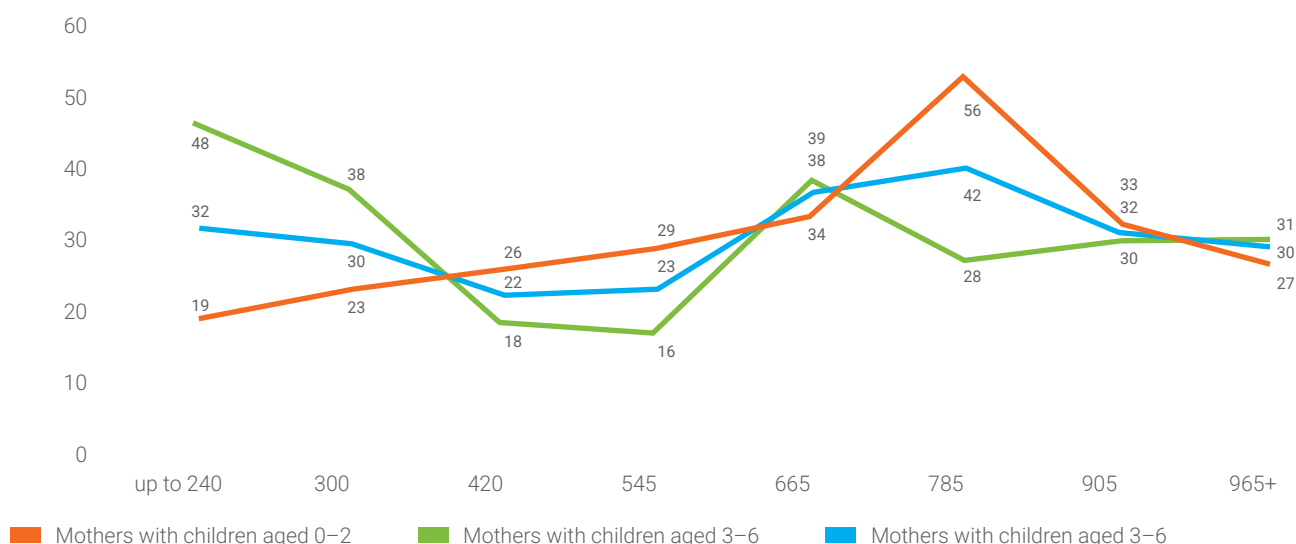
Household income has a clearly non-linear effect on women's willingness to work. Up to around UAH 17,500 (USD 420) per month, higher household income is associated with a lower desire to work.

As income rises further, up to about UAH 32,500 (USD 780), willingness to work increases, peaking at around 42 per cent for women with children aged 0–6, before declining again at higher income levels.

Among women with children under the age of three, this pattern is even more pronounced and takes a quasi-normal shape: as household income increases to approximately UAH 32,500, the share of those who wish to work rises sharply and reaches a maximum of 56 per cent, after which further income growth clearly reduces this desire.

The lowest willingness to work is observed among women in households earning between UAH 15,000 (USD 385) and 25,000 (USD 450). This “middle-income trap” reflects a situation in which families are not in acute poverty yet cannot afford childcare or paid help that would make employment financially worthwhile (Figure 2.5).

Figure 2.11. Share of economically inactive mothers who wish to work (per cent), by average monthly household income (USD)



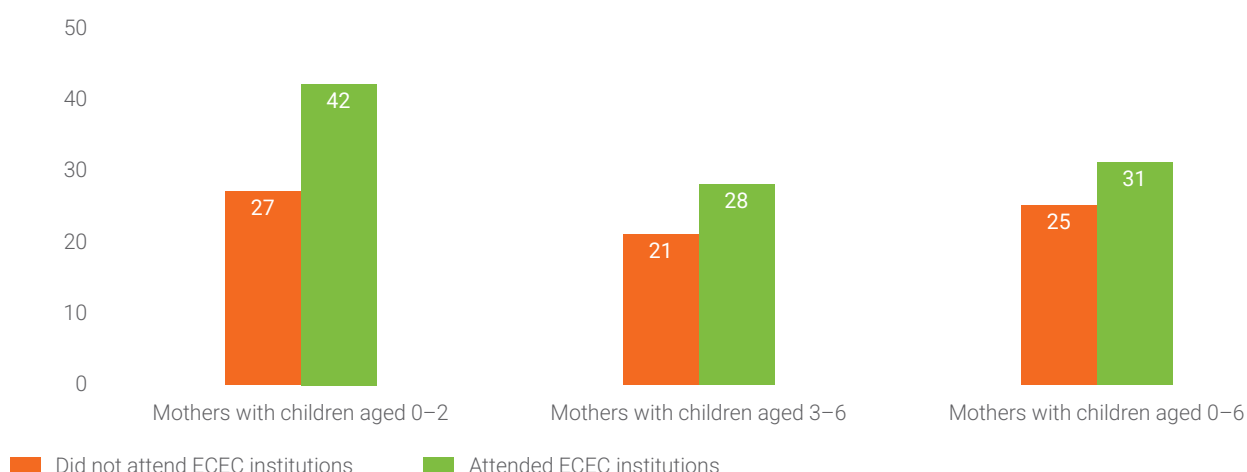
The number of children has a strong and consistent effect on women’s willingness to work. **Among economically inactive mothers with one child, only 23 per cent express a desire to work.** With the birth of a second child, this share rises sharply to 39 per cent. This pattern likely reflects a combination of growing financial necessity as family size increases and cumulative caregiving experience. Over time, many women gain greater confidence and practical skills in organizing childcare, while older children may also provide limited support, making the idea of combining paid work with caregiving more feasible (Annex B, Table B.6).

The presence of a partner has a nuanced and age-specific influence on women’s willingness to work. **Among economically inactive women with children aged 0–2, having a partner is associated with a higher desire to work, 31 per cent compared with 24 per cent among those without a partner. For mothers of children aged 3–6, the pattern reverses.** Women with a partner are less likely to express a desire to work, 25 per cent, while those without a partner show a higher willingness, at 29 per cent (Annex B, Table B.7). This suggests that partner support may facilitate early return aspirations during infancy, while for mothers of older preschoolers, financial responsibility and necessity play a stronger role in shaping labour market intentions.

Place of residence plays a minimal role. The difference between rural and urban areas in the share of women who wanted to work but were unable to do so does not exceed 2 percentage points, suggesting that employment barriers are largely similar across settlement types.

One unexpected finding is that ECEC attendance has limited effect on whether economically inactive mothers say they want to work. Among women with children aged 0–6, ECEC use only slightly increases the share expressing a desire to work. The difference is stronger for women with children under three. In this group, 27 per cent of women whose children did not attend ECEC want to work, compared to 42 per cent among those whose children attended ECEC. Among women with children aged 3 to 6, the difference is smaller, at 21 per cent versus 28 per cent. (Figure 2.12).

This suggests that ECEC access is more closely linked with employment aspirations when children are very young, but it is rarely sufficient on its own to overcome other barriers. Many inactive women face overlapping constraints, including low expected wages, health or care needs, multiple children, safety concerns or strong social norms around maternal care. As a result, a **kindergarten place alone is often not enough to change employment intentions without complementary supports.** This reinforces the need for integrated policy packages that combine childcare with flexible work, adequate pay and supportive social norms.

Figure 2.12. Share of economically inactive mothers who wish to work, by use of ECEC services, per cent

Overall, many economically inactive mothers express a willingness to work, particularly those with higher education, those in the lowest or highest income households, and those supporting larger families. At the same time, a substantial group of women, especially in middle-income households, perceive employment as impractical because available jobs do not offer sufficient flexibility or affordable childcare support to make work compatible with care responsibilities.

In summary, women's employment during the preschool years is strongly shaped by care responsibilities, producing a clear motherhood penalty alongside a fatherhood bonus in the labour market. Mothers of young children have far lower employment rates, higher economic inactivity and significantly lower earnings than fathers or women without young children. These gaps are reinforced by vertical and horizontal segregation, limited access to flexible formal employment, and insufficient childcare support. During the early years of a child's life, many mothers adopt adaptive strategies such as reduced hours, self-employment, home-based work and fragmented schedules to remain attached to the labour market. While these strategies demonstrate resilience, they often come at the cost of lower income, reduced job security and slower career progression. The analysis also shows that many inactive mothers would like to work but face structural barriers, including childcare constraints, low expected wages and inflexible working conditions. Overall, the findings confirm that mothers' employment outcomes are shaped less by motivation than by the interaction of care responsibilities, labour market structures and limited family-friendly support systems. Expanding accessible ECEC, promoting flexible formal employment and encouraging more equal sharing of caregiving are therefore critical for strengthening women's economic participation and reducing long-term gender inequalities in the labour market.

2.3. Workplace barriers and supports for parents

Workplaces play a decisive role in shaping whether having young children interrupts employment temporarily or leads to prolonged exclusion from paid work. For families with young children, labour market outcomes are influenced not only by individual choices but by how employers apply legal protections, respond to care needs and accommodate flexibility in practice. In Ukraine, the gap between formal guarantees and everyday workplace realities has become especially consequential in the context of war, labour shortages and rising caregiving demands. Understanding how employers support or constrain mothers' and fathers' participation in work is therefore critical for identifying the institutional barriers that sustain gender inequality and weaken families' economic resilience.

Legal rights versus workplace practice

Ukraine has a relatively comprehensive legal framework on maternity protection, paternity and parental leave and non-discrimination. However, evidence shows that having rights on paper does not automatically translate into effective support in the workplace. Our study consistently points to the **need for an integrated approach that links labour law, employment policies, gender equality legislation and social protection measures**, including childcare services and family-friendly working arrangements. Without enforcement, monitoring and adequate resources, legal guarantees alone are insufficient to support parents, especially mothers, in maintaining stable employment. At the same time, it is important to acknowledge that not all employers are resistant to family-friendly practices. Our interviews indicate that many employers, particularly in larger companies, consider the statutory maternity leave of 18 weeks manageable. Some already offer flexible schedules or remote work options for parents with young children. These examples demonstrate that **family-friendly employment practices are feasible and can serve as models for wider adoption**, even though they have not yet become sufficiently widespread. Our survey data show that most women and men do not report frequent violations of parental rights or protections. At least **80 per cent of women with children aged 0–6 and over 70 per cent of men with children of the same age report never having experienced direct violations**, such as dismissal due to pregnancy or denial of legally entitled leave (Annex B, Tables B.8–B.10). This suggests that basic legal compliance is widespread. At the same time, the survey presents a more nuanced picture of how discrimination is perceived and experienced. While most respondents have not personally experienced explicit job refusals, **over two thirds of women perceive employers as holding negative attitude towards the employment of women with young children**. This perception is especially pronounced among women with children under three, reported by 73 per cent (Annex B, Tables B.11–B.13).

From women's perspectives, **one of the most common perceived barriers is denial of employment due to maternity plans**, particularly among women with children under three, cited by 64 per cent (Annex B, Table B.11). Fewer women, 48 per cent, consider the belief that women can develop in their careers only to a certain level to be very widespread. These findings suggest that anticipated motherhood remains a salient concern in hiring decisions, even among women with relatively strong qualifications.

Men with young children tend to perceive these barriers less acutely. Among men with children aged 0–2, 57 per cent believe that having young children hinders women's hiring, 46 per cent report that women are denied employment due to maternity plans, and 36 per cent perceive limits on women's career advancement (Annex B, Table B.11). This divergence in perceptions highlights how gender norms shape what is recognised as discrimination and what remains invisible.

Taken together, these findings show that the **absence of overt violations does not mean workplaces actively support parents**. Discrimination often operates in indirect or unspoken ways that are difficult to document but still shape behaviour¹²⁰. For women with young children, including those with relatively high education and prior work experience, limited workplace support for care responsibilities continues to shape employment expectations and opportunities, even where formal rights exist.

Indirect discrimination include reluctance to hire women with young children, limited access to flexible working arrangements, exclusion from training or mentoring, constrained promotion opportunities, lower wages and unstable or informal contracts. These barriers often go unrecorded, yet **respondents widely recognise them as key obstacles to women's employment during the preschool years of motherhood**, even if they have not experienced them personally.

Employment refusals and attributed reasons

Reported non-compliance is more common among women with children aged 0–2 and 7–9. Among mothers of children aged 7 to 9 living in urban areas, 57 per cent reported experiencing employment refusals several times during the period when they were caring for young children, compared with 15 per cent among rural mothers (Annex B, Table B.13). This contrast suggests that while urban labour markets offer more employment opportunities, they may also involve stronger employer screening and discrimination against mothers with young children.

For mothers of children aged 0 to 2, two thirds reported no refusals overall, but the urban-rural gap remains notable. In rural areas, mothers more often reported repeated refusals than urban mothers, 42 per cent compared with 10 per cent. Among mothers of children aged 3 to 6, about one third reported repeated refusals, with similar levels across urban and rural areas.

Reported refusals are also common among women who do not yet have children but plan to have them in the near future. Among women planning childbirth within the next five years, 27 per cent experienced repeated refusals in urban areas compared with 11 per cent in rural areas (Annex B, Table B.14).

Women who reported employment refusals most often attributed them to having a young child, particularly among those with children aged 3–6 (Table 2.5). Other commonly cited reasons include insufficient work experience and doubts about schedule flexibility or willingness to work overtime.

For women planning childbirth, insufficient work experience was the most frequently cited reason for employment refusals, reported by about half of respondents overall. Lack of specific skills or qualifications was the second most common reason, followed by employers' expectations that young women would soon have children. In this group, anticipated motherhood was mentioned by 35 per cent of respondents, indicating that reproductive expectations continue to shape hiring decisions even before women become mothers (Annex B, Table B.15).

Table 2.5. Share of non-working women reporting employers' reasons for refusing to hire them, by child's age, per cent

	Mothers with children aged 0–2	Mothers with children aged 3–6	Women who plan to have children within the next 5 years
Presence of a small child (or plan to have children within the next five years)	50	74	24
Insufficient work experience	42	35	53
Lack of necessary skills and competences	25	18	29
Break in employment	0	7	8
Doubts about the flexibility of my schedule or willingness to work overtime	17	14	0
My high expectations regarding salary	17	9	11
Other	9	4	18

Importantly, the study does not support the conclusion that reluctance to hire mothers occurs only alongside objective applicant shortcomings. Mothers in the study often perceived inflated or irrelevant job requirements as a way to conceal underlying bias against candidates with young children. This interpretation was indirectly acknowledged in in-depth interviews with employers, although respondents typically attributed such practices to other employers rather than to their own companies.

Perceptions matter even when discrimination is not directly experienced. Stories shared through social networks, media and peer conversations shape expectations and behaviour. **A widespread belief among women that discrimination exists can itself become an additional factor of self-censorship and restraint,** even when actual cases of discrimination are less frequent. Anticipation of bias leads women to accept poorer job offers, avoid job changes or delay job search altogether. In this way, fear of discrimination alone can weaken labour market attachment and reinforce inequality.

Illustrative quotes from the research capture these dynamics clearly:



My salary was cut after maternity leave. I expected one thing, but it turned out differently. There is still some discrimination against mothers.

Mother of a 1-year-old

Employers have to choose between hiring a woman or their income. Well, income comes first.

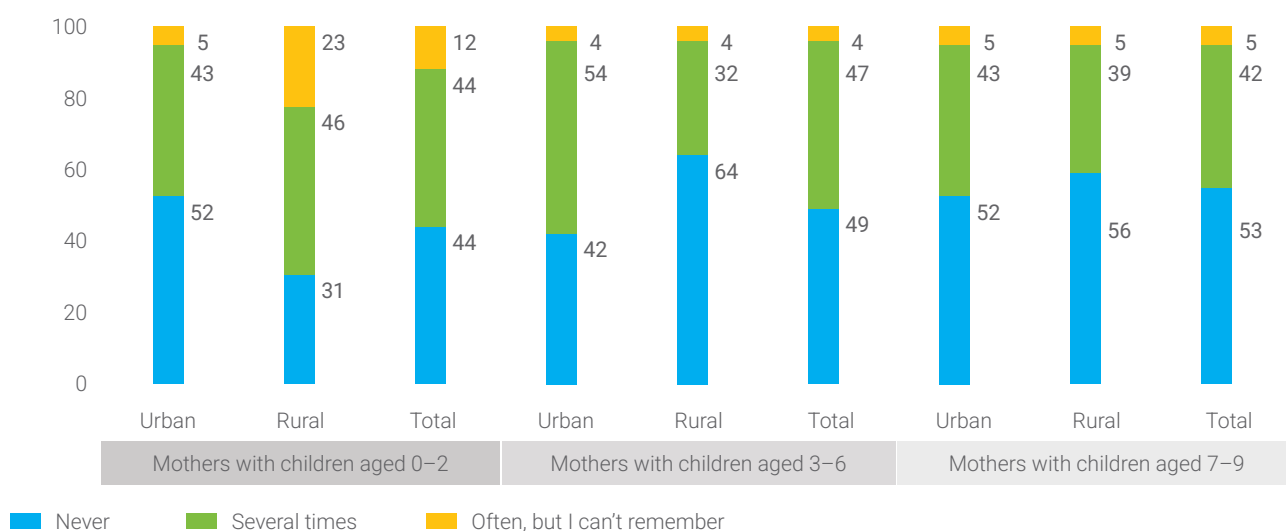
Employer, trade

Hence, discrimination often operates below the surface, shaping outcomes without overt violations. **Fear of negative treatment alone is enough to alter women's employment choices and weaken labour market attachment.** This underscores the need for stronger enforcement of anti-discrimination laws and incentives for employers to implement family-friendly policies, alongside broader public awareness efforts that promote transparency in the labour market and employment practices.

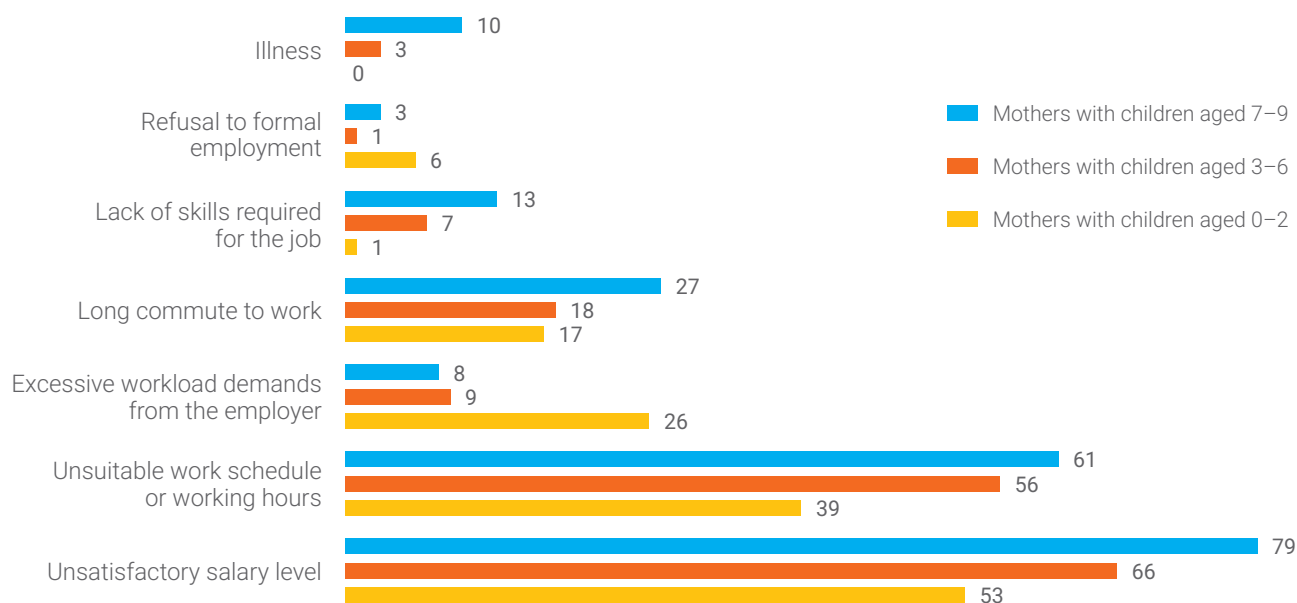
Job offers, pay and conditions

Most women report that they have not refused job offers, particularly in rural areas (Figure 2.13). The highest acceptance of employers' conditions is observed among unemployed rural women with children aged 3–6, 64 per cent, and among rural women with children aged 7–9 reflecting on earlier childcare periods, 56 per cent. This suggests limited bargaining power and a higher willingness to accept unfavourable conditions.

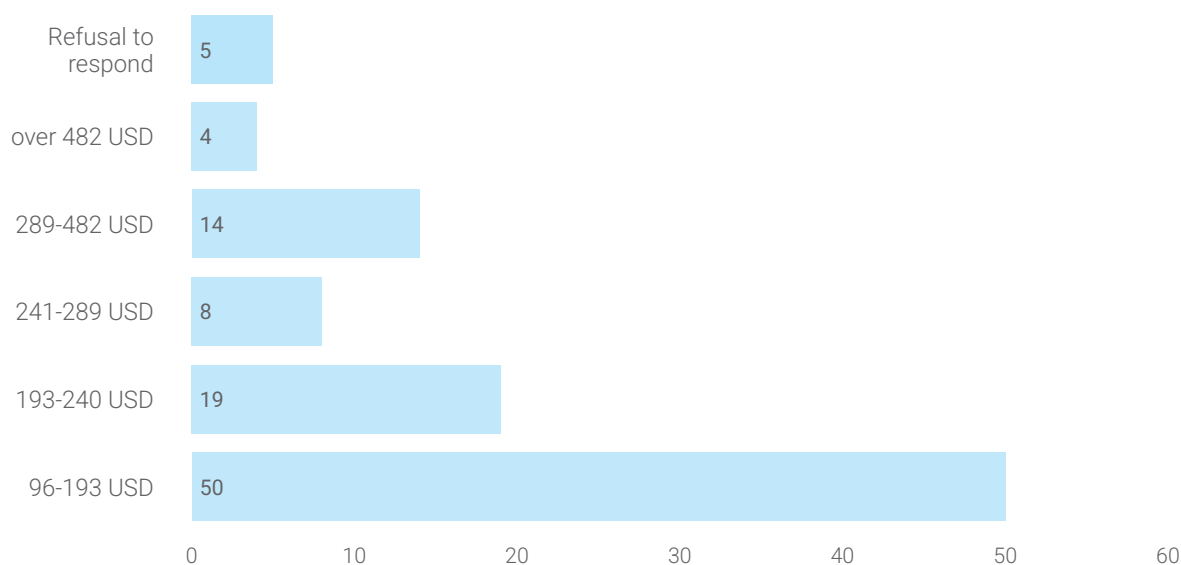
Figure 2.13. Share of non-working mothers reporting refusals of offered jobs, per cent



When refusals do occur, they are driven primarily by low pay and incompatible working hours (Figure 2.14). Among women with children aged 3–6, 66 per cent refuse offers due to unsuitable wages and 56 per cent due to rigid schedules. For women with children aged 7–9, these shares rise to 79 per cent and 61 per cent respectively. This underscores the central role of adequate pay and workable hours in reconciling employment with childcare responsibilities.

Figure 2.14. Share of non-working women with children aged 0–9, by main reasons for refusing offered jobs, per cent

Wage expectations further highlight structural issues (Figure 2.15). Many mothers report being offered salaries between UAH 4,000 (USD 95) and UAH 8,000 (USD 190), levels that may fall below or barely meet the statutory minimum wage (as of 2025, UAH 8,000¹²¹). This suggests that employers may undervalue women with children or assume limited bargaining power, even in a context of labour shortages.

Figure 2.15. Share of non-working mothers with children aged 0–6, by wage levels at which they refused offered jobs, per cent

Flexibility, gender norms and uneven expectations

The negative impact on women's economic opportunities during childcare stems not only from employers' attitudes toward mothers, but also from their attitudes toward fathers' caregiving roles. Workplace norms continue to frame caregiving primarily as a women's responsibility.

Survey data show that **relatively few fathers attempt to adjust their working arrangements for childcare**. Among those who do, around one in ten report that employers are unwilling to allow even minor flexibility, such as leaving early occasionally. This was reported by 23 per cent of men with children aged 0–2 and 5 per cent of men with children aged 3–6.

Employers' support for fathers' caregiving is perceived by women as limited and largely informal. Our survey results indicate that women view employers as only moderately willing to accommodate men's care responsibilities (Annex B, Table B.16). Most employers are seen as offering fathers short unpaid leave, reported by around 58 per cent of women. Some allow men to use an unscheduled paid annual leave, reported by 18 per cent of women with children under three and 21 per cent of women with children aged 3–6. Far fewer employers are perceived to offer remote work options or reduced workloads for fathers, cited by 9 per cent and 8 per cent of respondents respectively. About one quarter of employers, 26 per cent, are seen as expecting men to negotiate adjustments informally with colleagues rather than providing formal organisational support. As children grow older, even these limited accommodations tend to decline.

Notably, **men themselves perceive employers' attitudes toward fathers' caregiving involvement as even less supportive than women do** (Annex B, Table B.17). As our survey shows, men report that employers offer few options. Around 48 per cent of men believe that fathers can take leave only at their own expense, while just 22 per cent believe they can arrange temporary coverage with colleagues or use paid annual leave.

Women planning childbirth report similar cautious expectations. More than one fifth, 21 per cent, anticipate restrictions on flexible work after having a child. When asked what support they expect from employers, **women planning childbirth most often anticipate flexible schedules during the day or week, reported by 51 per cent**, followed by additional leave, 27 per cent, and reduced working hours, 22 per cent (Annex B, Table B.18). Urban women planning childbirth are more likely to expect higher salaries and remote work options, both at 22 per cent, while rural women in this group report far lower expectations for these forms of support, at 6 per cent and 5 per cent respectively.

Actual experiences of working mothers, however, differ in important ways from these expectations. **Among rural women with children aged 3–6, 66.8 per cent report having flexible work schedules** (Annex B, Table B.19). Similarly, 43 per cent of women with children aged 0–6 report earning enough to cover external childcare costs, compared to only 7 per cent of women planning childbirth who expect this to be possible. Women planning childbirth also tend to overestimate employers' willingness to provide additional leave, with 27 per cent expecting this support compared to only 9 per cent of working mothers who actually use it.

These gaps between expectations and experience suggest that **perceptions of limited employer support are shaped not only by practice but also by social norms and caution around caregiving at work**. Expectations about employer behaviour begin influencing women's labour market decisions well before childbirth.

Together, these findings point to **persistent workplace norms that position paid work as a priority for men and caregiving as a primary responsibility for women**. Limited support for fathers' caregiving reinforces unequal care arrangements and indirectly constrains mothers' employment options. Care continues to be treated as an individual issue rather than a shared social responsibility, with clear consequences for gender equality in the labour market.

Parental leave and job retention in practice

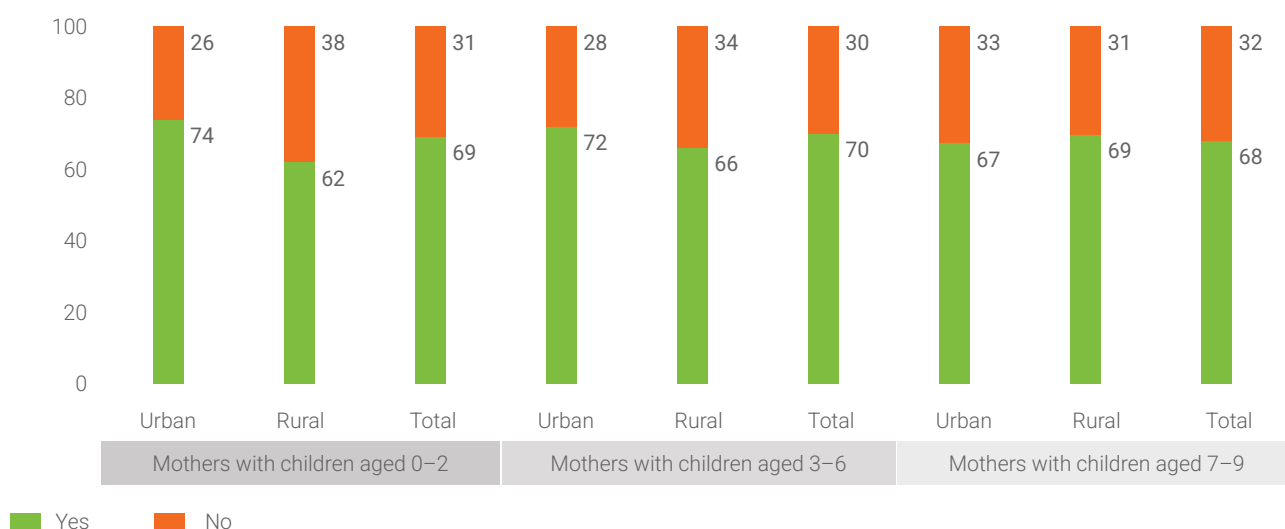
The gap between legal guarantees and actual access becomes especially visible in relation to parental leave with job retention. Our survey shows that **many mothers, particularly women in rural areas, are unable to take the legally guaranteed parental leave** of up to three years while retaining their job (Figure 2.16).

Many reported that they could not use this entitlement due to both personal circumstances, such as very low household income or the absence of a partner, and factors related to employer practices or the war. These include informal employment without official contracts, employers creating conditions that push women to resign before childbirth and forced displacement.

Among rural women with children aged 0–2, 38 per cent report being unable to take parental leave with job retention, compared to 26 per cent of urban women with infants. Similar shares were reported by rural women with children aged 3–6, at 34 per cent, compared to 28 per cent among urban mothers of toddlers. Informal employment, which is more prevalent in rural areas, appears to be a key factor undermining these guarantees.

This problem persists over time, with around one third of women with older children aged 7–9 reporting the same experience retrospectively, when their children were younger.

Figure 2.16. Share of mothers able to take parental leave of up to 3 years with job retention, among women with prior work experience, per cent



At the same time, **most women with preschool-aged children report that they intend to return to their previous workplace after leave** (Annex B, Table B.20). However, this intention declines as children grow older. The share of women who no longer wish to return to the previous workplace increases from 12 per cent among those with children aged 0 to 2, to 25 per cent among those with children aged 3 to 6.

Under the Ukrainian law on leave¹²², women who take parental leave are legally guaranteed job retention until the child reaches the age of three. In practice, these guarantees are not always effective. They do not protect against business closure, structural reorganisation, or situations where employers create conditions that are not acceptable for women returning to work.

Education shapes these trajectories. Among urban women with children aged 0–2, higher levels of education are associated with a greater likelihood of returning or planning to return to the same job after parental leave (Annex B, Table B.21).

By contrast, among urban women with children aged 3–6, those with secondary and higher education more often than others report that they do not plan to return to their previous workplace, 39 per cent and 35 per cent respectively, suggesting greater mobility and stronger bargaining power in the labour market.

Despite generally positive intentions to return to work after leave, **some women encounter explicit barriers in practice**. Among urban women, around 5 per cent of those with children aged 3–6 and 7–9 reported that their employer had created conditions that effectively prevented their return. While this share is relatively small, it highlights the importance of targeted monitoring and return-to-work support.

Fathers' expectations further illuminate how labour market structures shape family decisions. **Over 73 per cent of men with children aged 0–6 are confident that their partners will return to work after leave**, with higher confidence among rural men, 80 per cent, compared to 67 per cent among urban men (Annex B, Table B.22). This confidence is reinforced by perceptions of limited alternatives, particularly in rural areas where opportunities to change jobs are far more limited than in cities. As a result, rural residents often feel compelled to hold on to existing jobs as long as they remain available, even when women would prefer different employment conditions. Only 8 per cent of rural men believe that their partners could easily find other work, compared to 26 per cent of men in urban areas.

One likely explanation lies in the structure of rural employment. More than one third of rural women work in the public sector, and about half receive wages funded from public budgets at different levels, compared with roughly 15 per cent of men¹²³. The relative stability of public sector jobs, combined with limited alternatives, strengthens expectations that women will return to the same workplace after leave and constrains real choice in rural labour markets.

Among women planning childbirth, trust in employer support is far from universal. **Only 59 per cent believe their employer will guarantee job retention for the full period of parental leave** (Annex B, Table B.23). This trust is markedly higher among urban women, 83 per cent, than rural women, 68 per cent (Annex B, Table B.24).

This implies that more than **four in ten women feel uncertain about their employment future**, a level of insecurity that can influence both fertility decisions and labour market behaviour well before childbirth.

Overall, short-term job retention appears relatively common, but longer absences continue to pose a significant barrier to women's reintegration, particularly in contexts of informal employment or weak enforcement of labour protections.

In summary, workplaces in Ukraine rarely violate parental rights openly, but they often fail to provide the practical support parents need to combine work and caregiving. Most mothers and fathers report basic legal compliance, yet women widely perceive negative employer attitudes toward hiring and promoting mothers, especially those with children under three. Discrimination therefore operates mainly through indirect barriers, including reluctance to hire mothers, low wage offers, rigid schedules, limited access to flexibility, and weaker career progression, all of which shape women's choices even when formal refusals are not documented. The evidence also shows that employer support for fathers' caregiving remains minimal and largely informal, reinforcing gendered expectations that care is women's responsibility and indirectly constraining mothers' employment options. Pay and workable hours emerge as the main conditions for accepting jobs, while rural and informal employment settings weaken access to job-protected parental leave in practice. Overall, closing the gap between rights on paper and workplace reality requires stronger enforcement of anti-discrimination protections, clearer and more reliable flexibility arrangements, and targeted incentives that normalise fathers' caregiving and scale family-friendly employer practices.

CHAPTER

3



SOCIAL NORMS
AND FAMILY DYNAMICS

Chapter 3.

Social norms and family dynamics

This chapter explores how social norms, cultural expectations and family dynamics influence decisions about childcare and employment. It highlights how traditional norms often place primary care responsibilities on women, affecting their career opportunities and economic independence.

3.1. Gender division of childcare in the household

Motherhood and the care of children represent not only deeply personal and emotional experiences but also continuous, demanding and unpaid work. An analysis of role distribution in childcare within Ukrainian households indicates that **gender inequality is reproduced both within families and in the broader social sphere**. This imbalance continues to limit women's opportunities for personal growth and professional development.

Data from key scientific and research institutions in Ukraine indicate that the modern Ukrainian family combines elements of both traditional and contemporary behavioural models, resulting in evolving gender roles. A particular telling indicator of this shift is changing perception of who is regarded as “the head of the family”. **Only 19 per cent of respondents now believe the man is primarily “head of family” vs 34 per cent in 2009¹²⁴**. This reflects a gradual shift toward more egalitarian attitudes that could support policy change.

The full-scale war has become a major catalyst for changes in the organisation of childcare. Its impact is contradictory. On the one hand, the war accelerates the erosion of traditional patriarchal models, as many fathers are mobilised and women take on new roles, including becoming sole or primary breadwinners¹²⁵. On the other hand, the war has intensified existing constraints and created new barriers to childcare. Mass internal displacement, affecting more than 4.6 million people, 59 per cent of whom are women, has disrupted care arrangements and access to services^{126,127}. The lack of shelters has forced many kindergartens to close, leaving women at home with children¹²⁸. In addition, the shift to distance learning, which affected 42 per cent of children, requires constant parental supervision and further complicates the combination of paid work and caregiving¹²⁹.

Unequal distribution of childcare and household responsibilities

Studies reveal a deep gender asymmetry in the distribution of responsibilities for childcare and household management. Despite the increase in women's participation in paid work, the majority of unpaid household and care work continues to fall on women.

This reflects a global pattern. Across the world, women perform about three quarters of unpaid domestic and care work, or 75 per cent¹³⁰. In no country do women and men share unpaid care work equally. On average, women spend 3.2 times more time on unpaid care work than men. Women dedicate about 4 hours and 25 minutes per day to unpaid care work, compared with 1 hour and 23 minutes for men¹³¹.

National evidence from Ukraine shows similar dynamics.

- Men are little involved in childcare. According to the Info Sapiens survey (2023), only 20 per cent of respondents, including 16 per cent of mothers and 25 per cent of fathers, reported an equal distribution of responsibilities¹³².
- According to the Niras study (2023), Ukrainian women spend 2.1 times more time on unpaid housework, including childcare, than men¹³³.

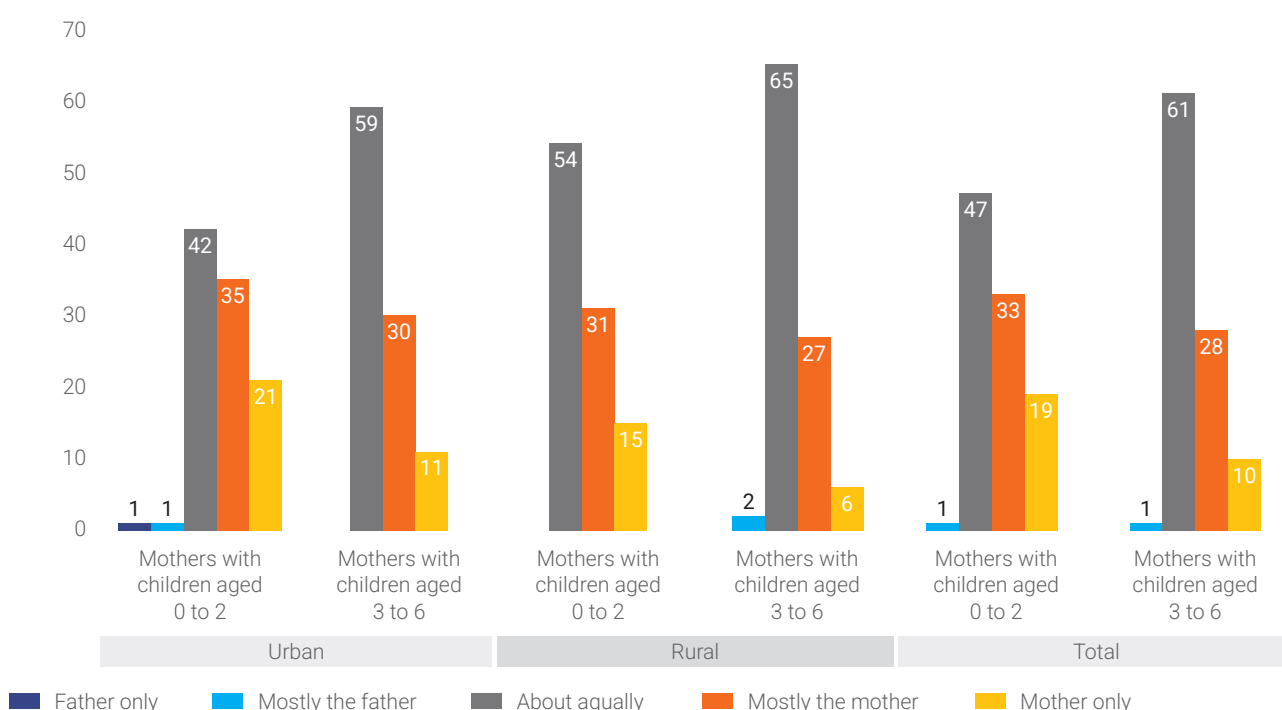
- A UNICEF study (2024) shows that women spend an average of 36.2 hours per week on childcare, while men spend only 14.8 hours¹³⁴.

The results of our survey confirm that in households with children aged 0–6, household chores such as **cooking, cleaning and laundry in over 75 per cent of cases are done exclusively or mainly by women**.

Interestingly, over half of couples (55 per cent) report sharing childcare equally, yet when we break down specific tasks, mothers still shoulder the bulk of routine daily care, especially for infants, while fathers participate more in play and on weekends. This suggests that **many families consider themselves “equal” if fathers are involved to some extent, even though mothers remain the default carers** in many situations. In fact, both parents often still **see the mother as the one ultimately responsible for the child’s well-being**.

Fathers’ involvement in childcare varies by the age of the child and the household’s place of residence (Figure 3.1).

Figure 3.1. Childcare distribution in households with children aged 0–6, per cent



The predominance of women’s caregiving is most visible **during the child’s first two years**, a stage closely associated with maternity leave and breastfeeding. Cases where fathers assume primary caregiving roles are statistically negligible.

In rural areas, fathers are more likely to share childcare equally with mothers (62 per cent) compared to urban areas (50 per cent), while childcare remains exclusively a female responsibility more often in urban households (16 per cent) than in rural ones (9 per cent).

The more balanced division of childcare in practice in rural areas may be explained by several factors. Families there more often have two or more children (40 per cent versus 25 per cent in urban areas). Combined with the additional burden of farm work and lack of services, this compels parents to cooperate out of necessity.

However, paradoxically, **traditional norms are stronger in villages**. Our survey data show rural respondents are more likely to say “society expects women to care and men to earn” and focus group quotes reveal that **rural communities can stigmatise men who are too involved in child-rearing**. This means even when rural fathers change diapers, they might face disapproving comments like “that’s women’s work”, highlighting

a tension between actual practices and stated values. **Thus, even though rural couples might practice pragmatic sharing, the community still believe in the traditional model and fathers' involvement in childcare is frowned upon.**

During the focus group discussions, participants shared the following views:



Grandmothers and neighbours keep telling me: 'The child is your responsibility and let the man do his work.' Otherwise, people start to judge.

Mother of a 2-year-old

I do not see anything wrong with washing a child or changing a diaper, but in the village, it is considered a shame for a man.

Father of a 1-year-old

Survey data show that **19 per cent of men and 14 per cent of women in rural areas explicitly identify social norms as a factor shaping the division of responsibilities**, compared to only 18 per cent of men and 8 per cent of women in cities. This shows that environment matters.

While limited access to childcare infrastructure and the practical need for joint involvement in household and farm work can compel families to adopt a more equitable tasks-sharing, dense social ties and the high visibility of individual behaviour intensify fear of social judgment and reinforce traditional expectations. **As a result, actual practices may be more egalitarian, while underlying norms remain far more conservative than in urban environments.**

Fathers' involvement in childcare

Evidence shows that **only 25 per cent of fathers are constantly involved in caring for newborns**, another 39 per cent – often¹³⁵. They are most actively involved in emotional interaction, while routine processes such as feeding or hygiene are mostly left to mothers (which is a common pattern in many contexts – dads do play, moms do diapers), while only 9 per cent of fathers do feeding/hygiene for babies regularly¹³⁶. These statistics underscores cultural expectation that mothers handle infant care.

According to our survey, when asked what prevents them from taking a greater part in childcare, **half of fathers say they don't do more because they need to financially support the family**, another 13 per cent blame an inflexible working schedule, while 11 per cent answered "no reasons, nothing stops me" (so perhaps they already do their share or they just won't) (Annex C, Figure C.1).

Our survey shows that fathers play a significant and steadily expanding role in childcare, with involvement increasing consistently as children grow older. Across all activities, fathers remain the most involved family members (after mothers), but their contribution is concentrated in interactive and less routine forms of care. Their participation rises from early infancy to preschool age, indicating that some fathers become more engaged as care demands shift from intensive physical care to interaction, play and supervision.

Fathers are most involved in childcare on weekends and holidays. Their level of involvement ranges from 51 per cent among fathers of children under one year old to 57 per cent among those with children aged 3 to 6 (Annex C, Figure C.1).

The father often acts as the main caregiver during non-working hours, enabling the mother to rest or attend to other responsibilities. The fathers most actively participate in walks with the child, increasing from 43 per cent in infancy to 53 per cent at ages 3 to 6, and in playing and developmental activities at home, rising from 44 per cent to 52 per cent. They are also highly involved in daily household care, reaching 46 per cent for older children, and feeding, which increases sharply from 15 per cent in infancy to 47 per cent at ages 3 to 6.

However, fathers are less involved in care tasks that require routine continuity or specific responsibility. Their involvement in escorting children to and from kindergarten, while increasing with age, reaches only 36 per cent. Fathers are least involved in the child's medical treatment, where participation remains comparatively low at 27 to 34 per cent. This pattern suggests that **fathers' engagement is strongest in visible, time-bound and interactive care**, while mothers continue to carry primary responsibility for routine and health-related tasks.

Negotiation and normalisation of childcare roles

More than 70 per cent of women, regardless of the child's age, report that **the division of care responsibilities results from discussion and mutual agreement**. However, the frequency and nature of these discussions vary by the child's age (Annex C, Table C.1):

- 0–2 years: only 67 per cent report discussions. This may reflect the automatic assignment of primary caregiving to mothers due to biological needs and traditional roles (breastfeeding, maternity and parental leave).
- 3–6 years: the share rises slightly to 72 per cent, coinciding with women return to the labour market and children's enrolment in kindergarten, moments where conscious redistribution of care responsibilities becomes crucial nudging more families towards the discussions.
- 7–9 years: the share of discussions increases to 78 per cent as the beginning of school life requires parents to consciously review and discuss logistics, division of responsibilities and adaptation to the child's growing and more complex needs.

A large majority of mothers who bear the main responsibility for childcare report being comfortable with that arrangement, and an even higher share (92 per cent) find it comfortable for the man to be the primary financial provider. This suggests that traditional gender roles remain not only common but also broadly accepted or rationalized by many couples. In other words, **gender norms are so ingrained that they often go unquestioned – many respondents see them as natural or even ideal**, rather than as a limitation.

When women were asked why chores are split the way they are, many said they simply followed tradition. Around 7–14 per cent of women, depending on the child's age, said “that's just the way it is” and they never questioned it. Men often don't consciously plan roles. About 24 per cent of fathers of infants “never thought about it”, the work just defaulted to the mother. Meanwhile, 17 per cent of fathers of infants simply believe “it's just how it is”. This supports the idea that the division of family responsibilities during infancy often occurs “by default”.

This unequal distribution of care responsibilities limits mothers' participation in paid work and contributes to lower employment or part-time engagement. Many women express a desire for change, especially those who believe that more support would help their careers. Yet they often adapt to the situation and accept it as normal (“that's just how it is, and I'm okay with it”). **Social norms reinforce this pattern, and limited reflection leads families to treat it as a natural order.**

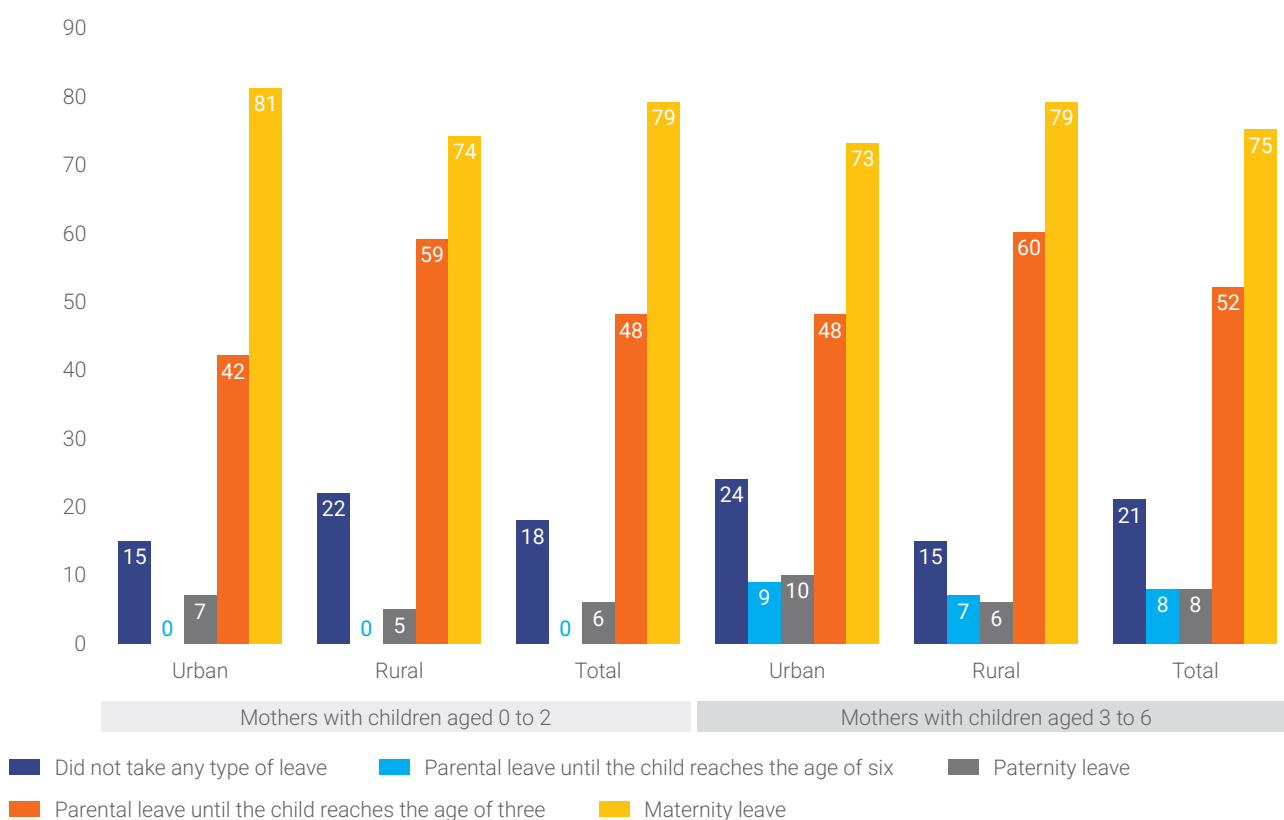
As a result, nine in ten mothers with children aged 0–6 report that they are rather or fully comfortable with the current arrangement, compared to 95 per cent of men. As children grow and mothers attempt to return to work, women's comfort with the unequal division declines to 82 per cent among those with children 7–9. This suggests that while many women accept unequal care roles in early childhood, **their expectations shift over time toward a more balanced partnership.**

Among women who feel uncomfortable with the current arrangement, more than one third of mothers with children under three report that greater involvement by their partner would support their career advancement. Women with older children, aged 7 to 9, are more likely to **link a more equal division of care with feeling respected as an equal partner.**

The results of our survey confirmed the fact that **not all women (or other relatives) take leave related to childcare**. Between 15 and 25 per cent of women, depending on the child's age and place of residence, reported that they did not use any type of leave (Figure 3.2).

- **Maternity leave** (referred to in Ukrainian legislation as pregnancy and childbirth leave) is most common. According to our survey, 75–79 per cent of women used this leave, regardless of employment status. This figure is highest among women in urban settlements: 81 per cent with children aged 0–2 and 73 per cent with children aged 3–6. Meanwhile, in rural areas, maternity leave was used by 79 per cent of women with children aged 3–6 and 74 per cent of women with children aged 0–2.
- **Paternity leave:** Between 5 to 10 per cent of mothers, depending on place of residence and the age of the child, reported that their husbands took paternity leave. **Parental leave** (referred to in Ukrainian legislation as childcare leave) was used by every second woman (59–60 per cent of women) living in rural areas, while in urban areas it was used by about 42–47 per cent of women with children aged 0–6.
- **In nearly 100 per cent of cases the parental leave was taken exclusively by women**¹³⁷. This clearly illustrates that parental leave is still almost entirely reserved for mothers, while fathers (or other relatives) almost never use this entitlement.

Figure 3.2. Use of maternity and parental leaves by parents of children aged 0–6, per cent



Reliance on grandparents and low uptake of external childcare

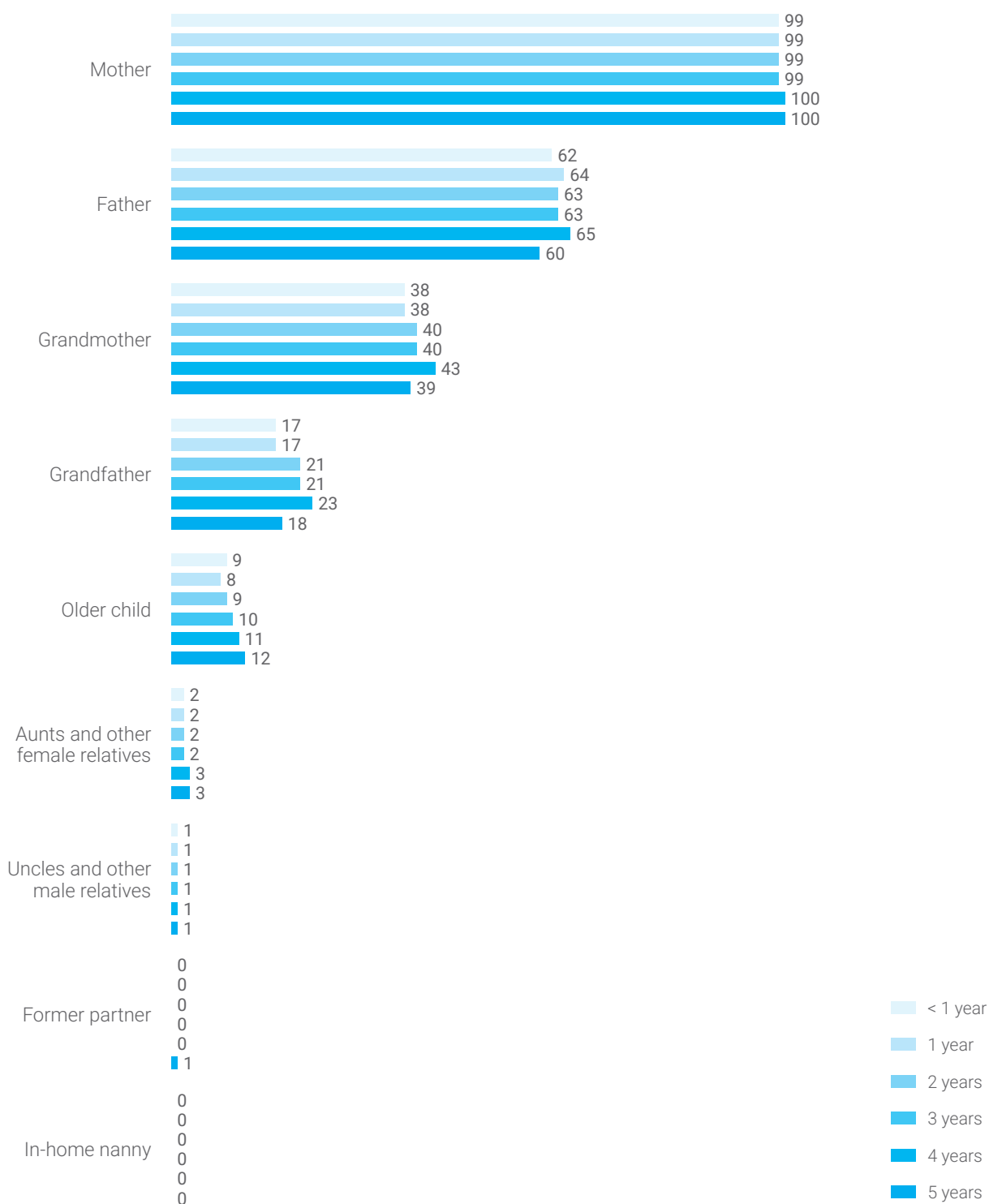
The organisation of childcare extends beyond parents to the wider family network. Grandparents play a particularly important role in providing informal care, which helps parents balance work and family responsibilities with greater flexibility.

Our survey data show that **mothers remain the almost universal primary caregivers for children aged 0 to 6**, reported in about 99 to 100 per cent of cases across all age groups (Figure 3.3). Fathers are the most common additional caregivers, but their involvement remains partial. Depending on the child's age, between 60 and 65 per cent of families report fathers participating in childcare.

Grandparents represent the most important source of additional support after parents. Grandmothers are involved in childcare in 38 to 43 per cent of families, making them the third most common caregiver after mothers and fathers. Grandfathers participate less frequently but still play a visible role, supporting childcare in 17 to 23 per cent of families depending on the child's age.

Older siblings also contribute to childcare as children grow older. Their involvement increases gradually from about 9 per cent in the first year of life to around 11 to 12 per cent when the younger child reaches 4 to 5 years of age. Other relatives and external caregivers play only a marginal role. Aunts and other female relatives participate in about 2 to 3 per cent of cases, while uncles and other male relatives account for around 1 per cent. The use of in-home nannies or former partners is extremely rare.

Figure 3.3. Primary and additional caregivers of children aged 0–6, per cent



Grandmothers provide particularly important support as children grow older and require less intensive basic care such as medical attention. Their involvement increases steadily with age across all activities. Their role is most visible in activities that require time and physical presence, including outdoor walks, weekend care, holidays, games and developmental activities at home. Their participation in these activities rises from around 20–24 per cent in infancy to 28–31 per cent for children aged 3 to 6. They also play a growing role in routine daily care and feeding, where involvement reaches 24 per cent and 27 per cent respectively by ages 3 to 6, and increasingly support escorting children to and from kindergarten, rising to 18 per cent (Annex C, Figure C.1).

At this stage, grandmothers often take responsibility for weekend care and outings, allowing parents to rest or manage other responsibilities. However, a clear gender gap persists, as grandfathers' involvement remains consistently lower across all activities and rarely exceeds 10–13 per cent, even for older children.

Grandparental care is also frequent and regular. Among grandparents who help care for grandchildren aged 0 to 6, **72 per cent provide care daily or several times a week**. A further 14 per cent provide care once a week regardless of the child's age. This indicates that grandparents, particularly grandmothers, often act as substitute caregivers in many families (Annex C, Table C.2).

The intensity of this support varies. The largest share of grandparents, **30 to 38 per cent, provide one to three hours of care per day**. Another 13 to 19 per cent provide full-day care of more than ten hours. Full-day care peaks at 19 per cent when children are aged 5 to 6. Short involvement of less than 30 minutes per day is most common during infancy at 14 per cent. Care lasting four to six hours per day is most frequent when children are aged 4 to 5, reaching 31 per cent and reflecting active daytime support (Annex C, Table C.3).

Social expectations also influence this pattern. Among grandparents who help care for grandchildren, **47 per cent believe that such support is expected of them by society**. Another 32 per cent report helping primarily to support their adult children, while 20 per cent say they do so out of personal choice (Annex C, Table C.4).

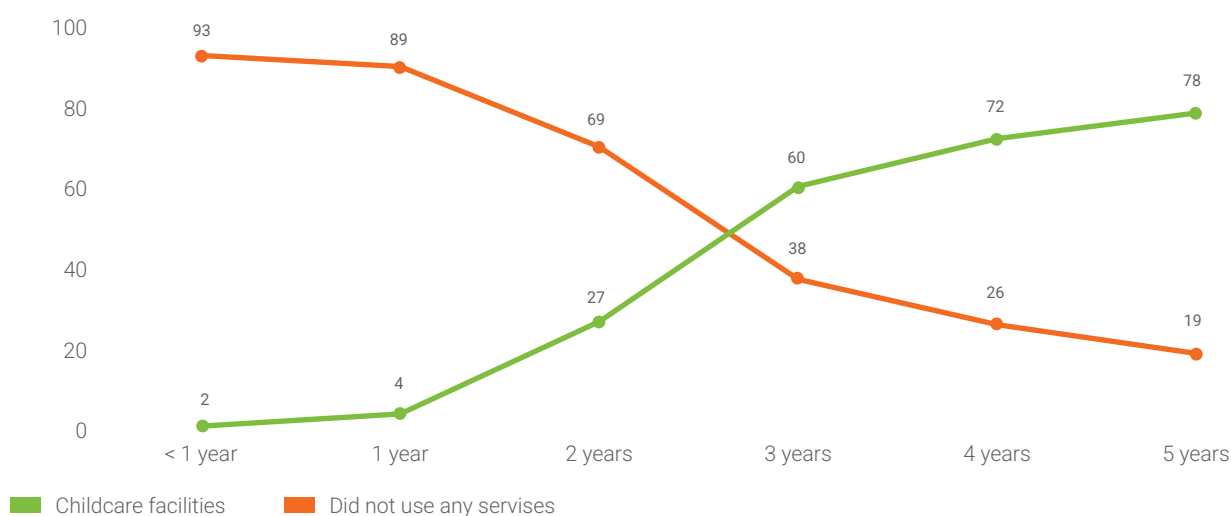
Despite their central role, this informal system has clear limits. Among grandparents, the most frequently cited **barriers to greater involvement are continued employment**, reported by 34 per cent, and **poor health**, reported by 26 per cent. Other barriers include concern about the physical demands and responsibility of childcare, mentioned by 15 per cent, living far from their children, reported by 9 per cent, and a desire to preserve time for themselves, also reported by 9 per cent (Annex C, Table C.5).

These patterns show that **when mothers receive support with childcare it most often comes from the extended family**, particularly grandmothers, rather than from paid caregivers. As a result, childcare remains largely organized within families.

At the same time, the **use of formal childcare services remains limited**, especially for very young children. Among families with infants under one year of age, 93 per cent do not use any external childcare services. The same is true for 89 per cent of families with one-year-old children. In practice, childcare at these ages is almost entirely provided by mothers or relatives. This reflects both limited availability of nursery services and low trust or acceptance of external childcare, as well as affordability constraints for many families.

Even by preschool age, reliance on family care remains significant. At age five, around 19 per cent of families still rely exclusively on family-based childcare, which suggests continued shortages of accessible preschool places or persistent preferences for home care driven by different barriers (Figure 3.4).

Overall, **only 2 to 4 per cent of children under two attend childcare facilities**. This reflects both the limited supply of nurseries and parents' preference for home-based care during early childhood. After the age of three, however, institutional childcare becomes the main form of care.

Figure 3.4. Use of ECEC services among mothers of children aged 0–6, per cent

Paid individual childcare remains rare. **Babysitting by professional nannies accounts for only 2 to 4 per cent across age groups.** These figures suggest that the market for individual paid childcare (nannies) remains very small. Most families either rely on relatives or use institutional childcare services when available.

As the population ages and many grandparents remain economically active or face health limitations, this informal childcare system is likely to face increasing strain in the future. Expanding accessible childcare services will therefore be essential to avoid overburdening older family members and to sustain women's participation in the labour market.

In summary, childcare in Ukrainian households remains strongly gendered. Women continue to carry most routine daily care and housework, especially during the first two years, while fathers' involvement is more common in play, walks and weekend care. Many couples describe childcare as "equal", yet task-level data show mothers remain the default carers and parental leave is taken almost exclusively by women. The war has both disrupted care arrangements and intensified caregiving demands through displacement, closures of kindergartens without shelters and distance learning, which further limits mothers' ability to combine care with paid work. Rural families often share tasks more out of necessity, but stronger community pressure and stigma still reinforce traditional expectations. Grandmothers provide substantial and frequent support, effectively filling gaps left by limited formal services, but this informal system is under strain as grandparents age, remain employed, or face health constraints. Overall, progress toward more equal caregiving will depend on shifting social norms, expanding accessible ECEC, and strengthening policies and workplace practices that enable fathers to take a real share of childcare.

3.2. Social norms influencing mothers' choices about work and childcare

Analysis of social norms and stereotypes affecting women's decisions to combine work and care of preschool children is an important step in formulating policies to provide equal opportunities in reality. The **breadwinner-caregiver model**, which emerged during the Industrial Revolution as industrialisation separated paid labour from domestic life, redefined men as economic providers and women as unpaid caretakers. Rooted in patriarchal and economical systems, this division was reinforced by social, legal and economic institutions that naturalised gendered roles within the family and broader society. Our survey shows that many current social norms and stereotypes continue to reinforce a traditional gender division of responsibilities, where women are seen as primarily responsible for childcare and unpaid care of elderly or sick relatives, while men are expected to provide financial support for the family.

Despite dynamic social transformations, **Ukrainian society continues to preserve persistent gender stereotypes** that are particularly evident in families with children under the age of seven and significantly shape women's life strategies:

- The dominant belief remains a **traditional division of roles**, according to which the man is perceived as the primary breadwinner, while the woman, as a mother, bears the main responsibility for childcare and household work.
- Within this stereotype, **men's ability to provide full and independent childcare is often questioned**, and their involvement is viewed as auxiliary rather than equal.
- At the same time, the notion of **"male" and "female" professions continues** to be reproduced, further limiting the professional choices of women with young children and reinforcing expectations of their prolonged absence from the labour market.

Taken together, these stereotypes pressure women to prioritise the maternal role and entrench structural inequalities in employment opportunities and economic independence. A more detailed general description of gender norms and stereotypes and their impact on individual areas of personal and social life is provided in Table 3.1.

Table 3.1. Impact of gender norms and stereotypes on parents with children aged 0-6

Gender norms and stereotypes	Area of influence			Impact on parents with children under 7
	Labour market	Legislation and polic	Family sphere	
Women care for children, men earn income	■ Lower female labour force participation ■ Pay gaps ■ Barriers to return to work after parental leave ■ Limited career progression for women	■ Limited policies promoting equal parental leave sharing ■ Insufficient support for flexible working arrangements for mothers ■ Tax and social incentives reinforce traditional role allocation	■ Women carry primary childcare responsibility ■ High emotional and physical burden ■ Limited personal time and development opportunities	Mothers: Concentration of childcare responsibilities limits labour market return and career advancement Fathers: Sole responsibility for household income, low expectations and opportunities to engage in childcare
Women are less productive employees	■ Discrimination in hiring and promotion ■ Lack of opportunity for innovation and use of women's potential	■ law-enforcement ■ Lack of laws on flexible working arrangements ■ Lack of incentives for employers to support flexible forms of employment	■ Increased pressure to be a "perfect mother" ■ Increased tensions within families	Mothers: Lower pay, narrower career opportunities, unstable employment Fathers: Pressure to be the breadwinner, reinforced expectation of uninterrupted employment

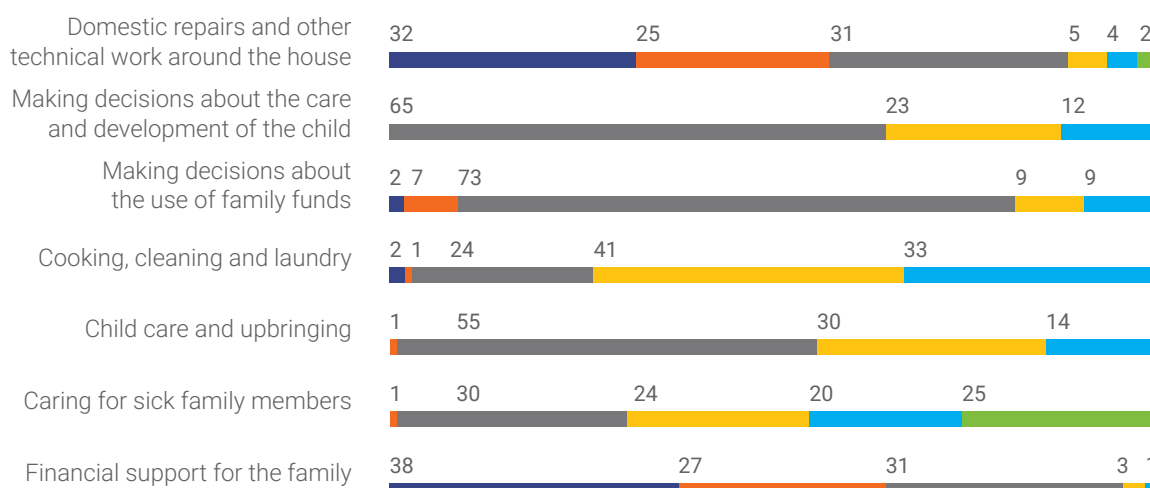
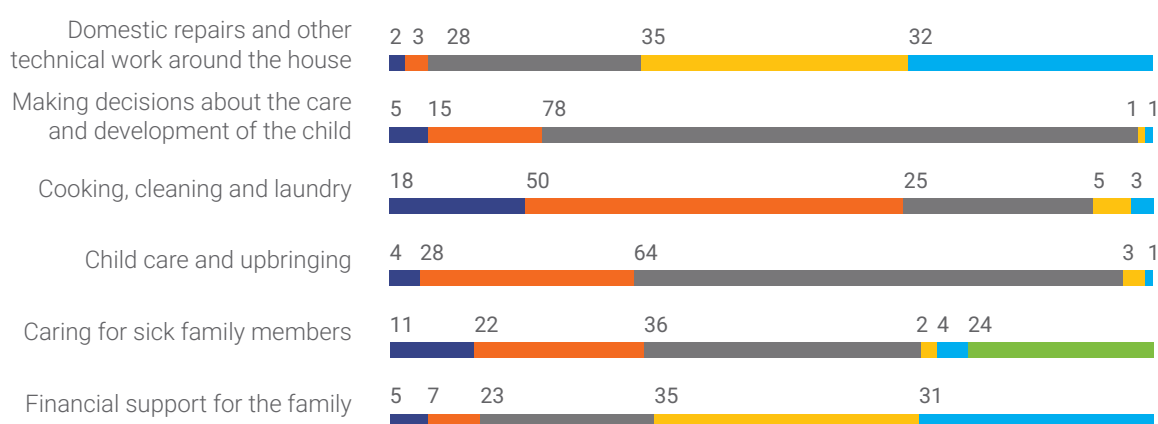
Gender norms and stereotypes	Area of influence			Impact on parents with children under 7
	Labour market	Legislation and polic	Family sphere	
Motherhood should come before everything else	- Intermittent career paths - Motherhood pay gap, lower pensions - Informality, non-standard forms of employment	- Underdeveloped childcare services - Lack of state support	- Double burden - Economic dependence	Mothers: Withdrawal from the labour market or part-time employment Fathers: Increased working hours, limited work life balance, reduced engagement in early childcare
Parental leave is not for men	- No incentives for employers to implement measures to support working fathers - Discrimination against men who take the leave - Higher employer bias against women of childbearing age - Reinforcement of gender pay gap	- Lack of paternity leave paid by the state - Lack of non-transferable parental leave for fathers	Leaves childcare solely to women	Mothers: Longer career breaks, loss of qualifications, loss of a partner in caregiving Fathers: Deprived of the right or incentive to take leave, restricts fathers' bonding with their child
Fathers are helpers, not primary caregivers	- Women take long childcare leaves - Women adapt work patterns to childcare needs	Lack of programmes that build childcare skills for both parents and promote equal parental roles	- Increased pressure on women - Stigmatisation - Widening gender gap in caregiving	Mothers: Less time for professional development. Loss of work-life balance Fathers: Loss of caregiving skills and emotional connection with the child
There are "male" and "female" occupations	- Narrowing of career choices - Lower salaries in female-dominated occupations	- Weak government support programmes for non-traditional careers - Weak career guidance reform	Lack of family support for women entering in "non-traditional" fields	Mothers: Labour market segregation, lower incomes, fewer prospects Fathers: Restricted career choice, limited work-life balance, low parental leave uptake

Source: Based on evidence from the study's survey, focus group discussions, in-depth interviews and desk research.

Stereotype 1. Women care for children, men earn income

This stereotype continues to shape family life and labour market outcomes, limiting opportunities for both parents. Women face constrained career prospects and interrupted employment, while men encounter social and practical barriers to active involvement in childcare. Our survey results show early signs of change at the level of attitudes. Both women and men increasingly describe childcare as a shared responsibility of both parents. **More men (64 per cent) than women (55 per cent) report that care in their families is shared equally**, revealing a gap between men's perceptions and women's lived experience. **Demand for greater equality is evident on both sides.** Over 74 per cent of women with children under seven want their partners to take on more childcare responsibilities, while 72 per cent of men say they would like to be more involved in childcare. **Yet practice lags behind stated intentions.** Among families with children under seven, women report that 65 per cent of their husbands act as the primary breadwinner and 57 per cent carry out repairs, traditionally "male" household tasks. In contrast, only 1 per cent of men provide childcare and just 2 per cent cook and do other household chores (Figure 3.5).

Men's contributions therefore remain largely supportive rather than primary, and even when fathers participate in childcare, both parents report that the ultimate responsibility for care continues to rest with women.

Figure 3.5. Division of household and childcare responsibilities between parents, per cent**Mothers****Fathers**

■ Exclusively partner
 ■ Mostly partner
 ■ Approximately equally
■ Mostly me
 ■ Exclusively me
 ■ No such area

Although men often report active participation in childcare in surveys, their actual willingness to expand this role remains limited, even when additional opportunities are available. Our survey shows that **only 46 per cent of men consider childcare as their direct responsibility**.

The main reasons cited for limited involvement are:

- 54 per cent report the need to financially support the family, reflecting both social expectations and economic pressures.
- 21 per cent are unwilling to change established behaviour patterns.
- 15 per cent state that childcare is primarily a woman's responsibility.

These findings indicate the presence of **dual pressure on men**: growing social expectation for greater engagement in family life alongside ingrained traditional norms and economic responsibilities that limit their real involvement.

This **discrepancy between stated attitudes and actual behaviour** underscores the need for comprehensive policies and programmes that not only promote the involvement of men in childcare but also address entrenched gender stereotypes within families.

Factors that influence the division of roles

The extent to which the breadwinner model shapes family roles varies across several factors.

The child's age plays a central role. **The younger the child, the more traditional the division of responsibilities.** Among families with children under three, 72 per cent of fathers identify financial provision as their primary role. This share drops to 61 per cent among families with children aged 3 to 6. Early childcare remains strongly associated with mothers, while fathers' roles expand slightly as care demands become less intensive and more flexible (Annex C, Tables C6–C7).

The mother's age also matters. Younger women tend to live in more traditional arrangements, while **older women are more likely to experience a more balanced division of roles.** In families where the mother is aged 18 to 25, financial provision is assigned to the man in 59 per cent of cases, and 15 per cent report that childcare is performed exclusively by the woman. Among women aged 36 to 45, exclusive financial provision by the man drops to 31 per cent, and exclusive childcare by the woman to 7 per cent (Annex C, Tables C8–C9).

Education shows a similar pattern. **Higher levels of education are associated with more egalitarian arrangements.** In families where women have secondary education, men are the sole income providers in 55 per cent of cases, compared to 34 per cent where women have higher education. Traditional domestic roles also follow this pattern. Cooking and household management are assigned exclusively to women in 41 per cent of families where women have secondary education, compared to 31 per cent among those with higher education (Annex C, Tables C10–C11).

Regional differences are also visible. **Women in central regions are more likely to report traditional role divisions,** while households in eastern regions tend to show more balanced arrangements (Annex C, Tables C12–C13).

The **full-scale war has reinforced traditional norms around men as protectors** and women as caregivers¹³⁸. Many mothers report strong social pressure to prioritise children's safety and emotional well-being, especially during displacement¹³⁹. This pressure affects their ability to engage in paid work. These expectations persist even in households where no family member serves in the Armed Forces, indicating a broader social reinforcement of traditional roles.

There are clearly defined groups of **women for whom the choice of a family role model is more often shaped by social norms and gender stereotypes** than by individual preferences or negotiation within the couple. As our survey shows, an average of 10.5 per cent of women directly acknowledge this.

The gap is most pronounced among (Annex C, Tables C14–C17): Women with **secondary education**: 24 per cent report an orientation toward a stereotypical division of roles, which is higher than in other education groups.

- Women **living in central regions** of Ukraine: 16 per cent report stereotypical role preferences.
- Women **aged 18–25**: 13 per cent report such preferences.
- Women with **monthly incomes of up to UAH 15,000 (USD 360)**: 13 per cent report such preferences.
- Women **with children under three**, where traditional breadwinner and caregiver roles are most pronounced.

These findings help identify groups at higher risk of reproducing traditional family role models.

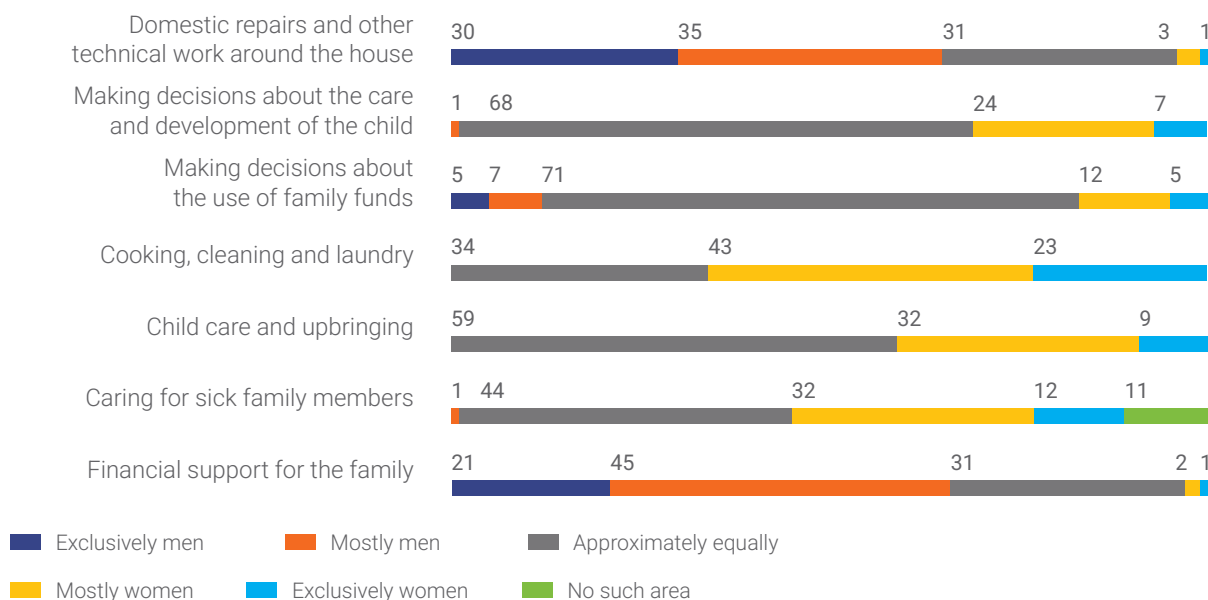
Normalisation of stereotypical gender roles

The study findings show a clear **gap between personal norms and social norms that shape the gendered division of family roles.** Personal norms reflect individual beliefs and preferred ways of organising family life. For many respondents, these lean toward more equal, partnership-based arrangements. In contrast, social norms, especially beliefs about what is considered appropriate and what others do, remain more traditional and often conflict with these preferences.

This gap between stated beliefs and actual practices reflects the pressure of social expectations. Around half of fathers, 54 per cent, and mothers, 51 per cent, report that society expects them to follow traditional roles.

Both women and men clearly recognise these social expectations. Public perceptions link men primarily with repairs, 65 per cent, and financial provision, 66 per cent. Women are associated with housekeeping, 66 per cent, childcare, 32 per cent mainly female and 9 per cent exclusively, and caring for sick family members, 44 per cent. These patterns show that traditional role expectations remain widely shared and continue to shape behaviour within households.

Figure 3.6. Social expectations for family roles, as reported by mothers, per cent



A critical awareness of these norms is present. **Respondents recognise that traditional roles are imposed and can limit their choices.**

When asked about the sources of these norms, 59 per cent of men and 52 per cent of women pointed to family upbringing and close social networks, including relatives and friends.

These findings are reinforced by focus group discussions:

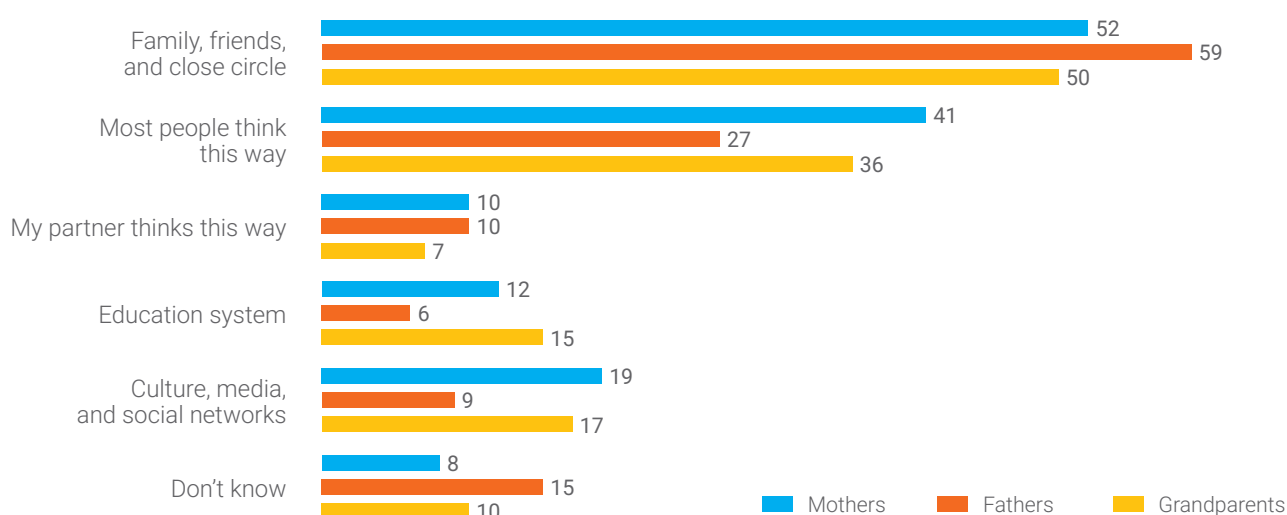


In my family, my mother always said: 'A man earns money, and a woman raises the children.' Even now, when my husband and I want something different, our relatives raise an eyebrow.

Mother of a 2-year-old

These insights are important for designing social norm change interventions. Efforts need to target not only individuals, but also families and wider community networks where these expectations are reinforced.

Women appear more sensitive to social pressure and to the influence of stereotypes on family decisions. Men are more likely to view role choices as autonomous and less shaped by societal expectations. Overall, 41 per cent of women, compared to 27 per cent of men, believe that these norms reflect the views of the majority (Figure 3.7).

Figure 3.7. Factors shaping ideas about family roles, as seen by respondents, per cent

Meanwhile, the share of women and men who have never reflected on why responsibilities in their household are organized the way they are – 12 per cent women and 14 per cent men. This lack of reflection can be interpreted as an **indirect indicator of entrenched gender stereotypes**. When a household arrangement is neither questioned nor discussed, gender roles are viewed not as negotiated choices but as “natural” or only appropriate way to organize family life.

The normalisation of traditional gender roles is clearly reflected in how satisfied women with children under seven are with the existing division of responsibilities in the family. According to the survey, **77 per cent of women** who bear the main responsibility for childcare **report being absolutely (42 per cent) or rather comfortable (35 per cent) with such division** (Table 3.2).

A similar pattern appears in attitudes toward men’s leading role in providing for the family: **86 per cent of mothers of children aged 0-6 consider this model comfortable**. Men also demonstrate a high level of satisfaction with their role as the main breadwinner in the household (Annex C, Table C.18).

Table 3.2. Mothers’ acceptance of the traditional gender roles within the family, per cent

Gender roles in the family		Absolutely uncomfortable	Rather uncomfortable	Difficult to say	Rather comfortable	Absolutely comfortable
Financial provision	Men	3	5	6	38	48
	Equal distribution	1	3	6	40	50
	Women	3	5	37	31	24
Care provision	Men	0	24	23	38	15
	Equal distribution	1	2	4	40	53
	Women	3	9	11	35	42

Stereotype 2. Women are less productive employees

The perception that “**women are less productive employees**” derives from the breadwinner-caregiver model, which assigns unpaid care to women and paid work to men. In modern workplaces, this model fuels bias that devalues women’s labour and frames **caregiving as incompatible with productivity**, reinforcing structural gender inequalities in employment.

Because traditional family roles remain prevalent, employers often view women with children as a potential risk for meeting deadlines and maintaining team productivity, which is the case not only in Ukraine.

These biases influence decisions on recruitment, promotion and assignment to key tasks. Before the full-scale invasion, an oversupply of highly qualified labour reinforced these patterns. Social norms that assign

childcare primarily to women strengthened employer bias. Mothers of young children were often seen as less reliable or less productive, which reduced their chances of being considered for positions even when they were highly qualified.

Evidence from companies with family-friendly policies shows that bias persists even in relatively progressive workplaces. A survey of office staff in large and medium-sized companies found that **most employees acknowledge differentiated treatment of women and men**¹⁴⁰. Between 13 and 19 per cent reported that men are more often preferred for career advancement, key projects, business trips and overtime work. At the same time, women are more likely to receive employer support related to childcare leave for children under three and for caring for sick children, as noted by 43 per cent and 35 per cent of respondents, respectively¹⁴¹. This effectively channels women into a mommy track while men remain on a career advancement track.

Employers echoed these views in our in-depth interviews. While rarely state it explicitly, many imply that **women with children are less competitive and less productive in the long run**, reinforcing existing gender gaps in employment opportunities.



A woman with a young child is seen as a higher risk and less efficient at work because she is constantly distracted by the child. A man with a child, on the contrary, will work with greater dedication, because he must provide for the family and is therefore fully committed to his job.

Employer, banking

The war and resulting labour shortages have started to shift practice. **Employers report greater willingness to hire women**, including mothers of young children, and place more emphasis on professional competence than family status.

Despite this shift, **entrenched attitudes continue to reinforce gendered role divisions. They penalize women and discourage men from taking on caregiving**. Thus, addressing employer mindsets remains critical for changing broader gender norms.

Impact of productivity stereotypes on women's employment

Employers' stereotypes about the limited productivity of mothers with young children are widely **shared by both female and male employees**. In a survey of office workers on family-friendly corporate policies, 55 per cent of the respondents agreed that family responsibilities (caring for children, elderly or sick family members) reduce employees' efficiency¹⁴². One in five noted that this mainly affects women, while one third believed it affects women and men equally.

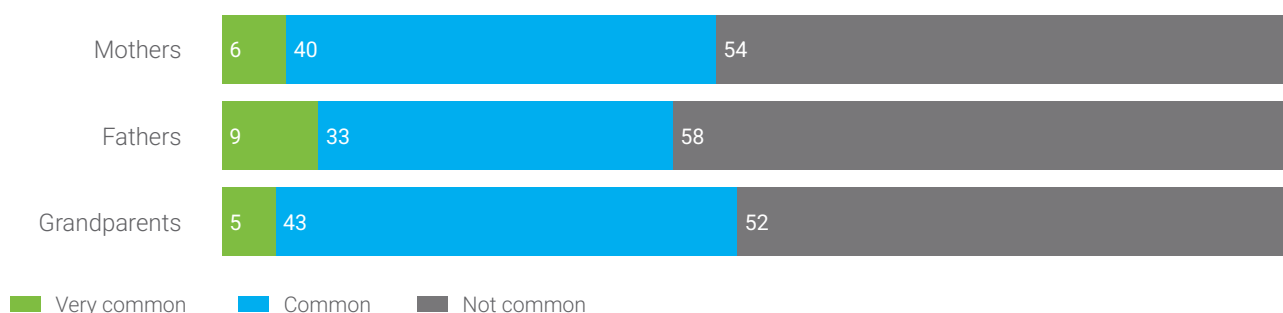
While gender stereotypes can influence women's perceptions and behaviour, the survey suggests that their direct impact on job search decisions among mothers of very young children is limited. Only 13 per cent of non-working women with children under three reported that they did not look for a job because they believed employers would not hire them. This indicates that, although mistrust of employers exists, it affects a relatively small share of mothers rather than representing a major barrier to labour market participation in this group.

Productivity stereotypes undermine women's professional confidence and career aspirations. Our survey shows that 30–35 per cent of mothers with children aged 0–6 believe they are less productive than colleagues without children. **One quarter (25 per cent) avoid complex tasks or applying for promotions** due to concerns about balancing work and childcare. In addition, 2 per cent of employed women with young children report that lack of confidence in their abilities often becomes a direct barrier when seeking new job opportunities.

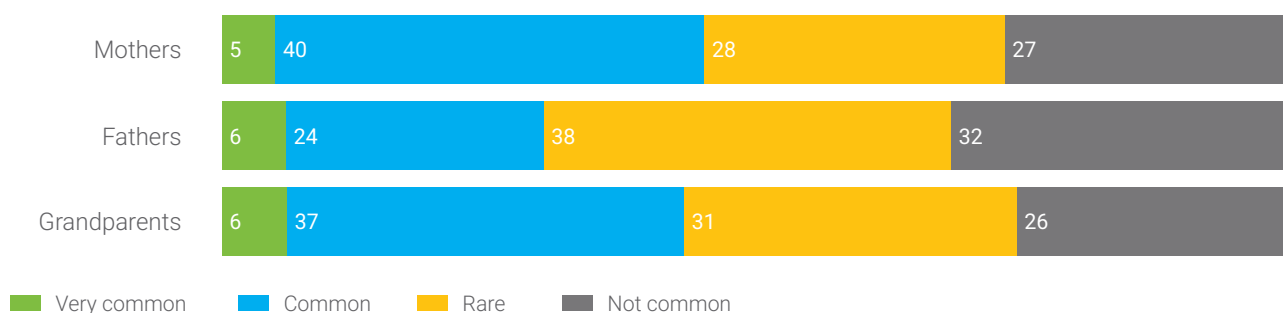
These patterns are reinforced by broader beliefs about women's professional limits. Our survey confirms the persistence of a glass ceiling mentality. **Forty per cent of women and 33 per cent of men say the view that management roles are not for women remains widespread in Ukrainian society.** Moreover, 40 per cent of women report direct or indirect experience of prejudiced attitudes that imply a limit to their career advancement. Only 24 per cent of men recognise this problem, pointing to a significant awareness gap (Figure 3.8).

Figure 3.8. Parents' and grandparents' views on women's professional self-determination, per cent

Leadership roles are not for women



Women can only advance to a certain level



Perceptions of limited career advancement vary by region and age. **The belief that women can progress only to a certain acceptable level is most common among women in eastern regions at 72 per cent.** It is far lower in northern and western regions at 29 per cent each.

Similar regional differences appear in views that leadership positions are not meant for women. This belief is reported by 57 per cent of women in eastern regions, compared to 25 per cent in northern and 33 per cent in western regions.

Younger women are also more likely to perceive this pattern. Around 47 per cent of women aged 18 to 25 report it as widespread, compared to 36 per cent among those aged 26 to 35.

Objective performance data contradict negative self-assessments. Around 85 per cent of mothers with flexible or remote working arrangements meet established deadlines¹⁴³. This shows that assumptions about lower productivity among mothers are largely unfounded.

Taken together, careers of women with young children are constrained both externally, through employer bias, and internally, through reduced confidence shaped by social norms and partner expectations. This creates a self-reinforcing system that limits women's career progression, reduces access to leadership positions and contributes to persistent gender pay gaps. Flexible work arrangements and corporate support for both parents can mitigate these effects and unlock productivity gains for employers.

Stereotype 3. Motherhood should come before everything else

The expectation that motherhood should come before everything else limits women's ability to enter or return to paid work. It also shapes employer behaviour by reinforcing the idea that men should be prioritised as employees, while women are seen as primarily responsible for care.

This norm is embedded in recruitment and promotion practices. In our in-depth interviews, women with children under seven consistently report being asked during job interviews how they plan to combine work and childcare, while men are rarely asked similar questions. This reflects an assumption that childcare is a woman's responsibility and a potential obstacle to her employment.

This experience was shared during our focus group discussions with mothers of young children:



When I was looking for a job, there were very often cases when the employer questioned my ability to combine work and childcare, arguing that for a woman the child always comes first.

Mother of a 3-year-old

The impact of this norm extends beyond employment decisions. It generates guilt or self-doubt among women who want to combine paid work and caregiving. Our survey findings show that **69 per cent** of out-of-work mothers of children under three said the **belief that a mother must devote herself fully to childcare was a main reason they weren't looking for a job**. Among women with children aged 3–6, this share was 47 per cent.

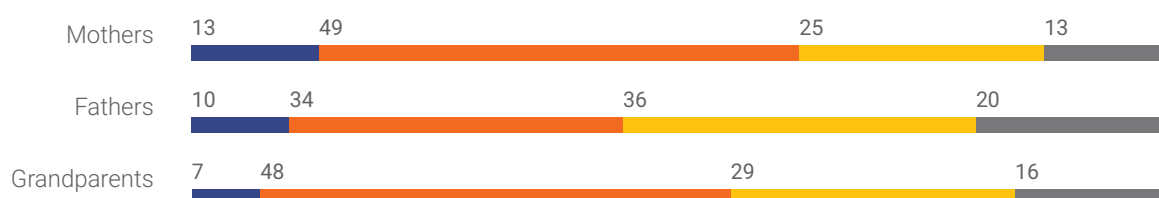
Men largely share these expectations, indicating how deeply rooted the norm remains. Some **51 per cent of men believe that a woman cannot return to work because a child requires care even after starting school**, while 18 per cent explicitly state that they do not want a woman to be employed. These views directly contribute to women's exclusion from the workforce.

Figure 3.9. Prevalence of discrimination against mothers with young children in employment, per cent

Women with young children are not hired



Denial of employment for women due to maternity plans



Very common Common Rare Never encountered

Although 61 per cent of women consider prejudice against mothers to be very widespread, they rarely report direct experiences of discrimination (Figure 3.9). This gap is explained by several factors:

- Employment refusals are usually framed in indirect terms such as unsuitable schedules or excessive workload. Many women interpret these as neutral job requirements rather than bias.
- Social norms also lead women to internalise barriers and attribute them to personal limitations.
- Fear of stigma or being seen as overly sensitive further discourages them from speaking openly about such experiences.

As a result, women **recognise the problem at the societal level but are less likely to link it to their own experience**.

At the same time, prevailing norms place a double demand. Women are expected to engage in paid work while remaining the primary caregivers, often at the expense of their own rest and recovery. Our survey findings show that only 10 per cent of women's time is available for rest. Around 18 per cent of women report having no time for rest at all. This constant overload leads to emotional and physical exhaustion, lower well-being, and weakens women's motivation for career development.

Employment-related constraints linked to this stereotype vary strongly by region:

- 63 per cent of respondents in the eastern regions report that refusal to hire women due to expected pregnancy or childbirth is widespread, compared to 38 per cent in the northern regions.
- The belief that women with young children are not hired is also most prevalent in eastern regions at 73 per cent. It is reported more often by women aged 35–45 (21 per cent) than by younger age groups.

Other sociodemographic differences are less pronounced, highlighting the dominant role of regional context in shaping these norms.

Stereotype 4. Parental leave is not for men

The belief that parental leave is not for men leads to a chain of expectations. It defines assumptions about men's roles at home, fuels employer bias and influences how parental leave policies are designed and used. At its core lies the idea that **men as unsuitable for childcare** and that mothers are the natural primary carers.

This stereotype has clear labour market consequences. Even when men are formally entitled to parental leave, they face strong pressure to remain fully engaged in paid work.

These attitudes discourage fathers from using parental leave and reinforce employer perceptions that men who assume care responsibilities are less committed or less suitable for career advancement.

The good news is attitudes are evolving. **Most women and men now say they prefer an equal partnership in childcare, and many men express a desire to be more involved**. Our survey data show that 52 per cent of women and 42 per cent of men support sharing parental leave between both parents.

Among respondents who support shared parental leave, most favour an equal division. This includes 53 per cent of men and 58 per cent of women. This points to growing **openness to more balanced models of parenthood**. However, the broader assessment of prevailing stereotypes and the current division of roles within households indicates that equal sharing of parental leave remains unlikely under existing social and institutional conditions.

Practice, however, lags behind attitudes. **Men's actual uptake of parental leave remains very low, despite existing legal entitlements**. According to our survey, only about 1 per cent of men have taken parental leave. This gap between formal rights and real use highlights how strongly the stereotype continues to shape behaviour and decisions in the labour market.

Existing norms put double pressure on men. They are expected to be primary providers while also facing growing expectations to be present fathers. Hands-on childcare is still seen as "unmanly". These norms generate internalised restraint, guilt or fear of social judgement when men consider taking parental leave or engaging actively in childcare.

As a result, even in countries with equal **parental leave rights**, only about **10–15 per cent of men actually use this entitlement**¹⁴⁴. This confirms the power of entrenched gender norms in shaping behaviour.

Overall, **many men express a desire to be active fathers but encounter social stigma or workplace obstacles**. Addressing this tension requires employer-focused measures, changes in corporate culture, and awareness-raising efforts that normalise and support men's use of parental leave.

Stereotype 5. Fathers are helpers, not primary caregivers

This stereotype is rooted in a belief that women are naturally competent caregivers, while men lack innate caregiving abilities and therefore play only a supportive role. It rests on the idea that care flows from women's nature rather than learned skills. This belief persists despite substantial evidence that both women and men need experience, guidance and support to provide adequate care for a newborn. Aside from breastfeeding, early childcare does not rely on biological differences.

Our focus group discussions and in-depth interviews confirm that this norm remains widespread:



Men don't have the instinct to take care of little ones. They can help, but they can't replace a mother.

Mother of a 2-year-old

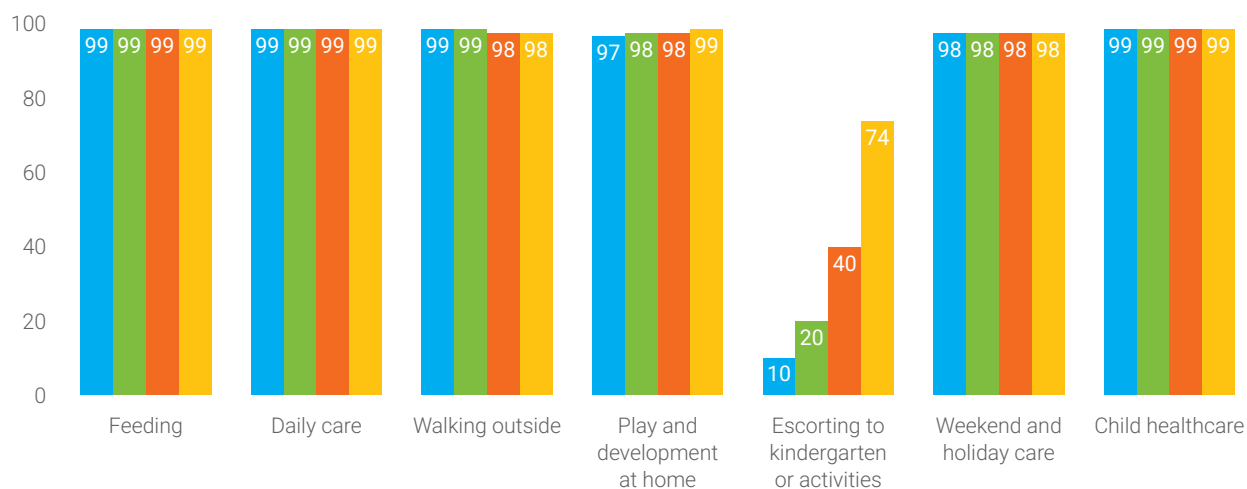
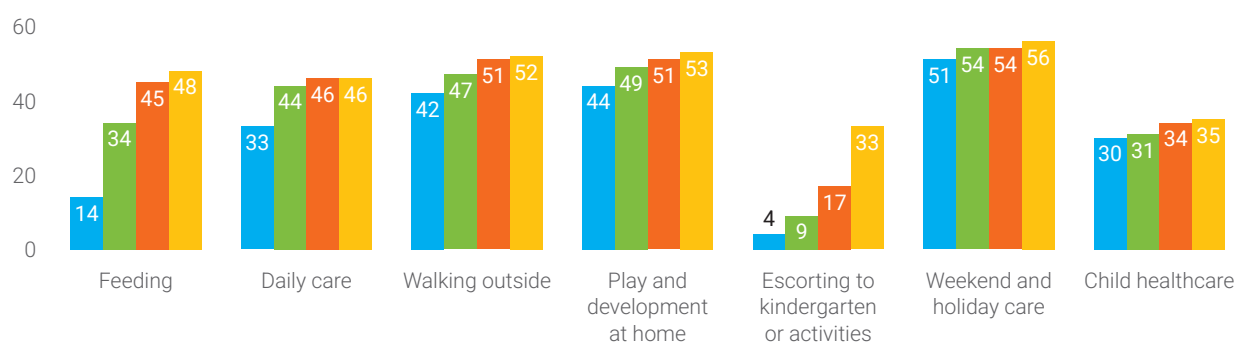
I think women do it naturally, calming the child and feeding them. I have to constantly ask how to do it better.

Father of a 1-year-old

Our survey results indicate that caregiving practices among parents of children aged 0–6 reflect this assumption. Women continue to be seen as primary caregivers. Men's roles have changed from being viewed as unreliable to being accepted as occasional carers who take on specific tasks or time periods. However, responsibility for key decisions and overall care remains with mothers (Figure 3.10).

More than 60 per cent of women with children aged 0–6 report that their partners actively participate in childcare. Fathers are more likely to help with feeding as children grow older, assist with daily household chores, accompany children outside the home, care for children on weekends and step in when mothers are delayed at work. This indicates growing involvement. At the same time, fathers' participation does not significantly reduce **mother's engagement**. **Across all caregiving dimensions, mothers' involvement remains close to 90 per cent.** Moreover, mothers continue to organise and coordinate the tasks carried out by fathers.

Overall, men's contributions remain largely supplementary rather than equal. Their involvement expands mainly as children grow older and varies significantly across households. Responsibility for planning, quality and continuity of care remains disproportionately with mothers.

Figure 3.10. Caregiving functions performed by mothers and fathers, per cent**Mothers****Fathers**

■ Age 0 ■ Age 1 ■ Age 2 ■ Ages 3-6

Stereotype 6. There are “male” and “female” occupations

This stereotype rests on assumptions about the natural suitability of men and women for certain types of work. Men are perceived as more suited for physically demanding, technical or managerial roles, while women are associated with care, education, service and communication-oriented occupations.

These expectations restrict occupational choices and career trajectories for both sexes, reducing the effective use of human capital. Occupational segregation limits women’s access to high-paying and leadership positions. It also reinforces other stereotypes, including the belief that women are less productive or distracted by family responsibilities. In this way, gendered perceptions of professions both reflect and perpetuate the traditional breadwinner-caregiver model, entrenching systemic barriers to equality in the workplace.

In practice, this norm manifests through structural and cultural barriers. **Women are less likely to enter STEM, technical or manufacturing occupations**, even when they have relevant skills. **Men remain underrepresented in care, administrative and education roles**. Many women choose public sector or education jobs instead of employment in the private sector, as these offer greater stability or shorter working hours, though with lower pay. This contributes to mothers earning significantly less on average than other workers.

Employers’ behaviour reinforces these patterns. **Women and men are often discouraged, directly or indirectly, from applying for jobs considered atypical for their gender.**

Our survey findings, focus group discussions and in-depth interviews confirm these patterns, showing that fear of social judgement and pressure to conform strongly influence career decisions:



Society immediately assumes that if a woman chooses a physically demanding or technical job, there must be something wrong with her. Because of this, many simply do not dare to try.

Mother of a 5-year-old

The war has intensified these dynamics. According to VoxUkraine surveys, labour shortages reached 27–36 per cent across companies in 2023¹⁴⁵. In theory, this could have expanded opportunities for women. In practice, however, **increased unpaid care, ECEC closures and widespread displacement forced many mothers to reduce their working hours, shift to part-time employment or leave the labour market.**

More women have entered sectors traditionally dominated by men, such as transport, manufacturing, defence logistics. However, this shift has not translated into higher overall employment or accelerated career advancement for women. **Structural barriers and care-related constraints continue to limit gains.**

Our survey confirms that stereotypes about “male” and “female” occupations remain widespread. Among women, 13 per cent consider these occupational stereotypes to be very common, 60 per cent describe them as common, and 27 per cent view them as not common. Among men, the corresponding figures are 19 per cent, 60 per cent and 21 per cent (Figure 3.11).

Figure 3.11. Attitudes toward stereotypes about “male” and “female” occupations, per cent



Notably, views are **similar across both younger and older age groups**, indicating the absence of a substantial generational shift. Without targeted interventions, such beliefs continue to be reproduced across generations. At the same time, the fact that most respondents label these stereotypes as moderately common rather than fixed suggests room for change.

Overall, gendered social norms around occupations continue to shape attitudes, but are not immutable. This creates space for evidence-based, targeted measures on **tackling occupational segregation**. Key actions include:

- promoting underrepresented occupations to both women and men,
- integrating gender-responsive approaches into education and skills development,
- strengthening workplace policies that challenge stereotypes and expand equal opportunities.

Such measures can expand career choice, support professional advancement and accelerate gender equality at work.

Overall, social norms reflect local characteristics and continue to evolve. **Some communities remain very traditional, while others change more rapidly.** This depends on the region where people live, the density of social ties, access to infrastructure, and external social events. In different communities, traditional expectations can remain highly stable, even as actual practices gradually shift.

Our study shows that, despite their deep-rooted nature, gender roles within the family are not always experienced as comfortable at the individual level. For example, even when women believe that financial provision is primarily a man’s role, many report that they would feel more comfortable if this responsibility were shared more equally.

At the same time, **women tend to perceive society as more traditional than it actually is**. This gap can discourage them from acting on their more egalitarian preferences. Public awareness efforts that promote freedom of expression and highlight changing norms can help reduce the pressure of social expectations and fear of judgment and enable people to live in line with their own preferences.

In summary, mothers' decisions about work and childcare are shaped strongly by social norms that continue to prioritise the breadwinner-caregiver model. Women remain widely expected to assume primary responsibility for childcare and family well-being, while men are expected to focus on financial provision. These norms influence employer behaviour, workplace practices and family dynamics, often discouraging fathers' involvement in caregiving and reinforcing bias against mothers in the labour market. Although survey results reveal growing support for more equal sharing of childcare and parental leave, actual practices remain far more traditional. Social pressure from family networks, workplace expectations and internalised beliefs continues to constrain women's employment choices and confidence. At the same time, war-related disruptions and care infrastructure gaps have intensified these pressures. As a result, mothers often face a double burden of paid work and primary caregiving, while fathers encounter barriers to taking a more active role at home. Addressing these patterns requires policies and programmes that expand ECEC services, promote father involvement, challenge employer bias and shift community norms so that both parents can realistically combine paid work and caregiving.

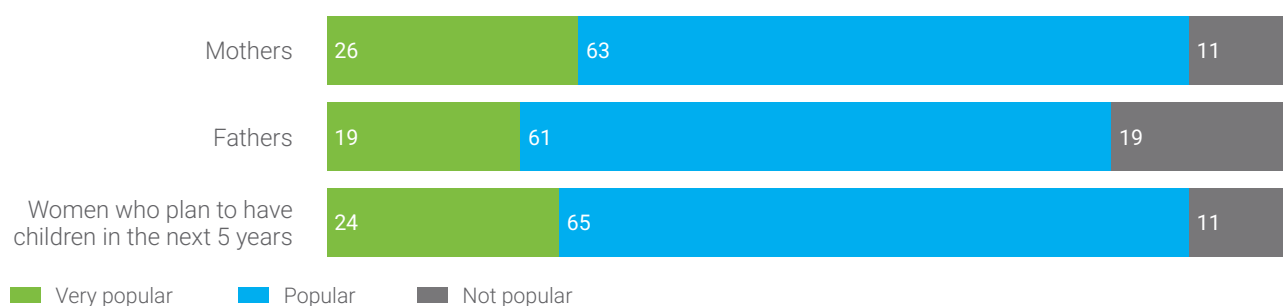
3.3. Impact of combining work and childcare on women's careers

Although women and men have the same legal right to work, women continue to face significant barriers in the labour market. Unpaid care and household responsibilities remain unevenly distributed, with women carrying most childcare and domestic work. At the same time, access to affordable and high-quality childcare services remains limited, which restricts many mothers' ability to enter or remain in paid employment. Persistent gender stereotypes also reinforce expectations that caregiving is primarily a woman's responsibility, shaping decisions within families as well as attitudes in the workplace.

These factors shape women's choices and behaviour long before childbirth and continue to influence careers afterward. The consequences of the war have further exacerbated these challenges. While the representation of women in senior management and entrepreneurship has increased overall during the full-scale invasion, **these gains have largely bypassed women with young children**¹⁴⁶.

Career inequality often begins before women have children. Many women choose fields of study and types of work based on anticipated compatibility with future care responsibilities. In our survey, 89 per cent of women described this motivation as common and very common (Figure 3.12).

Figure 3.12. Support for the view that girls should choose professions with flexible working hours, per cent



These anticipatory choices steer women toward flexible, part-time or lower-paid employment and become further entrenched during parental leave, shaping long-term career advancement and earnings.

At the same time, women do not anticipate permanent withdrawal from the labour market. Among women planning to have children within the next five years, 76 per cent intend to return to work after the child reaches age three, and 72 per cent expect to return to their current employer. After childbirth, however, they expect to adjust working arrangements. Flexible schedules and the option to work from home are among the most desired conditions.

This shows that early childcare is viewed as a temporary pause rather than career abandonment. Many women plan to reduce hours or seek greater flexibility after childbirth to accommodate care responsibilities (Table 3.3). While this reflects strong labour market attachment and significant untapped potential, it also reinforces a self-sustaining cycle.

Table 3.3. Desired and current employment conditions of women after childbirth, as reported by women planning to have children within the next five years

Employment characteristics	Desirable working conditions after childbirth	Current working conditions
Work schedule	Flexible (88%)	Full-time (84%)
Commuting to work	Up to 30 minutes (76%)	Up to 30 minutes (76%)
Length of working week	5 days (67%)	5 days (78%)
Workplace location	Preferably at home (66%)	At the employer's premises (87%)
Working hours	7-8 hours (48%)	7-8 hours (58%)

Women's employment trajectories reflect not only their individual labour market participation but also the structural conditions of available jobs. Even after childbirth, the type of work women enter or feel able to accept can trap them in lower-level positions and limit opportunities for career growth unless supportive policies and flexible working arrangements are in place.

Career interruptions linked to pregnancy and caregiving for children aged 0-6, and often beyond, constitute a major factor hindering women's career and professional development.

Earlier research confirms this pattern¹⁴⁷:

More than 57 per cent of women were outside the labour market due to maternity leave or childcare needs.

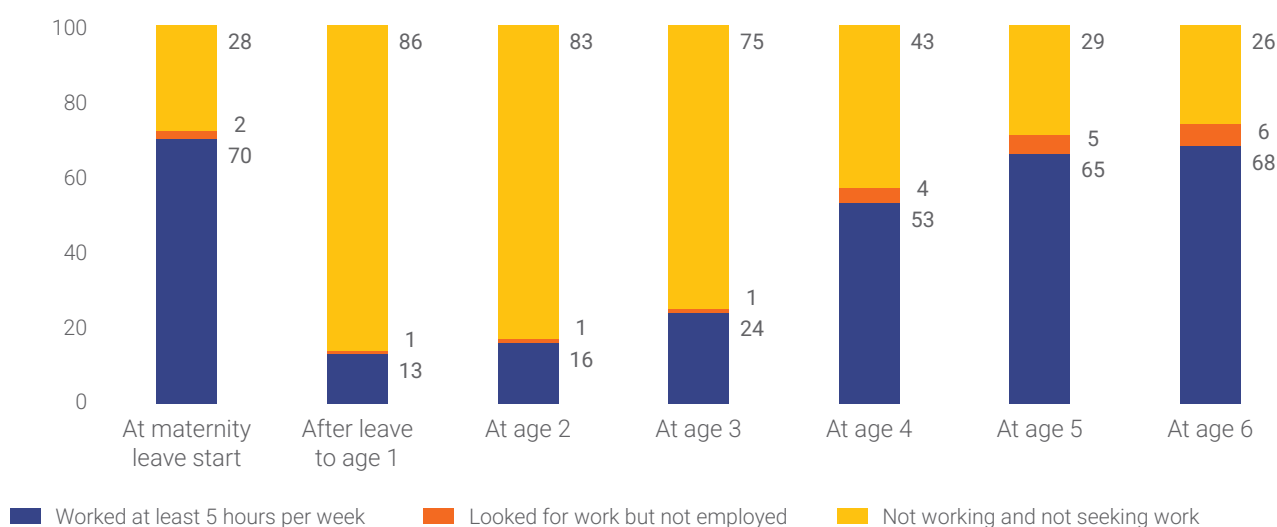
At the same time, 51 per cent reported that access to free or affordable childcare services would strongly motivate them to enter or re-enter employment.

Long breaks have a negative impact on career trajectories. Between 18 and 27 per cent of women identified skill loss after parental leave as the main obstacle to re-employment, reflecting the well-documented career interruption effect. Time spent unemployed limits further opportunities for growth and requires additional competence support through training and retraining of women.

Trajectory of mothers' economic activity

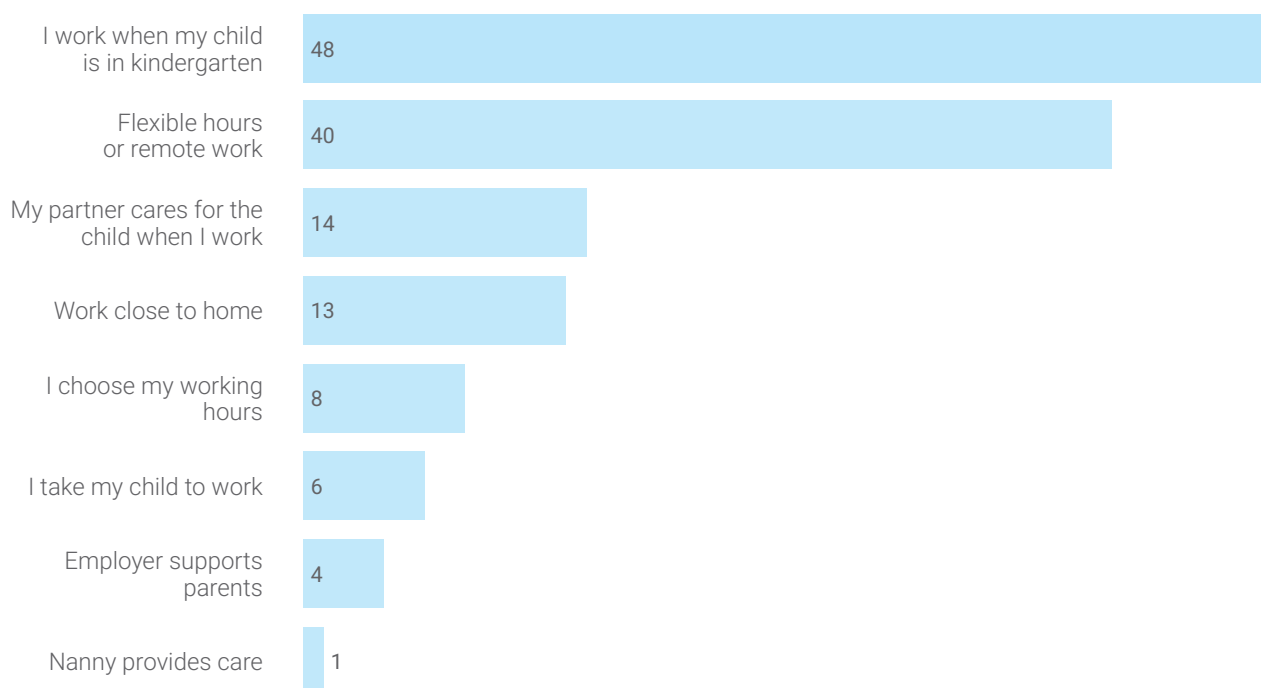
Our survey data demonstrate a clear and predictable pattern of women's economic activity around childbirth or adoption that closely follows the family life cycle and the availability of care services (Figure 3.13):

- 1. Before maternity or adoption leave**, around 70 per cent of women were economically active. This sets a baseline that most women want or need to work before having a child.
- 2. During pregnancy and until the child is two**, mothers' economic activity declines sharply. About 86 per cent are neither working nor seeking employment and only 13 per cent work more than five hours per week. This pattern should be understood in the context of maternity protection and intensive caregiving responsibilities rather than as labour market detachment. In Ukraine, women are entitled to 18 weeks of maternity leave paid at 100 per cent of previous earnings through the social insurance system, in line with ILO Convention No. 183, which guarantees income security and employment protection. This period represents a clearly defined and fully compensated leave entitlement. The remainder of the first year largely reflects ongoing caregiving needs after the end of statutory maternity leave. Those who remain employed during this period typically rely on part-time or home-based work, reflecting the need for flexibility during intensive caregiving.
- 3. When children reach age two**, women's participation in the workforce begins to gradually increase. The share of working mothers rises to 16 per cent, while 83 per cent remain outside the labour market. This stage marks the early return to work and a growing demand for part-time work, remote work and other flexible working arrangements.
- 4. When children are aged three to six**, and ECEC services become available, more women return to work. By the time their child reaches age four, 53 per cent of mothers are employed, increasing to 66 per cent by age five. This indicates a significant recovery in economic activity and the return of women to full labour market participation.

Figure 3.13. Mothers' employment status across stages of early childhood, per cent

This produces a classic U-shaped employment trajectory, with high engagement before childbirth, a sharp decline during early motherhood, gradual recovery after age three and a return to near pre-birth levels by age six. This underscores **the critical importance of accessible childcare, flexible working arrangements and supportive work-family policies** in facilitating women's timely return to employment.

Our survey data confirm that employment continuity depends heavily on flexibility and childcare. Among women who successfully combine work and childcare, 40 per cent cite flexible schedules or remote work as decisive, while 48 per cent rely on coordinating working hours with childcare availability (Figure 3.14). At the same time, the limited availability of family-friendly corporate policies means that women's employment continuity depends largely on individual and family strategies rather than structural support within the labour market.

Figure 3.14. Key factors that enable employed mothers to combine work and childcare, per cent

Employment trajectories also vary by place of residence. **After children reach the age of three, rural mothers show slightly higher employment rates than urban mothers.** Among mothers of children aged three, employment stands at 56 per cent in rural areas compared to 51 per cent in cities; for mothers of children aged four, the figures are 68 per cent in rural areas and 65 per cent in urban areas.

This reflects economic necessity, informal or flexible work closer to home, extended family support and lower entry barriers in rural labour markets:

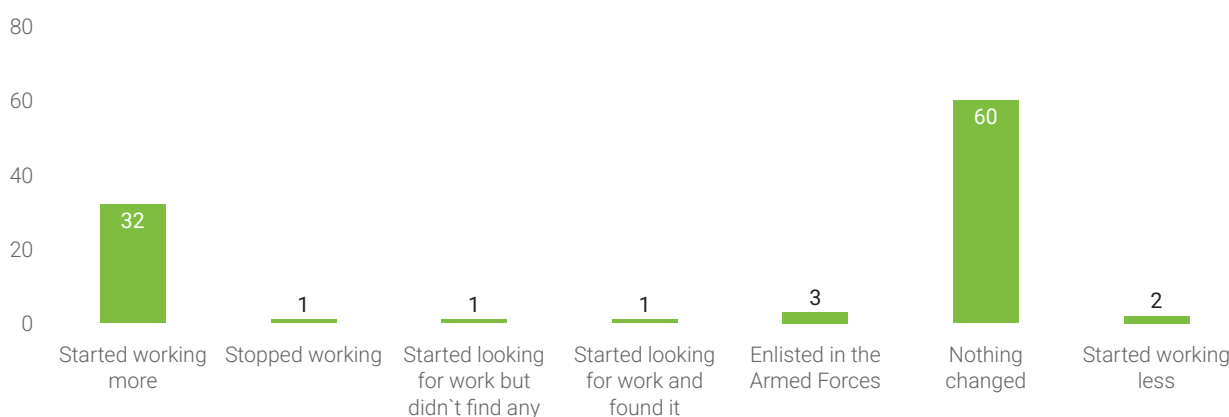
- Rural mothers are more likely to engage in flexible or informal employment close to home, enabling them to combine paid work with childcare without incurring significant supervision or transport costs.
- Support from extended family, together with lower entry thresholds to rural labour markets, further facilitates earlier engagement in work.
- By contrast, urban employment tends to require full-time availability and greater competition.
- Lower average household incomes in rural areas also increase financial pressure, encouraging earlier labour market participation.

Overall, higher employment in rural areas does not indicate stronger opportunities, but more feasible ways to balance paid work and caregiving.

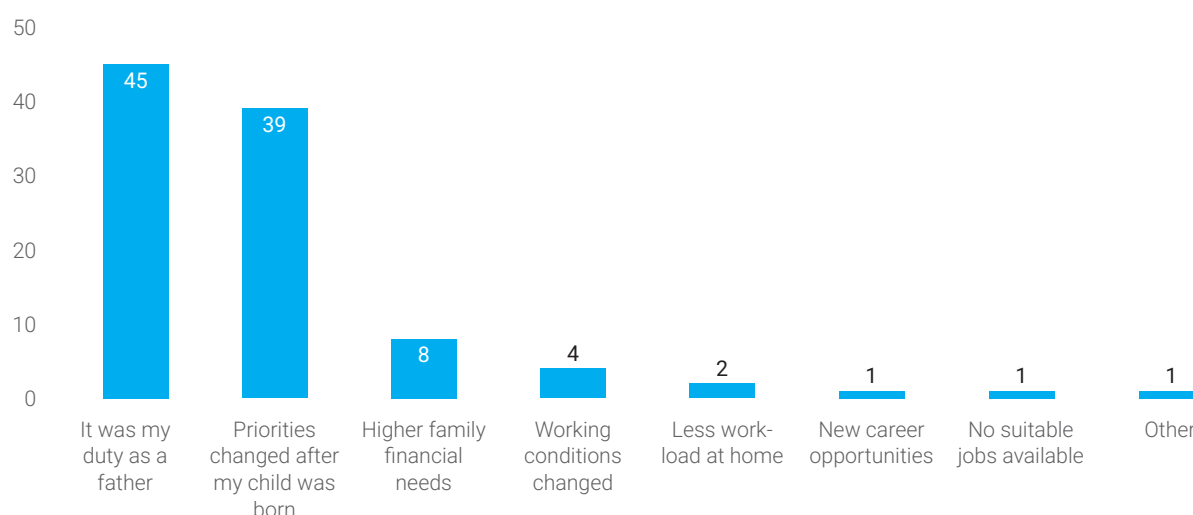
Trajectory of fathers' economic activity

Fathers' trajectories differ sharply. Our survey data show that childbirth reinforces men's labour market attachment and often increases work intensity. Nearly 32 per cent of men reported working more after becoming fathers, while 60 per cent maintained previous levels (Figure 3.15).

Figure 3.15. Changes in fathers' economic status after the birth of a child, per cent



The increase in fathers' economic activity is driven mainly by breadwinner expectations, 45 per cent, and a sense of financial responsibility, 39 per cent, rather than by joint decision-making within the household (Figure 3.16). Most men, 64.5 per cent, attribute this shift to personal choice rather than family needs. Only 23 per cent report that it results from household discussion.

Figure 3.16. Main reasons for changes in men's economic activity after the birth of a child, per cent

This indicates that **men exercise a high degree of autonomy in shaping their labour-market behaviour and experience little pressure to reduce work.**

These findings highlight the persistence of gender norms, whereby men predominantly maintain continuous labour market participation, while women are often forced to take extended breaks from work, particularly during childcare. **The long-term consequences of this include inequalities in earnings, career advancement and social protection, reinforcing traditional roles and limiting women's opportunities for full economic participation.**

Mothers' motives to seek employment

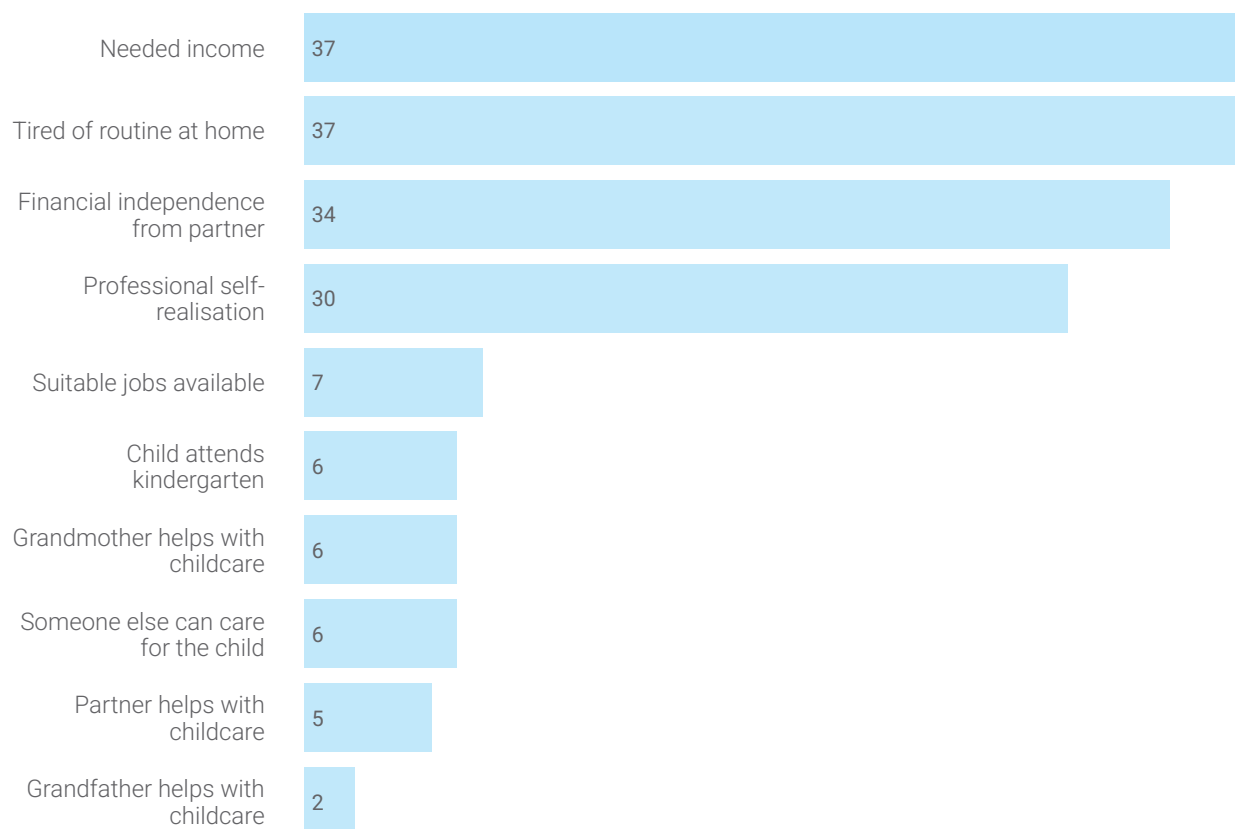
Our survey shows low responsiveness to employment incentives during early motherhood. Almost half of women with children under three, 46 per cent, report that nothing would motivate them to work. Among mothers of children aged three to six, this share remains high at 37 per cent. This does not reflect a lack of interest in employment. It reflects structural and normative constraints that shape what mothers see as realistically possible.

When incentives do matter, financial pressure is the main driver. Among mothers of children under three, 24 per cent say that serious financial need would motivate them to seek employment. Only a small share, 9 per cent, say that the possibility of **sharing childcare with a partner** would encourage them to work. Among mothers of children aged 3–6, financial considerations remain the main incentive at 19 per cent, followed by the opportunity to **build a successful career** at 10 per cent.

These patterns suggest that many mothers adjust their employment decisions to the existing policy environment. Extended parental leave combined with limited childcare options for children under three encourages women to remain outside the labour market during this period. As a result, **employment decisions are often shaped less by personal preferences than by the practical constraints families face.** Policies that combine shorter and better-paid leave with accessible childcare for children under three could make labour market participation more feasible for many mothers.

Financial motivation itself has different dimensions. For some women, employment is primarily a response to financial necessity and the need to support household income. For others, paid work represents financial independence and personal autonomy, even when the household's basic needs are met. These motivations often coexist and jointly influence decisions about returning to work.

Socio-psychological factors also play an important role. About 37 per cent of women report fatigue from performing only household duties, and 30 per cent express a desire for professional fulfilment (Figure 3.17). These responses point to unmet needs for self-realisation and signal risks of emotional exhaustion and declining well-being. Together, they highlight the importance of creating conditions that allow women to combine paid work and caregiving without sacrificing personal development.

Figure 3.17. Mothers' motives for returning to work, per cent

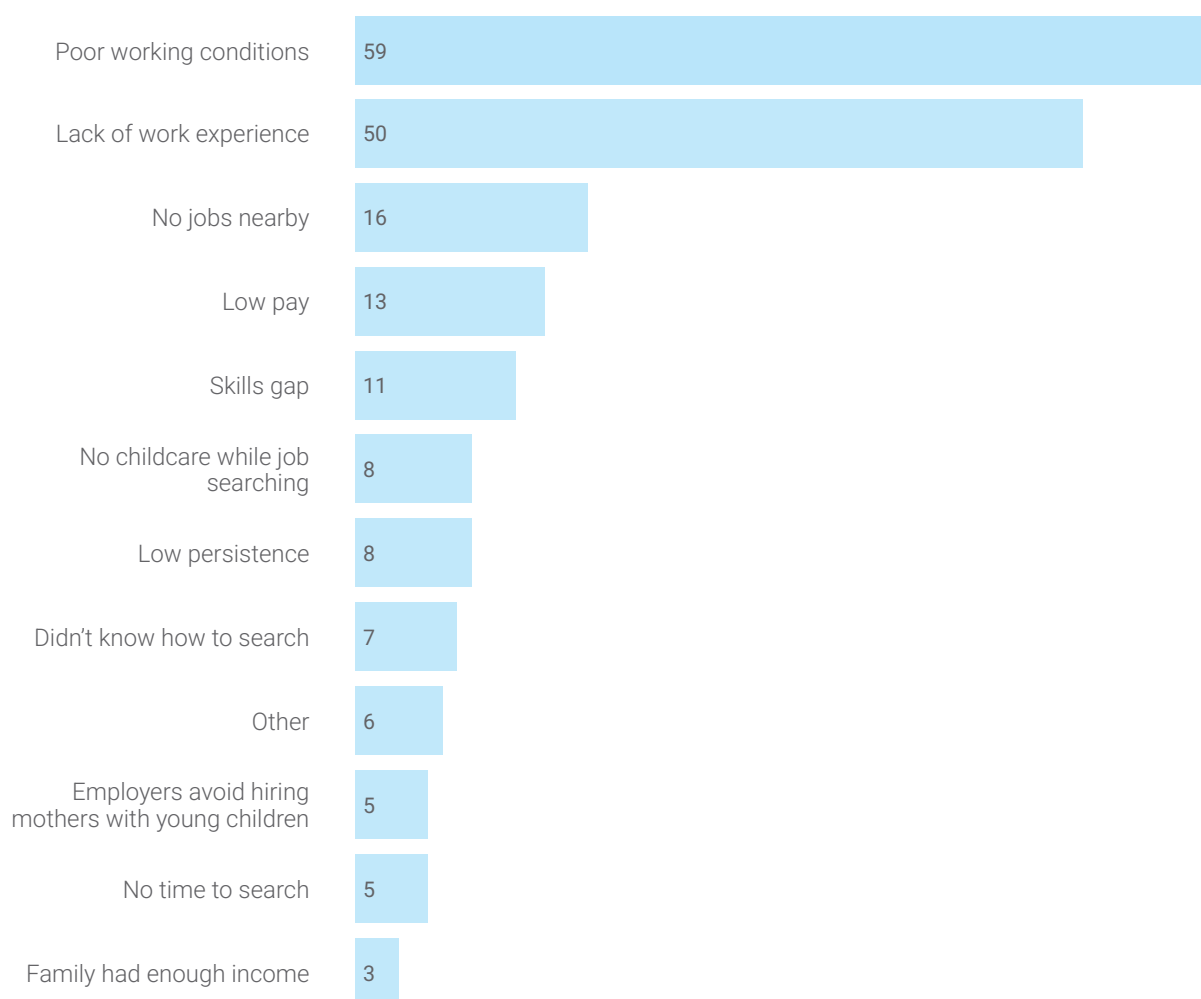
Job search experience of women with young children

Employment outcomes for women with young children are strongly shaped by how they search for work. Among women who found employment, nearly half, 46 per cent, did so without an active job search, typically through direct offers or personal contacts. A further 28 per cent secured work within one month of searching, indicating high motivation and competitiveness when opportunities are accessible.

In contrast, job search is often prolonged for women who do not succeed. Around 57 per cent of those who searched without finding work reported looking for a year or longer. This gap points to heavy **reliance on social networks for re-entry into employment**. Mothers without strong informal connections face greater difficulty accessing jobs.

Among currently employed women with young children, one third obtained their jobs through relatives or acquaintances. This confirms the central role of informal networks and suggests barriers in formal hiring processes.

Women who were unable to find work most often cited unacceptable working conditions, reported by 59 per cent, followed by uncertainty about the type of job they wanted at 50 per cent. Other reasons included a lack of suitable local vacancies (16 per cent), low pay offers (13 per cent) and insufficient skills (11 per cent). These responses reflect a mismatch between available jobs and the constraints of childcare (Figure 3.18).

Figure 3.18. Mothers' reasons for stopping the job search, per cent

Overall, reliance on personal networks for finding jobs suggests formal recruitment channels could be less accessible to mothers with care responsibilities. This creates systemic inequality of opportunities compared to men and women without young children, who are more likely to succeed through standard recruitment channels.

As a result, mothers' employment becomes dependent on private connections and individual resources rather than on transparent and equal labour market opportunities.

Obstacles to finding jobs for women with young children

Mothers with young children face a set of interrelated barriers that shape both their ability to find work and the type of jobs they accept.

The most common constraint is economic. For 41 per cent of respondents, available wages do not justify employment once childcare costs are taken into account. **Work does not pay enough to offset the cost of care.**

Working conditions also limit access to jobs. Nearly one third of women, 32 per cent, identify the lack of flexible arrangements as a key barrier. **Rigid schedules are difficult to reconcile with intensive childcare,** especially in the early years of a child's life.

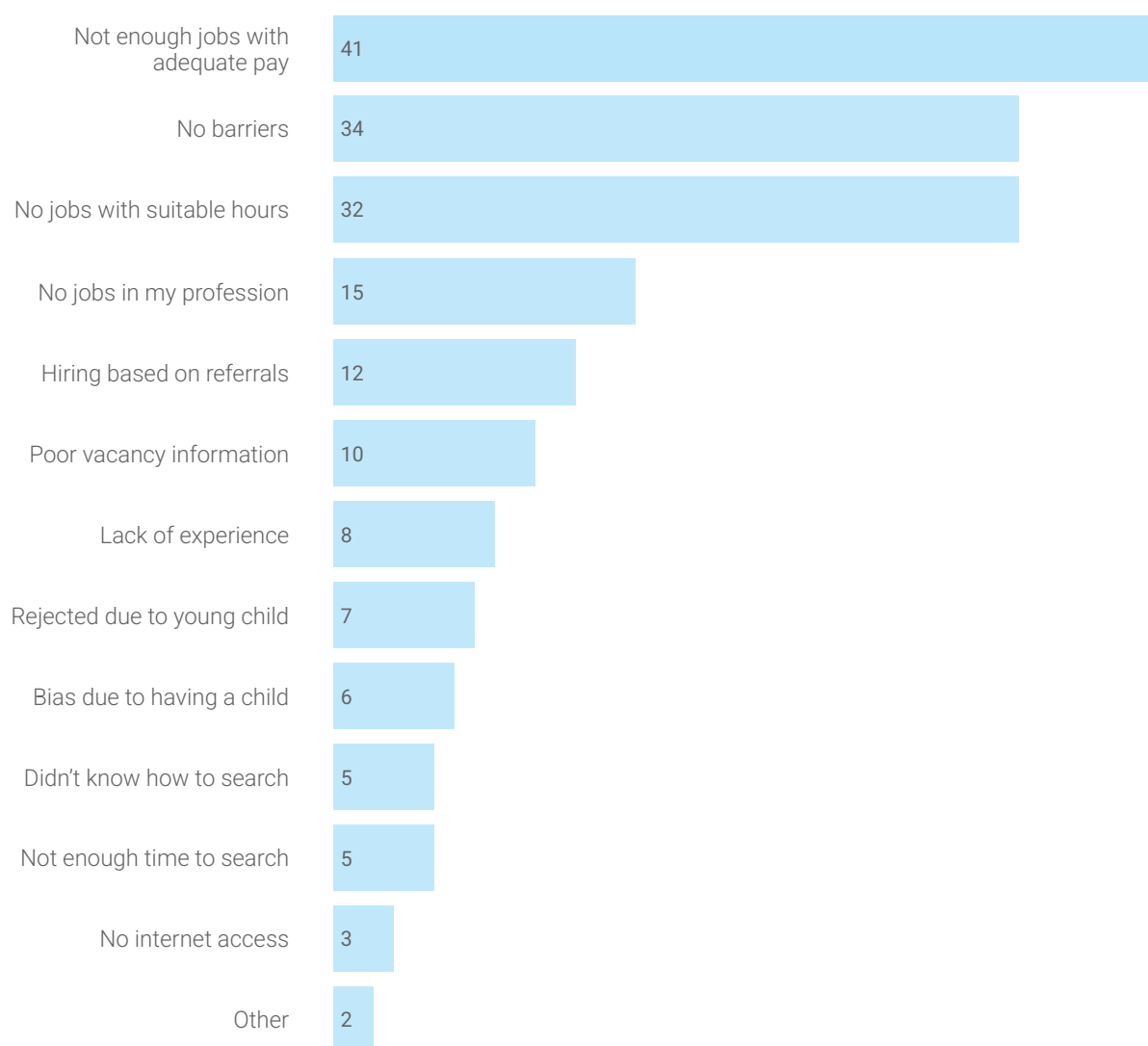
Career interruptions further weaken women's position in the labour market. Fifteen per cent report uncertainty about their professional direction, while 8 per cent cite insufficient skills or experience. This reflects the impact of **extended breaks after childbirth, which often lead to longer job searches** and reduced confidence in re-entering employment.

Social norms and limited informal support add another layer of constraint. Women are rarely openly discouraged from working, yet limited support from family or close networks, particularly in more traditional settings, can delay return to work and reduce confidence in seeking employment.

Taken together, these barriers point to a structural mismatch between labour market conditions and the employment needs of mothers with children aged 0 to 6 (Figure 3.19).

These risks are not evenly distributed. **Younger women** often report fewer perceived barriers and higher optimism, yet they face higher long-term risks when motherhood coincides with early career stages. Even short interruptions can have lasting effects. A similar pattern is observed in rural areas. **Rural women** may report fewer obstacles but limited local labour markets mean that employment often depends on informal networks or family support.

Figure 3.19. Main obstacles to job search, as reported by unemployed mothers, per cent



Overall, motherhood in Ukraine remains a critical turning point that reshapes women's career trajectories through a combination of structural constraints, institutional gaps and persistent gender norms.

First, prolonged career interruptions lead to skill loss and professional disorientation. Extended parental leave, especially early in a career, increases the risk of losing qualifications, confidence and professional direction. Almost a quarter of respondents identified skill erosion or uncertainty about their professional path as a major obstacle to returning to work. This underscores the need for continuous upskilling opportunities during parental leave, re-entry training and phased return-to-work programmes that allow women to maintain labour market attachment while care responsibilities remain high.

Second, limited access to affordable childcare services drives labour market exit. More than half of non-working mothers reported that the availability of free or affordable childcare would strongly motivate them to work. Childcare expansion is therefore a core labour market policy, not only a social service

Third, workplace inflexibility pushes mothers into part-time, informal or lower-paid employment. In the absence of flexible working arrangements, women frequently downgrade their positions or reduce working hours to reconcile paid work with caregiving. Our survey shows that 40 per cent of employed mothers rely on flexible or remote working arrangements to remain employed. This indicates that incentivising employers to introduce flexible hours, part-time options and hybrid work models is essential to retaining skilled mothers and preventing downward occupational mobility following childbirth.

Fourth, gender bias and reduced self-confidence contribute to career stagnation. Persistent stereotypes combined with diminished self-confidence after extended caregiving periods reduce women's willingness to pursue promotions, managerial roles or more demanding professional trajectories. These dynamics suggest the need for targeted mentorship programmes, leadership training for returning mothers and public awareness campaigns aimed at challenging gendered expectations around care, leadership and professional ambition.

In summary, combining work and childcare continues to reshape women's career trajectories in Ukraine through a chain of structural and social constraints. Although most women remain strongly attached to the labour market and intend to return to work after childbirth, unequal care responsibilities, limited ECEC availability, inflexible working conditions, and persistent gender norms interrupt career progression and reduce earnings potential. Mothers' employment typically follows a U-shaped pattern, with high participation before childbirth, sharp withdrawal during the first years of a child's life, and gradual re-entry once childcare services become available. In contrast, fathers' employment remains stable or even intensifies, reinforcing the breadwinner model and widening gender gaps in income, experience and career advancement. Women often rely on flexible work, informal employment, or personal networks to maintain labour market attachment, while many face prolonged job searches, skill erosion, or reduced professional confidence after career interruptions. As a result, motherhood becomes a critical turning point that can lead to occupational downgrading, slower advancement, and long-term economic inequality. Addressing these patterns requires integrated policies that expand affordable childcare, promote flexible and family-friendly workplaces, support re-entry and reskilling, and challenge gender norms that continue to shape both employer behaviour and women's career choices.

CHAPTER

4



EARLY CHILDHOOD
EDUCATION AND CARE
SERVICES

Chapter 4.

Early childhood education and care services

This chapter assesses the current state of early childhood education and care services in Ukraine, focusing on their availability, accessibility and quality. It highlights the strengths and limitations of the current system and identifies gaps that affect parents' ability to rely on childcare when engaging in paid work.

4.1. Availability, accessibility and quality of ECEC services

Ukraine's ECEC sector has long faced underdevelopment, underfunding and slow reform¹⁴⁸. At the same time, it is increasingly recognised as a core pillar of gender equality, family policy, social inclusion, labour market participation, and children's long-term development and quality of life. Current reforms and reconstruction efforts take place against this background.

The backbone of the ECEC system is the network of preschool education institutions. **State and municipal providers account for 96 per cent of all facilities.** Private provision remains limited, but it offers important alternatives for families seeking more flexible arrangements.

The majority of institutions follow a standard model of preschool education. These **general type kindergartens account for 86 per cent of all facilities** and provide full-day care and early learning based on a unified national curriculum¹⁴⁹. Recent reforms have introduced more flexible service models, including home-based, workplace-based, mini- and mobile kindergartens. These formats remain at an early stage of expansion.

Inclusive education has also expanded within the preschool system. **Over one quarter of children with special educational needs** now attends inclusive groups.

At the same time, informal childcare plays a significant role. Individual domestic workers, such as nannies, often operate in the informal economy and are not reflected in labour statistics. **Unpaid family care remains widespread.** Evidence shows that more than one third of mothers rely on regular childcare support from grandmothers¹⁵⁰.

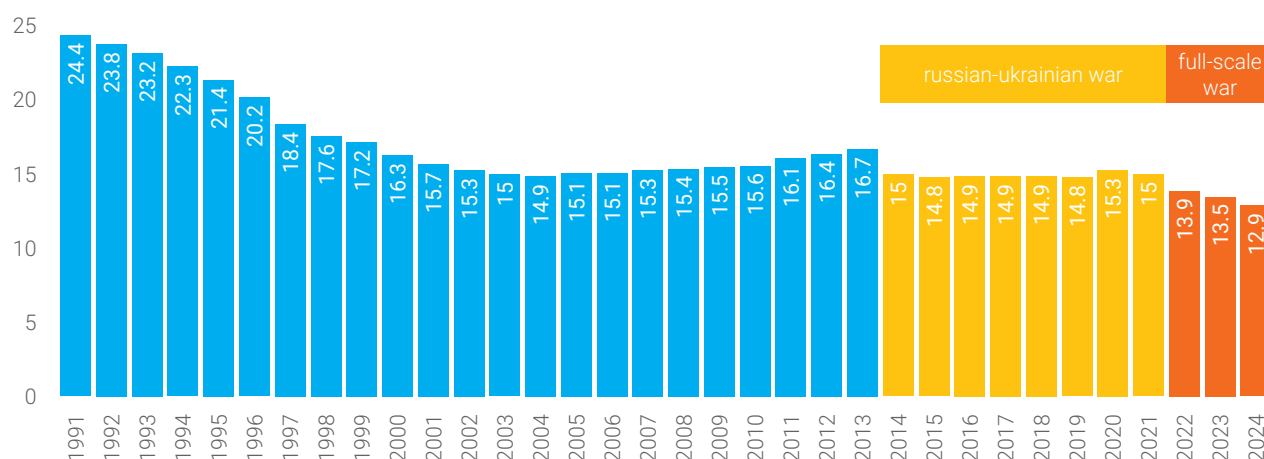
Research consistently demonstrates that **enrolment in ECEC is critical for child development, women's employment and job creation**¹⁵¹. Accessible childcare enables fathers to participate more actively in caregiving while maintaining employment, which helps challenge the perception that childcare is primarily women's responsibility. ECEC also contributes to poverty reduction, as employment of both parents increases household income and improves children's well-being and development¹⁵². Children who attend ECEC tend to experience better long-term outcomes than those who do not.

These benefits depend on both availability and quality. When service quality is low, the expected effects are reduced¹⁵³.

Several countries in the region expanded childcare access during EU accession processes. Slovenia, Latvia and Estonia provide examples of illustrative practices that Ukraine could adapt without major changes to the existing legal and policy framework¹⁵⁴. These experiences include subsidising private childminders and developing community-based creches.

Quantitative indicators of the ECEC network

The ECEC network has contracted in recent years due to military operations, demographic decline and population ageing. The number of ECEC institutions fell from 14,974 in 2021 to 12,921 in 2024¹⁵⁵. Since the start of the full-scale invasion, available places have declined by 16 per cent and children's enrolment by 30 per cent. These war related reductions in ECEC capacity may constrain women's access to paid work and increase their unpaid care responsibilities. The sector had already experienced a sharp decline in the 1990s, moderate growth until 2013, and renewed contraction since the start of the war (Figure 4.1)¹⁵⁶.

Figure 4.1. Number of ECEC institutions, thousands

In 2024, the network offered fewer than one million places, served 781,000 children and employed 257,000 full-time workers. By April 2025, 11,800 preschool institutions were operating, serving 741,000 children, and the downward trend continued¹⁵⁷.

Rural areas host a larger number of institutions, 7,400 compared with 5,500 in urban areas¹⁵⁸. However, rural facilities offer 284,000 places, while urban facilities provide 677,000. Private and corporate services account for only 4 per cent of provision, with higher shares in large regions such as Odesa oblast at 14 per cent and Kyiv city at 24 per cent.

Current administrative data reflect the typology that existed before the new law on preschool education entered into force in 2025 and revised the classification of service forms¹⁵⁹.

Under the previous typology, almost half of all ECEC facilities were combined nurseries and kindergartens serving children aged one to six or seven, one third were kindergartens for children aged three to six or seven, and the remaining fifth consisted of other facility types.

Nine out of ten ECEC facilities were general development institutions. About one in eight were combined institutions with specialised groups, including inclusive, family, or health-related groups. Sanatorium and special institutions for children accounted for about 2 per cent of facilities.

Table 4.1. Network of ECEC institutions, by previous and new typologies¹⁶⁰

Pre-2025 classification ¹⁶¹		Number of institutions, units	Share of institutions, per cent	Number of children, persons	Enrolment capacity, places	New classification, in line with the 2025 law ¹⁶²
Total		12 921	100	780 499	960 868	
Type	Kindergartens	4 243	33	129 165	173 887	Nursery, kindergarten
	Nursery-kindergartens, including 6 preschool educational institutions – nurseries	6 093	47	584 640	693 151	
	Others	2 585	20	66 694	93 830	
						Pedagogical partnership centre, child development centre
Kind	General development, including 11 preschool educational institutions – family	11 084	86	564 413	704 042	Mobile kindergarten, mini-kindergarten, family-based kindergarten
	Combined	1 593	12	200 209	236 942	Special kindergarten
	Sanatorium	57	1	5 554	6 689	
	Special	187	1	10 323	13 195	

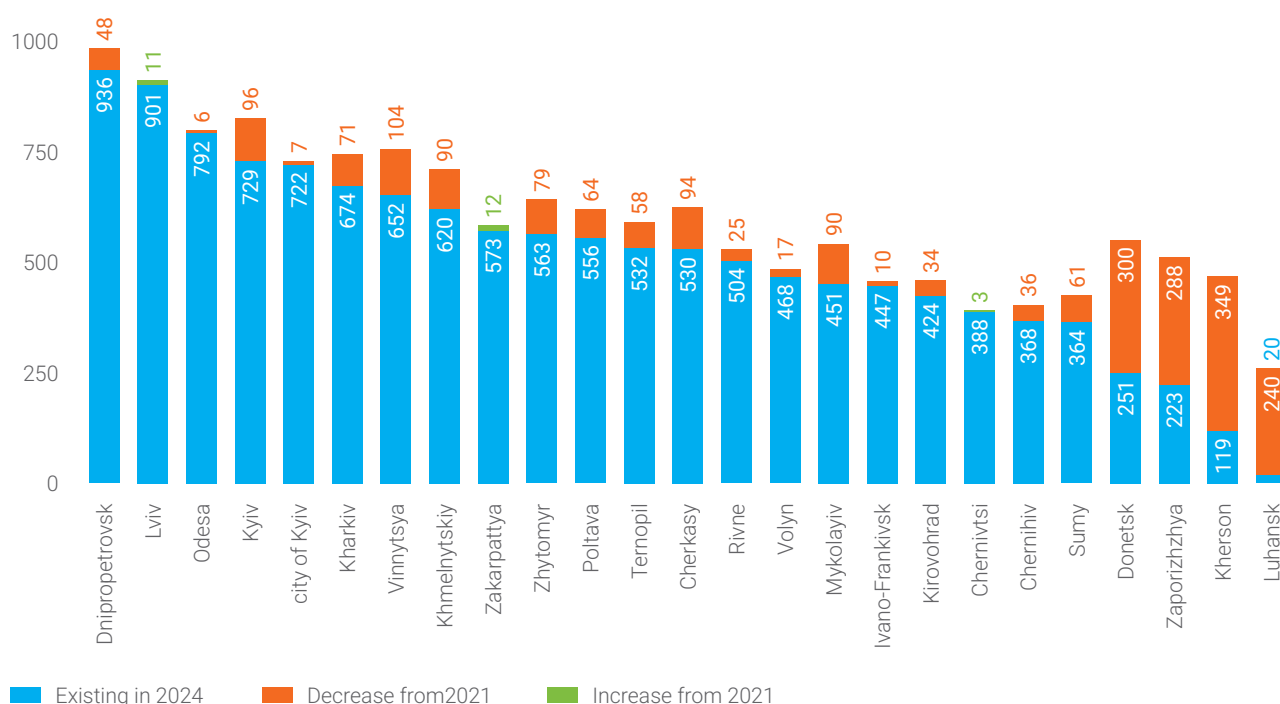
Losses of the preschool network due to military actions

The war has significantly reduced the availability of ECEC services. Many facilities have been damaged or destroyed; some operate remotely. Children parents, and staff have been displaced.

By the end of 2024, **about 8 per cent of institutions had been damaged and around 0.8 per cent destroyed**¹⁶³. As of December 2025, 132 institutions, 0.9 per cent, were destroyed and 1,353, 9.8 per cent, were damaged¹⁶⁴.

Regions near the front line saw the greatest losses. By 2024, Donetsk and Zaporizhzhia oblasts retained fewer than half of their pre-war institutions, and Kherson oblast about quarter (Figure 4.2)¹⁶⁵. Even in regions without active hostilities, demographic decline continues to reduce the size of the network. Conditions are more stable, and in some cases slightly improved, in western regions such as Zakarpattia, Lviv and Chernivtsi.

Figure 4.2. Number of ECEC institutions by region, 2021 to 2024



Source: State Statistics Service of Ukraine (2025). Pre-School Education in Ukraine

These losses reduce access to ECEC and weaken demographic resilience, which makes reconstruction crucial for Ukraine's post-war human capital.

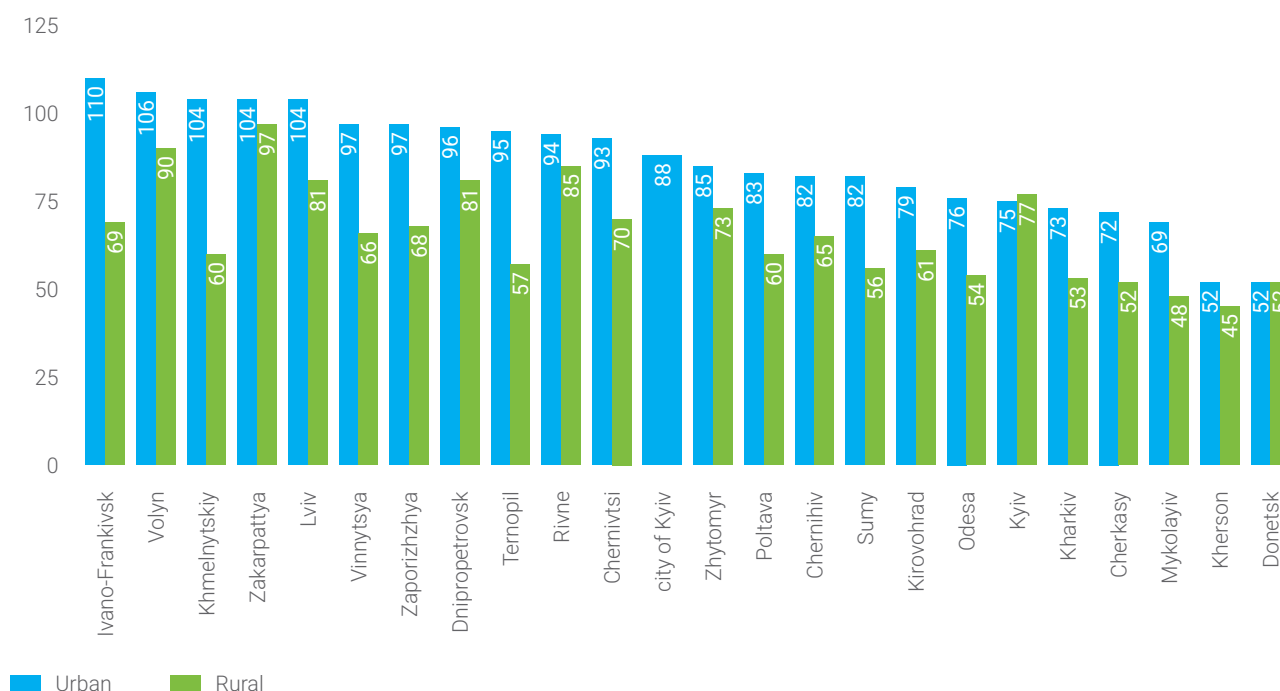
At the same time, reconstruction creates opportunities to modernise infrastructure and expand inclusive and flexible service models. Developing alternative ECEC forms can allow services to better match local needs. Achieving this will require engagement of government, international development partners, businesses, local communities, civil society and parents.

Accessibility of ECEC services

Access to preschool facilities varies significantly among regions and settlement types. Since 2022, the number of children has declined, and **for the first time in many years cities now have more available capacity**. In 2024, there were 90 children per 100 places, compared with 126 per 100 places in 2015¹⁶⁶.

At the same time, internal displacement has created new pressure points. **Overcrowding persists in large cities, western regions and some rural areas.** Urban kindergartens in eight regions report overcrowding, with the highest level in Ivano-Frankivsk region at 110 children per 100 places (Figure 4.3). According to the State Service for the Quality of Education, actual enrolment exceeds designed capacity in every third urban facility and every fifth rural facility¹⁶⁷. Our focus group discussions with parents and expert assessments confirm that **lack of places remains a significant problem in large cities**¹⁶⁸.

Figure 4.3. Number of children in ECEC per 100 places, 2024



Source: The State Statistics Service of Ukraine, authors' calculations

In rural areas, territorial remoteness and limited transport access to childcare services remain key barriers. ECEC facilities often operate below capacity, with an average of 70 children per 100 places¹⁶⁹, yet reach only a low share of rural children. Before the full-scale invasion, only 43 per cent of rural children were enrolled¹⁷⁰. Household survey data from pre-2022 period show that every fifth rural household with children under three lacked access to a preschool facility nearby, a much higher share than in cities¹⁷¹. In some regions, including Zakarpattya and Zaporizhzhia, rural ECEC facilities also experience overcrowding.

Population movements have further affected availability. In two thirds of preschools, children's enrolment declined due to families leaving abroad. In one third, enrolment increased due to the arrival of IDP children¹⁷². These dynamics contribute to uneven pressure across the network.

Limited availability has resulted in **waiting lists**. Although queues have declined in recent years due to population decline and, in some regions, expanded capacity, unmet demand remains significant¹⁷³. In 2023, **19.5 per cent of children aged 3 to 5 were on waiting lists for ECEC admission**¹⁷⁴.

Girls and boys have equal access to ECEC services. The gender participation index remains stable at 0.92–0.93, which closely reflects the sex ratio of children under seven¹⁷⁵.

Accessibility challenges are more pronounced for vulnerable households. Following the escalation of the war in 2022, large families, households with unemployed adults and single-parent households faced particularly severe constraints in accessing services¹⁷⁶.

Specifics of ECEC access amid the full-scale war

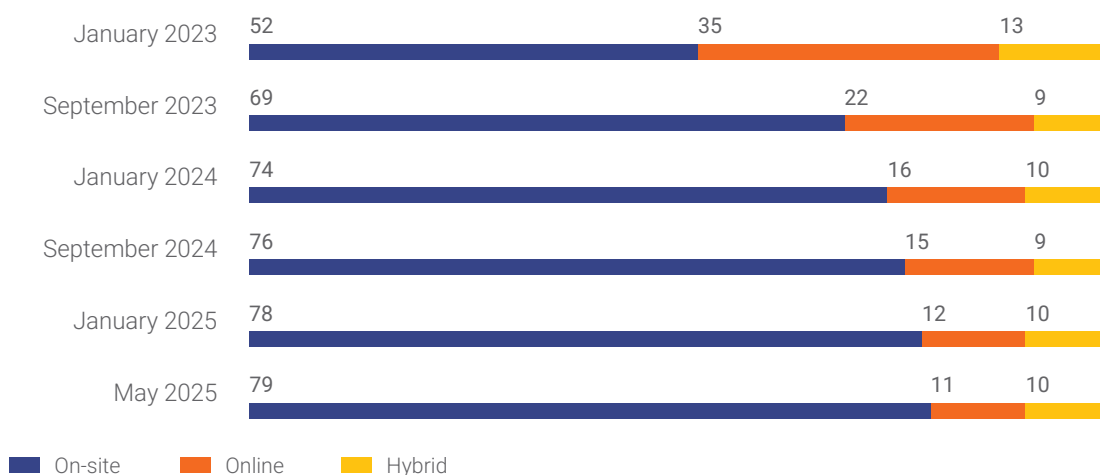
The full-scale war has introduced additional constraints on access to ECEC. These include **security risks, remote provision of services, limited availability of shelters and workforce challenges**, including staffing gaps in some areas.

Restoration of damaged facilities is ongoing. By early 2025, 565 kindergartens had been repaired and 293 shelters constructed or equipped¹⁷⁷.

Remote provision of ECEC services has posed major challenges for families. When kindergartens operate remotely, children lose access to in-person learning, interaction and developmental support. Facilities also lose their childcare function, which limits parents' ability to work. As a result, remote operation undermines both core roles of ECEC: supporting children's holistic development and enabling parents' labour force participation.

In January 2023, about half of preschools operated remotely or in a mixed format¹⁷⁸. By April 2025, the share declined to 9 per cent operating remotely and 13 per cent in a mixed format. The prevalence of remote operation increases closer to the front line. In Kharkiv, Zaporizhzhia and Kherson oblasts, all preschools operate remotely (Figure 4.4).^{179,180,181}

Figure 4.4. ECEC institutions by mode of operation, per cent¹⁸²



Source: The State Institute of Educational Analytics

Availability and quality of shelters strongly influence service provision. Most ECEC facilities now have access to shelters or protected spaces and are prepared for autonomous operation. At the same time, 7,000 kindergartens still require construction or reconstruction of shelters¹⁸³. Parents emphasise that shelter quality affects children's health and well-being.

Such concerns were highlighted during our focus group discussions:



If we talk about shelters, children get sick after staying there. A shelter should not only exist, but it should also be safe and adequate, with proper ventilation and full equipment.

Mother of a 4-year-old

ECEC services for different age groups

ECEC services in Ukraine primarily serve older preschool-aged children. Limited provision for children under three weakens support for working parents and reduces early development opportunities, especially for children from vulnerable families.

During our focus group discussions, parents emphasised the importance of ECEC for children's socialisation, even when access requires additional time and effort:



I cannot provide enough social interaction for my child at home. I would enrol my child in a kindergarten even if it only met average standards for me, but I would not choose one of poor quality. Even if it was 20-30 minutes away, I would still enrol my child.

Mother of a 4-year-old

Only one in seven places in urban ECEC facilities and one in ten in rural facilities is available for children under three (Figure 4.5)¹⁸⁴. Of 986,000 places in 2024, 834,000 were for children aged three and older, while only 152,000 were for children under three¹⁸⁵. In rural areas, only 30,000 places served this age group nationwide. Regional shares range from 8 to 20 per cent.

Figure 4.5. Share of ECEC places in urban and rural areas in 2024, per cent



Source: The State Statistics Service of Ukraine

Before the full-scale invasion, **enrolment among children aged 3–5 increased to 85 per cent**¹⁸⁶. **Coverage for children under three remained around 18 per cent, which is low by European standards.** In comparison, under-three coverage reaches 73 per cent in the Netherlands, 58 per cent in France, 35 per cent in Latvia and 36 per cent on average across OECD countries¹⁸⁷.

Rural-urban disparities are significant. In 2021, only 9 per cent of rural children under 3 were enrolled in ECEC services¹⁸⁸. In 2024, only 109 children under one attended ECEC facilities nationwide.

Since the start of the full-scale invasion, detailed age-specific coverage data have not been published by the State Statistics Service. According to the Ministry of Education and Science, **overall preschool coverage in 2024 was 73 per cent**¹⁸⁹.

Before the full-scale war, data already showed substantial unmet need among families with very young children. In rural areas, 19 per cent of households with children under three lacked access to ECEC services, compared with 14 per cent among families with children aged 3–6. In cities, the gap was 8 per cent versus 2 per cent¹⁹⁰.

Overall, most children aged 3–6 attend ECEC, while access for children under three remain very limited, particularly in rural areas.

Future demand for ECEC services

Future demand for ECEC services in Ukraine will be shaped by declining child population alongside a growing need for affordable, accessible and high-quality ECEC.

ECEC enrolment fell by 33 per cent between 2021 and 2025, from 1,111,000 to 741,000 children¹⁹¹. Drivers include outward migration of families, occupation of territories, closures due to shelter shortages and long-term fertility decline^{192,193}. Demographic projections suggest a further 22 per cent reduction in the number of children aged 0–4 by 2035, with significant regional variation¹⁹⁴. Urban areas are expected to face growing demand as families concentrate in larger cities.

UNICEF surveys conducted during the full-scale invasion highlight both **insufficient access to ECEC services and a strong demand for more flexible options**. One quarter of families with children aged 0–4 report needing better access to ECEC services¹⁹⁵. Parents express significant interest in **diversified service formats**:

- 64 per cent favour part-time kindergartens,
- 56 per cent prefer extended hours services,
- 55 per cent seek holiday programmes,
- 48 per cent want corporate kindergartens¹⁹⁶.

This demand contrasts sharply with supply. Short-term or round-the-clock groups operate in only 8 per cent of facilities, almost all serving children aged three and older. In 2024, just 50 facilities nationwide offered 24-hour groups, 49 of which were for children aged three and older. Kyiv had only 20 such places¹⁹⁷.

Recent legislative changes establish a framework for a more adaptive ECEC system. New service formats increase **flexibility**, while **expanded financial support and compensation mechanisms** aim to enable families to access services when public provision is unavailable.

Inclusivity of ECEC

Efforts to expand inclusive ECEC services have progressed but remain insufficient to meet demand. Coverage **of children with disability and special educational needs**¹⁹⁸ **remains limited**. In 2024, only 28 per cent of such children were enrolled in inclusive groups¹⁹⁹.

The number of inclusive groups continues to grow. In 2024, 6,860 inclusive groups served 12,800 children. Nearly 3,000 special groups served 35,290 children²⁰⁰. Overall, **about 164,000 children attend inclusive groups**²⁰¹, **equivalent to every fifth child in ECEC**. In 2020, the ratio was one in sixteen.

Physical accessibility of ECEC services remains a major barrier. Barrier-free access to buildings is provided in 48 per cent of ECEC facilities. Barrier-free access between floors exists in only 16 per cent of facilities. Toilets adapted for children with disabilities are present in 10 per cent of facilities. Resource rooms are available in one fifth of ECEC facilities. Only 10 per cent provide alerts accessible to children with hearing or visual impairments²⁰².

Reconstruction of damaged or destroyed ECEC facilities offers an opportunity to address these gaps and create **more modern and inclusive ECEC** environments.

Preschool staff

Service quality depends heavily on the preschool workforce. Educators play a central role in children's development and are a **key factor for parental choice** of facilities.

During our focus group discussions, parents consistently stressed that the quality of ECEC depends primarily on educators, rather than on facilities or infrastructure:



First of all, you are not leaving your child with a kindergarten. You are leaving the child with a teacher. You are trusting them to care for your child. This matters more than the playground or the state of repairs. This is the most important criterion.

Mother of a 5-year-old



The quality of childcare is inseparable from the staff working in childcare facilities. Parents often place higher expectations on educators than on material conditions or even the cost of services. When they find an educator who meets their expectations, they are often willing to travel longer distances or pay more to access those services.

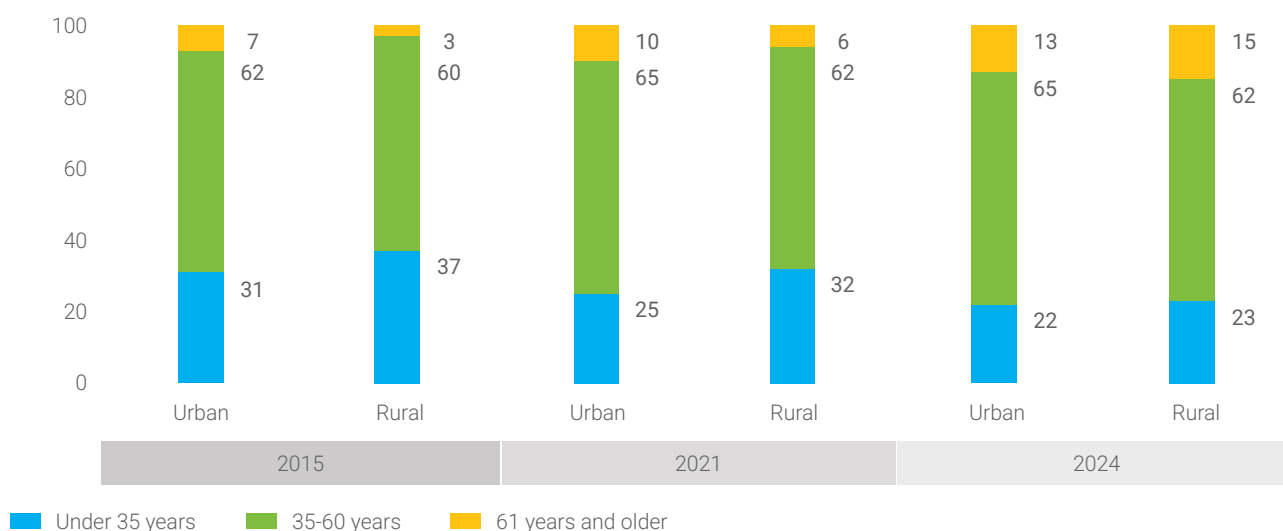
Mother of a 4-year-old

The war has intensified existing staffing shortages in ECEC facilities. About 5 per cent of ECEC positions are vacant²⁰³. Vacancies exist in one third of rural facilities and more than half of urban facilities. Shortages are particularly acute among specialised staff such as health workers and psychologists²⁰⁴.

The ECEC sector struggles to attract young professionals. Low pay, limited career prospects and high emotional demands reduce its appeal. In Kyiv, only 17 per cent of staff are under 35.

The workforce is ageing. Over the past decade, the share of young staff declined by one third, while the share of workers aged 61 and older increased. Western regions show slightly better age profiles, where 30–35 per cent of staff are under 35, but overall trends indicate worsening shortages.

Figure 4.6. Age distribution of teaching staff in ECEC institutions, per cent



Source: The State Statistics Service of Ukraine

ECEC remains highly gender segregated. Women account for 99 per cent of full-time teaching staff.

Low pay and high stress are persistent challenges²⁰⁵. Nearly 38 per cent of managers and teachers report needing psychological support, while only one third receive it²⁰⁶.

The sector also continues to absorb the impacts of displacement. Five per cent of ECEC workers are currently internally displaced, and another 8 per cent were previously displaced before returning to their workplaces²⁰⁷.

During our focus group discussions, parents emphasised the need for systemic reforms to improve working conditions and remuneration for ECEC staff:



The entire system needs reform so that teachers receive adequate salaries and can fully focus on their work.

Mother of a 7-month-old

Material conditions also affect staff retention. In one third of facilities, staff were placed on unpaid leave. In 16 per cent, guaranteed income decreased. One in ten teachers reported difficulties covering transport costs²⁰⁸. National authorities have described salary levels in the sector as catastrophic²⁰⁹. Yet, targeted policy responses remain absent.

Financing of ECEC facilities

Financing of ECEC facilities has fluctuated over the past decade. Funding increased steadily from 2011 until 2016, reaching 7.3 per cent of total education expenditure, then declined. Since the start of the full-scale war, allocations have increased again, reaching UAH 40.7 billion (USD 0.9 billion) in 2022, UAH 45.3 billion (USD 1.1 billion) in 2023, UAH 50.7 billion (USD 1.2 billion) in 2024, and UAH 56.1 billion (USD 1.36 billion) in 2025²¹⁰.

Despite these increases, spending on **ECEC fell from 0.9 per cent of GDP in 2019 to 0.7 per cent in 2023 and remained at about 0.7 per cent in 2025**²¹¹. This level is close to the OECD average of 0.8 per cent, but far below countries such as Sweden at 1.6 per cent²¹². These figures raise concerns about spending adequacy relative to enrolment needs.

ECEC services rely primarily on local budgets, which produces significant regional disparities. Rural communities receive lower levels of funding, reinforcing spatial inequalities in access to ECEC²¹³. These gaps undermine the legal right to early education under the Law on Preschool Education and hinder progress toward national gender equality goals and SDG targets.

Inclusive education requires additional, differentiated financing²¹⁴. Under wartime conditions, both state and local budgets face severe constraints, limiting implementation.

According to the State Service for the Education Quality, **around 16 per cent of facilities receive less than half of the resources they need**²¹⁵. Under martial law, ECEC may be deprioritised as **communities redirect funds to urgent needs**²¹⁶.

At the same time, characterising funding as satisfactory contrasts with low salaries and continued failure to provide an ECEC place for all children under seven. These inconsistencies suggest that funding assessments may not fully capture gaps affecting service quality and accessibility.

Investment in ECEC offers substantial social and economic returns. **Every dollar invested in ECEC can yield several dollars in economic benefits**, according to global studies. According to ILO estimates, each dollar invested in closing the childcare policy gap may yield an average of US\$3.76 in global GDP by 2035, increase women's employment from 46.2 per cent to 56.5 per cent and reduce the global gender pay gap from 20.1 per cent to 8 per cent²¹⁷. It enables mothers to participate in the labour market, creates decent jobs largely filled by women, and improves children's long-term outcomes.

The Strategy for Demographic Development of Ukraine until 2040 recognises the need to support families in having and raising children. Expanding ECEC and promoting equally shared parenting can **reduce trade-offs between work and family, support childbearing intentions and contribute to slowing population decline**. This is a long-term national interest.

In summary, Ukraine's ECEC system plays a critical role in supporting children's development and enabling parents, particularly mothers, to participate in the labour market, yet it continues to face significant structural constraints. The sector is dominated by public provision, with limited private and flexible alternatives, and has been further weakened by demographic decline and the impacts of the full-scale war. Damage to infrastructure, displacement of families and staff, shelter shortages and uneven regional capacity have reduced availability and created new accessibility challenges. Access remains especially limited for children under three and for families in rural or vulnerable situations, while inclusive services and barrier-free infrastructure still fall short of demand. At the same time, staffing shortages, low wages and an ageing workforce affect service quality and sustainability. Although recent legislative reforms and reconstruction efforts create opportunities to modernise the system and expand flexible ECEC formats, persistent funding disparities and reliance on local budgets continue to shape uneven access. Strengthening ECEC availability, accessibility and quality will therefore be essential not only for children's well-being, but also for supporting women's employment, reducing poverty risks and advancing gender equality in Ukraine.

4.2. Parents' perceptions of ECEC services

Parents perceive ECEC services as necessary and important. **They are needed by almost everyone with a child aged three and up and by many with a child under three.**

The most common services are those provided in kindergartens, which are widely used for the care and education of children aged three and up to school age.

For children under three, views vary, with both a sense of need for kindergartens and a desire to raise a child at home being common. Many prefer parenting at home but recognise the need for ECEC services as useful to other parents in different situations. Using childcare for infants is viewed as acceptable only if absolutely necessary.

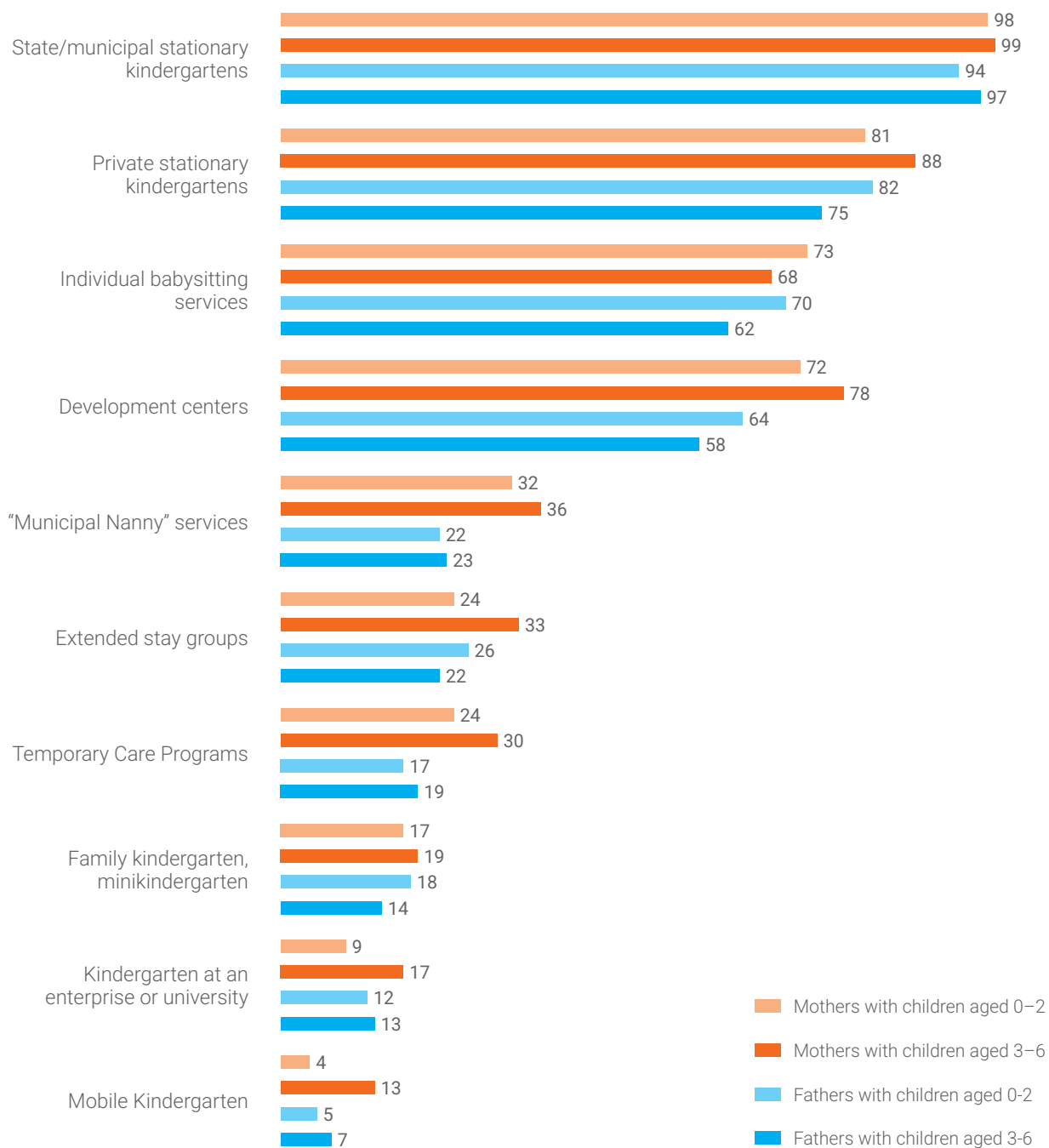
Awareness on the types of ECEC services

Overall awareness of different ECEC service types is uneven, with newer or alternative formats being less known (Figure 4.7). While virtually all mothers know about state/municipal kindergartens, and the vast majority are familiar with private kindergartens, nannies and child development centres²¹⁸, awareness drops sharply for less traditional options.

Only about one third know about the Municipal Nanny programme²¹⁹ or extended and short-stay groups, and around one in five are aware of family-based kindergartens and only around one in ten are aware of mobile kindergartens.

Fathers are less aware than mothers of almost all alternative forms of ECEC, while the gap in awareness of state kindergartens is minimal.

This indicates that scaling-up innovative ECEC models must be accompanied by **active parent engagement and communication efforts**, as such services cannot be effective if families don't know about them.

Figure 4.7. Awareness of mothers and fathers about different types of ECEC, per cent

There are not many disparities in awareness among various social groups:

- Parents with lower income, lower education and those in the lowest income group are less informed.
- Mothers in the eastern region are less aware of nannies and private kindergartens, while mothers in the northern region are less familiar with the Municipal Nanny programme.
- Fathers in the northern region show the lowest awareness of development centres, and fathers in the eastern region of hourly services, with low awareness of the Municipal Nanny in both regions.
- Older mothers tend to be better informed overall, while among fathers awareness increases with age mainly for kindergartens.
- Awareness levels for mothers show little dependence by labour-market status.
- Mothers with older children are slightly more aware of all childcare services than mothers of younger children, and urban mothers are slightly more aware than rural mothers.
- The short-term stay and day care groups are much less known in villages.
- Mothers with a partner or another adult are slightly more aware of services than mothers without a partner, suggesting that having another adult might improve information access – for example, through a partner’s workplace or social network.

The figure above shows that **fathers are consistently less informed than mothers**, with only about one quarter aware of the Municipal Nanny programme. Among fathers, awareness increases higher levels of education and income.

Engaging fathers in outreach about ECEC options could further raise family awareness and support for using these services.

The survey’s focus on parents’ awareness reflects reality that **women are still viewed as the default caregivers in Ukraine**. This highlights the importance of both empowering mothers with information and encouraging fathers to take initiative in arranging childcare to more evenly share this “mental load” of parenting.

The issue of low awareness of alternative care services is underestimated in public policy, and there is little hope for successful implementation of services with such low knowledge about most of them.

Government and community stakeholders can **ramp up communication through clinics, social media, employers, and local councils** to inform parents about available and new ECEC services. Without proactive outreach, even well-designed programmes (like the Municipal Nanny subsidy) will remain underutilised.

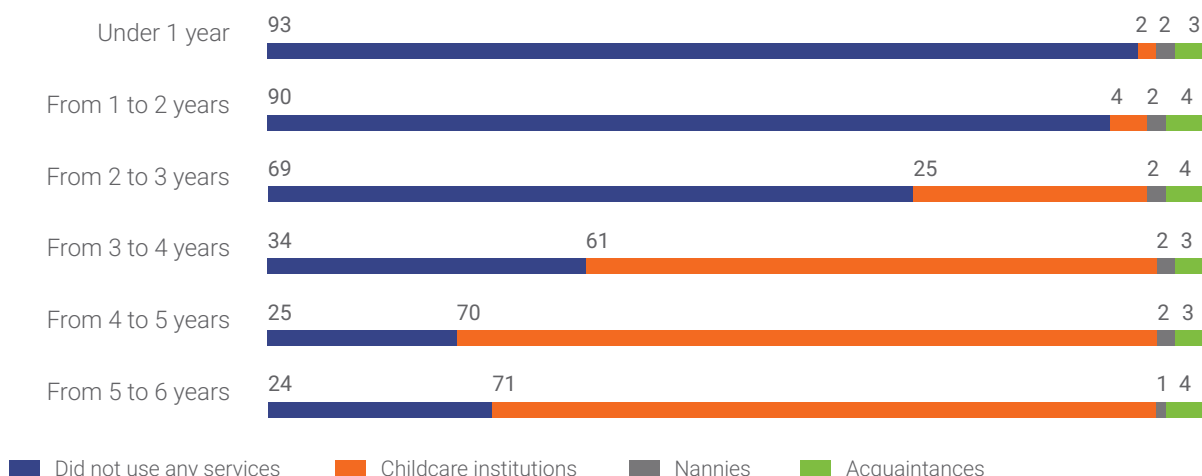
Employers can play a role by sharing information on local childcare options with their employees or even facilitating access to such services, while community centres and healthcare providers, who often interact with parents of young children, could distribute ECEC service guides.

Factors shaping the use of ECEC services by parents

Awareness is converted into use of services, where state and municipal kindergartens are the absolute leaders. Among mothers of children aged 7–9 (who have already passed preschool age), **85 per cent of both urban and rural mothers have used state kindergartens**. In rural areas, this is the only type of service that is actively used.

The use of ECEC depends on the type of area, where the family lives. Preschool facilities remain inaccessible to a large proportion of rural families, which is confirmed by the fact that **27 per cent of mothers of children aged 3–6 from rural areas do not use any childcare services**. Thus, limited accessibility of preschool services may be contributing to lower workforce participation among rural mothers.

Age of the child is also an important factor. ECEC services are used by most mothers of children aged 3 to 6 and a small proportion of mothers of children under 3 (Figure 4.8). The absolute majority of those who use services use kindergartens. So, affordable preschool is a prerequisite for mothers’ ability to work or study once their child reaches toddler age.

Figure 4.8. Use of different ECEC services, by child's age, per cent

Use of ECEC services becomes more common only after a child turns two; before this age, service use is minimal. **Among mothers of children aged 2–3, one in four reports using kindergarten services.** Nannies are also used at this age, but at much lower levels, far below the prevalence of kindergarten enrolment.

According to UNICEF²²⁰, parental perceptions of **age appropriateness and safety are the main reasons for non-attendance**:

- Among parents of children aged 1-2 who do not use kindergarten, 76 per cent believe the child is too young to attend.
- Among parents of children aged 3 to 6, “it is safer at home” is the most common reason at 26 per cent, followed by “we do not see the need” at 21 per cent.
- A notable minority question the value of ECEC altogether, 19 per cent in villages and 15 per cent in cities.
- In rural areas, lack of nearby ECEC facilities remains a barrier for 8 per cent of parents.

Our survey data show that the **use of ECEC services beyond state and municipal kindergartens varies** by location and service model.

In cities, private kindergartens are used by 10 per cent of mothers of children aged 3 to 6, nannies by 8 per cent, and development centres by 22 per cent of mothers of children aged 3 to 6 and 32 per cent of mothers of children aged 7 to 9 (Annex D, Table D.1).

Other formats, including mobile and family-based kindergartens, enterprise-based facilities, extended day or short stay groups and the Municipal Nanny programme, remain rarely used. This likely reflects their recent introduction and limited scale of implementation.

Childcare use among mothers with children under three remains very low. Eighty per cent do not use any services. Among those who do, most rely on state kindergartens at 17 per cent, with a smaller share using development centres. Nanny care and the Municipal Nanny programme are used only minimally.

Several factors shape ECEC use:

- **Single motherhood increases reliance on childcare.** Mothers without a partner use state ECEC facilities and development centres somewhat more often than partnered mothers.
- **Economic activity is a strong determinant.** Sixty-nine per cent of economically inactive mothers use no services, compared with 14 per cent of employed mothers. At the same time, only 23 per cent of inactive mothers rule out future use.
- **Regional disparities persist.** In the east of the country, only 39 per cent of mothers use kindergarten services, compared with 63 per cent in the west and 53 per cent in the centre.
- **Co-residence with a grandmother doubles the likelihood** that children attend development centres.
- **Income and education matter.** Mothers with lower education levels use services less and are less informed, with the youngest and least educated mothers showing the lowest participation rates.

Among fathers, ECEC use shows weaker links to socioeconomic or family characteristics. Service use increases modestly with the number of children and with higher household income. Fathers serving in the military are significantly less likely to use any services, reflecting the impact of the full-scale war. The lowest uptake is among fathers of children under three, with fewer than 10 per cent reporting use of ECEC services (Annex D, Table D.2).

Child's age considered appropriate for kindergarten entry

Parents' views on when to enrol a child in kindergarten depend on the type of services they use.

Parents who use private services tend to favour earlier entry. Among mothers with children under three, 13 per cent consider age one appropriate, and 15 per cent among mothers of children aged 3-6. The corresponding figures for fathers are 7 per cent and 5 per cent. Parents using private kindergartens are also more open to enrolment at age two, with 52 per cent of parents of children under three supporting this option, compared with 32 per cent among users of public kindergartens (Annex D, Table D.3).

By contrast, public kindergarten users prefer later enrolment. Only 2 to 3 per cent support entry at age one. Around one third favour age two, while more than half consider age three the ideal starting point. A smaller share cite age four (Annex D, Table D.3).

Economically active mothers are more likely to report enrolment from age two, particularly those using private providers. Regionally, mothers in the east of the country express the lowest demand for enrolment at age two, while earlier entry is more common among more educated mothers and those with prior experience using services.

Parents with higher education levels are generally more inclined to start using all types of childcare services earlier, including hiring a nanny at a younger age.

Parents' satisfaction with ECEC services and selection criteria

Most mothers identify kindergartens as their main childcare option and assess service quality positively.

Satisfaction levels generally exceed 80 per cent. The main exception is support for children with disabilities and special educational needs, where satisfaction is consistently low (Annex D, Table D.4).

Mothers' assessments vary across specific dimensions of service quality:

- Staff professionalism, child well-being, safety, comfort, affordability, and territorial accessibility receive high ratings.
- Dissatisfaction is more visible regarding food quality.
- Safety and comfort are rated positively overall, though the availability of shelters remains a concern, particularly in cities, where 65 per cent report dissatisfaction.
- Educational programmes receive mixed assessments. Inclusivity is the weakest dimension, with the lowest ratings given to how well facilities meet the needs of children with disabilities and SEN.

Satisfaction varies across social groups. **Urban mothers of children aged 3 to 6 report consistently high satisfaction**, while rural mothers show greater variation, with lower scores among those with the youngest children. Territorial accessibility remains a national strength, with 88 to 92 per cent satisfied. However, rural families face distance and transport constraints, reflected in lower satisfaction with work schedules, at 62 per cent among parents of children aged 0 to 2.

Satisfaction with public kindergartens is lowest in the eastern macro region, which receives weaker ratings across most dimensions, likely reflecting service disruptions and facility closures.

Young mothers²²¹ report lower satisfaction, while mothers living with a partner tend to report higher satisfaction. Parents who have not used public kindergartens express more favourable views than current users. Younger mothers, single mothers, lower income households and rural families give slightly lower ratings for territorial accessibility. Economically active mothers are more critical of the convenience of daily schedules.

Fathers tend to assign higher ratings overall, which may reflect their more limited involvement in day-to-day childcare and lower exposure to operational challenges.

Territorial accessibility is particularly decisive for single mothers, reflecting the need to combine childcare with other responsibilities. In rural areas, many parents report selecting a facility because it was the only available option, including 16 per cent of mothers of children aged 3 to 6 in villages.

Additional preferences vary by child age (Annex D, Tables D.5–D.6). Among parents of children aged 0 to 2, **nutrition** is the leading secondary priority. However, cost and food quality are among the least frequently cited criteria, suggesting they are viewed as basic expectations rather than determining factors.

For urban families, **convenient working hours** are important. Among parents of older preschool children, the **quality of educational programmes** gains importance as school preparation becomes more relevant.

Criteria related to equality, feedback mechanisms, and individualised approaches remain of limited importance. There are no significant differences between mothers and fathers in their top priorities.

Overall, parental satisfaction is shaped not only by service quality but also by broader contextual factors, including local infrastructure, employment conditions, safety and social integration.

Across all groups, **the main criteria for choosing an ECEC facility are staff professionalism, safety and comfort, and territorial accessibility** (Annex D, Table D.4).

Parents' assessment of the accessibility of services and vision for development

Parents' assessment of ECEC accessibility appears mixed, the majority reported easy access, however for a significant share of respondents this is not the case (Annex D, Table D.7). **Inaccessibility is especially evident for ECEC services for children under three**: 27 per cent of urban mothers and 33 per cent of rural mothers of children aged 3–6 assess ECEC facilities for children 0–2 in their communities as inaccessible; a quarter of mothers of children under three report the same. Accessibility improves significantly for services targeting children aged three and above.

Parents also recognise that low pay and high turnover among preschool staff undermine service quality and stability.

There is a pronounced demand for more flexible attendance hours. Many parents experience a mismatch between ECEC operating hours and their own work schedules (for example, kindergartens closing at 5 p.m. while parents work from 8 a.m. to 8 p.m.). Excessively short-stay formats (for example, 2 hours) are also viewed as impractical for both parents and children.



If I go to work and the working schedule is from eight to eight, how can I manage? Even if there was a kindergarten, it won't help.

Mother of a 4-month-old

Inter-settlement differences strongly shape demand: **urban parents are more likely to request diversified and innovative services** and tend to be better informed about available options. **Urban mothers also identify ECEC development as a priority** and as a key instrument for work-family balance more often than their rural counterparts.

UNICEF data further shows that children aged 1–3 do not attend preschool facilities simply **because they are deemed too young** – the view held by 78 per cent of parents of children of this age²²².

Other constraints become more relevant from age two onward. **For parents without partners, material and financial support from public policies often becomes a higher priority than ECEC services.** Yet the data also indicate that accessible, nearby ECEC services remain important, even for those households.

Although ECEC services are not seen as the top priority, substantial share of mothers still name preschool facilities' expansion as important. The demand is particularly strong among urban mothers of children aged 3–6 and middle class and better-off mothers.

Most parents view accessible ECEC services as essential for combining parenthood and employment, with especially strong support among urban mothers of children under three. Urban mothers also express greater demand for workplace-based nurseries and kindergartens.

Compensation or partial subsidies for ECEC costs is supported by about one third of respondents, particularly by mothers of children aged 7–9 who have already left preschool. The absence of a partner, however, does not significantly increase support for subsidies.

Parents' visions for ECEC development reflect both responses to existing care deficits and openness to new service models. Needs differ substantially even within the preschool population, suggesting that a wide range of support modalities, not necessarily large scale, but easily accessible, is required to meet diverse family circumstances.

While parents are generally satisfied with ECEC staff, some expect more versatile and creative pedagogical approaches and a wider range of activities in their work.

Rural areas pose challenges for implementing new ECEC initiatives due to sparser populations and limited infrastructure. These issues could be addressed by mobile services, family day care models and other community-based approaches.

Vision of ideal ECEC services

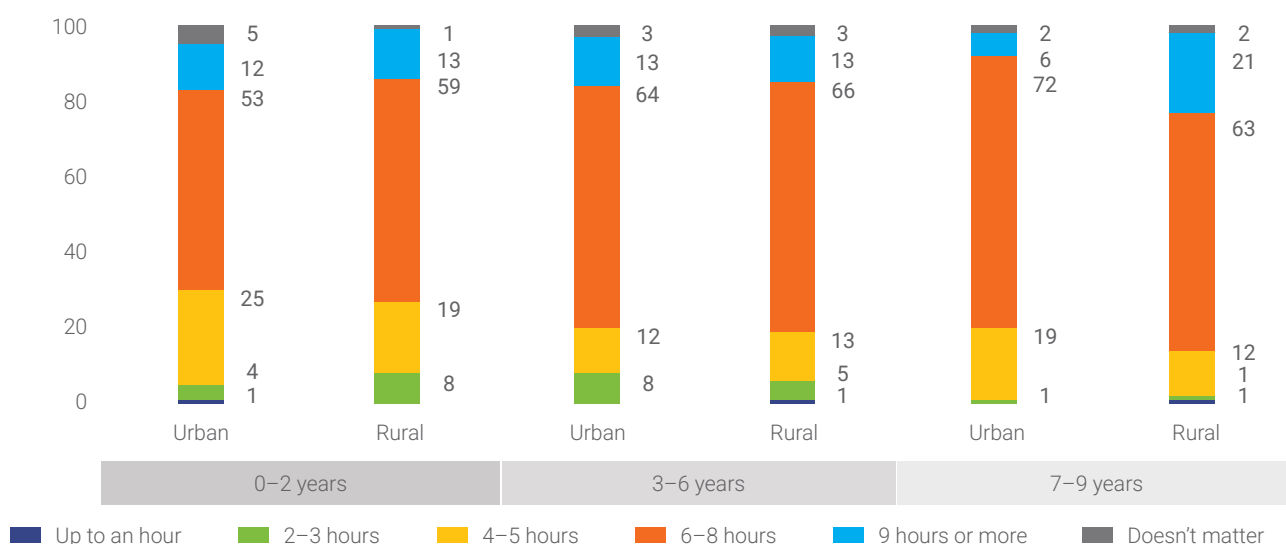
Across groups, mothers express a broadly consistent vision of an ideal ECEC model, with a full-time five-day schedule as the central feature (Annex D, Table D.8). **An overwhelming majority prefer a five-day week, particularly mothers of younger children at 90 per cent.**

A six-to-eight-hour stay is the most common expectation. At the same time, there is demand for both shorter and longer formats. Urban mothers more often request four-to-five-hour stays, and mothers of children aged 3 to 6 increasingly value even shorter two-to-three-hour options. Demand for extended hours is present across most groups and is slightly stronger in rural areas. This highlights the need for diversified and flexible attendance models.

Mothers of children under three tend to prefer shorter daily stays combined with full-week availability and flexible attendance. Economically active mothers are somewhat more likely to favour longer attendance, while co-residence with a grandmother is associated with preference for a three-day rather than a five-day schedule.

Urban mothers show stronger demand for diversified formats in terms of hours and activities. Among them, three-to-four-day schedules are more attractive for children aged 3 to 6, reflecting a preference for flexibility. In rural areas, mothers of children aged 7 to 9 are more open to extended six- or seven-day schedules, given limited alternatives and a stronger reliance on full-time provision, while one- or two-day options remain rarely preferred (Figure 4.9).

Figure 4.9. Ideal duration of a child's stay in ECEC, per cent



Accessibility is primarily understood as proximity. Around three quarters prefer a facility within a fifteen-minute walk, and one quarter accept up to thirty minutes. Transport solutions are rarely considered, underscoring the importance of walkability. Mothers without partners are somewhat more willing to tolerate longer distances, likely reflecting greater need for childcare support (Annex D, Table D.8).

Affordability remains critical. Around half of mothers (45 per cent with a child aged 0-2 and 58 per cent with a child aged 3-6) consider up to UAH 1,000 (USD 24) per month acceptable, while 25 to 33 per cent prefer free services. Mothers of children under three are more willing to pay higher fees than those with children aged 3 to 6, reflecting limited public provision for younger age groups.

Nutrition is another priority. Only one quarter of urban and one third of rural mothers are willing to accept any type of nutrition. Most express specific requirements, and more than half of urban mothers prefer choice-based meal options.

In the context of war, the **availability of an on-site shelter is seen as essential.** More than 90 per cent across all groups require this feature (Annex D, Table D.8). For safety more broadly, caregiver attentiveness is valued more than formal behavioural rules, particularly among mothers of children aged 3 to 6 (over 80 per cent).

Many mothers envisage combining formal and informal care. Grandmothers play a central and highly trusted role. More than one third of mothers receive regular support from relatives, particularly among those with preschool-aged children. Among mothers of children aged 1 to 3, reliance on grandmothers at 34 per cent exceeds preference for kindergartens at 19 per cent, reflecting the continued gendered distribution of unpaid care and limited involvement of fathers and grandfathers (Annex D, Table D.9). Differences between mothers and fathers in their views on ideal services are minimal.

Despite the predominance of family-based care for children under three, a segment of **urban mothers expresses clear demand for formal services.** Among mothers with children under one, 8 per cent would choose a nanny and 10 per cent a kindergarten. For children aged 1 to 3, preference for kindergarten rises to 30 per cent (Annex D, Table D.9). Views on hiring private nannies remain divided, with some mothers viewing this as practical and modern, and others questioning safety and professionalism.

Overall, the **ideal ECEC facility** is close to home and within walking distance, operates primarily on a full-time five-day schedule while offering flexible attendance and varied daily hours, employs qualified and attentive staff, ensures safety including an on-site shelter, provides appropriate and preferably choice-based nutrition, and remains affordable or free for families.

In summary, parents view ECEC as essential, especially from age three, while attitudes toward services for children under three remain cautious, with home care preferred unless childcare is necessary. Awareness is high for traditional options like public kindergartens, private kindergartens, nannies and child development centres, but low for newer formats such as Municipal Nanny subsidies, short-stay and extended-hour groups, family-based and mobile kindergartens, with fathers consistently less informed than mothers. Use of services mirrors these patterns. Public kindergartens dominate, alternative models remain rarely used, and non-use is most common among families with very young children and in rural areas where access constraints persist. Parents' satisfaction with kindergartens is generally high, driven by trust in staff, safety, comfort and proximity, but concerns remain about shelter adequacy, food quality and, most of all, inclusion for children with disabilities and special educational needs. Parents' vision of an ideal ECEC model centres on a nearby, affordable, full-week service with flexible hours that match work schedules, qualified staff, safe facilities with shelters and good nutrition. These findings highlight the need to expand ECEC provision for children under three, diversify service formats, improve inclusive quality, and strengthen communication, especially to reach rural families, lower income parents and fathers, so available options translate into real access and use.

4.3. Parents' perceptions of ECEC services for children with disabilities and SEN

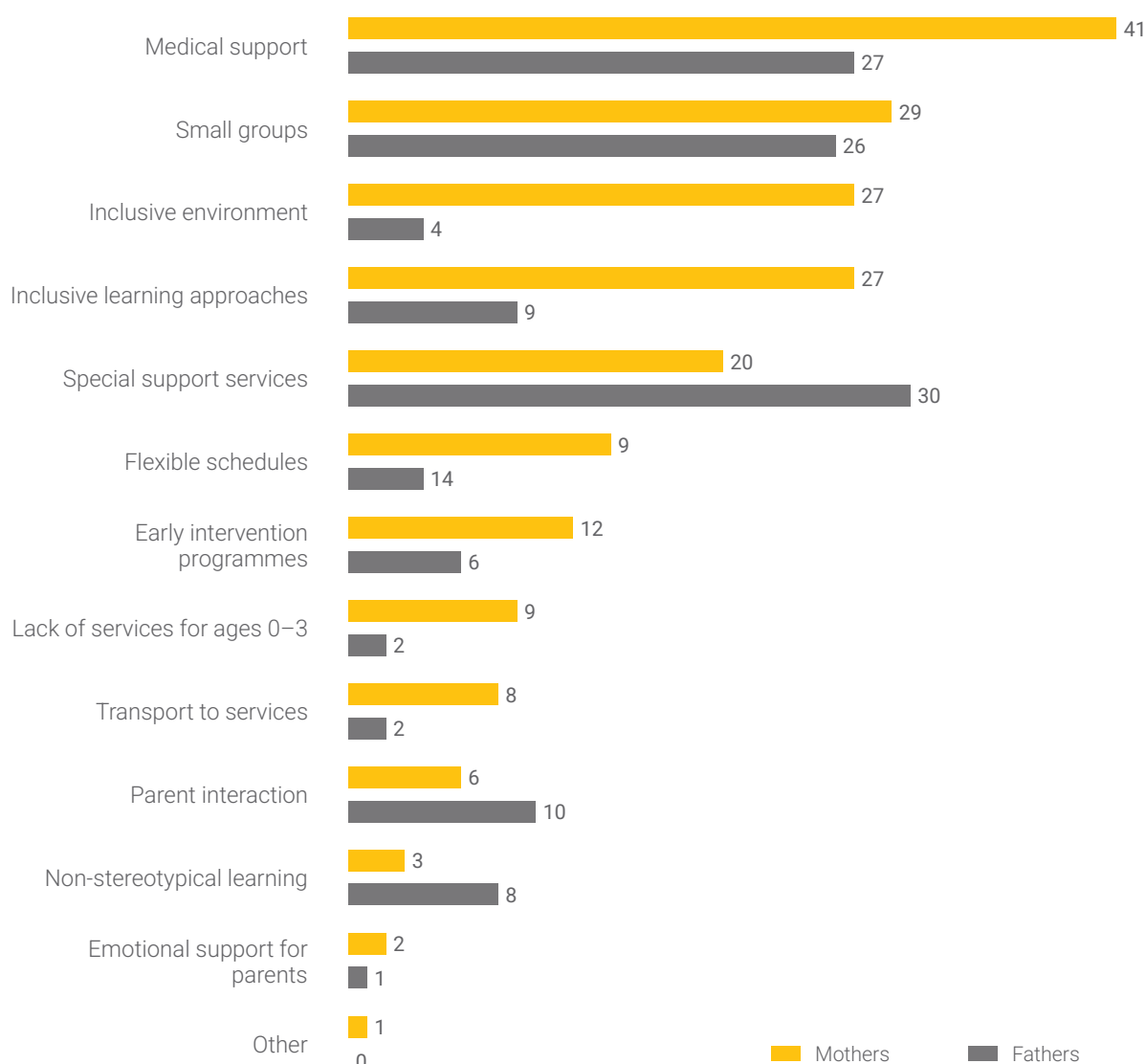
For parents of children with disabilities and special educational needs (SEN), concerns about accessibility and quality of childcare services are systemic and more acute than for other families. Challenges are diverse and affect both practical access and trust in services.

While some parents are aware of specialised services, overall information about the full range of available support remains limited.

Satisfaction levels are significantly lower than among families raising children without disabilities or SEN. This reflects structural gaps in the ECEC system as well as broader societal barriers that shape parents' willingness to entrust their child to external providers. Mothers stress that genuine satisfaction depends on whether their child feels included and treated as an equal, with real opportunities for development and socialisation. In this sense, satisfaction with ECEC services is closely linked to dignity and equal life chances.

Parents of children with disabilities and SEN identify a wide range of quality requirements (Figure 4.10). For these families, satisfaction has a multidimensional character. It includes core elements such as safety, staff professionalism, material conditions and proximity, but places particular emphasis on inclusivity and the system's ability to respond to individual needs.

Figure 4.10. Key ECEC conditions for parents of children with disabilities, per cent



For mothers, medical support stands out as the highest priority, mentioned by just over 40 per cent. Small group sizes follow closely at around 30 per cent. Mothers also place strong emphasis on an inclusive environment and adapted learning approaches, each cited by more than a quarter. These responses suggest that mothers prioritise both health-related security and the everyday quality of interaction within the group setting. Their focus extends beyond technical provision to the overall environment in which the child develops.

Fathers, by contrast, place the strongest emphasis on the availability of specialised professionals, at around 30 per cent, making this their top priority. While mothers also value this dimension, it ranks slightly lower for them. Fathers also assign notable importance to medical support and small groups, but their priorities are more concentrated on the presence of expert support rather than on broader environmental conditions.

Differences become more pronounced in secondary priorities. **Mothers are more likely than fathers to highlight flexible visiting schedules, early intervention and social skills** development programmes, and the availability of creches or services for children aged 0 to 3. They also pay more attention to organized transportation. This pattern indicates that mothers take a more operational perspective, focusing on how services function in practice and how they fit into daily caregiving routines.

Fathers, in contrast, give relatively greater weight to interaction with parents and to non-stereotypical approaches to learning and development. Although these shares remain moderate overall, they suggest that fathers are attentive to pedagogical philosophy and family engagement components of ECEC.

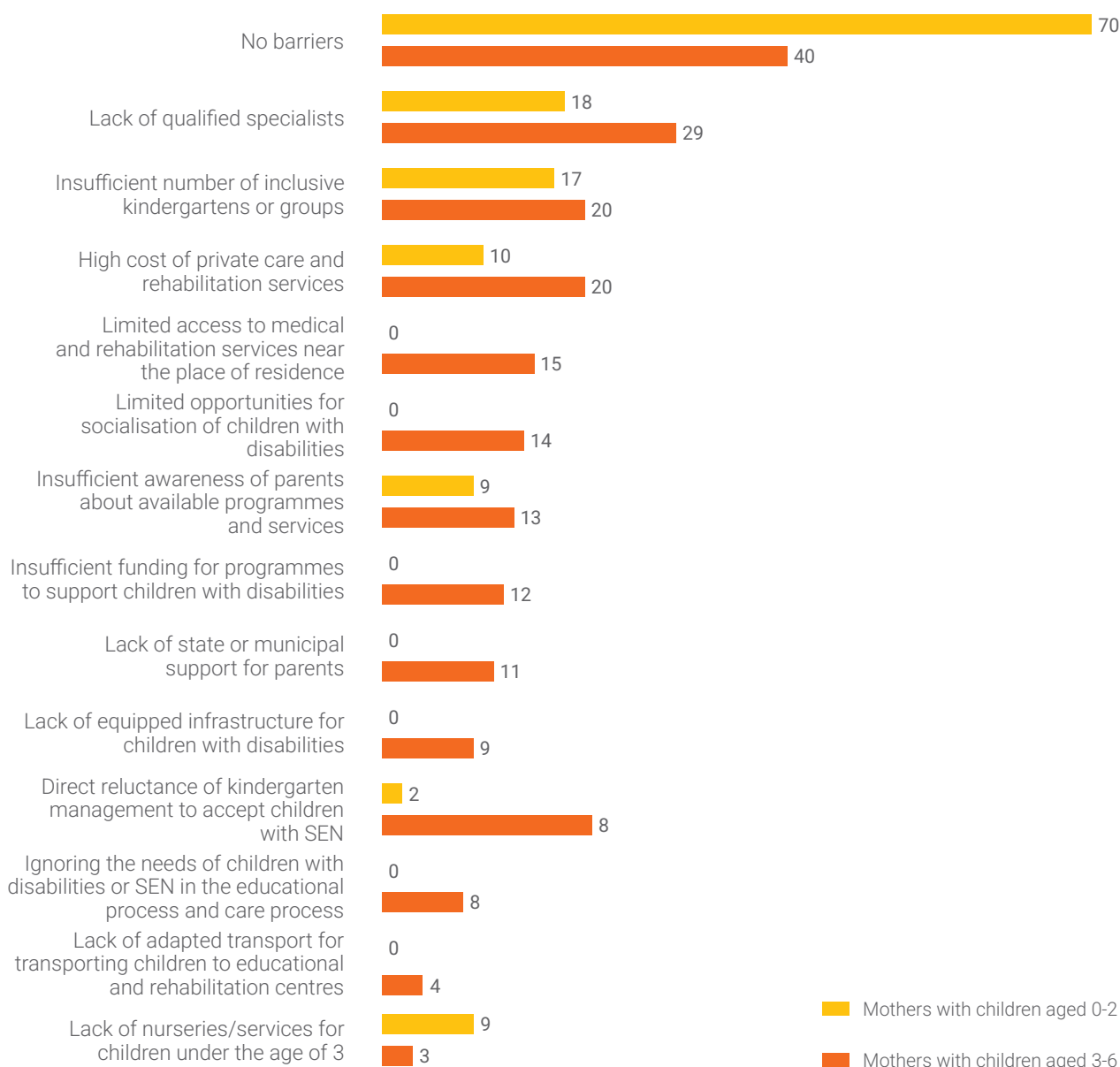
Emotional support for parents and other conditions receive low attention from both groups, indicating that structural and professional features dominate parental expectations.

Overall, **mothers articulate a broader and more multidimensional set of requirements, combining medical, pedagogical, logistical and organisational aspects**. Fathers' priorities are more concentrated on specialised expertise and structured learning approaches. These patterns reflect the more intensive day to day caregiving role often assumed by mothers, while fathers' expectations centre more on professional competence and formal service quality.

Parental challenges in accessing inclusive ECEC services

The barriers faced by parents of children with disabilities or SEN in accessing ECEC are multidimensional. They include **infrastructure constraints, shortage of qualified staff, persistent social stigma, limited information and more acute financial pressures** than those experienced by other families. These challenges align with broader findings on insufficient financial support for such households, which restricts parents' ability to combine caregiving with work or education and creates long-term risks for family well-being²²³.

According to our survey, the scale and nature of problems differ by the age of the child (Figure 4.11).

Figure 4.11. Barriers faced by mothers of children with disabilities or SEN, per cent

Among mothers of children aged 0–2, 70 per cent report no major problems in organising ECEC. However, even in this group, 18 per cent report a lack of qualified specialists able to meet their child’s needs and 17 per cent point to an insufficient number of inclusive kindergartens or groups. Ten per cent cite the high cost of private care and rehabilitation services, while 9 per cent report insufficient awareness of available programmes and another 9 per cent highlight the lack of nursery services for children under three. These findings suggest that **early-stage barriers are linked primarily to service availability, affordability and information gaps.**

For mothers of children aged 3–6, the situation becomes more pronounced. **Only 40 per cent report no problems, meaning the majority encounter at least one barrier.** The most frequently cited issue is the lack of qualified specialists, reported by 29 per cent. Structural gaps are also pronounced, with 20 per cent reporting limited availability of inclusive kindergartens or groups and another 20 per cent citing high costs of private services. Fifteen per cent report limited access to medical and rehabilitation services near their place of residence and 14 per cent point to limited opportunities for socialisation.

More explicit institutional and structural barriers also emerge for this age group. Twelve per cent refer to insufficient funding for disability support programmes, 11 per cent note a lack of state or municipal support for parents, and 9 per cent cite the lack of adapted infrastructure. Eight per cent report direct reluctance

of kindergarten management to accept children with disabilities or SEN. These findings illustrate that as children move into preschool age, parents face not only availability gaps but also systemic and attitudinal barriers within institutions.

A recurring concern is the **lack of clear and accessible information**. Even where services exist, they may remain underused due to limited awareness. This suggests the need for centralised information platforms or designated social workers to guide families through available options.

Respectful and non-discriminatory treatment is another decisive factor. Some mothers choose to keep their child at home or rely only on close relatives due to fears of stigma or exclusion. For children with disabilities or SEN, ECEC must ensure not only quality but also dignity, inclusion and equal opportunity.



Until you find an appropriate environment for the child that meets their needs and brings results, you can lose a lot of time. We spent two years looking for a place where my child was welcomed.

Mother of a 5-year-old with disabilities

Such testimonies illustrate both parental resilience and the urgent need for systemic change so that no family must search for years to secure inclusive care.

Security concerns are twofold. **Parents emphasise the need for shelters and safe locations**, as well as **protection from bullying or social exclusion**. Mothers note that responsibility for navigating these risks falls largely on them. **Many mothers report feeling alone in their caregiving role**. Greater involvement of fathers and wider family support should be encouraged, including targeted programmes that strengthen fathers' caregiving capacity and reduce pressure on mothers.

Fears related to inclusive ECEC services are complex and persistent. The main concerns include:

- reluctance to entrust the child to others at 40 per cent
- staff qualifications at 24 per cent
- child safety at 21 per cent
- high cost at 12 per cent low quality at 12 per cent
- limited availability at 11 per cent

Some mothers are open to alternative service delivery models. More than one third support home visits by specialists, though a similar share opposes this option. Among mothers of children under three, most reject the idea, often citing discomfort with leaving the child with a stranger.

For many mothers, these barriers carry a strong psychological burden. They must combine intensive caregiving with employment and administrative procedures, often navigating complex systems with limited support. This highlights the invisible care load carried primarily by mothers and underscores the need for systemic reform.

As a result, **many mothers reduce working hours or leave the labour market entirely**. Expanding inclusive ECEC and strengthening family support is therefore both a child rights and a women's economic empowerment issue. Effective family-friendly policies must address the additional barriers faced by these households.

Ways to improve the situation

Ukraine can build on international practice to move closer to inclusive standards. Priorities include reducing child-to-teacher ratios, ensuring the presence of nurses or therapists in preschools and upgrading facilities to meet accessibility requirements.

In mothers' view, **ideal ECEC services for children with disabilities or SEN** form a comprehensive support system that includes:

- Small inclusive groups with balanced child-to-teacher ratios
- Qualified specialised professionals
- Adapted and accessible infrastructure
- On-site medical support

Exposure to international models has raised expectations. Parents increasingly expect comparable inclusive services to be available in Ukraine.

Social support for families of children with disabilities, including allowances and rehabilitation services, should be better integrated with ECEC provision. Simplifying access to benefits and expanding affordable or free specialised childcare sessions would ease pressure on families. Flexible work arrangements and stronger parental leave provisions would further support parents of children with disabilities or SEN.

Ukraine is also bound by its commitments under the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities and national legislation to guarantee inclusive ECEC. Accessible care and development are rights, and mothers should not be pushed out of employment due to lack of support.

In summary, parents of children with disabilities or special educational needs face more complex and acute challenges in accessing ECEC than other families. Satisfaction with services is significantly lower and depends not only on availability but on the extent to which services provide genuine inclusion, specialised support, safety and respectful treatment. Parents place particular importance on qualified specialists, small inclusive groups, adapted infrastructure and on-site medical support. Mothers often emphasise practical and organisational aspects of care, while fathers focus more on specialised expertise and educational approaches. Barriers remain substantial and include shortages of qualified staff, limited numbers of inclusive facilities, high costs of private services, lack of accessible infrastructure and persistent social stigma. Information gaps and institutional reluctance to accept children with disabilities or SEN further restrict access. These challenges place a disproportionate burden on mothers, many of whom reduce working hours or leave employment due to lack of suitable services. Expanding inclusive ECEC, strengthening specialised staffing, improving accessibility and integrating social support with childcare provision are therefore essential both for protecting the rights and development of children with disabilities or SEN and for enabling parents, especially mothers, to remain economically active.

4.4. Parents' perceptions of alternative ECEC formats

Alternative forms of ECEC can be arranged with the participation of various stakeholders such as families, communities, businesses and non-governmental organizations to fill accessibility gaps and provide flexible services under different living circumstances.

Services can vary in form, duration, place of provision and target groups. A flexible, multi-component structure allows families to choose ECEC arrangements that best suit their lifestyle, employment and child's needs, depending on local availability.

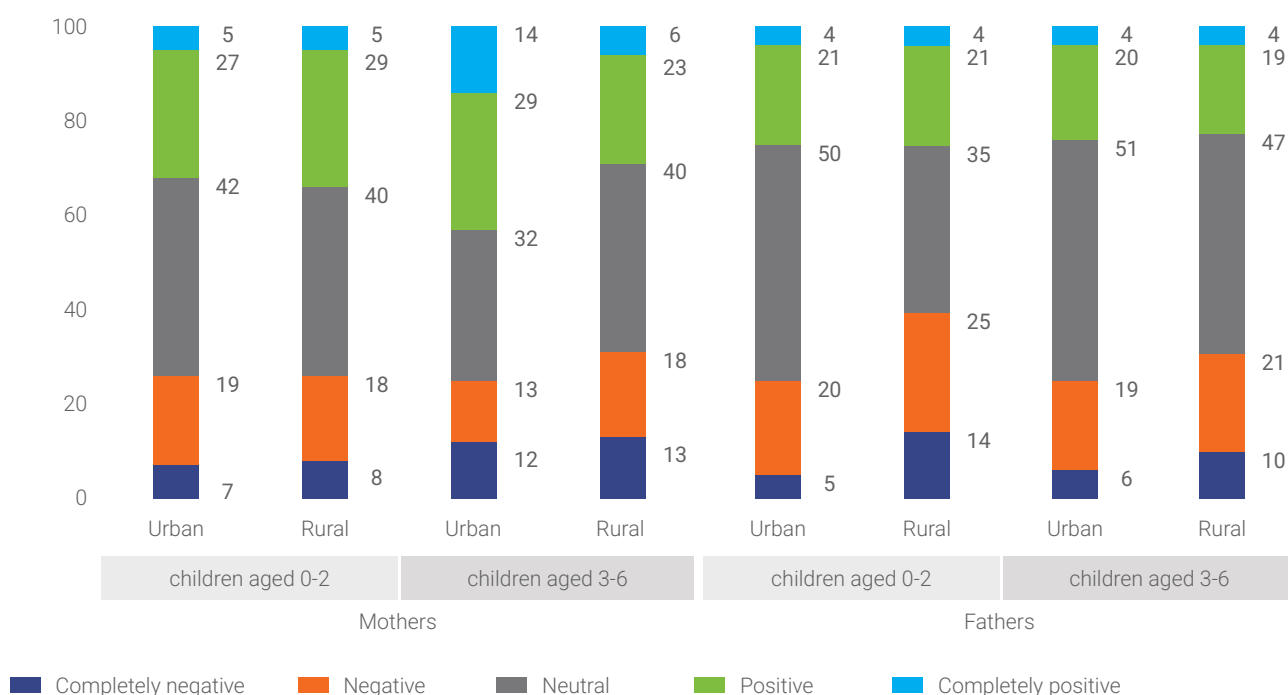
Ukraine's new ECEC law has opened the door for alternative ECEC models, which remain largely unfamiliar to parents. **Employers and local authorities could support these formats to demonstrate their benefits** and scale up successful models to build trust.

Parents of preschool-aged children are generally poorly informed about alternative forms of ECEC services, as they remain in the early stages of development. The only widely recognised alternative is the nanny. Nannies therefore represent the most visible component of alternative ECEC services.

Despite this awareness, **actual use of nanny services remains extremely low**. Only around 2 per cent of mothers of preschool children report using a nanny, rising to about 5 per cent among employed and higher income mothers. Fathers also report similarly low levels of use, around 2 per cent. This low uptake is consistent with parental attitudes toward in-home specialist services.

Perceptions of professional in-home ECEC provision vary considerably by settlement type and child's age (Figure 4.12). Positive perceptions prevail over negative or neutral ones only among mothers in cities whose children are aged three and older. Among mothers of children under three, the combined share of positive and completely positive attitudes reaches only about one third, indicating substantial hesitation toward this modality of service delivery.

Figure 4.12. Parents' attitudes toward engaging ECEC specialists at home, per cent



According to our survey data, **clearly positive attitudes remain limited**. Among mothers in cities, around 36 per cent express either positive or completely positive views, compared with 32 per cent in villages. **Neutral attitudes dominate**, reported by around 39 per cent of urban mothers and 38 per cent of rural mothers. Negative or completely negative views are more common in villages, reaching 29 per cent compared with 24 per cent in cities (Annex D, Table D.10).

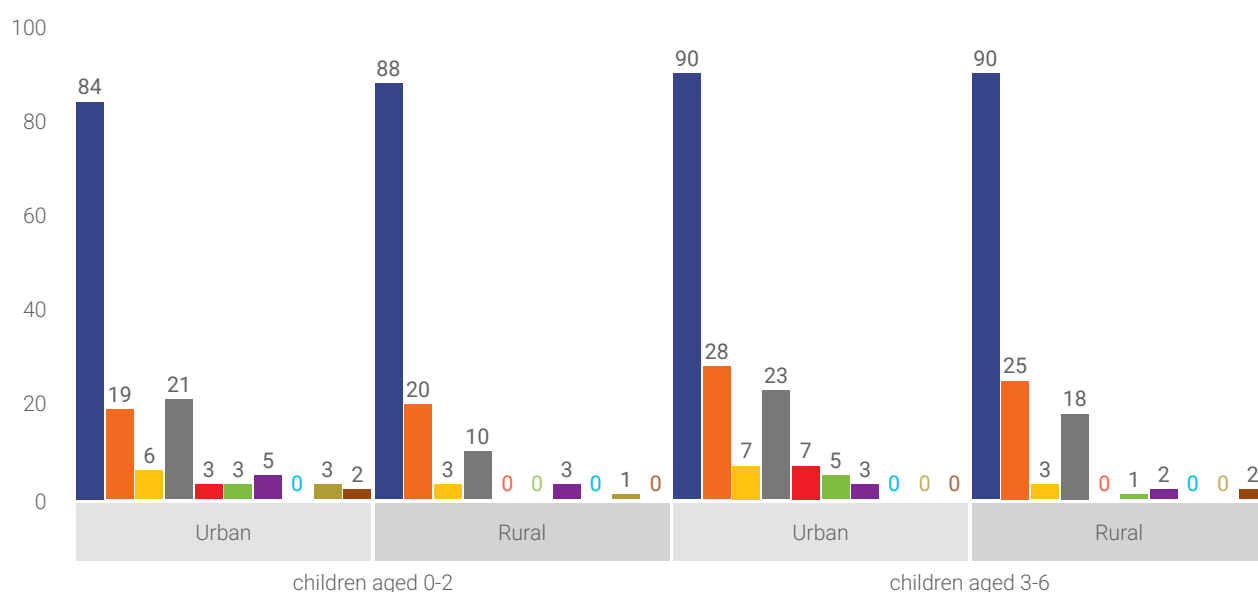
Fathers are somewhat less positive than mothers about involving external specialists, negative attitudes expressed by 26 per cent of fathers in cities and up to 31 per cent among fathers in villages. Nearly half of fathers report neutral attitudes toward bringing specialists home, regardless of location or child age. Positive responses remain lower than among mothers, at around 25 per cent combined. This reflects persistent norms about parental responsibility and scepticism toward external caregiving.

The main concerns about the use of nannies involve trust. Over 80 per cent of mothers who are against individual care state that they do not trust leaving their child with a stranger (Figure 4.13). This concern is more pronounced in villages and among mothers of children aged 3 to 6, where it reaches up to 90 per cent.

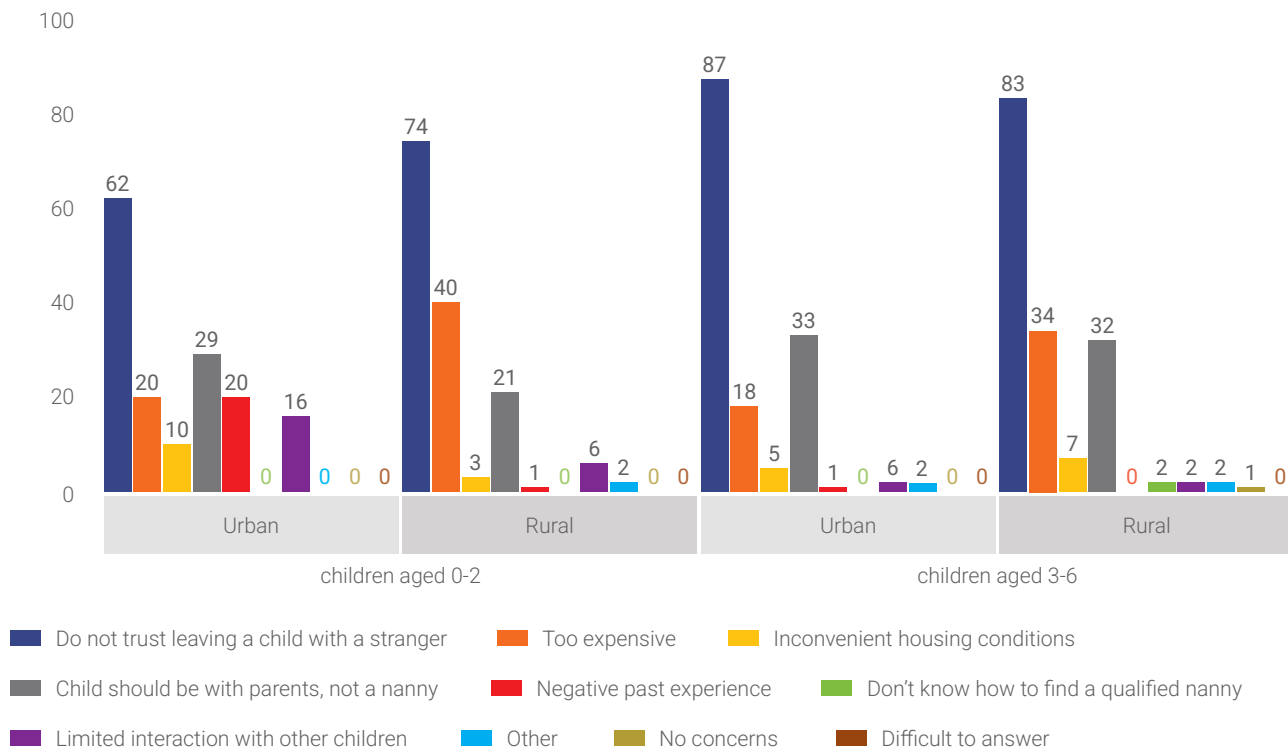
Fathers also cite lack of trust as a primary concern, though at slightly lower levels than mothers, reaching 74 per cent in cities and 77 per cent in villages. This indicates that trust deficits represent a structural barrier to expanding in-home ECEC. The pattern also reflects social norms and fears, where many parents feel a child should stay with parents, which in practice often means mothers.

Figure 4.13. Main concerns related to the use of nannies, per cent

Mothers



Fathers



A notable share of parents also expresses normative concerns. Among fathers, 33 per cent in cities and 27 per cent in villages believe that children should be cared for by parents rather than hired caregivers. Among mothers, this view is expressed by around 20 per cent. These findings reinforce the role of traditional norms that position childcare as a family-based responsibility, often implicitly a maternal one. Encouraging and normalising fathers' involvement, including men's use of leave to care for children, can therefore be part of expanding acceptance of alternative care.

Cost is another significant concern. Around one quarter of mothers report that babysitting services are too expensive, with slightly higher shares among mothers of older preschool children. Among fathers in villages, concern about cost reaches 36 per cent, highlighting the role of financial constraints in rural areas. For many families, perceived unaffordability becomes a mental barrier, the service appears to exist but feels "not for us." Housing conditions and inconvenience are mentioned less frequently but still affect a small share of families.

The **involvement of older generations in childcare remains high.** About half of mothers with children under three and two thirds of mothers with children aged 3 to 6 report that grandparents are willing to provide care (Annex D, Table D.11). **Trust in grandmothers exceeds 90 per cent.** This strong reliance on informal care partly explains the low demand for formal alternative services. However, 12 to 16 per cent of grandparents remain employed and about one in ten cannot provide care due to health constraints. Grandparents' support therefore depends strongly on their health and employment status.

This highlights that **informal family support remains the default solution.** It is culturally trusted and socially accepted, yet demographically fragile. Thus, the need for trusted alternative ECEC services is likely to grow.

It is also worth noting that **parents express a need for short-term support formats**, such as care for a few hours per day or assistance with household tasks. This reflects the substantial share of unpaid care responsibilities carried by women.



If the mother is given an hour a day to rest, then she, her husband and their child, everyone will be happier.

Mother of a 1-year-old

Such testimonies illustrate how even limited and flexible support services could significantly improve family well-being.

Barriers in accessing alternative services

Discussing the barriers that families face in accessing alternative ECEC services, several groups of problems are worth mentioning. Despite war-related disruptions and structural demographic challenges, the ECEC system demonstrates resilience. Barriers remain substantial, particularly in terms of trust, cost, communication and social norms, but they are not insurmountable.

Institutional barriers include the lack of clear certification, quality assurance, and monitoring systems for alternative ECEC providers. Limited and inconsistent communication of government initiatives also weakens public understanding and trust. Broader communication gaps include parents' low awareness of alternative services, persistent prejudices against involving outsiders in childcare, limited information for families of children with disabilities or SEN and insufficient understanding of ongoing ECEC reforms. Such gaps can weaken the impact of innovative initiatives even where services exist.

Social barriers are shaped by low trust in outsiders and the traditional belief that children should be cared for by parents or grandparents. The data show that this view remains particularly strong among fathers. These norms discourage families from seeking external help and reinforce unequal caregiving roles. Addressing these norms through public campaigns showcasing involved fatherhood and the benefit of shared caregiving is key to expanding acceptance of alternative ECEC. Community dialogues and positive examples (like Fathers' Schools or peer support groups) could gradually build trust in vetted caregivers and dispel the notion that only family can safely care for a child.

Financial barriers are also significant. Even when quality options are available, they are often unaffordable, particularly in rural areas where private providers are scarce and access to public kindergartens is limited. Around one quarter of respondents cite high costs as a reason for not using nanny services, with even higher shares in rural areas among fathers. In some rural communities, perceptions that kindergarten is not important for child development further reduce demand. Additional constraints include limited housing space to host nannies, transport costs and expenses for food and supplies. Financial incentives, such as the Municipal Nanny programme, as well as mobile kindergartens and transport services in rural areas, could help address these access gaps.

Various stakeholders can be mobilized:

- employers could partner with local authorities to create workplace kindergartens or co-fund community childcare initiatives
- local governments could provide premises for short-term childcare

A care economy approach that treats childcare as essential infrastructure can simultaneously support families and create employment opportunities.

Beyond alternative formats, it is important to situate these findings in the broader ECEC crisis context. Despite the extremely difficult circumstances of a full-scale war and ongoing structural and sociodemographic challenges, the ECEC system demonstrates resilience and continues to provide educational services while supporting parents' economic opportunities. War-time adaptations such as remote learning, flexible schedules and community initiatives also create opportunities to strengthen the system and improve access for hard-to-reach families.

At the same time, key structural barriers remain. These include insufficient supply of services, particularly for children under three and for children with disabilities or SEN, inconsistency between available services and families' needs, inadequate funding, staff shortages and low attractiveness of the profession. Wartime destruction of infrastructure, displacement of families and staff, regional security risks and the need for shelters further shape access to services. These factors increase spatial and social inequalities and often lead women to absorb greater unpaid care responsibilities, reducing their economic opportunities.

In summary, parents show limited awareness and cautious attitudes toward alternative ECEC formats, with nanny care remaining the only widely recognised option and its actual use still very low. Trust concerns, traditional norms that prioritise family-based care, and perceptions that childcare should remain primarily a parental responsibility continue to constrain acceptance of in-home services, particularly among fathers and in rural areas. Financial barriers and limited regulation of alternative providers further reduce demand, while strong reliance on grandparents reflects both cultural preferences and gaps in formal childcare provision. At the same time, parents express interest in flexible and short-term support formats that could ease the daily care responsibilities, especially for mothers. Expanding alternative ECEC therefore requires a combination of stronger regulation and certification systems, improved public communication about available services, financial incentives and initiatives that address social norms around caregiving. With coordinated efforts by government, employers, communities and civil society, alternative ECEC models can complement public provision, respond to diverse family needs and contribute to a more flexible and resilient care system in Ukraine.

Recommendations

Expanding women's economic empowerment in Ukraine, especially for mothers of young children, requires treating early childhood education and care (ECEC) as essential public infrastructure that delivers economic and social returns for families, communities and the country. This approach reflects the complementary mandates of UNICEF and ILO on children's rights, human capital development and decent work in the care economy, recognising quality childcare as critical for both child development and women's participation in the labour market.

This roadmap applies the ILO 5R framework while aligning with UNICEF's family-friendly policies, early childhood development and gender frameworks, which together focus on reducing and redistributing unpaid care, strengthening childcare services and supporting inclusive recovery.

Progress will require coordinated action by government, employers' and workers' organizations and communities to ensure that childcare is recognised as a shared societal responsibility rather than a private responsibility placed primarily on women.

The ongoing war-related recovery and Ukraine's path toward EU accession present a pivotal opportunity to invest in family-friendly policies and services as part of rebuilding a more equal and prosperous society. Crucially, all efforts must be inclusive and intersectional, recognising that women and families are diverse. Solutions need to be targeted to different needs across rural and urban communities, low-income families, single mothers, internally displaced families and parents of children with disabilities or special educational needs. This ensures that no group is left behind.

The findings of this study demonstrate that barriers to women's economic participation are multidimensional. Limited ECEC availability, inflexible workplaces, persistent gender norms and weak coordination across policy areas interact to constrain mothers' employment and career advancement. Expanding childcare services alone will therefore not be sufficient. Progress requires simultaneous reforms in labour markets, social protection systems and cultural attitudes toward caregiving.

The roadmap below sets out short-, medium- and long-term opportunities for key stakeholders to strengthen women's economic empowerment by improving access to early childhood education and care and creating a more supportive environment in the labour market. These opportunities reflect a rights-based and gender-transformative approach and align with Ukraine's commitments under EU integration (e.g., work-life balance directives and Barcelona childcare targets) and UNICEF's and ILO's global focus on gender equality, decent work, care economy and children's rights.

National government

The national government can spearhead reforms to make childcare, family support, and family-friendly employment a pillar of economic recovery and gender equality by enacting enabling laws, allocating resources and setting strategic direction.

National strategies already underscore these goals; the following actions could accelerate progress while aligning with EU accession requirements and global standards.

Short-term opportunities (1–2 years)

- **Accelerate family-friendly policy alignment.** Introduce state-paid paternity and parental leave with use-it-or-lose-it non-transferable quotas for fathers, enforce rights to request flexible or remote working arrangements and strengthen non-discrimination protections for workers with care responsibilities to align its legislation with ILO Conventions No. 183 and No. 156 and the EU Work-Life Balance Directive. Strengthening labour inspection and enforcement mechanisms would ensure that these rights are applied in practice and reduce discrimination against pregnant workers and mothers returning from childcare leave.

- **Improve access to childcare subsidies and support.** Broaden family benefits, including childcare subsidies and programmes such as eYasla, eSadok and Municipal Nanny. Priorities include indexing subsidies to inflation, guaranteeing them by law beyond annual budget cycles and expanding eligibility to parents working part-time or re-entering the labour market after long breaks. Streamlined access, proactive outreach and temporary fee waivers or emergency stipends in conflict-affected areas would particularly help low-income families, single mothers and internally displaced women. Reskilling programmes, mentorship initiatives and job placement support for unemployed mothers would strengthen return-to-work outcomes, with special attention to mothers returning after long career interruptions.
- **Issue guidelines for alternative childcare formats.** Following the new Law on Preschool Education, set clear guidelines and simplifying licensing and certification procedures to support the implementation of alternative ECEC formats. Short-term actions include piloting registries and inspection mechanisms to ensure child safety and quality, building parental trust in options beyond public kindergartens. This is especially relevant for rural areas.
- **Enhance accountability for access to ECEC.** Introduce a unified ECEC monitoring system with common indicators to track enrolment, unmet demand, waiting lists and accessibility gaps across municipalities. Building on the forthcoming 2028 legal requirement for communities to either provide a kindergarten place or compensate working parents, central authorities can reinforce enforcement through standardized reporting and verification procedures. Linking these monitoring systems with labour market indicators, such as employment rates of mothers with young children, would allow policymakers to assess whether ECEC expansion translates into improved economic participation.
- **Strengthen decent work and formalise childcare providers.** Promote ratification of ILO Convention No. 189 on Decent Work for Domestic Workers, strengthen measures to formalise home-based childcare providers and scale up the Municipal Nanny programme with improved pay, social protection and benefits to care workers. This will improve working conditions and service quality for a predominantly female workforce while increasing social security contributions and supporting the sustainability of the programme.
- **Launch national information campaigns on care and equal parenting.** Roll out low-cost public awareness campaigns, in partnership with UNICEF, ILO, NGOs and media, to inform families about available childcare support and parental rights, including enrolment procedures subsidies, parental leave, promoting men's equal role in caregiving. Proactive outreach through social media, healthcare facilities, employers and local centres would improve uptake, especially among internally displaced families and those in remote areas.
- **Advance care reforms through social dialogue.** Effective social dialogue through the National Tripartite Social and Economic Council can support rapid consensus on care economy reforms, including expanded services, parental leave improvements and decent working conditions for care workers. This will help align legislation, budgets and implement international labour standards and EU accession requirements, while ensuring fair sharing of responsibilities across the State, employers and workers.

Medium-term opportunities (3–5 years)

- **Rebuild and expand ECEC infrastructure.** Prioritise ECEC as essential infrastructure within recovery and reconstruction plans. This includes auditing areas with destroyed or inadequate preschool facilities and fast-tracking reconstruction funds to underserved communities, particularly war-affected and rural regions. Recovery budgets can support new construction and refurbishment of preschools with safe, modern designs, including shelters and digital connectivity. Sustained investment in diverse service models can move Ukraine toward the EU Barcelona targets.
- **Strengthen inter-ministerial coordination on care.** Strengthen high-level coordination across education, social policy, finance and labour authorities to align childcare expansion, parental leave and employment policies. This mechanism can deliver an integrated national care strategy and action plan, supported by coherent budgeting and monitoring of gender equality outcomes. Parliamentary oversight, regular reporting to Parliament and the EU and conditional budgeting linked to benchmarks on ECEC coverage and women's employment can reinforce accountability during the EU accession process.

- **Enhance inclusivity, quality and the ECEC workforce.** Scale up inclusive and targeted childcare services through funding inclusive kindergarten groups, training and recruiting educators, upgrading certification and offering incentives such as scholarships, salary uplifts or housing support to address staff shortages, especially in rural areas. Quality should be assured through inspections, accreditation and parent feedback. Differentiated support such as higher subsidies, extended leave options, transport services or mobile ECEC units, along with complementary psychosocial and advisory services for parents, can help single mothers, low-income families and IDPs and prevent long-term labour market exclusion.
- **Implement work-life balance and gender equality commitments.** Fully implement ILO Convention 156 and the EU Work-Life Balance Directive as enforceable rights. This includes the right to request flexible and remote working arrangements, supported by stronger labour law enforcement and protection from caregiver discrimination across sectors, normalising equal leave-taking by mothers and fathers, supported by incentives and public-sector leadership, sustained public education on shared parenting.
- **Monitor progress and prepare for EU social funding instruments.** Strengthen readiness for future EU instruments, including the European Social Fund Plus, by developing clear strategies, robust data systems and costed investment pipelines. A monitoring framework or care economy scoreboard can track childcare access, workforce quality, women's employment outcomes and employer adoption of family-friendly practices. Public recognition of high-performing municipalities or employers can incentivise progress.

Long-term opportunities (beyond 5 years)

- **Accelerate universal and affordable childcare access.** Aim to guarantee universal, rights-based access to early childhood education and care as essential social infrastructure. Building on the Barcelona targets, this could include approaching 45 per cent enrolment of children under three and near-universal enrolment of children aged 3–6 by 2030. This requires positioning ECEC as a public good similar to primary education, anchoring financing in multi-year budgets or a dedicated care fund and targeted measures for low-income families and children with disabilities.
- **Boost culture change and shared care responsibilities.** Foster a culture where shared caregiving and gender-equal parenting are fully normalised by promoting legal reforms and sustain public action. Continued investment in awareness programmes, education curricula and public messaging can reinforce the value of care work and fathers' involvement in childcare and reduce stigma around working mothers.
- **Sustain multi-stakeholder commitment, innovation and a broader care vision.** Formalise the inter-ministerial care coordination mechanism into a permanent care strategy council that includes government, employers' and workers' organizations, civil society and international development partners. Such platform can oversee implementation, adapt policies and promote innovation, including data-driven planning, digital service platforms and predictive tools to anticipate and meet care needs.

By pursuing these national-level opportunities, the government will be laying the foundation for a more gender-equitable economy²²⁴. The payoff will be substantial: increased female labour force participation, higher family incomes and tax revenues, and progress toward EU accession obligations on gender equality and social inclusion.

Local authorities

Local authorities have deep knowledge of their communities' needs so they can translate national policies into concrete programmes on the ground, innovate and tailor solutions for their areas. By working in partnership with communities, businesses and national ministries, local governments can foster family-friendly environments where no family is overlooked.

Short-term opportunities (1–2 years)

- **Map needs and leverage existing spaces.** Start with identifying facilities damaged, destroyed or repurposed by the war, as well as new demand created by displacement. Using this data, they can prioritise reopening safe childcare spaces and repurpose underused facilities such as community centres, libraries or school classrooms as interim preschools, ensuring they have secure bomb shelters. In rural areas or settlements without formal services, mobile childcare groups can provide early learning activities on a rotating basis.

- **Introduce flexible and short-duration services.** Introduce flexible childcare models that respond to diverse family needs, including half-day programmes, short-hour groups or drop-in childcare. Municipal spaces can host part-time creches or baby corners where parents leave children for a few hours as needed, including temporary childcare corners in IDP shelters or hubs set up in coordination with humanitarian agencies. Authorities can also support vetted local nannies through simple registries, training or small subsidies.
- **Improve outreach and community-level information.** Inform families about childcare options and subsidies through setting up a one-stop information point online and in local offices, sharing information through health clinics, IDP centres, schools and village councils and using SMS or social media to raise awareness of services. Targeted outreach to rural families, displaced parents and parents of children with disabilities can increase enrolment and uptake of schemes such as the Municipal Nanny subsidy.

Medium-term opportunities (3–5 years)

- **Expand local childcare capacity through mixed models.** Continue expanding childcare through mixed models. This includes constructing new preschools and rebuilding damaged ones with safe rooms and accessibility features, while integrating ECEC into urban planning and reconstruction alongside housing and transport. In rural areas, local authorities can use hub-and-spoke models (where a high-quality town preschool supports childcare providers in surrounding villages), transport services, mobile kindergartens or supervised home-based childcare services to reach smaller villages.
- **Support public-private and community partnerships for childcare.** Partner with employers, NGOs and community organizations to co-create childcare solutions. Municipalities may provide land, premises or operational support, while employers or local businesses contribute funding and NGOs or social enterprises manage services. Examples include workplace-adjacent childcare in business parks, employer-supported centres that also serve nearby families, or NGO-led childcare initiatives using municipal space. Such partnerships could attract donor or international financial institution co-financing.
- **Lead by example in family-friendly employment.** Introduce family-friendly work practices in municipal enterprises and public institutions and demonstrate workable models for the local labour market. Measures may include flexible working hours, part-time arrangements without loss of position, remote or hybrid work policies, and pilot job-sharing schemes. Such practices can help parents combine paid work with care responsibilities and gradually establish new standards of work organisation.
- **Incentivise family-friendly employers and recognise good practice.** Use local tax instruments to encourage businesses to adopt family-friendly employment practices. This may include reduced local tax rates or property tax preferences for companies that offer flexible work arrangements or create part-time jobs. Municipalities can also introduce voluntary “family-friendly employer” recognition schemes to highlight businesses that support working parents. Although the fiscal impact may be modest, these tools can create positive incentives and signal local commitment to supportive labour market practices.
- **Strengthen the local childcare workforce and quality assurance.** Invest in workforce development and quality systems. This includes partnering with colleges, NGOs or training providers to offer continuous professional development, certification upgrades, and training in gender-responsive, inclusive and trauma-informed care. To address staff shortages, especially in rural areas, local governments can introduce incentives such as housing support, salary top-ups, bonuses or recognition schemes. Municipal quality assurance mechanisms, including regular inspections, community oversight boards and parent feedback systems, can be institutionalised for both public and private providers.
- **Target support to vulnerable families and foster community norm change.** Institutionalise targeted support for families most at risk of exclusion, including low-income families, single mothers, IDPs, Roma families, and families raising children with disabilities. One-stop family support centres can help households access childcare, subsidies, transport and employment services, while priority enrolment or sliding-scale fees can ensure affordability. In parallel, municipalities can promote community-level norm change by supporting parenting workshops, father groups and public events that encourage shared caregiving.

Long-term opportunities (beyond 5 years)

- **Integrated community childcare networks.** Develop integrated childcare networks providing equal access to ECEC, regardless of location or background. This means in addition to simply expanding traditional nurseries and kindergartens, using other options, such as public centres, NGO or private services, home-based providers and mobile or outreach models where they will be more effective. Hub-and-spoke systems, cross-community enrolment with transport and formally subcontracted childminders can link villages to town centres and reduce territorial inequality.
- **Sustainable and institutionalised local financing.** Embed ECEC as a permanent responsibility within local budgets and development planning. Municipalities can allocate a stable share of local revenue to ECEC, complemented by needs-based central transfers, local care funds or innovative instruments such as social impact bonds, align local financing with EU mechanisms, prepare pipelines for future European Social Fund Plus and anchor these commitments in local bylaws.
- **Family-friendly urban and rural planning.** Ensure every neighbourhood includes ECEC facilities, safe routes and play spaces, while rural development can rely on multipurpose community centres offering part-time preschool alongside other services. Treating childcare like a public utility, maintained and upgraded over time, reinforces its role in everyday community life.
- **Continuous improvement, innovation and community feedback.** Use annual public consultations, satisfaction surveys and pilot projects to refine service models, scale effective approaches and discontinue those that do not work. Sharing experience across municipalities through associations or subnational platforms, leveraging data and technology, such as digital enrolment systems or service-mapping tools, can further improve targeting and responsiveness.
- **Community resilience and emergency preparedness.** Drawing on wartime experience, ensure that childcare systems remain functional during future crises. Long-term measures include equipping facilities with bomb shelters and backup locations, training reserve caregivers and maintaining partnerships with civil society for emergency childcare provision.

In sum, by embracing these opportunities local authorities will be critical drivers in building a family-friendly, gender-equal Ukraine from the ground up. The partnership between national and local levels, with funding, policy support and flexibility for innovation, will determine how quickly and effectively these outcomes are achieved.

Employers and employers' organizations

In Ukraine, some women report difficulties returning to work after having children due to inflexible workplace practices or discrimination. Employers have an opportunity to change this by fostering family-friendly work environments that complement public policies. The roadmap below outlines what employers could consider doing in the short, medium and long-term to become allies in the care economy, aligned with ILO and UNICEF guidance.

Short-term opportunities (1–2 years)

- **Strengthen engagement in work-childcare policy design.** Engage in social dialogue with policymakers to shape practical work-family policies that reflect business realities and workers' needs. This includes promoting flexible working arrangements, non-discrimination practices and employer-supported childcare solutions, with incentives tailored to small- and medium-sized enterprises and joint or cooperative models. Employers' organisations can also lead awareness-raising on the business case for family-friendly practices, sharing evidence on improved retention, productivity and employer branding, as well as communicate available public supports to staff.
- **Support flexible working arrangements.** Support workers with family responsibilities by institutionalising flexitime, remote or hybrid work, compressed working weeks and temporary reductions in working hours in ways that uphold decent work principles. These measures can support parents returning from maternity, paternity or parental leave, provided they do not lead to penalties in pay, career progression or social protection. Transitional arrangements, such as phased return to work, part-time schedules or work from home options, can ease reintegration after childbirth or adoption. Clear internal policies and

communication are essential to ensure that flexibility is accessible without stigma or discrimination and that equal treatment, job security and opportunities for advancement are preserved, in line with ILO standards.

- **Provide on-site or subsidized ECEC.** Pilot on-site or co-located childcare, reserve slots with local providers or offer childcare allowances or negotiated discounts. Practical supports such as lactation rooms, family rooms and childcare during training days can reduce pressure on parents. Utilisation rates and employee satisfaction can track effectiveness, while joint models with municipalities and donors can help scale pilots.
- **Normalise parental leave and shared parenting.** Actively promote paternity and parental leave for fathers through HR briefings, visible leadership support, and assurances of no career penalties. Offering enhanced leave benefits where feasible and celebrating male role models who take leave can shift norms and drive cultural change.

Medium-term opportunities (3–5 years)

- **Scale up family-friendly workplace practices.** Institutionalise comprehensive family-friendly workplace models, particularly in larger firms and the public sector. This includes enhanced parental leave benefits, guaranteed job retention during maternity, paternity and parental leave, phased return-to-work programmes after childbirth or adoption, re-skilling and mentorship for returning parents, flexible options such as part-time work or job sharing at all levels. This can be complemented by proactive communication during leave, access to training and internal audits to identify and correct motherhood penalties in pay or promotion, supported by manager training to address bias.
- **Invest in employer-supported childcare.** Establish on-site or near-site childcare facilities, individually or through cooperation with other companies. Shared centres in industrial parks, hospitals or business districts can serve employees from multiple firms, with costs spread and, where possible, co-funded with local authorities. These centres can help address critical gaps, including care for children under three, and increase overall childcare supply in the community.
- **Integrate family-friendly practices into company policies and agreements.** Embed family-friendly measures into company policies, handbooks and collective agreements. This can include guaranteed return to equivalent positions after childcare leave, paid family emergency leave, protections against caregiver discrimination and clear procedures for requesting flexibility. This will reduce reliance on managerial discretion, contribute to social dialogue and set standards that others can follow.
- **Targeted support for vulnerable employees.** Recognise that some staff face higher work-care pressures, including single parents, families with multiple young children, parents of children with disabilities or special educational needs and IDP employees. Targeted measures may include flexible scheduling for care and therapy appointments or emergency childcare support.

Long-term opportunities (beyond 5 years)

- **Embed a care-friendly and gender-equal corporate culture.** Flexible working arrangements, parental leave and caregiver support could become standard practice. Leadership pipelines can actively promote women, including mothers, who used flexible working arrangements. Scheduling meetings within core hours and normalising men's use of family benefits, can reduce stigma and help dissolve the motherhood penalty.
- **Participate in policy advocacy and invest in the care ecosystem.** Start advocating for strong public care policies. Through business associations, sectoral networks or EU-aligned platforms, employers can exchange evidence on how family-friendly practices improve productivity and retention, mentor smaller enterprises and adopt joint charters that set common standards. In parallel, companies can contribute to community childcare, workforce training or public-private projects, especially in high-need or war-affected areas.

In summary, employers who proactively engage with these opportunities will not only support national objectives of gender equality but also directly benefit from a more stable, motivated, and diverse workforce. International experience shows that family-friendly policies yield returns in employee retention and loyalty.

Workers' organizations

As key stakeholders in advocating for workers' rights, workers' organizations in Ukraine can ensure that the voice of employees, both women and men with family responsibilities, is heard in the design and implementation of policies and workplace practices. Alongside government and employers, unions can work to rebuild the social organization of care as a collective responsibility. By doing so, they will also help shift cultural expectations around gender equality and care.

Short-term opportunities (1–2 years)

- **Raise awareness of labour rights for parents.** Run practical information campaigns on maternity and paternity leave, job protection during childcare leave, breastfeeding breaks, nursing facilities and the right to request flexible working arrangements. Disseminate information on special relief measures for IDPs and families with children, provide legal aid, helpdesks or hotlines for pregnancy- and caregiving-related disputes.
- **Integrate work-family balance into collective bargaining.** Propose clauses on flexible working arrangements, protections for parents returning from leave, employer contributions to childcare, nursing rooms or partnerships with childcare providers. Actively participate in national and local social dialogue platforms to ensure workers' experiences shape care policies.
- **Protect caregivers from discrimination.** Monitor dismissals or restructurings to ensure caregivers are not disproportionately affected, supporting grievances and legal action in cases of discrimination, and creating a deterrent effect through visible defence of members' rights. Support IDP workers and parents facing childcare disruptions is especially important.
- **Promote gender equality and shared care.** Hold campaigns and training, encourage men to take paternity and parental leave, support flexible working arrangements without stigma and strengthen women's leadership within workers' organizations, including through women's committees, leadership targets and family-friendly union practices.

Medium-term opportunities (3–5 years)

- **Advance care reforms through social dialogue.** Use social dialogue to push for comprehensive care economy reforms. This includes advocating for sustained public investment in childcare and long-term care, stronger parental leave entitlements and decent working conditions for care workers. Unions can anchor these demands in national campaigns, aligned with global trade union movements that frame childcare as critical infrastructure and a collective responsibility.
- **Support return to work, skills and direct services for parents.** Provide practical support for parents bargaining for childcare-friendly working conditions. Medium-term actions include partnering with training providers to offer re-skilling, returnship or mentoring programmes for women returning after care breaks, including displaced women and single mothers. Workers' organizations may also facilitate childcare cooperatives, summer programmes or mutual aid funds to help members manage care costs and emergencies.
- **Negotiate advanced family-friendly workplace agreements.** At sectoral and enterprise levels, negotiate collective agreements that go beyond legal minimums. This may include guaranteed flexible working arrangements for parents of young children, employer-supported childcare or reserved kindergarten places, breastfeeding facilities and predictable scheduling. Sector-wide standards can raise expectations across industries. In parallel, workers' organizations can train workplace representatives to monitor implementation, address non-compliance and work with labour inspectorates where needed.
- **Drive culture change and peer learning.** Campaign for family-friendly workplace cultures that normalise shared caregiving. Public campaigns, employer rankings and positive role-model stories can reduce stigma around using leave or flexible working arrangement, including for fathers. Sharing best practices across sectors and with international partners helps spread effective models and keeps pressure on lagging employers.

Long-term opportunities (beyond 5 years)

- **Institutionalise gender equality and care as workers' rights.** Institutionalise gender equality and care priorities within workers' organizations' mandates, leadership structures and bargaining agendas, supported by permanent gender equality or care economy committees and dedicated focal points. Workers' organizations can progressively raise standards through collective bargaining and advocacy, including flexible working arrangements, the right to rest and disconnect, and caregiving leave for women and men without negative impact on career progression.
- **Collaborate through multi-stakeholder initiatives.** Act as key social partners in sustained collaboration with governments, employers' organizations, NGOs and women's rights groups to advance family-friendly labour markets. Through tripartite and multi-stakeholder platforms, workers' organizations can contribute worker feedback, co-shape national care strategies and support community-level childcare and awareness initiatives.

In summary, through collective bargaining, advocacy and member engagement, workers' organizations ensure that the realities of working parents inform workplace norms and national policies. Their involvement helps to root the changes in the day-to-day world of work, fighting discrimination and reshaping expectations among workers and employers alike.

Community partners

Community partners, including non-governmental organizations (NGOs), community-based organizations, women's associations, parent groups and other civil society actors, often pilot innovative solutions, provide services to vulnerable families and hold other stakeholders accountable.

In Ukraine, UNICEF, ILO, other international agencies and local NGOs have been active in supporting children and parents, especially during the war crisis. Moving forward, community partners can ensure that improvements in policy truly reach all families, including those who might be overlooked by formal systems, such as isolated rural households, internally displaced families or children with disabilities.

Short-term opportunities (1–2 years)

- **Strengthen local accountability through community oversight.** Contribute to tracking enrolment gaps, waiting lists, and accessibility barriers through community-level assessments and social audits, complementing official data systems. Civil society can also support parents in using grievance and redress mechanisms, document cases of exclusion or unequal treatment, and bring this evidence to local councils and national authorities. By engaging in dialogue with municipalities and ministries, community actors can help ensure that forthcoming obligations to provide kindergarten places or compensation are met.
- **Launch community awareness and behaviour-change programmes.** Run targeted awareness campaigns to address cultural barriers and low awareness of childcare options. Activities may include local information sessions, media and social media campaigns, and parenting programmes that promote shared caregiving and the benefits of ECEC. Women's NGOs can organize father clubs, parenting classes, or other initiatives to encourage men's active involvement in care.
- **Provide targeted support to vulnerable families.** Deliver interim childcare and parent support to families facing the greatest barriers. This includes NGOs setting up child-friendly spaces, drop-in daycare or short-hour childcare in libraries, cultural centres or IDP shelters. Community organizations can also facilitate parent support circles, especially for single mothers, displaced families and parents of children with disabilities, linking them to information on services and rights. Mobile toy and book libraries, volunteer babysitting networks and respite care can complement formal provision and improve well-being.
- **Train and certify community childcare providers.** Certified educational institutions can launch government-approved training programmes for community childcare providers, building on models such as ILO-supported nanny training. Short courses covering childcare basics, safety, first aid, early learning, inclusion, and gender-equitable parenting can rapidly expand the pool of qualified ECEC providers. Women's organizations and community groups can help recruit trainees, especially unemployed women and IDPs, and coordinate with local authorities to match certified caregivers with families.

Medium-term opportunities (3–5 years)

- **Develop community-run childcare initiatives.** Scale up and formalise successful pilot childcare models, in coordination with local authorities. This may include cooperatives, social enterprises or parent-led initiatives that operate licensed daycare centres, home-based childcare networks, mobile childcare teams or short-duration services. Civil society can also support replication by developing simple toolkits on governance, financing and quality standards.
- **Exercise advocacy and watchdog role.** Track implementation of national reforms and EU-aligned targets by documenting childcare coverage, budget allocations, workforce gaps, and accessibility for low-income, rural and displaced families. Publishing periodic report cards or shadow reports, supported by testimonies from parents, helps highlight progress and expose gaps, and can prompt corrective action by authorities and employers.
- **Catalyse intersectoral partnerships for holistic support.** Act as connectors across childcare, employment and social support systems. NGOs can convene partnerships among municipalities, employers, preschools, health services, and social workers to deliver integrated solutions. Examples include family resource centres that combine preschool services with job counselling, parenting support and psychosocial care, or after-hours childcare operated by community groups in public buildings with employer co-funding. International partners can support these models through financing, evidence generation and technical assistance.

Long-term opportunities (beyond 5 years)

- **Sustain community engagement and social support networks.** Become an integral part of care systems governance through parent advisory boards or community oversight committees linked to childcare providers and local planning bodies. These mechanisms ensure that diverse voices, including rural families and parents of children with disabilities, shape service design, quality and expansion. Civil society can also introduce community scorecards and feedback tools that feed directly into service improvement and local decision-making.
- **Influence cultural norms and attitudes for future generations.** Help institutionalise gender-equal parenting and respect for care work through school curricula, youth programmes, faith-based initiatives and local media. Civil society may promote recurring community events and continue father-focused initiatives that normalise men's caregiving. As these messages reach younger generations, expectations around shared care and the use of childcare services shift permanently.
- **Maintain collaboration, knowledge sharing and collective voice.** Consolidate learning by forming durable coalitions or knowledge hubs on care and women's economic empowerment. These platforms can document effective models, share tools across regions and sustain advocacy aligned with EU and global commitments. By linking grassroots evidence with national and international dialogue, civil society can help ensure that community-originated solutions become part of mainstream policy and that care reforms remain resilient to political change.

In conclusion, community and civil society partners serve as the connective agents between families and formal structures. Their deep engagement at the local level helps ensure that reforms are not just on paper but in practice, reaching mothers in a remote village, changing the mind of a hesitant father, empowering a displaced family to rebuild their lives.

Overall, Ukraine has a unique opportunity to reshape its care economy, unlock the full economic potential of women, which in turn will drive economic growth. By framing care as productive infrastructure, Ukraine can meet EU integration goals while supporting children's development and gender equality. Success will depend on targeting solutions to diverse needs and ensuring accountability through measurable goals. Whether through national reforms, local innovation, supportive workplaces, or community-led models, each stakeholder has a role. As these efforts align, they will create a more family-friendly, gender-equal Ukraine – one where care is valued, shared, and central to both economic recovery and long-term prosperity.

Annexes

Annex A

Block A.1. Alternative models of ECEC in Europe and Central Asia

The UNICEF study reviews alternative ECEC models used across the region, including:

- **Half-day services.** Daily 3–4-hour programmes with curricula similar to full-day provision.
- **Community-based models.** Non-governmental services created or managed by communities, often with external support.
- **Public-private partnerships.** Private providers deliver services under public oversight and quality control.
- **Forest kindergartens.** Outdoor-based learning through play and exploration.
- **Nanny services.** Home-based care provided by trained individuals.
- **Itinerant teachers.** Mobile preschool teachers serving remote communities.
- **Distance learning.** Parents act as primary caregivers with training and support, used during closures or in remote areas.

Source: UNICEF, A flexible preschool system for every child: diversifying early learning in Europe and Central Asia (2023). <https://www.unicef.org/eca/reports/flexible-preschool-system-every-child>

The ILO study identifies priority actions to expand ECEC access and align with the EU acquis:

- **Link parental leave reform with a guaranteed ECEC entitlement** from the end of leave, including use of publicly supported private provision where needed (EU Work-Life Balance Directive).
- **Strengthen licensing and quality assurance for alternative ECEC** through simplified procedures, monitoring, and incentives for formalisation, such as social enterprise status or technical support.
- **Introduce inclusive financing** such as subsidies, vouchers, and public-private partnerships to ensure affordability, with attention to children aged 0–2 and rural providers.
- **Pilot and scale alternative ECEC models** in regions with the largest gaps, with clear governance, monitoring, and pathways for national rollout.

Source: ILO, Analysis of care system expansion in post-Socialist EU Member States: lessons learned and good practices for Ukraine (2024). <https://www.ilo.org/publications/analysis-care-system-expansion-post-socialist-eu-member-states-lessons>

Block A.2. Investing in ECEC: international experience

Quebec, Canada

Following the introduction of a subsidised childcare system (Centres de la Petite Enfance), preschool coverage for children under four increased from 18 per cent in 1998 to 53 per cent in 2011. Mothers' labour market participation rose accordingly. Their employment rate is now 7 per cent higher than the Canadian average. This generated an additional 94.3 million hours of paid work, estimated at about CAD 2.78 billion, contributing roughly 0.78 per cent to Quebec's GDP growth.

Finland

Investment in ECEC increased from 0.6 per cent of GDP in the 1980s to around 1.2 per cent in the 2000s. Preschool coverage for children aged 3 to 5 reached 96 per cent. The gap between children from the poorest and richest families is 9 per cent, compared to an OECD average of 19 per cent. Higher ECEC investment has supported women's labour market participation. The employment rate for women aged 25 to 54 exceeds 84 per cent, among the highest globally.

Slovakia and Poland

Between 2018 and 2021, investment in early childhood education rose to 0.76 per cent of GDP in Poland and 0.62 per cent in Slovakia. This reduced the share of women outside the labour market due to unpaid care work by 9 per cent and 7.2 per cent, respectively. In Poland, the Active Parents Programme launched in 2023 provides monthly support of EUR 353 to cover childcare costs in kindergartens, at home, or with relatives. In Slovakia, a 2023 law guarantees a kindergarten place for all children aged four and above from September 2024, and for children aged three and above from September 2025.

Source: The Government of Canada, "The value of unpaid childcare and paid employment by gender: What are the impacts of the low-fee universal childcare programme?", Statistics Canada (2022). https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/n1/pub/36-28-0001/2022007/article/00003-eng.htm?utm_source=chatgpt.com;

ILO, The impact of care responsibilities on women's labour force participation. Statistical Brief. October 2024. https://www.ilo.org/sites/default/files/2024-10/GEDI-STAT%20brief_formatted_28.10.24_final.pdf;

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OECD, Education at a glance 2024: Country note – Finland (OECD Publishing, 2024). https://www.oecd.org/content/dam/oecd/en/publications/reports/2024/09/education-at-a-glance-2024-country-notes_532eb29d/finland_eb77a2f9/99e1b050-en.pdf

Block A.3. Investing in ECEC: strategic importance for Ukraine

The UNICEF study estimates the expected effects of expanding ECEC service coverage in Ukraine.

- Total economic benefits are projected at UAH 261 to 522 billion between 2023 and 2050, depending on the scenario. This corresponds to a return on investment of 4.3 to 5.1. The estimated price of inaction²²⁵ over the same period is UAH 419 billion, see a table below.
- Under the rapid scaling scenario, the average length of schooling would increase by 0.37 years to 13.3 years per child, comparable to levels observed in several European countries.
- Expanded ECEC coverage would free up time for carers, mainly women, and support their return to paid work. Under the rapid scaling scenario, up to 350,000 people could re-enter the labour market by 2030 as their children gain access to ECEC services.
- Meeting demand for ECEC would require an additional 9,800 new workers per year under the slow scenario and 16,700 under the rapid scenario. This would create new employment opportunities, primarily for women, who make up the majority of the preschool workforce.

Beyond quantitative impacts, the study highlights the strategic importance of ECEC investment in the context of full-scale war. It supports return migration, helps address labour shortages for reconstruction, and contributes to meeting EU accession requirements.

Table. Economic benefits of investing in ECEC, costs, and price of inaction in Ukraine up to 2050, billion UAH, discounted at 5 per cent

	Scenarios		
	Rapid	Medium	Slow
Total costs	103	82	61
Total benefits	522	393	261
Benefit cost ratio	5.1	4.8	4
Cost of inaction	419	311	200

Note. Three scenarios are considered. Rapid scaling assumes target coverage is reached by 2030 and maintained thereafter. Medium scaling assumes target coverage by 2040. Slow scaling assumes target coverage at the end of the period. Target coverage is defined as 100 per cent of children aged 3 to 5 and 100 per cent of children under age 3 who need care. Demand for care is assumed to reflect women's labour force participation, with a target value of 55 per cent.

The full-scale war has caused a sharp economic contraction, rising poverty, and losses of productive and human capital in Ukraine. This creates serious macro-financial constraints. Without effective systemic measures, the projected funding gap for early childhood development (including ECEC, healthcare and social protection) by 2030 could reach UAH 21.6 billion under the rapid expansion scenario or UAH 6.7 billion under the slow scenario.

Source: UNICEF, A Better Future: The Economic Case for Investing in Early Childhood Development (ECD) in Ukraine: Final Report (2024). <https://www.unicef.org/ukraine/en/documents/brighter-future-investment-case>

Block A.4. Employment creation through investing in transformative care policies in Ukraine

There is a strong investment case for progressively achieving universal access to transformative, nationally designed care policy packages. According to the ILO Care Policy Investment Simulator, investing in universal childcare services in Ukraine could generate nearly 177,600 jobs by 2030. This includes about 159,100 direct jobs in childcare and 18,500 indirect jobs in non-care sectors²²⁶.

Closing existing care policy gaps would require a progressive and sustainable annual investment of USD 1.6 billion by 2030, equivalent to 0.8 per cent of GDP before taxes. Of this amount, USD 149 million would be allocated to childcare related leave policies and about USD 1.4 billion to ECEC services. Increased tax revenue from higher employment and earnings would reduce the net funding requirement to about 0.6 per cent of GDP after taxes.

These investments would deliver significant economic and social returns. Ninety-three per cent of new jobs created by 2030 would be taken by women, and 98 per cent would be formal employment. Each dollar invested in closing the childcare policy gap is estimated to generate an average economic return of USD 6.52 by 2030 through mothers regaining pre-birth earnings over their lifetime. The fiscal return is estimated at USD 2.6 per dollar invested due to higher tax revenues.

Beyond economic gains, these investments would advance gender equality. Investment in childcare related leave and ECEC services could increase women's employment rates from a global average of 63.2 per cent in 2019 to 64.5 per cent in 2030 and reduce the gender gap in monthly earnings from 22.8 per cent to 17.3 per cent over the same period.

Source: ILO country brief. Care at work in Ukraine. Investing in care leave and services for a more gender equal world of work (2022). https://www.ilo.org/sites/default/files/wcmsp5/groups/public/@dgreports/@dcomm/documents/publication/wcms_838653.pdf

Annex B

Table B.1. Population structure aged 15-70 and 18-49, by gender*

	Age 15-70		Age 18-49		Share of population aged 18-49 among persons aged 15-70, per cent
	Thousands of persons	Share of total population in age group, per cent	Thousands of persons	Share of the total population in the age group, per cent	
Men	11 761	49	7 588	52	64
Women	11 981	51	6 925	48	58
Total	23 742	100	14 513	100	61

*According to OSCE data

Table B.2. Gender structure of the population aged 18-49 with children under 7*

	Thousands of persons	Share in the 18-49 age group, per cent	Share among persons aged 18-49 with children under 7, per cent
Men aged 18-49 with children under the age of 7	1 441	19	45
Women aged 18-49 with children under the age of 7	1 788	26	55
Total	3 229	22	100

*According to OSCE data

Table B.3. Age structure of women aged 18-49 with children under 7, per cent*

	Percentage of women in the corresponding age group			Percentage of women aged 18-49		
	Without children under 7	Have children under 7	Total	Without children under 7	Have children under 7	Total
18-24	16	13	16	78	22	100
25-29	10	31	16	49	51	100
30-34	16	27	19	63	37	100
35-39	18	19	18	73	27	100
40-44	20	7	17	89	11	100
45-49	20	3	14	95	5	100
Total	100	100	100	74	26	100

*According to OSCE data

Table B.4. Age structure of men aged 18-49 with children under 7, per cent*

	Percentage of men in the corresponding age group			Percentage of men aged 18-49		
	Without children under 7	Have children under 7	Total	Without children under 7	Have children under 7	Total
18-24	20	5	17	95	5	100
25-29	15	23	16	73	27	100
30-34	15	35	19	64	36	100
35-39	17	22	18	78	22	100
40-44	16	11	15	86	14	100
45-49	17	4	15	94	6	100
Total	100	100	100	81	19	100

*According to OSCE data

Table B.5. Desire to work among inactive mothers with children of different ages, by levels of education

Mothers	Levels of education	Wanted to work	Didn't want to work
Mothers with children aged 0–2	Incomplete secondary education	15	85
	Complete secondary education	29	71
	Vocational education and training	32	68
	Professional pre-higher education	28	72
	Higher education	30	70
	Total	29	71
Mothers with children aged 3–6	Incomplete secondary education	25	75
	Complete secondary education	21	79
	Vocational education and training	30	70
	Professional pre-higher education	20	80
	Higher education	27	73
	Total	26	74
Mothers with children aged 0–6	Incomplete secondary education	18	82
	Complete secondary education	25	75
	Vocational education and training	31	69
	Professional pre-higher education	24	76
	Higher education	28	72
	Total	27	73

Table B.6. Desire to work among inactive mothers with children of different ages, depending on the total number of children

Mothers	Number of children in the household	Wanted to work	Didn't want to work
Mothers with children aged 0–2	1	22	78
	2	48	52
	3	41	59
	4 and more	29	71
	Total	29	71
Mothers with children aged 3–6	1	24	76
	2	32	68
	3	33	67
	4 and more	33	67
	Total	26	74
Mothers with children aged 0–6	1	23	77
	2	39	61
	3	38	62
	4 and more	30	70
	Total	27	73

Table B.7. Desire to work among inactive mothers with children of different ages, with or without a partner

Mothers	Having a partner	Wanted to work	Didn't want to work
Mothers with children aged 0–2	Without a partner	24	76
	With a partner	31	69
	Total	29	71
Mothers with children aged 3–6	Without a partner	29	71
	With a partner	25	75
	Total	26	74
Mothers with children aged 0–6	Without a partner	27	73
	With a partner	28	72
	Total	28	72

Table B.8. Mother's exposure to labour rights violations by employers, by child's age (per cent of mothers in the group)

	Mothers with children aged 0-2	Mothers with children aged 3-6	Mothers with children aged 7-9
Denied early leave / childcare break			
Constantly	7	4	7
Sometimes, once	7	16	22
Never	86	80	71
Total	100	100	100
Reduced pay / lower salary than peers			
Constantly	3	2	5
Sometimes, once	8	5	7
Never	89	93	88
Total	100	100	100
Denied paid sick leave			
Constantly	5	2	5
Sometimes, once	6	7	14
Never	89	91	81
Total	100	100	100
No career advancement opportunities			
Constantly	9	4	6
Sometimes, once	11	7	15
Never	80	89	79
Total	100	100	100
Denied paid annual leave			
Constantly	5	2	2
Sometimes, once	7	2	3
Never	88	96	95
Total	100	100	100
Denied paid additional leave for parents			
Constantly	6	4	5
Sometimes, once	5	3	5
Never	89	93	90
Total	100	100	100

	Mothers with children aged 0-2	Mothers with children aged 3-6	Mothers with children aged 7-9
Forced unpaid overtime			
Constantly	5	3	7
Sometimes, once	10	10	17
Never	85	87	76
Total	100	100	100
Moral / psychological harassment			
Constantly	6	3	6
Sometimes, once	2	9	12
Never	92	89	82
Total	100	100	100
Prompted to resign			
Constantly	3	1	5
Sometimes, once	7	7	1
Never	90	92	94
Total	100	100	100
Denied business trips			
Constantly	3		1
Sometimes, once	1	2	1
Never	96	98	98
Total	100	100	100

Table B.9. Father's exposure to labour rights violations by employers, by child's age (per cent of men in the group)

	Fathers with children aged 0-2	Fathers with children aged 3-6
Denied early leave / childcare break		
Constantly	4	1
Sometimes, once	24	5
Never	72	94
Total	100	100
Reduced pay / lower salary than peers		
Constantly	0	1
Sometimes, once	3	4
Never	97	95
Total	100	100
Denied paid sick leave		
Constantly	6	2
Sometimes, once	4	3
Never	90	95
Total	100	100
No career advancement opportunities		
Constantly	2	3
Sometimes, once	9	3
Never	89	94
Total	100	100

	Fathers with children aged 0-2	Fathers with children aged 3-6
Denied paid annual leave		
Constantly	0	3
Sometimes, once	4	3
Never	96	94
Total	100	100
Denied paid additional leave for parents		
Constantly	6	2
Sometimes, once	2	2
Never	92	96
Total	100	100
Forced unpaid overtime		
Constantly	9	7
Sometimes, once	10	9
Never	81	84
Total	100	100
Moral / psychological harassment		
Constantly	0	0
Sometimes, once	2	7
Never	98	93
Total	100	100
Prompted to resign		
Constantly	0	1
Sometimes, once	5	1
Never	95	98
Total	100	100
Denied business trips		
Constantly	0	0
Sometimes, once	9	1
Never	91	99
Total	100	100

Table B.10. Distribution of women planning children in the next 5 years by frequency of labour rights violations and place of residence (per cent of women in group)

	Women who plan to have children in the next 5 years		
	Rural	Urban	Total
Denied early leave / childcare break			
Constantly	0	0	0
Sometimes, once	8	21	13
Never	61	42	54
Don't know	31	37	33
Total	100	100	100
Reduced pay / lower salary than peers			
Constantly	0	0	0
Sometimes, once	4	9	6
Never	72	46	62
Don't know	24	45	32
Total	100	100	100
Denied paid sick leave			
Constantly	0	0	0
Sometimes, once	11	11	11
Never	67	54	55
Don't know	22	35	34
Total	100	100	100
No career advancement opportunities			
Constantly	2	0	1
Sometimes, once	4	9	6
Never	70	54	64
Don't know	24	37	29
Total	100	100	100
Denied paid annual leave			
Constantly	1	1	1
Sometimes, once	2	6	3
Never	75	66	72
Don't know	22	27	24
Total	100	100	100
Denied paid additional leave for parents			
Constantly	2	0	1
Sometimes, once	2	8	4
Never	66	43	57
Don't know	30	49	38
Total	100	100	100
Forced unpaid overtime			
Constantly	3	0	2
Sometimes, once	7	13	10
Never	67	62	65
Don't know	23	25	23
Total	100	100	100

	Women who plan to have children in the next 5 years		
	Rural	Urban	Total
Moral / psychological harassment			
Constantly	0	0	0
Sometimes, once	6	1	4
Never	72	66	70
Don't know	22	33	26
Total	100	100	100
Prompted to resign			
Constantly	1	0	1
Sometimes, once	9	1	6
Never	69	72	70
Don't know	21	27	23
Total	100	100	100
Denied business trips			
Sometimes, once	0	4	2
Never	73	68	71
Don't know	27	28	27
Total	100	100	100

Table B.11. Mother's assessment of prevalence of discrimination in employment, by child age (per cent of mothers)

	Mothers with children aged 0–2	Mothers with children aged 3–6	Mothers with children aged 7–9
Women with young children are not hired			
Very common	17	15	16
Common	56	50	53
Rare	19	24	23
Never	8	11	8
Total	100	100	100
Women can only advance in their careers to a certain level			
Very common	6	6	4
Common	42	36	41
Rare	27	27	32
Never	25	31	23
Total	100	100	100
Refusal to hire women due to plans for motherhood			
Very common	12	11	19
Common	52	47	48
Rare	24	26	23
Never	12	16	10
Total	100	100	100

Table B.12. Perceived prevalence of gender-based employment discrimination among fathers, by child age (per cent of fathers)

	Fathers with children aged 0–2	Fathers with children aged 3–6
Women with young children are not hired		
Very common	9	12
Common	48	29
Rare	27	37
Never	16	22
Total	100	100
Women can only advance in their careers to a certain level		
Very common	13	2
Common	22	25
Rare	33	40
Never	32	33
Total	100	100
Refusal to hire women due to plans for motherhood		
Very common	9	10
Common	36	33
Rare	35	37
Never	20	20
Total	100	100

Table B.13. Frequency of employer refusals to hire among unemployed mothers, by child age and place of residence (per cent of mothers)

	Mothers with children aged 0–2			Mothers with children aged 3–6			Mothers with children aged 7–9		
	Urban	Rural	Total	Urban	Rural	Total	Urban	Rural	Total
Never	80	42	66	62	72	65	31	85	47
Several times	10	42	22	31	24	29	57	15	45
Often, but I can't remember	10	16	12	7	4	6	12	0	8
Total	100	100	100	100	100	100	100	100	100

Table B.14. Frequency of employer refusals to hire among women planning children in the next 5 years with job search experience and place of residence (per cent of women)

	Women who plan to have children in the next 5 years		
	Urban	Rural	Total
Never	70	85	75
Several times	27	11	22
Often, but I can't remember how many times	3	4	3
Total	100	100	100

Table B.15. Employer refusal reasons among women planning children in the next 5 years with job search experience and place of residence (per cent of women, multiple answers)

	Women who plan to have children in the next 5 years		
	Urban	Rural	Total
Young age and prospect of having a child	22	27	24
Insufficient work experience	51	36	53
Lack of necessary skills and abilities	35	22	29
Break in employment	11	0	8
Doubts about the flexibility of my work schedule	0	0	0
My high expectations regarding salary	13	4	11
The refusal was completely unjustified	15	21	18

Table B.16. Employer-permitted partner/husband actions for childcare among mothers, by child age and place of residence (per cent of mothers, multiple answers)

	Mothers with children aged 0-2			Mothers with children aged 3-6			Mothers with children aged 7-9		
	Urban	Rural	Total	Urban	Rural	Total	Urban	Rural	Total
Take leave at own expense	56	57	56	60	51	57	47	30	39
Take paid annual leave	18	19	18	19	24	21	12	24	17
Take paid additional leave for parents	8	13	9	6	13	8	3	17	10
Work remotely, if possible	9	10	9	9	5	8	14	15	14
Change your work schedule to a flexible one so that you can work at night or on weekends	3	7	4	4	10	6	5	7	6
Reduce your working day	6	12	8	6	14	8	17	11	14
Negotiate with employer for temporary reduction in workload	8	16	10	10	10	10	9	9	9
Take sick leave	13	21	15	15	20	16	12	22	16
Agree with colleagues on replacement	30	29	30	24	23	24	28	13	21
Quit your job	2	6	3	1	1	1	3	0	2
Organize help from others	4	3	4	5	0	3	0	2	1
Nothing	2	0	1	2	0	1	0	0	0
Difficult to answer/don't know	5	10	7	6	12	8	5	17	10

Table B.17. Employer-permitted actions allowing fathers to stay home for childcare, by child age and place of residence (per cent of fathers, multiple answers)

	Fathers with children aged 0-2			Fathers with children aged 3-6		
	Urban	Rural	Total	Urban	Rural	Total
Take leave at own expense	43	41	43	57	61	59
Take paid annual leave	17	20	18	14	18	16
Take paid additional leave for parents	13	4	11	6	8	7
Work remotely, if possible	10	4	8	2	16	7
Change your work schedule to a flexible one so that you can work at night or on weekends	4	6	5	7	10	8
Reduce my working day	7	20	11	1	10	5
Negotiate with employer for temporary reduction in workload	15	20	16	10	16	12
Take sick leave	9	2	7	10	9	9
Arrange for a replacement with colleagues	24	22	24	27	9	20
Quit your job	3	2	3	0	0	0
Organize help from others	2	4	2	1	4	2
Nothing	3	4	4	3	1	2
Other	0	0	0	1	0	1

Table B.18. Employer actions supporting work-childcare balance among working women planning children in the next 5 years, by place of residence (per cent of women, multiple answers)

	Women who plan to have children in the next 5 years		
	Urban	Rural	Total
Flexible work schedule during the day or week	48	57	51
Salary that allows me to pay for childcare by other people	17	4	12
Shorter working day or week	33	22	29
Home-based or remote work	23	7	17
Breaks for feeding a child	13	3	9
Nursery at work	5	10	7
Changing tables and other care items	1	1	1
Additional leave	24	27	25
None of the conditions	5	7	6
Difficult to say	4	6	4

Table B.19. Employed mother's assessment of most useful support for working parents, by child age and place of residence (per cent of mothers, multiple answers)

	Mothers with children aged 0-2			Mothers with children aged 3-6			Mothers with children aged 7-9		
	Urban	Rural	Total	Urban	Rural	Total	Urban	Rural	Total
Flexible work schedule during the day or week	51	57	52	71	58	67	67	69	68
Salary that allows you to pay for childcare by other people	51	29	45	37	50	42	46	50	47
Reduced working day or week	34	18	29	27	16	23	21	27	23
Home-based or remote work	26	39	29	22	12	18	32	12	25
Breaks for feeding the child	5	7	6	3	1	2	1	5	2
Children's room at work	8	0	6	10	6	9	3	2	3
Changing tables	3	0	2	0	1	0	0	0	0
Additional leave	1	14	5	12	15	13	21	20	21
Other	3	3	3	2	2	2	3	2	3

Table B.20. Distribution of mothers by intention to return to previous job, child age, and place of residence (per cent of mothers with work experience)

	Mothers with children aged 0-2			Mothers with children aged 3-6			Mothers with children aged 7-9		
	Urban	Rural	Total	Urban	Rural	Total	Urban	Rural	Total
Yes, I have returned or plan to return	82	91	85	61	79	66	56	71	62
No, I have no desire to return	14	8	12	30	14	25	38	26	33
No, my employer forced me to resign later	0	0	0	3	5	4	1	0	1
No, the employer created conditions that forced me not to return	4	1	3	6	2	5	5	3	4
Total	100	100	100	100	100	100	100	100	100

Table B.21. Distribution of urban mothers with work experience by intention to return to previous job after parental leave, by child age and the level of education, per cent of mothers in group

	Secondary education	Vocational and professional pre-higher education	Higher education	Total
Urban mothers with children aged 0-2				
Yes, I have returned or plan to return	65	70	87	82
No, I have no desire to return	35	19	10	14
No, my employer forced me to resign later	0	2	0	0
No, the employer created conditions that forced me not to return	0	9	3	4
Total	100	100	100	100
Urban mothers with children aged 3-6				
Yes, I have returned or plan to return	55	80	55	61
No, I have no desire to return	40	16	34	31
No, my employer forced me to resign later	0	0	5	3
No, the employer created conditions that forced me not to return	5	4	6	5
Total	100	100	100	100

Table B.22. Distribution of fathers with children aged 3–6 by partner's ability to return to previous job and place of residence (per cent of fathers)

	Fathers with children aged 3-6		
	Urban	Rural	Total
Yes, her job was kept for her during maternity leave	67	80	72
No, her job was officially kept, but in fact her employer refused to let her return	0	2	1
No, the job was only kept for the duration of maternity leave	0	4	1
No, she was dismissed immediately after the birth of her child	0	0	0
No, she kept her job, but she found another job	26	8	19
No, the company ceased to exist	3	0	2
Other	4	3	4
I don't know	0	3	1
Total	100	100	100

Table B.23. Working women planning children (next 5 years) by employer's attitude to maternity leave and place of residence (per cent of women)

	Women who plan to have children in the next 5 years		
	Urban	Rural	Total
Mostly retains their job for the entire period of parental leave (up to 3 years and/or up to 6 years)	69	67	68
Mostly retains their job only for the duration of maternity leave (126 calendar days)	6	4	6
Mostly retains their job, but must work remotely	0	4	2
Mostly lays off women who go on parental leave	3	4	3
It depends on the situation (the woman's position, her qualifications, etc.)	11	3	8
Difficult to answer	11	18	13
Total	100	100	100

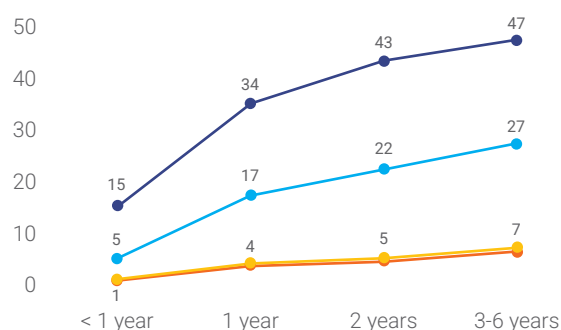
Table B.24. Working women planning children (next 5 years) by employer's attitude to current working mothers and place of residence (per cent of women)

	Women who plan to have children in the next 5 years		
	Urban	Rural	Total
Very positive – favourable conditions are created, there is support	44	43	43
Mostly positive – there is understanding and flexibility, but no additional initiatives	36	32	35
Neutral – no particular attention is paid, but there is no discrimination either.	15	13	14
Rather negative – there is prejudice or barriers for such employees	0	3	1
Very negative – women with children face discrimination or mistrust	1	2	1
Difficult to answer	4	7	6
Total	100	100	100

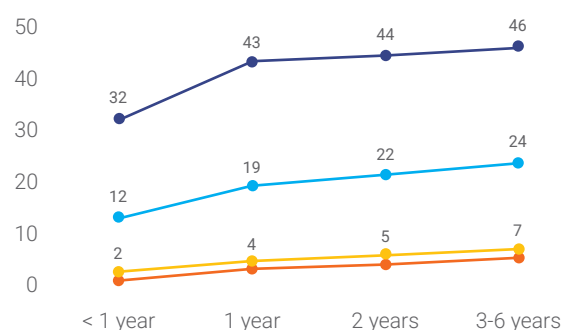
Annex C

Figure C.1. Involvement of family members in childcare duties in households with children aged 0–6

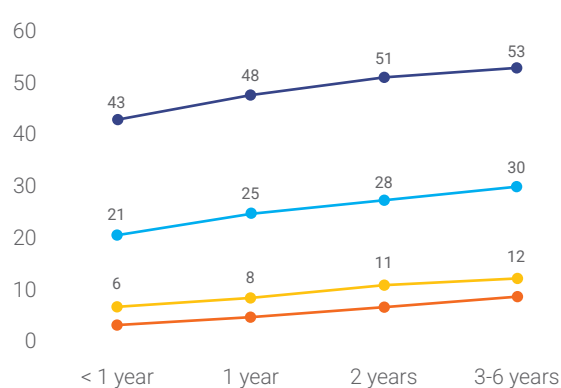
Feeding



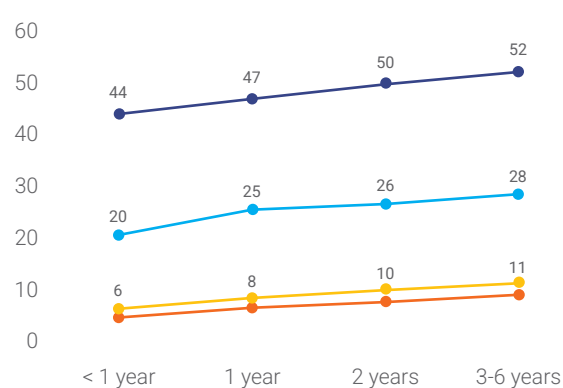
Daily care



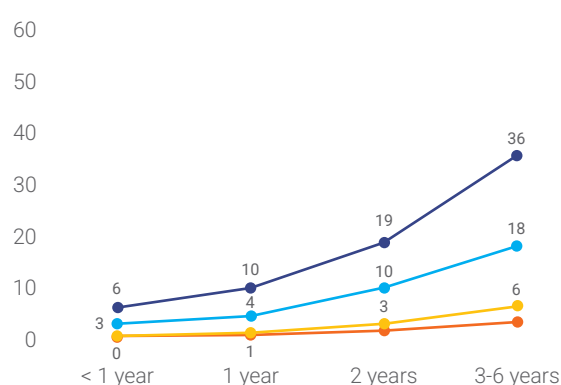
Walking outside



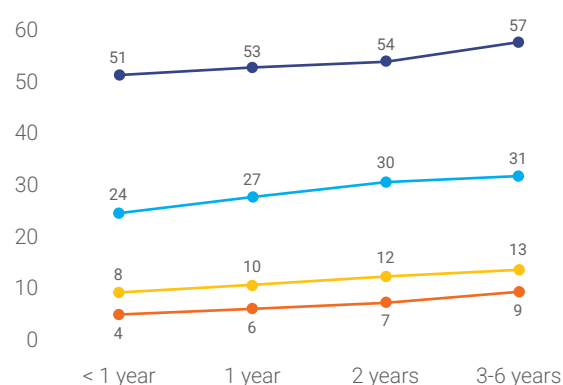
Play and development at home



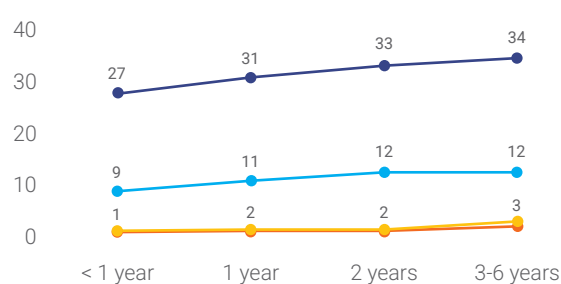
Escorting to kindergarten or activities



Weekend and holiday care



Child healthcare



■ Father
 ■ Older child
 ■ Grandmother
 ■ Grandfather

Table C.1. Mothers' responses on division of responsibilities between parents, per cent

	Mother with a child aged 0–2	Mother with a child aged 3–6	Mother with a child aged 7–9	Average
Aligns with my preferences	7	3	3	5
Aligns with partner's preferences	1	2	0	1
Mutual agreement after discussion	67	72	78	71
Socially accepted norm	8	14	7	11
Never reflected on this	17	9	12	12
Total	100	100	100	100

Table C.2. Grandparents' responses on frequency of childcare support for children aged 0–6, per cent

Period	Daily	Several times a week	Once a week	Once every two weeks	Once a month	Once a year	Did not provide support	Total
Up to 1 year old	32	32	15	2	7	1	1	100
1 year old	28	38	14	3	8	2	7	100
2 years old	29	38	11	4	10	2	6	100
3 years old	35	35	11	5	7	2	5	100
4 years old	31	37	13	6	6	2	5	100
5 years old	29	43	12	3	6	3	4	100

Table C.3. Grandparents' responses on daily time spent caring for a child aged 0–6, per cent

Period	Less than 30 minutes	30 minutes to 1 hour	1 to 3 hours	4 to 6 hours	7 to 9 hours	More than 10 hours	Total
Up to 1 year old	5	13	42	22	5	13	100
1 year old	3	11	44	24	5	13	100
2 years old	2	9	39	25	8	17	100
3 years old	3	6	34	29	8	20	100
4 years old	3	6	29	32	8	22	100
5 years old	2	7	26	30	12	23	100

Table C.4. Grandparents' views on involvement in child-rearing, per cent

	Grandfathers	Grandmothers	Total
A social norm, expected behaviour	46	43	44
Necessary support to children	28	33	31
A matter of personal choice	25	23	24
Grandparents should not be involved	1	1	1
Total	100	100	100

Table C.5. Grandparents' responses on barriers to greater involvement in childcare, per cent

Poor health	26
Continued employment	34
Live far away	9
Limited capacity for additional caregiving	10
Desire for more personal time	9
Other caregiving responsibilities (sick family members)	3
Unwillingness to take responsibility	6
No barriers	25
Other	1

Table C.6 Fathers' views on distribution of childcare responsibilities within the family, per cent

	Father with a child aged 0–2	Father with a child aged 3–6
Exclusively partner	3	5
Mostly partner	29	28
Shared equally	66	63
Mostly me	2	3
Exclusively me	0	1

Table C.7. Fathers' views on distribution of financial provision responsibilities within the family, per cent

	Father with a child aged 0–2	Father with a child aged 3–6
Exclusively partner	5	4
Mostly partner	3	10
Shared equally	20	25
Mostly me	36	34
Exclusively me	36	27

Table C.8 Mothers' views on distribution of financial provision responsibilities within the family, by age, per cent

	18–25 years old	26–35 years old	36–45 years old
Exclusively partner	1	0	0
Mostly partner	0	1	1
Shared equally	56	51	62
Mostly me	28	31	30
Exclusively me	15	17	7

Table C.9. Mothers' views on distribution of childcare responsibilities within the family, by age, per cent

	18–25 years old	26–35 years old	36–45 years old
Exclusively partner	1	0	0
Mostly partner	0	1	1
Shared equally	56	51	62
Mostly me	28	31	30
Exclusively me	15	17	7

Table C.10. Mothers' views on distribution of childcare responsibilities within the family, by education, per cent

	Secondary education	Professional education	Higher education
Mostly partner	1	0	1
Shared equally	54	58	53
Mostly me	26	26	34
Exclusively me	19	16	12

Table C.11. Mothers' views on distribution of financial provision responsibilities within the family, by education, per cent

	Secondary education	Professional education	Higher education
Exclusively partner	1	0	0
Mostly partner	0	1	1
Shared equally	56	51	62
Mostly me	28	31	30
Exclusively me	15	17	7

Table C.12. Mothers' views on distribution of childcare responsibilities within the family, by region, per cent

	Western	Southern	Northern	Eastern	Central
Exclusively partner	0	1	0	0	0
Mostly a partner	2	0	0	1	1
Shared equally	49	65	56	49	57
Mostly me	37	27	30	38	18
Exclusively me	12	7	14	12	24

Table C.13. Mothers' views on distribution of financial provision responsibilities within the family, by region, per cent

	Western	Southern	Northern	Eastern	Central
Exclusively partner	37	38	33	28	54
Mostly a partner	29	23	28	28	25
Shared equally	29	36	34	33	19
Mostly me	3	1	3	11	1
Exclusively me	2	2	2	0	1

Table C.14. Mothers' views on reasons for perceived appropriateness of role distribution in the family, by region, per cent

	Western	Southern	Northern	Eastern	Central
Aligns with my preferences	4	5	3	11	1
Aligns with partner's preferences	1	0	4	1	1
Mutual agreement after discussion	75	76	70	67	64
Socially accepted norm	10	8	14	4	16
Never reflected on this	10	11	9	17	18

Table C.15. Mothers' views on reasons for perceived appropriateness of role distribution in the family, by education level, per cent

	Secondary education	Professional education	Higher education
Aligns with my preferences	6	2	6
Aligns with partner's preferences	0	2	2
Mutual agreement after discussion	63	73	70
Socially accepted norm	24	10	8
Never reflected on this	7	13	14

Table C.16. Mothers' views on reasons for perceived appropriateness of role distribution in the family, by age, per cent

	18-25 years old	26-35 years old	36-45 years old
Aligns with my preferences	5	3	8
Aligns with partner's preferences	1	2	1
Mutual agreement after discussion	73	72	66
Socially accepted norm	13	10	11
Never reflected on this	8	13	14

Table C.17. Mothers' views on reasons for perceived appropriateness of role distribution in the family, by income, per cent

	Up to UAH 15,000 (USD 360)	UAH 15,000 (USD 360) – UAH 30,000 (USD 720)	More than UAH 30,000 (USD 720)
Aligns with my preferences	3	7	4
Aligns with partner's preferences	2	3	1
Mutual agreement after discussion	71	66	77
Socially accepted norm	13	11	7
Never reflected on this	11	13	11

Table C.18. Fathers' acceptance of traditional gender roles within the family, per cent

Gender roles in the family		Absolutely uncomfortable	Rather uncomfortable	Difficult to say	Rather comfortable	Absolutely comfortable
Financial provision	Men	3	6	6	37	48
	Equal distribution	1	2	7	40	50
	Women	3	5	37	31	24
Care provision	Men	0	23	23	39	15
	Equal distribution	1	1	4	40	54
	Women	3	9	11	35	42

Annex D

Table D.1. Types of ECEC services used by mothers, by child's age and settlement type, per cent

	0-2 years old		3-6 years old		7-9 years old	
	Urban	Rural	Urban	Rural	Urban	Rural
State/municipal stationary kindergartens	17	17	66	71	85	86
Private stationary kindergartens	2	1	10	3	4	2
Development centres	1	2	22	7	32	6
Individual babysitting services	0	1	8	1	3	1
Municipal Nanny services	0	1	2	0	0	0
Temporary Care Programmes	0	0	1	0	1	1
Extended stay groups	0	0	1	1	2	6
Kindergarten at an enterprise or university	0	0	0	0	0	0
Mobile kindergarten	1	0	0	0	0	0
Family kindergarten, mini kindergarten	0	0	0	0	0	0
Other	0	0	0	0	0	0
None	79	81	18	27	11	12

Table D.2 Types of ECEC services used by respondents, per cent

	State/municipal stationary kindergartens	Private stationary kindergartens	Development centres	Individual babysitting services	"Municipal Nanny" services	Temporary Care Programmes	Extended stay groups	Kindergarten at an enterprise or university	Mobile Kindergarten	Family kindergarten, mini kindergarten	Other	None
Mothers												
Employed women with children aged 0-6 years No	25	2	8	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	68
Employed women with children aged 0-6 years Yes	80	8	12	5	1	1	1	0	0	0	0	14
Macroregions: Western	63	1	6	1	1	0	2	0	0	0	0	36
Macroregions: Southern	55	4	11	1	0	2	0	0	1	0	0	38
Macroregions: Northern	56	4	10	2	1	1	1	0	0	0	0	39
Macroregions: Eastern	39	7	30	5	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	44
Macroregions: Central	53	4	10	2	1	0	1	0	0	0	0	43
Type of area: city	54	5	17	3	1	1	1	0	0	0	0	38
Type of area: village	55	2	5	1	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	43
A woman with a child aged 0-2	17	2	2	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	80
A woman with a child aged 3-6	69	6	16	4	1	1	1	0	0	0	0	22
Number of children in the household: 1 child	51	4	14	3	0	1	1	0	0	0	0	42
Number of children in the household: 2 children	64	3	9	1	2	0	2	0	0	0	0	33
Number of children in the household: 3 children	54	4	5	2	2	0	0	0	0	0	0	43
Family income level: up to UAH 15 000	46	2	6	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	50

	State/municipal stationary kindergartens	Private stationary kindergartens	Development centres	Individual babysitting services	"Municipal Nanny" services	Temporary Care Programmes	Extended stay groups	Kindergarten at an enterprise or university	Mobile Kindergarten	Family kindergarten, mini kindergarten	Other	None
Family income level: from UAH 15 000 to UAH 30 000	60	3	16	2	1	1	1	0	0	0	0	36
Family income level: from UAH 15 000 to UAH 30 000	60	4	16	2	2	0	2	0	0	0	0	35
Family Income Level: Refused to answer	48	6	11	5	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	41
Respondent's education level: upper secondary or lower	50	1	6	0	0	1	1	0	0	0	0	48
Respondent's education level: vocational and professional pre-tertiary	47	2	10	1	0	0	2	0	0	0	0	44
Respondent's education level: tertiary (higher) education	59	6	16	4	1	0	1	0	0	0	0	35
Economically inactive women with children aged 0-6 years	23	2	8	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	69
Fathers												
Employed civilian men No	49	3	7	2	0	0	3	0	1	0	0	47
Employed civilian men Yes	51	6	8	2	0	0	0	2	0	0	0	42
Macroregions: Western	51	6	4	2	0		0	0	0	0	0	41
Macroregions: Southern	53	6	9	2		0	0	2	2	0		38
Macroregions: Northern	58	2	7	3	0	0	2	6	0	0	0	33
Macroregions: Eastern	55	15	17	3	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	43
Macroregions: Central	34	2	4	0		0	0	0		0	0	63
Type of area: city	50	7	10	2	0	0	0	3	0	0	0	42
Type of area: village	52	3	5	3		0	2	0	0		0	45
A man with a child aged 0-2	20	3	2	3	0	0	0	2	0	0	0	72
A man with a child aged 3-6	70	8	12	2	0	0	1	2	0	0	0	24
Number of children in the household: 1 child	48	6	8	1	0	0	1	2	0	0	0	46
Number of children in the household: 2 children	58	3	8	3	0	0	1	2	0	0	0	37
Number of children in the household: 3 children	60	2	9	14	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	23
Family income level: up to UAH 15 000	46	0	0	3	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	50
Family income level: from UAH 15 000 to UAH 30 000	55	2	4	0	0	0	0	3	0	0	0	39
Family income level: from UAH 15 000 to UAH 30 000	57	13	21	3	0	0	2	0	0	0	0	37
Family Income Level: Refused to answer	38	4	2	3	0	0	0	2	0	0	0	54
Respondent's education level: upper secondary or lower	54	3	2	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	42
Respondent's education level: vocational and professional pre-tertiary	48	2	4	2	0	0	1	3	0	0	0	45
Respondent's education level: tertiary (higher) education	51	9	12	2	0	0	1	1	0	0	0	42
Employed military men of the AFU	43	2	7	3	0	0	4	0	0	0	0	55

Table D.3. From what age did you use it or do you think it is appropriate to use it? (among users of state and private kindergartens), per cent

	Mothers with children aged 0-2	Mothers with children aged 3-6	Fathers with children aged 0-2	Fathers with children aged 3-6
State/municipal stationary kindergartens				
Under 1	0	0	0	0
1 year old	3	2	1	2
2 years old	30	26	32	21
3 years old	56	54	52	58
Private stationary kindergartens				
Under 1	4	0	0	0
1 year old	13	16	7	5
2 years old	29	40	58	41
3 years old	49	30	29	28

Table D.4. Combined share of mothers “satisfied” and “rather satisfied” by individual characteristics of childcare services, per cent

	Mothers with children aged 0-2		Mothers with children aged 3-6	
	Urban	Rural	Urban	Rural
Professionalism of service providers	84	91	90	89
Territorial accessibility	87	89	91	90
Safety and comfort	88	88	88	86
Ensuring child well-being	93	84	89	90
Consideration of individual needs	90	85	84	91
Quality of nutrition	74	79	76	85
Use of equality and non-stereotypical approaches	85	72	85	84
Affordability of service cost	88	82	85	90
Convenience of working schedule	90	62	89	89
Availability of feedback	89	84	93	89
Availability of shelter	79	83	65	80
Quality of educational programmes	83	75	85	84
Consideration of needs of children with disabilities and SEN	47	39	34	56

Table D.5. Most important criteria for choosing childcare services as viewed by women, by child's age and settlement type, per cent

	Mothers with children aged 0-2		Mothers with children aged 3-6		Mothers with children aged 7-9	
	Urban	Rural	Urban	Rural	Urban	Rural
Professionalism of service providers	40	31	43	31	35	34
Quality of educational programmes for development	16	4	5	7	4	7
Quality of nutrition	3	3	2	3	1	3
Use of equality-based approaches	1	1	0	1	1	0
Consideration of individual needs	0	1	1	1	0	2
Safety and comfort	16	16	13	11	16	10
Territorial accessibility	17	24	25	25	36	29
Convenience of working schedule	2	6	0	2	0	2
Affordability of service cost	0	0	0	0	0	0
Availability of feedback	0	0	0	0	0	0
It happened spontaneously	1	2	1	1	0	0
Had no particular choice, used what was available	2	10	8	16	5	12
Other	0	0	0	0	0	0
Difficult to answer	2	2	2	2	2	1

Table D.6. Second most important criteria for choosing childcare services as viewed by women, by child's age and settlement type, per cent

	Mothers with children aged 0-2		Mothers with children aged 3-6		Mothers with children aged 7-9	
	Urban	Rural	Urban	Rural	Urban	Rural
Professionalism of service providers	22	117	117	13	20	12
Quality of educational programmes for development	13	13	223	11	6	15
Quality of nutrition	25	15	17	16	26	21
Use of equality-based approaches	1	4	1	2	2	3
Consideration of individual needs	1	3	2	2	2	1
Safety and comfort	14	12	9	220	7	3
Territorial accessibility	8	11	10	15	20	17
Convenience of working schedule	9	6	6	5	1	13
Affordability of service cost	4	4	3	4	6	3
Availability of feedback	0	0	1	0	1	0
It happened spontaneously	0	1	2	3	3	1
Had no particular choice, used what was available	0	3	4	3	2	6
Other	0	1	1	0	0	0
Difficult to answer	3	10	4	6	4	5

Table D.7. Assessment of accessibility of preschool institutions, per cent

	Mothers with children aged 0-2		Mothers with children aged 3-6	
	Urban	Rural	Urban	Rural
How would you assess the accessibility of kindergartens for children under age 3 in your community?				
Very accessible – easy to find a place, convenient to reach	338	335	37	334
Rather accessible – some difficulties, but generally satisfactory	26	226	26	27
Rather inaccessible – often no free places	12	8	10	14
Completely inaccessible – impossible to find a place, too expensive or not available	11	19	217	219
Difficult to answer	13	12	10	8
How would you assess the accessibility of kindergartens for children aged 3 and older in your community?				
Very accessible – easy to find a place, convenient to reach	50	51	47	50
Rather accessible – some difficulties, but generally satisfactory	26	27	27	30
Rather inaccessible – often no free places	7	4	8	8
Completely inaccessible – impossible to find a place, too expensive or not available	7	6	13	7
Difficult to answer	10	12	5	5

Table D.8. Intentions for ECEC service use for mothers, per cent

	A woman with a child aged 0-2	A woman with a child aged 3-6	Unemployed women with children aged 0-6	Employed women with children aged 0-6	City	Rural	Grandparents, other relatives living together No	Grandparents, other relatives living together Yes
Work schedule, possible time of the child's stay								
less than an hour	0	0	1	0	0	1	1	0
2-3 hours	6	7	9	3	5	5	4	11
4-5 hours	23	12	19	13	18	15	18	10
6-8 hours	55	64	55	68	62	63	61	65
9+ hours	13	13	12	14	11	14	13	11
Frequency of visit								
1 day per week	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
2 days per week	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1
3 days per week	4	6	7	1	5	4	3	10
4 days per week	4	4	3	6	4	2	4	2
5 days per week	87	83	84	86	86	87	87	83
Distance from home								
walking distance up to 15 minutes	71	74	71	74	74	73	73	76
walking distance up to 30 minutes	22	19	23	18	20	21	21	17
a commute of up to 15 minutes	3	3	2	3	3	2	2	5
a commute of up to 30 minutes	1	1	1	1	1	2	1	0

	A woman with a child aged 0-2	A woman with a child aged 3-6	Unemployed women with children aged 0-6	Employed women with children aged 0-6	City	Rural	Grandparents, other relatives living together No	Grandparents, other relatives living together Yes
The most affordable cost of services per month								
free	28	28	29	23	26	32	27	34
up to UAH 1 000	45	58	47	61	50	56	55	42
up to UAH 5 000	16	11	14	13	15	8	12	12
up to UAH 10 000	7	2	6	1	4	2	4	0
Shelter availability of a separate shelter on the premises	87	90	88	89	87	88	87	86
A safe space for the child to stay and play								
Attentive educators	75	82	77	81	78	79	78	81
Learning the rules of safe behaviour and interaction for children	22	16	21	18	21	19	21	19

Table D.9. What type of ECEC would respondents choose for children of different ages, per cent

	From 3 months to 1 year				From 1 to 3 years				From 3 to 6 years			
	Mothers with children aged 0-2		Mothers with children aged 3-6		Mothers with children aged 0-2		Mothers with children aged 3-6		Mothers with children aged 0-2		Mothers with children aged 3-6	
	Urban	Rural	Urban	Rural	Urban	Rural	Urban	Rural	Urban	Rural	Urban	Rural
Relative care	39	24	38	27	34	25	29	24	7	13	16	11
Full/part-time nanny	7	4	4	5	6	4	12	4	1	1	7	0
Private nursery, kindergarten	2	2	4	2	10	4	5	5	7	8	4	4
Public nursery, kindergarten	8	6	5	6	19	20	15	14	71	67	64	65
Short-term stay/day care groups	0	1	1	0	1	1	1	1	0	0	0	0
Extended stay groups	0	1	0	0	0	2	0	0	0	2	0	0
Combined form	0	1	2	0	2	1	1	0	1	1	1	2
Kindergarten at the enterprise or at the university	0	1	0	1	1	2	0	2	2	2	1	5
Family kindergarten in an individual residential building	1	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	0
Mobile kindergarten	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Only at home with parents	35	57	42	53	21	39	32	46	5	4	5	10
Difficult to answer	8	3	4	6	6	2	4	4	6	2	2	3

Table D.10. Attitudes and misgivings regarding the use of specialist home care services

	City	Village	Child aged 0-2	Child aged 3-6	City	Village	Child aged 0-2	Child aged 3-6
	Mothers				Fathers			
	What is your opinion on bringing specialists home to provide ECEC services?							
Completely negative	9	11	8	12	6	9	7	7
Negative	15	18	19	15	20	22	24	19
Neutral	39	38	42	36	49	44	45	48
Positive	27	27	27	27	21	20	20	21
Completely positive	9	5	5	10	4	4	4	4
Main concerns related to the use of nannies								
I don't trust leaving a child with a stranger	88	89	86	90	74	77	64	84
Babysitting services are too expensive for our family	23	25	19	27	18	36	27	25
It is inconvenient to receive a babysitter at home due to housing conditions	5	4	5	5	8	6	9	6
I believe that the child should be with the parents, not with a hired person	26	14	17	21	33	27	24	35
Negative experiences of acquaintances or own in cooperation with babysitters	6	0	3	4	9	0	12	0
I don't know where and how to look for a proven, qualified nanny	4	1	2	3	0	2	0	1
Lack of communication between the child and other children	6	4	4	3	10	3	10	5

Table D.11. Attitudes toward involving grandparents in childcare, by child's age and settlement type, per cent

	Mothers with children aged 0-2		Mothers with children aged 3-6	
	Urban	Rural	Urban	Rural
Would you agree to involve a grandmother/grandfather in regular childcare for a child under age 3?				
Yes, and the grandmother/grandfather also does not object	51	53	50	49
Yes, but the grandmother/grandfather cannot because they work	19	12	16	8
Yes, but the grandmother/grandfather does not want to help	1	1	3	2
No, I do not trust their skills and upbringing methods	6	9	6	8
No, their health condition does not allow childcare	8	14	12	15
The child did not have grandparents during that period	15	11	13	18
Would you agree to involve a grandmother/grandfather in regular childcare for a child aged 3-6 years?				
Yes, and the grandmother/grandfather also does not object	61	66	62	63
Yes, but the grandmother/grandfather cannot because they work	18	12	18	10
Yes, but the grandmother/grandfather does not want to help	1	1	4	2
No, I do not trust their skills and upbringing methods	6	8	5	4
No, their health condition does not allow childcare	13	15	11	21
The child did not have grandparents during that period	1	2	0	0

Table D.12. Number of preschool education institutions and places in them, 2015–2024

	2015		2021		2024	
	Urban	Rural	Urban	Rural	Urban	Rural
Number of institutions (thousand units)	6	9	6	9	5	8
Places for children under age 3 (thousand)	143	38	145	34	122	30
Children under age 3 enrolled (thousand persons)	162	31	130	27	86	24
Places for children aged 3 and older (thousand)	629	295	655	304	560	274
Children aged 3 and older enrolled (thousand persons)	819	279	716	238	536	200

Source: compiled based on data from the State Statistics Service of Ukraine

Table D.13. Dynamics of inclusiveness indicators in preschool institutions of Ukraine

	2018	2021	2024
Number of children with special educational needs (thousand)	61	61	60
of which:			
children with disabilities	9	9	8
in inclusive groups	2	10	13
Total number of children in inclusive groups (thousand)	28	88	138
Number of places in inclusive groups (thousand)	24	92	129

Source: compiled based on data from the State Statistics Service of Ukraine

Footnotes

- ¹ UNICEF uses the term early childhood education and care (ECEC) to describe services from birth until entry into primary education, with care generally covering ages 0 to 2 and education covering ages 3 to 6. This aligns with the terminology of the Ministry of Education and Science of Ukraine, which defines early childhood as ages 0 to 2 and preschool education as ages 3 to 6 or 7. In this policy brief, the terms ECEC, childcare, preschool and related terms are used interchangeably to describe services provided before entry into primary school.
- ² The care economy comprises care work, both paid and unpaid, and direct and indirect care, its provision within and outside the household, as well as the people who provide and receive care, and the employers and institutions that offer care... The care economy comprises policies and regulatory frameworks, services, infrastructure, institutions, financing mechanisms and social norms that influence and govern the provision and receipt of care and support throughout the life-course. Source: International Labour Organization, *Resolution concerning decent work and the care economy. International Labour Conference, 112th Session, Geneva, 14 June 2024.* https://www.ilo.org/sites/default/files/2024-07/ILC112-Resolution%20V-%7BRELMEEETINGS-240620-001%7D-Web-EN_0.pdf
- ³ UNICEF, *Nationwide Sample Survey of the Socioeconomic Status of Households in Ukraine* (2024). <https://www.unicef.org/ukraine/en/documents/socio-economic-status-of-households>
- ⁴ United Nations Population Fund, Population Data Portal (2026). https://pdp.unfpa.org/?country=804&data_id=data-Source_8-6%3A231%2CdataSource_8-1%3A2%2B10%2B11&page=Explore-Indicators
- ⁵ The Institute for Demography and Quality of Life Studies of the National Academy of Sciences of Ukraine. <https://www.demography.org.ua/>
- ⁶ The State Statistics Service of Ukraine. <https://stat.gov.ua/en>
- ⁷ ILO, *The impact of care responsibilities on women's labour force participation. Statistical Brief. October 2024* https://www.ilo.org/sites/default/files/2024-10/GEDI-STAT%20brief_formatted_28.10.24_final.pdf
- ⁸ OHCHR. International standards on the right to work. <https://www.ohchr.org/en/right-work/international-standards-right-work>
- ⁹ United Nation, *Convention on the Rights of the Child, General Assembly resolution 44/25, 20 November 1989.* <https://www.ohchr.org/en/instruments-mechanisms/instruments/convention-rights-child>
- ¹⁰ Motherhood penalty refers to the negative impact of having children on women's pay, career progression and job security compared to men and women without children.
- ¹¹ United Nations, *Convention on the Rights of the Child, General Assembly resolution 44/25, 20 November 1989.* <https://www.ohchr.org/en/instruments-mechanisms/instruments/convention-rights-child>
- ¹² United Nations, *Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women. United Nations, Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights* (1979). <https://www.ohchr.org/sites/default/files/cedaw.pdf>
- ¹³ Maternity leave is for mothers for pregnancy and childbirth, paternity leave is for father or male carers around childbirth, and parental leave can be taken by either parent or carer after maternity, paternity, or adoption leave.
- ¹⁴ Ukraine has ratified the earlier Maternity Protection Convention No. 103 (1952), which the ILO Standards Review Mechanism Tripartite Working Group identified as outdated at its eighth meeting. In line with this assessment and with the ILO Governing Body's proposal to abrogate or withdraw Convention No. 103, Ukraine may consider ratifying Convention No. 183, which represents the current international standard on maternity protection.
- ¹⁵ UNESCO, *Tashkent Declaration and Commitments to Action for Transforming Early Childhood Care and Education*, 16 November 2022 <https://www.unesco.org/sites/default/files/medias/fichiers/2022/11/tashkent-declaration-ecce-2022.pdf>
- ¹⁶ UNICEF. *Family-Friendly Policies: Redesigning the Workplace of the Future. A Policy Brief* (2019) <https://www.unicef.org/documents/family-friendly-policies-redesigning-workplace-future>
- ¹⁷ UNICEF. *Family-Friendly Policies: Redesigning the Workplace of the Future. A Policy Brief* (2019). <https://www.unicef.org/documents/family-friendly-policies-redesigning-workplace-future>
- ¹⁸ UNICEF, *Foundations for the Future: Strengthening Early Childhood Education and Care Systems for Ages 0-3 in Europe and Central Asia*, (2024), p. 22 <https://www.unicef.org/eca/media/36911/file/Strengthening%20Early%20Childhood%20Education%20and%20Care%20Systems%20for%20Ages%200-3%20in%20Europe%20and%20Central%20Asia.pdf>
- ¹⁹ IOM Lithuania Migration Information Centre, Benefits for Parents. <https://micenter.lt/en/benefits-for-parents>
- ²⁰ ILO, *Closing the gender gap in paid parental leaves: Better parental leaves for more caring societies. Care Economy Brief* (2025). <https://www.ilo.org/sites/default/files/2025-06/ILO%20Care%20Economy%20Brief%20-%20Closing%20the%20gender%20gap%20in%20paid%20parental%20leaves.pdf>; OECD. "Paid parental leave – Big differences for mothers and fathers. OECD Policy Brief" (2023). <https://www.oecd.org/en/blogs/2023/01/Paid-parental-leave--Big-differences-for-mothers-and-fathers.html>; International Network on Leave Policies & Related Research, *Spotlight on public policy: Parental leave* (2021). https://www.wepls.org/sites/default/files/2021-03/Spotlight_on_Public_Policy_Parental%20Leave.pdf; European Parliament, *The need for fully paid, non-transferable parental leave: Leaving inequality behind and giving our children the care they need, Background Paper* (2018). <https://www.europarl.europa.eu/cmsdata/139328/MenCare-Parental-Leave-Platform-Background-Paper-EU-Parliament-21.02.18.pdf>
- ²¹ Swedish Social Insurance Agency, Parental benefits. <https://www.forsakringskassan.se/english/parents/when-the-child-is-born/parental-benefit>; "What Is the Evidence on the Swedish "Paternity Leave" Policy?: Policy Brief". *FREE Network*, 5 February 2024. <https://freepolicybriefs.org/2024/02/05/fathers-parental-leave-policy/>

- ²² Spain, Ministry of the Presidency, Justice and Relations with the Courts, Royal Decree-Law 6/2019, of March 1, on urgent measures to guarantee equal treatment and opportunities between women and men in employment and occupation (*Official State Bulletin*, No. 57, 7 March 2019). <https://www.boe.es/eli/es/rdl/2019/03/01/6>
- ²³ ILO, *Maternity Protection Convention No. 183*, Geneva, 2000. https://www.ilo.org/dyn/normlex/en/f?p=NORMLEXPUB:12100:0::NO::P12100_INSTRUMENT_ID:312328
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