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Project code: 101191047 — CAREdiZO — CERV-2024-GE

2025

CarediZO

Needs and challenges, status of gender mainstreaming in Micro-enterprises and Micro-CSOs

Insights from Greece, Cyprus, Bulgaria, and Lithuania

Needs and challenges, status of gender mainstreaming in Micro-enterprises and Micro-CSOs report authors & reviewers

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Contents

About the Project 4
    Project Partners 5
List of Abbreviations 10
Introduction - research overview 11
Research methodology 18
Greece 20
Bulgaria 31
Cyprus 39
Lithuania 47
Collection of good practices 56
Conclusions 57
References 59
Annexes 63

About the Project

Проектът CAREdiZO – CARE Driven Innovation for Gender mainstreaming in Home, Micro-Enterprises & Micro-CSOs (CAREdiZO – Иновации, насочени към грижата за равенството между половете в дома, микропредприятията и микроорганизациите на гражданското общество) има за цел да преодолее неравенството между половете в по отношение на грижата за тях, като насърчава подхода, трансформиращ ролите свързани с половете в дома, микропредприятията и микроорганизациите на гражданското общество, като прилага иновативни дигитални инструменти.

Чрез изследвания, обучение чрез игри и застъпничество проектът насърчава културен подход, който трансформира погледа върху половете, цени грижите, бори се със стереотипите, свързани с пола, и насърчава мъжете и жените да споделят по-равномерно неплатените грижи.
Този проект ще насърчи микропредприятията и микроорганизациите на гражданското общество, които съставляват 93,5 % от всички предприятия в ЕС, да прилагат политики, благоприятни за семейството и за баланса между личния и професионалния живот. Като част от своите дейности CAREdiZO ще разработи игра, е-обучение под формата на игра, поредица от подкасти, дигитална платформа, в която ще участват 120 души от цяла Европа, и система за сертифициране, която ще признава организациите, които насърчават равенството между половете на работното място.
CAREdiZO има за цел да ангажира обществеността, като повишава осведомеността за стойността на неплатената грижа и насърчава положителни ролеви модели, които предизвикват традиционните норми за пола, свързани с грижата.

Проектът се реализира от консорциум от пет организации от Гърция, България, Кипър и Литва, координиран от CHALLEDU и подкрепен от WHEN Equity Empowerment Change, Информационен център по въпросите на жените, Средиземноморски институт по изследвания на пола и Национална мрежа за бизнес развитие – всяка от които допринася с уникален опит в областта на равенството между половете, овластяването на жените и ангажираността на общността.

Project Partners:

CHALLEDU

INCLUSION I GAMES I EDUCATION

Challedu (Координатор) - Атина, Гърция, challedu.com
https://challedu.com/en/

Мисията на CHALLEDU е да даде възможност на общностите и учащите се, като създава влиятелни иновативни образователни решения, които повишават осведомеността, вдъхновяват действия за положителна промяна и създават устойчив, приобщаващ и справедлив свят за всички. Ние си представяме един по-устойчив, приобщаващ, равен и справедлив свят, в който всеки има възможност да учи, да се развива и да допринася активно за по-добро бъдеще в общността и по света.

Нашите основни ценности са:

Креативност-Иновация-Устойчивост: Ние насърчаваме творчеството, най-модерните технологии , включително обучението чрез игри, в съответствие с 17-те цели за устойчиво развитие (SDG), за да трансформираме образованието и да създадем дългосрочни, положителни и ефективни решения, които насърчават опазването на околната среда, социалната справедливост и правата на човека.

Сътрудничество-включване: Ние сме ангажирани с насърчаването на равенството,

приобщава

WHEN

EQUITY • EMPOWERMENT • CHANGE

WHEN (former WoT)- Athens, Greece
https://when.org.gr

WHEN is an organization that aims to empower women professionally and promote gender equality in the workplace. It focuses on individual empowerment, through mentoring, training, community building, career and legal counselling, as well as on bringing about positive change in the social, work and economic environment in which we all grow, learn and work. To this end, it provides consulting and training to companies and organizations, conducts research to better understand the needs of women and the gaps in gender equality in Greece, formulates policy proposals and creates campaigns to raise awareness about the obstacles that women still face today in their equal participation in public life. In 2024, the organization created the WHEN Hub, the first hub for women's empowerment and gender equality in Greece, which, among other things, provides creative play services for children 0-12, while their parents use the space to get trained, work, network and build their financial independence.

WOMEN'S ISSUES
INFORMATION
CENTRE

Women's Issues Information Centre (WIIC) - Vilnius, Lithuania

https://lygus.lt/

Women's Issues Information Center (WIIC) is a leading women's non-governmental organization in Lithuania, committed to promoting gender equality and providing support to individuals affected by gender-based violence. WIIC mission encompasses informing and educating society on gender equality issues, reducing gender-based violence, shaping gender policies, and implementing them in Lithuania.

WIIC offers various programs and services, including:

- Training Programs: We conduct training sessions on gender equality topics for companies, professionals, policymakers, youth and organizations, tailoring over 30 different programs to meet specific needs.

- Specialized Complex Assistance Center: Providing free, confidential, and specialized comprehensive assistance to individuals who have experienced domestic violence.

- Women's Helpline: Offering free, confidential, and anonymous emotional support via telephone and online platforms 24/7.

Through these initiatives, WIIC strives to create a society where gender equality is the norm, and all individuals can live free from violence and discrimination.

National Business Development Network (NBDN) - Sofia, Bulgaria
https://nbdn-bg.org/

The National Business Development Network (NBDN) is an association of 42 business centres and business incubators established under the JOBS project, with the support of the Ministry of Labour and Social Policy of Bulgaria and the local municipalities.

NBDN's mission is to create a new entrepreneurial culture, to improve the standard of living through various forms of support for the development of small and medium businesses and ensuring greater employment opportunities in the rural and lagging behind areas of Bulgaria.

NBDN supports its members in the design and management of international projects in the areas of employment encouragement, increasing the competitiveness of the Small and medium-sized enterprises in the country, professional training and re-qualification in the fields of tourism, agriculture, protection of the environment, etc
.
NMBD offers high quality services that empower entrepreneurship and local economies, improve citizens' quality of life and preserves and promotes the local, regional and national cultural and natural heritage. The NBDN also has its Vocational Training Center (VTC), which was established in 2003 as a training entity to provide vocational training and is licensed by the National Agency for Vocational Education and Training. The center provides training in 28 vocational sectors in 95 specialties and 179 professions including entrepreneurship, management, marketing, agriculture, tourism, ICT, soft skills, etc.

MEDITERRANEAN
INSTITUTE OF
GENDER STUDIES

Mediterranean Institute of Gender Studies (MIGS) - Nicosia, Cyprus
https://medinstgenderstudies.org/

The Mediterranean Institute of Gender Studies (MIGS) is a non-profit organization affiliated to the University of Nicosia that promotes and contributes to projects of social, political, and economic themes relating to gender with an emphasis on the Mediterranean region. The Institute recognizes the multi-layered levels of discrimination against women and accepts that this discrimination takes different forms. It is committed to the elimination of this discrimination using a combination of research and analysis from a feminist and gender equality perspective, advocacy and lobbying, as well as trainings, conferences, and other activities.

In the framework of promoting women's rights in Cyprus over two decades, MIGS has consistently implemented projects aimed at a) strengthening women's participation in political and public decision-making, b) bolstering and mobilising civil society to promote gender equality priorities, and c) promoting civic participation among diverse groups of women, such as women of migrant background. MIGS also carries out research studies and analyses commissioned by European and international bodies including the UNHCR, the Council of Europe, the European Parliament, and the European Institute for Gender Equality (EIGE), among others. MIGS, as the only independent feminist NGO in Cyprus, remains at the forefront of women's rights activism in Cyprus, with a critical and strategic role in keeping gender equality issues on the political agenda, and is also an active member of numerous civil society networks and advisory bodies at the national and European level.

List of abbreviations

BG	Bulgaria
CSO	Civil society organisation
CY	Cyprus
EIGE	European Institute for Gender Equality
EL	Greece
LT	Lithuania
MIGS	Mediterranean Institute of Gender Studies
NBDN	National Business Development Network
NGO	Non Governmental organisation
WIIC	Women's Issues Information Centre
WHEN	previously Women On Top

Introduction - research overview

According to European Institute for Gender Equality (EIGE) 2024), and based on the Gender Equality Index and sources by Eurostat, on the domain of work, women face inequalities; on the sub-categories of participation, including full-time employment and duration of working life, existing data reveal that men tend to work full-time more than women, women tend to be employed in education, human health and social work activities more than men, men were able to get one or two hours off during working hours to take care of personal or family that more than women, and concerning career advancement prospects and development[1] of the workplace in terms of the number of employees, men and women were almost in equal terms.
Overall, EIGE scores the European Union for Gender Equality in the domain of work as 74.2, according to the 2024 edition. While it seems high compared to other domains (such as violence, scoring 31.9), it still is a domain that needs consistent work and effort to ensure that equality will be achieved in the near future.

According to Gender Equality Strategy 2020-2025 EU countries on average scored 67.4 out of 100 in the EU Gender Equality Index in 2019, a score which has improved by just 5.4 points since 2005. The statistics show that while the gender gap in education is being closed, gender care gap and employment gap persist. According to Special Eurobarometer 465, gender stereotypes are a root cause of gender inequality and affect all areas of society. 44% of EU citizens think that the most important role of a woman is to take care of her family while 43% of them believe that the role of man is to earn money. These stereotypes are strong in partners' countries.

This leads to the relevance of the CAREdiZO project (CARE Driven Innovation for Gender mainstreaming in Home, Micro-Enterprises & Micro-CSOs), which aims to tackle the gender care gap by promoting a gender-transformative approach in Home, Micro-enterprises, Micro-civil social organizations and utilizing innovative digital tools. One of the project's main objectives is the promotion of family friendly[2] and gender mainstreaming practices[3] in micro-enterprises and micro-CSOs, by challenging gender stereotypes to encourage equal sharing care (of children, housework, elders, people with disabilities etc.) between men and women.

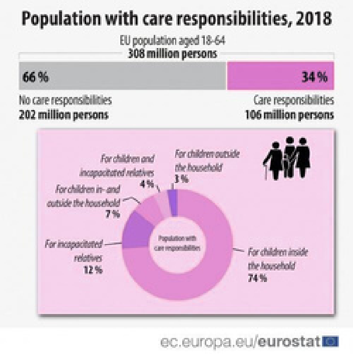
[1] Career Prospects Index (capturing the "continuity of employment, defined in relation to type of employment contract, job security (the possibility of losing a job in the next six months" (EIGE)

[2] Family-friendly practices examples include childcare programs, flextime, and more accommodations that are described as "human resource management (HRM) practices intended to enable employees to manage their responsibilities in both their work and family lives." (Ko, 2024, pg. 378).

[3] Gender mainstreaming practices refer to "the integration of a gender perspective into the preparation, design, implementation, monitoring and evaluation of policies, regulatory measures and spending programmes, with a view to promoting equality between women and men and combating discrimination." (European Institute for Gender Equality, 2025)

According to Eurostat (2019), one-third of European adults aged 18–64 have care responsibilities, making supportive workplace policies critical.
In the report Eurocarers – dimension of informal care" (2021) at least 44 million people provide informal care on a regular basis. On average in the EU, 59 % of all informal carers (age 18+) are women. Most informal carers are middle-aged. 48 % of informal carers are aged 45-64, 33 % are 44- , and 22 % are 65+. The unequal distribution of caring responsibilities between women and men over the lifecycle has a clear negative impact on women's employment opportunities; gender employment gap, higher temporality, and extent of part-time jobs among women, gender pay gap, concentration in some sectors ("glass walls"). The increase in women's participation in paid work over the last few years has not resulted in a decrease in their involvement in unpaid care work. On the contrary women often trade off on their personal care and leisure time to fulfil their domestic and care responsibilities. This shows the immediate need of transform the men's role at home and societies unconscious

There are various EU directives and initiatives that can support the caregiving burden and inequalities in the work environment of these people.



Source: Eurostat (2019): Population with care responsibilities

Relevant EU Policy Framework: Work-Life Balance Directive

First and foremost, the Work-life balance Directive European Commission Directorate-General for Employment, Social Affairs and Inclusion, n.d.) that entered into force on 13 June 2019. This Directive tries to address relevant challenges faced by employees with caring responsibilities. This directive focuses on enabling carers (parents but not limited to it) to balance to a greater extent the juggle around caring responsibilities.

It proposes various measures (legal and policy mainly) so as to update previous relevant legal frameworks mainly on family-related leave and flexible work arrangements.

Among the legal measures more related to CAREdiZO project include:

- introduction of paternity leave (at least working days around to the birth of their child, with compensation at least equal to the level of sick pay)
- enforcing the existing measure of the 4 month parental leave. 2 out of 4 months estimated is non-transferable from one parent to another. The level of compensation will be determined by EU member states. This type of leave is quite flexible, since they can take it in various ways (e.g. part-time or in a piecemeal way)
- introduction of carer’s leave for employees that support a relative or other household member. They can take a leave up to 5 days/year.
- extension of the right for flexible working arrangements (eg place of work, working hours or reduced working hours) to all carers, including those being parents of children up to at least 8 y.o.

Policy related measures act as complementary to legislative measures and support Member States to achieve common EU goals.
The most related policy related measures to CAREdiZO spectrum are:

- creating a safe, protective work environment without discrimination for parents and carers
- adopting a more flexible working culture and use of family related leaves
- remove gender related barriers that discourage women from entering the work force or work on a full time basis

Relevance to CAREdiZO Target Groups

Both categories of measures benefit several groups central to CAREdiZO:

- micro enterprises & micro CSOs: by adapting targeted policies, employers can attract and retain more talented and skilled employees that will be motivated and productive. Also, employers will have less absences.
- managers and HR leads: they will get acquainted with tools to foster a more equitable and productive work environment.
- employees with care responsibilities (parents and caregivers): They will benefit by achieving a better work life balance, including health benefits, inclusion and economic stability. Discriminations among employees also impose a heavy toll on the economy. For instance, EU relevant data show that the proportion of women aged 30-34 that had attained tertiary education exceeded that of men which constitutes a waste of resources, skilled workers, and talents. The economic loss due to the gender employment gap amounts to 370 billion Euros per year, corresponding to 2.8% of the EU’s GDP.

Relevant Strategy: EU Gender Equality Strategy 2020-2025

Another important and relevant EU initiative is the EU Gender Equality Strategy 2020-2025 (European Commission, 2025) that aims to make progress towards a gender-equal Europe where all citizens can freely choose the way they lead their lives, with equal opportunities. It was launched on 5th March 2025.

Among the key objectives of the Strategy are:

- closing the gender care gap
- question gender related stereotypes
- diminishing the gender gap in the employment sector
- equal participation of all genders in different sectors of the economy
- addressing pay and pension gender gap
- ending gender based violence and,
- move towards gender balance in the field of decision making and politics.

To achieve these objectives, the Strategy employs a dual approach. On one hand, it proposes gender mainstreaming in all aspects it can cover and on the parallel it introduces intersectionality as a horizontal measure to implement it. The strategy focuses on developing internal and external policies on gender equality and women's empowerment.

Below, we will briefly refer to some of relevant deliverables of the Strategy for CAREdiZO project, that are:

- EU work-life balance rights for parents and carers put into force on August 2022 (mentioned earlier)

- EU campaign to challenge gender stereotypes (European Commission, 2023), launched on 8th March 2023. This campaign aims to raise awareness on how gender stereotypes are appearing in society. For instance gender relate in a certain profession, color or sport.

- Eurobarometer on gender stereotypes, examining perceptions on employment

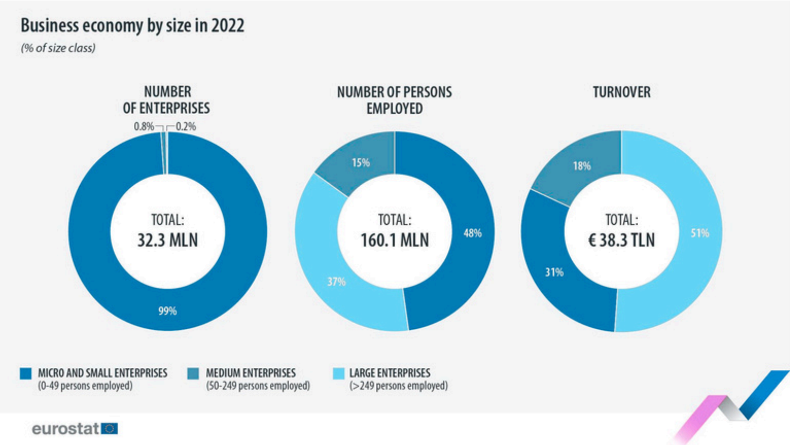
Other relevant policies

Among other relevant policies there are:

- the Directive on equal opportunities and equal treatment of men and women in matters of employment and occupation,
- the EU Gender mainstreaming policy and toolkit,
- the EU Gender analysis mapping tool,
- the 2021 Commission's advisory committee opinion on equal opportunities for Women and Men on Combating Gender Stereotypes and gender transformative approach.

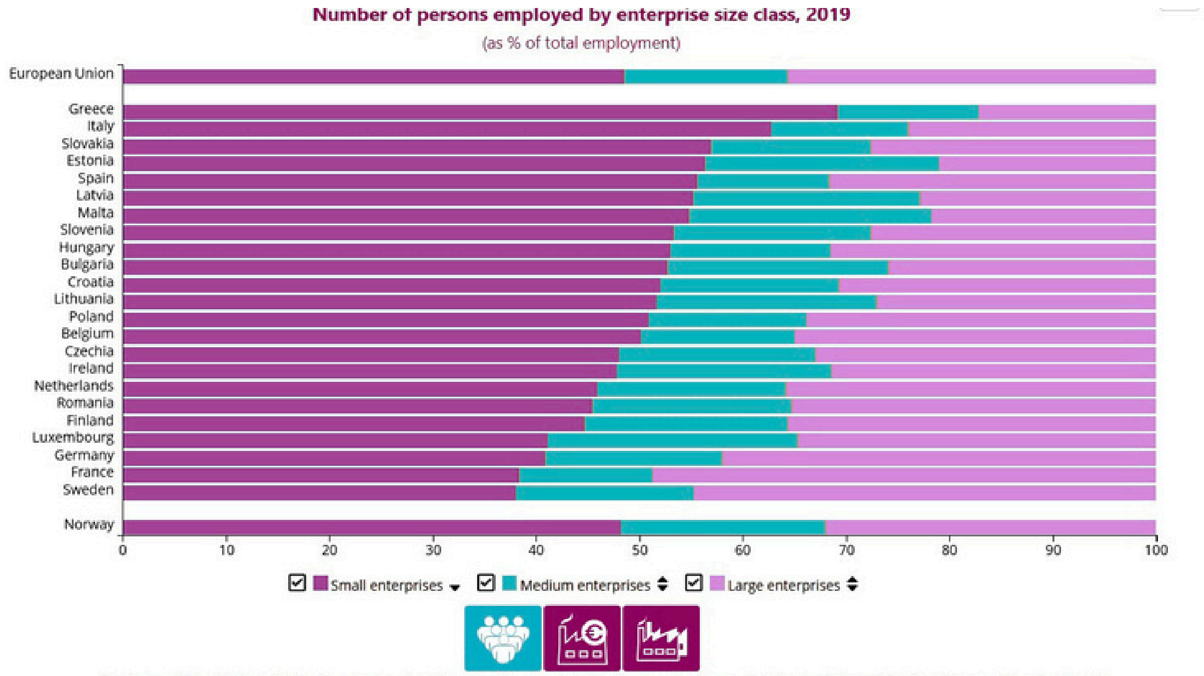
Scope and Context in the EU

According to EU statistics (Eurostat, 2024), as of 2022 the EU had 32.3 million enterprises, with a 99% of the share to be small and micro enterprises (up to 49 employees).



Source: Eurostat. dataset: sbs_sc_ovw

Regarding the share of micro enterprises (less than 10 employees accounted for 93 % of the total number of enterprises. When looking at the number of persons employed in the EU, however, the shares change considerably with around half working in small and micro enterprises enterprises in 2019, 16 % in medium and more than one third in large. Among the Member States for which data are available, the largest shares of persons employed in small enterprises were observed in Greece (69 %) and Italy (63 %), and for medium sized enterprises in Luxembourg (24 %) as well as Estonia and Malta (both 23 %). For large enterprises, the highest proportions were found in France (49 %) and Sweden (45 %).



Number of persons employed by enterprise size class, 2019

(as % of total employment)

Due to confidentiality of data for some enterprise size classes, data for Denmark, Cyprus, Malta, Austria and Portugal cannot be displayed.

Source: Eurostat - access to dataset

The largest share of persons employed in small enterprises (Eurostat, n.d.) were observed in Greece (69 %,) with Lithuania accounting for 50%. For Bulgaria and Cyprus we cannot find such data.

On EUROCARERS REPORT (2021) eas of work-life balance, it worth mentioning that 62% of women- 51% of men in Greece, 41% women- 34% of men in Cyprus, 38% women- 27% of men in Bulgaria and 23% women- 15% of men in Lithuania are not eligible to receive parental leave. The key reason behind it seems to be in the case of women from Greece, Cyprus, and Bulgaria the unemployment/inactivity- in the case of men from Greece and Cyprus the self-employment, while for both men and women from Lithuania the duration of employment. 84% of women and 76% of men in Bulgaria, 76% of women and 74% of men in Cyprus, 79 % of women and 72 % of men in Lithuania and 59% of women and 52% of men in Greece are unable to change their working arrangements and access flexible working time.

Conclusion

The CAREdiZO approach targets micro Enterprises and micro CSOs that face distinct challenges in aligning with EU directives on Work-Life Balance and gender mainstreaming policies due to lack of human resources. Yet these organizations are the backbone of the EU economy and, thus, their practices impact on a very large number of employees.

This report will explore findings in Cyprus, Greece, Lithuania and Bulgaria focusing on existing gender and care-related policies and practices within these small organizational structures.

Research methodology

This section outlines the research methodology applied. The methodology selected combines desk research along with primary data collection from focus groups to ensure effective data collection from all partner countries.
It also involves a good practices collection. Where no relevant case studies could be retrieved from data collection, partners expanded their desk research to EU based good practices. The primary objectives of the research are:

- To investigate the existing needs, challenges, and implications for Micro-enterprises and Micro-CSOs in adopting gender mainstreaming and family-friendly practices.
- To identify and collect good practices, tools, and policies that support gender equality and the equal sharing of care responsibilities.
- To build a foundation for community engagement, particularly through digital communities of practice that involve stakeholders from micro-enterprises and Micro-CSOs. All the material selected.

Research Design

A mixed-methods approach was used, integrating both desk research and data collection methods to address the research questions. Some partners found it difficult to find adequate data for existing care policies, so there was a unanimous decision to form focus groups. This approach was selected to ensure that partners will collect all the data needed to compile the national reports.

Desk Research

The desk research mainly involved:

- A comprehensive review of national and literature, policy documents, government reports, and statistical data concerning micro-enterprises and Micro-CSOs.

- The identification and analysis of existing survey data related to awareness, attitudes, and practices surrounding gender mainstreaming and family-friendly policies.

Inclusion Criteria

- Data specific to organizations employing fewer than 10 individuals.
- Information related to community-driven, small-scale operations with limited financial capacity.

Focus Groups

- Aminimum of 2 focus groups were organized per country.
- Discussions were both structured and informal to allow for in-depth exploration ofparticipants' lived experiences.

Ethical Considerations

- Allparticipants provided informed consent prior to participation.
- Interviewers guarantee the anonymity of the interviewees and their participation was entirely voluntary, and they were able to withdraw at any stage of the process.

The research focused specifically on:

- micro CSO’s
- micro Enterprises

Timeline

Data collection, focus group interviews, analysis of collected data, and compilation of the report were implemented from MAY 2025 to JUL 2025.

Greece

1. Introduction

According to the European Institute for Gender Equality (EIGE), gender inequalities persist across EU Member States in the domain of work. Greece, in particular, continues to score below the EU average on several gender equality indicators, particularly in work-life balance and the sharing of unpaid care work. The COVID-19 pandemic further exposed and deepened these inequalities, with women disproportionately carrying the burden of household and caregiving duties.

This national desk research for Greece aims to explore the current state of gender equality and family-friendly policies in micro-enterprises and micro-CSOs. The research investigates both formal policies and informal practices, highlighting the perceptions, needs, and challenges of small-scale employers and employees in integrating caregiving responsibilities into their work environments. Given the limited availability of official data on this population, the research relies on qualitative data gathered through two focus groups, one with founders and managers of micro-enterprises and one with founders and managers of micro-CSOs from different sectors. The groups included both men and women and provided valuable insights into the everyday realities and adaptive strategies of these organizations.

2. National context

According to the European Institute for Gender Equality (EIGE), Greece continues to score significantly below the EU average on the Gender Equality Index. In the 2024 edition, Greece ranked low among EU Member States, with a total score of 59.3 compared to the EU average of 71. In the domain of work, which includes indicators such as full-time employment, participation in the labour market, and the duration of working life, Greece scored 69.4 - almost 5 points below the EU average of 74.2. These figures reflect persistent challenges in gender equality, particularly in employment structures, access to opportunities, and the sharing of unpaid care work.

The gender care gap in Greece is shaped by deeply entrenched social norms and traditional gender roles. Women continue to bear the overwhelming burden of unpaid care and domestic work, while men's involvement in caregiving remains limited, both culturally and institutionally. Although some progress has been made through EU-driven legislative reforms - including improvements in parental leave and workplace protection - implementation is uneven, and awareness of available rights remains low, especially among small-scale employers.

In parallel, labour market segregation remains a structural barrier to equality. Women are overrepresented in low-paid, precarious, or part-time work, often in sectors such as

education, caregiving, or administration. Men dominate in leadership positions and more profitable industries. The pandemic further exposed these inequalities, exacerbating the care responsibilities of women and leading to increased burnout and attrition, particularly in micro- and informal employment settings.
Within this landscape, micro-enterprises and micro-CSOs - which constitute the vast majority of economic and civil society activity in Greece - are largely invisible in national strategies for gender equality and family-friendly employment. Data specific to these organizations is sparse or non-existent. At the same time, EU-funded programs and some philanthropic initiatives have begun introducing gender mainstreaming requirements even for small organizations, creating new expectations and opportunities for change.

By exploring the national context through this broader lens, the CAREdiZO project aims to uncover the lived realities behind the data and highlight the critical role micro-organizations can play in transforming Greece’s gendered care landscape.

2.1 Overview of survey data on micro-enterprises in the country and their level of awareness regarding the key issues.

In Greece, micro-enterprises (employing up to 10 individuals) make up a significant portion of the business ecosystem, especially in sectors such as retail, hospitality, legal services, technology, and crafts. Based on the latest data by the European Commission, micro-enterprises make up about 93% of the enterprise ecosystem in Greece. However, there is a notable absence of national quantitative data specifically addressing the awareness or implementation of gender mainstreaming and family-friendly policies within micro-enterprises.
It is important to note that micro-enterprises in Greece do not fall under the requirements of most regulatory frameworks regarding gender equality. For example, legislation concerning the employer's responsibility to prevent sexual harassment in the workplace (Law 4808/2021) applies only to companies with more than 20 employees.

Consequently, micro-enterprises are difficult to monitor in terms of compliance with even basic equality guidelines.

Additionally, many micro-enterprises are family businesses or operate with a "family-like" atmosphere due to their small size. This self-perception often obscures the operationalization of core values like belonging, balance, fairness, and equality. A culture of silence can also develop, as employees might avoid raising issues to preserve the supposedly positive atmosphere.

Due to the lack of formal survey data, insights for this report were gathered from one focus group consisting of eight male and female founders and managers of micro-enterprises across various sectors. The findings revealed:

- **Low prevalence of formal policies:** Most micro-enterprises lack formalized, written policies for family-friendly practices or gender equality. Flexibility is often offered informally and on a case-by-case basis.
- **Challenges balancing caregiving and work:** Both male and female founders reported struggles in balancing caregiving duties (for children or elderly parents) with their business responsibilities. Women tended to highlight the impact of caregiving on their career development and mental health, while men emphasized the difficulty of sustaining work-life balance, especially during peak business periods.
- **Leadership approach influenced by personal caregiving experiences:** Founders who had personal caregiving responsibilities were more inclined to adopt flexible arrangements for their employees, valuing communication and work-life balance.
- **Remote work as a growing trend:** Especially since the pandemic, remote work policies have been introduced informally in response to specific needs, though often without formal documentation.

2.2 Overview of survey data on micro-CSOs in the country and their level of awareness regarding the key issues.

Micro-CSOs in Greece also represent a vibrant yet under-documented sector. These organizations typically operate in areas such as social services, education, culture, and community support. Similar to micro-enterprises, there is limited to no quantitative data on the integration of gender mainstreaming and family-friendly policies within micro-CSOs.

Notably, micro-CSOs are subject to similar regulatory gaps. Their size excludes them from many legal requirements for gender equality practices. Furthermore, the nature of their mission - serving the common good - can sometimes create a "moral privilege," obscuring the necessity to ensure a decent, healthy, and fair environment for their employees and often normalise overwork and burnout for the -mostly female- employees that make up their care and humanitarian workers but also their volunteers' base.

According to an unpublished study[4] from 2022 (Chrysani, 2022), most research on international Human Resource Management (HRM) has been conducted in the for-profit, Western-type multinational corporate sector. Thus, best practices from this field may not be fully applicable to NGOs. Domestic humanitarian NGOs often operate in a complex, nonprofit environment and HRM is usually seen as a supportive, not strategic, function. Many small-scale humanitarian NGOs in Greece do not prioritize human resource development, which undermines efforts toward institutionalizing gender equality and family-friendly policies.

Our focus group with six leaders of micro-CSOs (both male and female) revealed:

- **High value on flexibility:** Leaders, both male and female, emphasized the importance of flexibility, with many allowing remote work, flexible schedules, and supportive arrangements for caregiving staff.
- **Informal but consistent practices:** Policies tend to be unwritten but applied consistently, with a strong emphasis on mutual understanding and teamwork.
- **Gendered challenges:** Female leaders often reported greater sensitivity to caregiving needs and proactive adjustments in the workplace. Male leaders recognized these needs but also expressed concerns about overburdening remaining team members when one person is on leave.
- **Lack of formal HR structures:** Due to the small size of these organizations, HR functions are typically informal, making it difficult to systematically implement and monitor family-friendly policies.

Finally, it is worth noting that pressure from funders, such as the European Commission and philanthropic foundations, has increasingly included requirements for gender equality plans and family-friendly policies, even for micro organizations. However, these requirements are often perfunctory, focusing on documentation rather than the actual qualitative experience of employees.

Efforts to foster inclusive workplace practices exist but are highly dependent on the personal leadership style of founders and managers rather than institutional frameworks. Moreover, leaders expressed a need for templates, good practice collections, and legal guidance to better support the development of formalized family-friendly and gender-equal policies.

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[4] https://ikee.lib.auth.gr/record/337449/files/GRI-2022-33904.pdf

3. Challenges and barriers

3.1 Common challenges in adopting gender-sensitive care policies

Focus group findings reveal a series of challenges common to both micro-enterprises and micro-CSOs:

- **Absence of formalized policies:** Most organizations operate without written family-friendly or gender equality policies. Flexibility is extended informally, depending heavily on personal relationships and ad hoc decisions, which creates inconsistencies.
- **Workload distribution issues:** Especially in micro-CSOs, when a team member with caregiving responsibilities is absent, the burden often falls on other team members without a structured replacement plan, leading to resentment or burnout.
- **Balancing business sustainability and flexibility:** In micro-enterprises, particularly those in the tech and service sectors, founders noted that the pressure to maintain business viability makes it hard to offer generous leave or flexible arrangements.
- **Cultural barriers:** Many micro-enterprises operate within a "family business" culture that discourages open conversations about workplace rights and caregiving needs. This "silent" culture can lead to unresolved tensions.
- **Gendered expectations:** Women leaders showed higher awareness of caregiving challenges and made more proactive accommodations. Male leaders often acknowledged the need but highlighted operational constraints.
- **Resource limitations:** Both micro-enterprises and micro-CSOs struggle with financial and human resource constraints, making it hard to provide substitutes for employees on leave or to develop formal HR practices.
- **Communication gaps:** Several leaders pointed out that insufficient internal communication structures can exacerbate issues of fairness and consistency. A lack of clear processes for discussing and approving leave or flexibility can lead to misunderstandings or perceived inequities.

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3.2 Financial, cultural, and structural obstacles

In addition to the challenges noted above, micro-organizations face significant financial, cultural, and structural obstacles that hinder the implementation of gender-sensitive and family-friendly practices:

- **Financial constraints:** Limited budgets prevent many organizations from offering extended parental leaves, flexible working arrangements, or additional support for caregiving employees.
- **Cultural norms:** Societal expectations around caregiving - viewing it primarily as a woman's responsibility - persist and influence workplace practices, even if unintentionally. In smaller "family-like" organizations, these expectations remain unchallenged.
- **Lack of HR infrastructure:** Few micro-organizations have dedicated HR personnel. Decisions about leave, flexible work, and accommodations are often made by founders or team leaders, with limited formal guidance.
- **Operational dependency:** Small teams mean that the absence of even one employee can cause significant disruption, making leaders reluctant to approve extended absences or flexible work.
- **Reluctance to formalize policies:** Some leaders worry that formalizing flexibility and equality policies might backfire, creating legal liabilities or rigidities they feel unprepared to handle.

Overall, while there is a strong personal commitment to flexibility and caregiving support, these good intentions are often undermined by financial limitations, informal structures, and cultural expectations, especially in organizations led by male founders.

4. Impact and benefits of equal care policies

4.1 Employee well-being, retention, and productivity Focus group participants reported that the presence of family-friendly policies and a flexible approach to caregiving needs significantly boosts employee well-being, satisfaction, and loyalty.

- **Work-life balance:** Leaders, especially female founders, emphasized that offering flexible schedules and remote work options contributed to better work-life balance, reducing stress and improving mental health.
- **Retention and loyalty:** Organizations that supported employees during caregiving challenges reported higher levels of employee retention. Employees expressed greater commitment to workplaces that accommodated their caregiving needs, reducing turnover and the associated costs.
- **Productivity gains:** While some leaders voiced concerns about remote work impacting productivity, many observed that flexible arrangements increased employee engagement and efficiency, particularly when caregiving stress was alleviated.

4.2 Evidence on the advantages of gender mainstreaming in care responsibilities

- **Enhanced organizational reputation:** Organizations that actively endorsed gender mainstreaming and family-friendly policies were perceived more positively by current and potential employees, enhancing their employer branding and attractiveness.
- **Access to experienced staff:** A culture supportive of caregiving responsibilities was found to attract experienced professionals who might otherwise be sidelined due to family duties, broadening the talent pool.
- **Improved workplace culture:** Gender mainstreaming and caregiving-friendly policies contributed to more inclusive and supportive workplace cultures, fostering teamwork and reducing conflicts.
- **Business performance:** Although no formal quantitative metrics were reported, leaders noted that employee satisfaction and stable staffing indirectly contributed to better business outcomes through higher morale and more consistent service delivery.

Overall, the qualitative evidence from micro-enterprises and micro-CSOs indicates that while the path to formalizing gender-sensitive care policies is challenging, the benefits are substantial in terms of employee well-being, retention, organizational culture, and reputation.

5. Best practices and case studies

5.1 Best practices

The following best practices and case studies illustrate practical approaches that micro-enterprises and micro-CSOs in Greece have adopted to promote gender-sensitive and family-friendly workplaces.

- **Flexible Work Arrangements:** Several micro-enterprises and micro-CSOs allow flexible working hours and remote work. One micro-enterprise in the technology sector highlighted how they implemented a remote-first policy following a successful ad hoc adaptation, later formalized to ensure consistency and fairness.
- **Informal Support Networks:** In micro-CSOs, team-based approaches were effective. Staff would voluntarily cover for colleagues during periods of caregiving leave, fostering a culture of solidarity and mutual support.
- **Proactive Leadership Styles:** Leaders who experienced caregiving challenges themselves were more likely to build a work culture that preemptively accommodated caregiving needs, such as offering extra leave during life events like childbirth or eldercare.
- **Feedback and Adjustment Mechanisms:** Some CSOs reported organizing quarterly meetings with staff to collect feedback on workplace flexibility and caregiving support, making adjustments based on these discussions.
- **Onboarding with HR Guidelines:** A few organizations emphasized onboarding practices that include reviewing codes of conduct and caregiving policies to ensure new employees understand available support structures from day one.
- **Enhanced Internal Communication:** Many organizations stressed the importance of streamlining internal communication, such as through shared calendars and clear leave request protocols. Improved communication was seen as a way to balance flexibility without formal bureaucracy, ensuring fairness and transparency.

5.2 Case studies

The case studies below provide real-world examples of how different types of micro-organizations have successfully implemented family-friendly practices.

- **Case Study 1: Micro-enterprise (Technology Sector)** A tech micro-enterprise with 10 employees implemented flexible working hours and remote options after leadership faced personal caregiving challenges. Over time, this flexibility contributed to high employee retention and positive feedback from the team. The founder emphasized the importance of maintaining open communication about individual needs.
- **Case Study 2: Micro-CSO (Education Sector)** A CSO working in education, with a team of 11, reported success by embracing flexibility and developing a culture where caregiving was openly discussed and supported. Their approach involved cross-training employees to cover each other's tasks and maintaining biannual reviews to adapt policies. As a result, team cohesion and job satisfaction remained high even during caregiving leaves.
- **Case Study 3: Micro-enterprise (Jewelry Manufacturing Sector)** Amicro-enterprise in the jewelry manufacturing sector, led by a female founder, faced high caregiving demands from both the founder and her staff. Recognizing the strain, she implemented a policy of flexible unpaid leave for family emergencies and informal job-sharing arrangements. Employees appreciated the flexibility, which improved their long-term loyalty. Although budget limitations made it impossible to offer additional financial incentives, the workplace's supportive environment was cited by employees as the primary reason for their commitment.

These examples show that even without extensive formal HR frameworks, micro-enterprises and micro-CSOs can create supportive environments by leveraging flexibility, mutual understanding, communication, and proactive leadership.

6. Conclusion

This desk research highlights the unique challenges faced by micro-enterprises and micro-CSOs in Greece regarding gender mainstreaming and the adoption of family-friendly policies. While these organizations often operate in environments with limited formal frameworks and resources, their leaders demonstrate a strong commitment to flexibility and caregiving support. The qualitative evidence from focus groups underscores that improvements in internal communication, proactive leadership, and a culture of mutual support can significantly enhance employee well-being, retention, and workplace inclusivity. Future efforts should focus on developing practical tools, templates, and training to assist these organizations in formalizing and expanding their best practices while maintaining their essential flexibility.friendly policies.

Bulgaria

1. Introduction/National context

The current report has been prepared in the frameworks of the CAREdiZO project "CARE Driven Innovation for Gender Mainstreaming in Home, Micro-Enterprises & Micro-CSOs.

The desk research reflects the challenges, needs and issues that the micro-enterprises and micro CSOs in Bulgaria face with regard to integration of family-friendly policies and gender mainstreaming.
Bulgaria ranks 16th in the EU Gender Equality Index (65.1 out of 100 points- 10.1 points below the EU's score). Since 2020, Bulgaria's ranking in the domain of work has dropped by two places. Within this domain, Bulgaria's ranking dropped from 12th to 18th place in the sub-domain of participation (46% women full-time employment contrary to 59% of men). The ability of taking 1-2 hours of work differs (23% women, 31% men) while the key caregivers in the country are women like in Greece. 43% of women take care of the children and elders contrary to 32% of men and 72% of women take care of the housework everyday contrary to 37% of men. In Bulgaria there is also a large difference between women who have social activities (25%) contrary to men (32%).

Bulgaria's ranks 18th on the Gender Equality Index. The score score fell from 65.1 (2023) to 64.5 in 2024 (based on 2022 data), about 6.5 points below the EU average of 71.0. When it comes to caregiving unpaid care, the burden remains heavily on women: with about 43% of women to be primary caregivers contrary to 32% of men , 72% of women claim to do daily housework, and only 25% of women participate in social activities daily.

In Bulgaria the principle of equality is enshrined in the Constitution of the Republic of Bulgaria, adopted in 1991. Article 6(2) of the constitution states: 'All citizens are equal before the law. No restrictions on rights or privileges based on race, nationality, ethnicity, sex, origin, religion, education, beliefs, political affiliation, personal or social status or property are allowed.
The Law on Equality between Women and Men (Закон за равнопоставеност на жените и мъжете), adopted in 2016, is the main legal document on gender equality.[2] It includes a legal obligation to implement gender mainstreaming under Article 4(1), which specifies that the state's policy on equality between women and men is to be implemented through 'integrating the principle of equality between women and men in legislation and all national, regional and local policies, strategies programmes and plans'.[3] The law includes no provisions regarding enforcement or sanctions. In addition, since January 2004, the Law on Protection from Discrimination (Закон за защита от дискриминацията) has

prohibited discrimination on a broad range of grounds, including sex (Article 3). (European Institute for Gender Equality).
There is a legal obligation to undertake gender impact assessments when drafting laws, policies, plans and programmes under Article 14 of the Law on Equality between Women and Men, which states that the impact of regulations and strategic documents on gender should be assessed. The law also states that gender equality coordinators, appointed at the central and regional levels, should participate in these assessments.

Gender impact assessment is defined in the law as ‘part of the social assessment [that] includes assessing the impact of regulations and strategic documents on the situation of women and men’. According to the law, this will ensure that discriminatory effects are neutralised and gender equality promoted.

1.1 Overview of survey data on micro-enterprises in the country and their level of awareness regarding the key issues.

Micro enterprises are frequently established in Bulgaria. They face many unique challenges from all business perspectives: management, finance, marketing, human resources, etc. While Micro enterprises have certain advantages, the challenges they face are quite different from the ones medium and large companies experience.
Micro and small enterprises hold a key position in the economic balance – they account for 90% of businesses, 60-70% of employment, and 50% of GDP worldwide (UN data). Micro, Small and medium-sized enterprises represent 99% of all companies in the EU and employ around 100 million people.

As a member of the European Union, Bulgaria applies the same definitions concerning the classification of the enterprise. As per the European Commission (2003) the limit under which a company is considered a micro or small is enterprise is 50 employees and a turnover below €10 million.

According to the ILO, “Implementing “family-friendly” policies is a business strategy with a dual agenda of creating a win-win situation for achieving both organizational effectiveness and employee well-being. Some measures may be costly for the employer, but also smaller cost-efficient, family-friendly initiatives can make a big difference for the enterprise, CSO and their staff and positively affect the bottom line of the business”. (ILO, 2004)

The family-friendly employer recognizes the family responsibilities of employees and accepts that such responsibilities can have an impact on employees' working lives. A family-friendly organization tries to facilitate the reconciliation between work and family responsibilities for its staff and to make them feel supported in balancing their work and outside work commitments.

Being a family-friendly organization goes beyond being just child- or women-friendly, and under the wider "work-life" concept, many employers now recognize the importance of making "family-friendly" arrangements available to all employees, not just those with care responsibilities.

For the staff, some of the most important benefits of family-friendly practices are:

- Decreased stress caused by reducing conflicts between work and family responsibilities;
- A more supportive and positive working environment where each person is valued and needed, also contributing to making team work easier and more efficient;
- Increased job satisfaction and morale that can make employees more committed to their job, more cooperative, loyal, productive and innovative.

Gender mainstreaming for micro-enterprises in Bulgaria involves integrating a gender perspective into the design, implementation, monitoring, and evaluation of policies and programs to ensure equal opportunities for both women and men in business. This approach aims to address gender inequalities that may disproportionately affect micro-entrepreneurs, particularly women, who often face unique challenges in accessing resources, financing, and networks.

For the purpose of this report, information was gathered from focus groups consisting of male and female representatives from the hospitality and tourist sector, as well as agricultural producers. We have also discussed the issue with a CSO for people with intellectual disabilities. During the discussions it turned out that there are a range of factors involved in the decision-making of employers regarding the implementation of Family Friendly Workplace Policies (FFWPs). These can be categorised into three interconnecting influencing factors:

- pressures from inside or outside the organisation,
- organisational-specific factors and
- to meet and improve organisational goals.

The pressure from inside or outside the organisation can include level of state support for flexible working, institutional pressures to introduce FFWPs policies and proportion and influence of women in the workplace.

The organisational –specific factors include the size of the organization, its sector and industry, job type and better technology enabling working from home.
Last but not least the factors that meet and improve organisational goals include: recruitment of highly-skilled workers, improvement of staff commitments, reducing of workers' absence, etc.

3. Challenges and barriers

3.1 Common challenges in adopting gender-sensitive care policies

During the discussions with the focus groups, it became clear that the majority of the micro enterprises lack adequate knowledge and awareness about gender equality and family friendly workplace policies.

3.2 Financial, cultural, and structural obstacles

Their biggest problem that the micro enterprises face in this relation is the limited financial resources and staff. This reduces their capacity to develop and implement gender-sensitive policies.
The same applies for the micro-CSOs – they heavily rely on project based grants and do not have the operational capacity to introduce family-friendly workplace policies, like for example subsidised childcare or flexible working hours.
Moreover, the micro and small enterprises, as well as CSOs do not have dedicated HR departments (which the big companies can afford) and do not have even the internal capacity to assess gender needs, let alone develop policies dedicated to address the gender related issues.
Apart from this, there is a lack of understanding of the importance of gender related issues as well as specialized knowledge for their development and adoption. Often this results in these policies remaining at the concept level, without practical implementation.

(Petrov, 2019)

It also became clear that usually, organisations that are involved in the social services and disability sector face even bigger challenges to low income, specific employee needs and cultural barriers , such as traditional gender roles.
In micro enterprises, the challenges are more in regards to maintaining competitiveness and limited administrative capacity. In strictly structured organisations, for example with hierarchical structure, resistance to change and the lack of capacity to implement new family friendly policies is more tangible.

(Dimitrova 2021)

Another problem that arises is that the majority of the small business owners are not aware of the existing national legislation and EU standards related to gender equality, family-friendly work policies and appropriate best practices.
Societal norms, especially traditional notions of female and male roles, strongly influence paternal leave decisions and caring responsibilities. In Bulgaria, as in other countries with patriarchal characteristics, women are the ones who primarily take care of the children and elderly, which makes it more difficult to introduce equal practices.

(Karadzhova, 2020)

4. Impact and benefits of equal care policies

4.1 Employee well-being, retention, and productivity

Family-friendly policies, such as flexible working hours, care leave, home office, etc. have a significant positive effect on the employees' well-being. Research shows that employees who are supported in these areas, report higher positive emotional balance, lower stress and greater productivity and job satisfaction (Georgieva, 2021).

In depth research is still lacking in Bulgaria but data from Bulgarian Industrial Association shows that flexible work improves work efficiency and reduces stress levels (BIA, 2020).
There is evidence that micro enterprises which stimulate the work-life balance through equal care policies often achieve greater productivity. According to some research conducted, the supported employees show up to 15% higher efficiency and a lower percentage of absence (European Foundation for the Improvement of Living and Working Conditions, 2019). Some micro enterprises in Bulgaria also report improvements in the quality of the performed tasks after the implementation of the FFWPs.

4.2 Evidence on the advantages of gender mainstreaming in care responsibilities

Micro enterprises that actively support gender equality often tend to have better results in terms of attracting and retaining talent, as well as better image in the society.

- **Impact on hiring experienced staff and profitability:**

According to the Social Policy Institute, Policies that support equality help to attract more experienced and qualified personnel, which leads to increased productivity and profitability. According to a research, organisations that have equal opportunity policies in place, are more competitive and more innovative (Beleva, Iskra, 2010).

- **Social image and overall acceptance:**

According to the discussions with the focus groups,equality policies improve the image of the enterprises and CSOs in society and facilitate their overall acceptance by the local community and potential partners. This is especially valuable for micro and small enterprises and micro CSOs, which often rely on public support and a good image for sustainable development. In Bulgaria, enterprises and CSOs that see equality policies as a strategic value achieve a higher social reputation and attractiveness to both potential employees and customers.

From all of the above said, we may conclude that the introduction of FFWPs and supporting gender equality brings significant benefits to micro-enterprises and small NGOs in Bulgaria. They clearly improve employee well-being and satisfaction, reduce turnover and increase productivity. Furthermore, they strengthen the social image and contribute to a better work culture, which is an important factor for the future development and sustainability of these organisations.

- **Impact on workplace culture and interpersonal relationships:**

Implementing gender equality policies significantly contributes to a positive culture and an inclusive environment. This promotes a dynamic of mutual respect, better cooperation and reduced conflict. In micro-enterprises, where teams are small and relationships are closer, supporting equality improves motivation and a sense of belonging (Stoyanova, 2004).

5. Best practices and case studies

Many micro and small enterprises, as well as CSOs in Bulgaria have started to implement flexible work arrangements, especially during and after the pandemic. The following best practices were identified while interviewing the CHANCE Association for People with Intellectual Disabilities successfully provided remote work options and flexible hours, which helps employees balance care and professional obligations. This creates a more equitable work environment, especially for the women with children and employees caring for elderly r Guest house “DESHKA” has also provided flexible working hours for 2 of their female employees, who care for elderly parents. relatives.

Cyprus

1. Introduction

The desk-research's objectives are to navigate the challenges and needs of micro-enterprises and micro-CSO's, in terms of implementing family-friendly and gender mainstreaming practices. This research focuses on finding the micro-enterprises and micro-CSOs' official and unofficial policies, practices, attitudes and perspectives on both family-friendly practices,[5] as well as challenges into implementing family-friendly and gender-mainstreaming practices. It is significant to note that due to the difficulties in finding official data on micro-enterprises and micro-CSO's online, through desk research, we attempted to conduct focus groups and interviews in order to find more information on the subject and ensure the validity of the study's results on a national level. As a final sample, four interviews were conducted in order to record the experiences, but also the[5] beliefs, of employees and employers working in micro-organizations and micro-CSOs in regard to family-friendly and gender mainstreaming practices. One interviewee is the employer of a travel agency, working full-time but on seasonal work (meaning only working during the tourist season), with around five employees, in the private sector. The second one is a member of a CSO working a different main job but undertaking responsibilities akin to a part-time job at the organization, which concerns social issues, including gender, with around 7 members. The third one is the employer of a micro-NGO, also concerning social issues focused on women and health, focused on providing information around birth, with around 10 employees. The fourth and final one is an employee of a micro-NGO on agriculture, protecting cultural heritage etc., with around 7 employees.

2. National context

According to EIGE (European Institute for Gender Equality), Cyprus has no official national laws on gender equality and/or gender mainstreaming but has sectoral laws on specific issues for gender equality (such as equal work and pay, gender-based violence, domestic violence and more)[6]. Equally, there is the Article 28 of the Cypriot Constitution of 1960, which cites “All are equal before the law, the administration and the judiciary and are entitled to equal protection and treatment.”[7]

Additionally, there are always international means that refer to the protection of gender based discrimination and gender mainstreaming, referring to the United

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[5] It is significant to note that there are not many NGOs and CSOs in Cyprus under or even around 10 people including the volunteers, and equally, there are a few organizations that are part of larger, international branches that could not have been interviewed. Therefore, the number of interviews, in order to keep a balance between enterprises and NGO/CSOs could not easily be larger. There could be a few more enterprises interviewed, but few showed interest to be interviewed, being distrustful ofbeing accused, or their data being used evenafter being assured that their data wouldhave been completely anonymous and not shared with anyone.

[6] https://eige.europa.eu/gender-mainstreaming/institutions-and-structures/eu-member-states

[7] https://www.cylaw.org/nomoi/enop/ind/syntagma/section-sccd616e86-2684-7e31-8de4-7c011089e650.html

Nations, United Nations (UN) Convention on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) and the Beijing Platform for Action (BpfA) (EIGE)[8].
Finally, on the manner of the presence of micro-enterprises and micro-CSOs in the country, parts of other research have shown that enterprises focus more on the sector of services, whereas in the past it used to be the primary sector that was more prevalent due to agriculture (Masouras, Pistikou & Komodromos, 2021). Equally, the sectors found most in NGO/CSOs are in protection and preserving of environment (as found from the NGO base)[9], with no other statistics or research found around both enterprises, and micro-NGO/CSOs.

2.1 Overview of survey data (if available) on micro-enterprises in the country and their level of awareness regarding the key issues.

From personal experience with regard to the recognition of micro-enterprises and micro-organizations of civil society in relation to family-friendly practices, but also with regard to gender equality, it should certainly be noted.
In regard to micro-enterprises' awareness on key issues, I have identified that there is some awareness but not enough because of societal structures such as stereotypes and gender roles that are reinforced in a patriarchal society, with women being associated with marriage and having and raising children but also due to lack of knowledge and education on the matters; on gender equality, there are many institutions that influence the lack of awareness (influences of religion, politics and patriarchal society), but also there is lack of awareness in a systemic and systematic manner. There are courses such as Health Education (in primary school), in which issues related to gender stereotypes and gender roles are developed, but it seems that it is not enough[10]. Efforts are being made by various organizations in society to raise awareness and inform citizens. In addition, due to economic difficulties, there is an emphasis on profits which often leads to failure to recognize family and gender friendly policies.
As far as family-friendly practices are concerned, there is recognition to some extent, but they often revert to gender essentialism: for example, women who take on caring responsibilities are often given leave, emergency leave or even the ability to work from home, due to them being seen as caretakers. Thus, the idea that it is women who should and can take care is reinforced, thus perpetuating traditional gender roles.

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[8] No national reports on good practices for Cyprus, except 1 on entepreneurship https://eige.europa.eu/gender-mainstreaming/good-practices/financial-services-designed-women-women

[9] https://ngobase.org/c/CY/cyprus-ngos-charities

[10] 3.3 Interculturality, acceptance and management of diversity; Stereotypes and their deconstruction - Respect for diversity, as well as 3.1 Family planning, sexual and reproductive health: Deconstructing stereotypical gender roles (https://sch.cy/sd/262/ap_periechomeno.pdf).

2.2 Overview of survey data (if available) on micro-CSOs in the country and their level of awareness regarding the key issues.

As far as civil society micro-organisms are concerned, there seems to be a different level of recognition for both tracks: On the one hand, most small civil society organizations are concerned with human rights, which gives room for both more and more extensive information on gender and family issues, but also more emphasis on identifying potential problems and how to address them. It is observed that despite the lack of education in a broader context, the organizations are composed of researchers as well as experts in the topics of interest, such as migration, gender, sexuality, environment, family, gender-based violence and others. Despite the financial difficulties experienced by small community organizations, there is not so much emphasis on profits, but on securing financial assistance and funding through European programs. However, this seems to affect workload, performance of activities and work-life balance, but does not affect the visibility of practices or needs.

Broader national context

According to a study on experiences of gender equality in the workforce in Cyprus, participants expressed that "that they were given equal opportunities and employers did not discriminate due to gender. However, it was noted from some senior participants that sometimes things are not as equal as they seem" (Kouta, Parmaxi, Smoleski, 2017, pg. 1227). They also shared that "Cypriot societal and cultural influences are strong, and men hold most managerial positions" (ibid.), and that men are preferred in companies that aim for great profit, believing that women are more emotional and "may not be able to cope with difficult situations or hard decisions" (ibid.). Some participants reached a consensus that women face challenges at work, and that there is inequality at the workplace, but there was a strong correlation to women having specific roles at work and family. Finally, regarding employability, the participants of the research identified pregnancy as a hurdle at the workplace (ibid.).

[11] There were no observed challenges specifically about implementing gender-sensitive care policies, due to the fact that most participants of enterprises and CSOs that gave information were women, do not have a greatly diverse workforce and therefore have adopted and implemented policies that revolve around gender.

3. Challenges and barriers

3.1 Common challenges in adopting gender-sensitive care policies

Challenges based on sector and organizational differences: Common challenges that were observed concerned adopting family-friendly practices mostly, and the most frequently cited were financial challenges, lack of adequate workforce, project-based work that leaves little to no room for flexibility in work schedules, and few identified no challenges at all. The sectors of the participants included a focus on tourism and traveling, social issues and sensibilization such as LGBTQIA+ issues, education and research, and rural and agricultural communities focused on heritage, landscape and tradition. Most micro-CSO's focused on lack of funding and financial struggles and lack of adequate workforce for the amount of projects they take on, while enterprises focused on inability to have a more flexible working schedule and environment, which created an inability to balance work-personal life even more.

Perceptions of Leadership and Employees on the implementation of equal care policies: the NGO leadership appeared to be supportive of equal care policies and thought their implementation was easy but seemed constrained by tight project deadlines and inadequate workforce. The enterprise leadership noted that integrating equal care policies is feasible and easy, but only if Cypriot society accepts that women are equally capable as men. The CSO participants found that the implementation of equal care policies is not easy due to challenges being deep-rooted in cultural norms and systemic barriers, but also due to other challenges previously mentioned (financial struggles, lack of workforce etc.)

In conclusion, both leadership and employees of NGOs and CSOs found hardships in implementing equal care policies, and both focused on reforming society and culture first in order for these policies to be integrated into workplaces. Only enterprises' leadership found equal care practices to be easy, keeping in mind the sector that was mostly interviewed came from the tourism and traveling private sector.

Funded by the European Union. Views and opinions expressed are however those of the author(s) only and do not necessarily reflect those of the European Union or European Commision. Neither the European Union nor EC can be held responsible for them Project code: 101191047 — CAREdiZO — CERV-2024-GE

3.2 Financial, cultural, and structural obstacles

Financial Constraints:

- **Heavy reliance on European funding:** Micro-CSOs' mentioned that they rely heavily on European funding in order to operate, which depends on the projects available in their field and focus.
- **Minimal or no governmental support:** In relation to the point above, participants also stated that they do not have adequate national projects to take, nor governmental support, which leads to further challenges.
- **Limited funding:** which leads to low pay, workforce instability, an inability to offer flexible and/or hybrid work and consequently leads to reduced motivation and performance, but also employees seeking better-paying jobs, risking to quit the organization.

Cultural Attitudes and Norms:[12]

- **Societal norms:** This refers to the societal roles and expectations placed on women and men regarding caring responsibilities.
- **"Hustle culture":** The participant who mentioned hustle culture referred to employees taking on many tasks simultaneously, while tackling them half-heartedly, leading to minimized productivity and efficiency.
- **Low work accountability:** This refers to employees not being held accountable and not having a sense of responsibility in order to complete tasks on time, mentioned especially by micro-NGOs' with minimal or no funding, leading to further issues.
- **Backwards society, not aligned with European standards & Patriarchal values:** The participants who mentioned Cypriot society as backwards, referred to patriarchal values and an unequal treatment and view of men and women. Specifically, participants mentioned that women are expected to be primary caregivers, that hiring is unequal due to gender stereotypes, role assignments, and perceptions of leadership, and that emotional labor is disproportionately shouldered by women.

Structural Limitations:

- **Lack of number of employees (due to lack of funding)**: which leaves few employees that are able to have flexible times; most employees have been unable to receive family-friendly practices that would allow them to better balance their work-life and personal life, thus, face difficulties in maintaining motives for work due to them being unable to care for family members (with the most common category being children).

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[12] It is critical to mention that all NGOs, CSOs, and enterprises interviewed are mostly comprised of women employees and have few men employees; as an NGO stated that, most NGOs are women-dominated spaces. Therefore, the challenges that are identified below as parts of cultural attitudes and societal norms do not reflect the beliefs of mainstream cultures of employers and structures, but come from alternative spaces of work and employment, allowing for a different approach and perspective of society.

4. Impact and benefits of equal care policies

4.1 Employee well-being, retention, and productivity Presence of family-friendly policies and impact on employee well-being, job

satisfaction, and work-life balance: The presence of family-friendly policies has been mostly identified to have positive impact in regard to the employee's wellbeing, satisfaction and productivity at work: specifically, enterprises have mentioned productivity increase, loyalty to the enterprise, to balance their work-life, especially when having responsibilities towards their families, and led to employees giving back to the enterprise. The same has been identified by CSO/NGOs with the addition of such family-friendly practices being helpful, by experiencing, in caretaking responsibilities, especially with children that might need a lot of attention in the first half of the day, and not so much in the night; therefore, having the ability to adjust an employee's schedule as an example of family-friendly practice, allows for a more harmonious balance between work-life and personal life, as well as increases the ability to perform well in carrying out the necessary tasks.

Effect of equal care policies on employee retention rates in micro-enterprises and micro-CSOs: Positive; enterprises and CSO/NGOs have observed that by implementing equal care policies, both on the matter of gender mainstreaming and family-friendly practices, it leads to employees remaining in the enterprises, not easily deciding to leave and seek work elsewhere due to the building of trusting relationships that are long-lasting, due to such practices.

Productivity gains associated with organizations that implement care-related benefits: There has been a visible productivity of employees that has been correlated to the implementation of care-related benefits such as flexibility in scheduling, the ability to leave in an emergency and the ability to cover missed work at a different time, many days of leave granted (for sick leave but including other emergencies as well). Both NGOs and enterprises have observed this, while some CSOs have talked about the lack of productivity that is accompanied by such flexibility and fluidity.

4.2 Evidence on the advantages of gender mainstreaming in care responsibilities

Active Endorsement of gender mainstreaming and performance: The only difference in performance that has been identified between micro-enterprises that actively endorse gender mainstreaming and those who do not, is in the desire of the employees to do more in order to give back to the organization/ enterprise, which leads to a better work performance, since employees are satisfied. Through their perceptions, interviewees have identified other cases through which it becomes evident that people who were not treated equally either become dissatisfied and perform less efficiently and effectively or even leave the enterprises to work somewhere else.

Enterprises have acknowledged that by allowing employees to have a personal life and balance their duties and responsibilities impacts their personal lives, but also their work performance positively; they have stated that the employees show gratitude and in turn offer to do more at work, leading to a more satisfied workforce and satisfactory performance.

Social image and acceptance of micro-organizations based on appliance of gender mainstreaming: There was nothing mentioned by the interviewees on their image, presumably due to the small size of the organizations; smaller enterprises and CSOs care more about building connections and communities with other small enterprises and CSOs, and are client or project-based, meaning they do not rely on society's views. Equally, most CSOs, especially those that were interviewed, already apply gender mainstreaming practices, and interact with other CSOs that apply such practices. Thus, the relationship between them is built on the knowledge that everyone is preoccupied with social issues and gender equality, therefore acceptance is already a given.

Influence of gender mainstreaming policies on workplace culture, team dynamics and inclusivity: Identified by a CSO, is the idea that a better work-life to personal life balance would contribute to the projects and causes of the NGOs, influencing workplace culture positively, as it would be on the basis of community building. Equally, enterprises identified that with more equal treatment, there are more content employees, which in turn become more efficient at work, including in their collaboration with each other.

5. Best practices and case studies

Good practices that have been identified from CSOs and micro-enterprises that were interviewed include:

Flexible schedule / remote work: In order to help the employers maintain a balance, organizations have suggested the use of flexible schedules and remote work, or even a hybrid workspace in which individuals could work from home whenever it is appropriate and helpful for them to manage their caring responsibilities, but also in order to maintain a more flexible outlook.

Less bureaucratic approach: Equally, a less bureaucratic approach was presented, in the sense that procedures and protocols are important, but they cannot come before an employee's responsibilities and lives.

Promotion of equal parental leave: Additionally, organizations mentioned the promotion of equal parental leave for men and women, so that women will not be excluded or discriminated against due to gender roles, meaning women will not be rejected in job applications because of the expectation of leaving work for months when pregnant, since men will equally have as much time off to take care of the child as well, leading to men and women being treated equally by the employers.

Holding accountability of responsibilities: Another organization mentioned holding accountability regarding work performance and responsibilities, in order to get the work done despite the fact that some workspaces are understaffed or face difficulties, thus, individuals need to be held accountable and focus on the sense of responsibility in order for other practices to work.

Changing culture: Finally, a lot of organizations mentioned culture in various manners, concerning good practices; one was to harbor a compassionate and understanding culture, holding these two as central values, another one was to change attitudes and culture around how men and women are perceived and regarded as polar opposites with inherent characteristics, but also to change the working culture into something closer to European standards.

Conclusions On a final note, a few organizations mentioned that good practices

are significant,
but they cannot succeed without changing society first, especially in the way it regards and treats women and gender equality.

Lithuania

Introduction

EU member states continue facing an ageing society, declining fertility rates, a lack of jobs for parents with young children, a shortage of childcare and facilities for ill persons or persons with disabilities. Many caregivers experience stress, burnout, and financial strain, especially when workplace policies lack adequate support, such as paid leave or remote work options. Workers who care for ill, aging relatives or persons with disabilities must navigate unpredictable medical needs, behavioral challenges, and emotional strain, while maintaining productivity and reliability at work. In this context, countries are increasingly focusing on one of the key areas of family policy, the development of family-friendly policies, in the hope of improving families' ability to reconcile work and caregiving, and to encourage both women and men to participate actively in the labour market and to ensure gender equality.

The problems identified above lead to the need for family-friendly policies and flexible work environments that can successfully address the challenges of reconciling work and family roles. The social, economic, cultural and political environment implies priority areas for family-friendly policies, among which the reconciliation of work and family roles is becoming the most relevant area for family-friendly policies in post-industrial societies. Flexible forms of work organisation in enterprises create opportunities to recruit and retain a better-qualified workforce, whose lower turnover is ensured by job satisfaction, the ability to reconcile work and private life, and loyalty to the enterprise. A skilled workforce is better able to develop and adopt new technologies, which helps it to integrate more easily into an ever-changing economy. Most people working in companies want to be not only good employees, but also caring parents who raise their children responsibly; exemplary children who take care of their parents; managers of an ever-expanding household; activists who always find time for their favourite activities, etc. All of this requires time and flexibility (Genys D., Baltrušaitis M, 2009). One of the activities of the Caredizo project is to identify and analyse the existing needs and challenges of Micro-enterprises and Micro-CSOs to apply gender mainstreaming and family-friendly practices through discussions, consultations, brainstorming, research within a community and collect tools that will enable gender mainstreaming in micro-enterprises and micro-CSOs as well as closing the gender care gap.

After a thorough analysis of existing sources and publications it is clear that there is no information about the work-life situation in micro-enterprises and micro-CSOs in Lithuania. Information is quite non-existent. It is important to note that the term “Micro – CSO” is not used on a national level at all, and the term “Micro - enterprise” is mainly used in legal context. To collect some information and experiences two focus groups of 4 informants representing micro-enterprises and micro-CSOs in each were held. 3 women and 1 man participated in each group. The focus groups included three leaders and one deputy head of micro-enterprises, one self-employed individual (micro-enterprise), one founder, one leader, and one staff member from micro-CSOs.

2. National context

Better share of care responsibilities is an important subject for Lithuanian social policies. It can be supported by the statement made by Inga Ruginienė, Minister of Social Security and Labour. She has presented Lithuania's achievements in strengthening gender equality in the labour market at the informal meeting of EU Ministers for Employment, Social Affairs and Gender Equality in Warsaw in April, 2025 (Lithuanian Ministry of Social Security and Labour, 2025). She highlighted Lithuanian Government efforts to facilitate the active participation of people with caring responsibilities in the labour market, and outlined measures ranging from expanded childcare services to flexible forms of work and targeted benefits. She has also discussed equality in the labour market in a broader sense and potential support mechanisms for people with caring responsibilities to fully engage in working life. *"The fair distribution of household and care responsibilities is not only an issue of gender equality, but also one of the key elements in overcoming demographic challenges, both in Lithuania and in the European Union. Various social programmes and the availability of services for families can help us greatly in this process. Only by implementing comprehensive measures can we ensure a more equitable distribution of childcare responsibilities within the family, so that the burden is not placed on women alone*" minister I. Ruginienė stressed at the informal ministerial meeting in Warsaw.

Any surveys and analyses on the share of caring responsibilities conducted before the COVID-19 pandemic are not relevant to the post-COVID-19 situation, when employers and employees significantly changed their opinion regarding telework, workcation and other flexible arrangements that help to balance caregiving responsibilities. However, it seems that it did not bring significant changes in the better sharing of care responsibilities.

Legal framework

According to EIGE, the Lithuanian Law on Equal Opportunities for Women and Men forbids any discrimination, direct or indirect, on the ground of sex, including sexual harassment and the Law on Strategic Governance states that the principle of gender equality, equal opportunities and non-discrimination must be considered during policy planning, implementation, monitoring and evaluation phases (EIGE, 2025).

The term of micro - CSO is not used on a national level at all, the same could be said about the term “micro - enterprise”. In common language, the term small enterprise includes micro-enterprises as well as small enterprises. Nevertheless, the Law on the Accountability of Companies and Company Groups of the Republic of Lithuania (No. XIV-2811) defines micro - enterprise as: Very small companies – companies that meet at least 2 of the following criteria on the last day of the financial year:

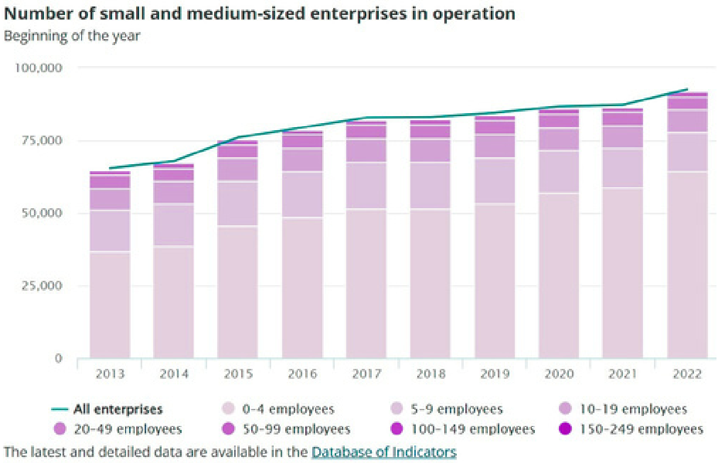
- The value of assets indicated in the balance sheet is up to 450,000 euros;
- Net sales revenue during the financial year is up to 900,000 euros;
- Average annual number of employees during the reporting financial year up to 10 employees.

According to the Labour Code an employer with an average number of employees of more than fifty must adopt the policy on equal opportunities along with measures for its implementation and monitoring. Some experts advocate for a new provision on employers' accountability for the implementation of measures supporting work-family balance, but only for enterprises and entities with more than 50 employees to be introduced in the Labour Code.

For the purpose of this research, the main criteria to identify the micro-CSOs and micro-enterprises was that the number of staff (and volunteers) should not exceed 10 persons. As the terms are not popular and widely used, there are no survey data available.

In 2021, the number of small and medium-sized enterprises (non-financial enterprises, except natural persons carrying out economic activity) (enterprises) increased by 6.1 %. Very small enterprises (0–9 people employed) accounted for the largest proportion – 84.3 %. (https://osp.stat.gov.lt/verslas-lietuvoje-2022/veikiancios-mazos-ir-vidutines-imones).

Table 1. Number of small and medium-sized enterprises in operation in Lithuania, 2013 – 2022



Source: Official Statistics Portal

3. Challenges and barriers 3.1 Common challenges in adopting gender-sensitive care policies

There is no obligation for micro-enterprises and/or micro-CSOs to introduce policies related to care. Usually, they implement such policies based on oral agreement between the director or president of the micro-enterprises and/or micro-CSOs. All informants highlighted the possibility to reconcile care duties with work responsibilities as an added value working in micro-enterprises and/or micro-CSOs. The staff appreciate having conditions that allow them to bear caring responsibilities while working, usually it is combined with remote work. Colleagues in micro-enterprises and/or micro-CSOs are rather friendly and support each other in such cases, same with the employers as they consider that the loyalty of the staff is very important. Directors (or leaders) of these entities are very understanding of the staff's needs to carry out care responsibilities when such circumstances arise. Leaders and employees generally view flexible, care-friendly policies positively. Many leaders expressed pride in fostering supportive environments, emphasizing mutual respect and adaptability. However, some voiced concerns about potential abuse of flexibility or generational differences in work ethic and expectations. Focus groups informants shared a few examples when the director and staff members supported colleagues in need to take care of family members in unforeseen circumstances.

Micro-enterprises and micro-CSOs in Lithuania face several recurring challenges when implementing gender-sensitive care policies:

> **Resource Constraints:** the difficulty of balancing caregiving responsibilities with work, especially in the absence of formal support systems. For example, individuals managing elder care or children with special needs often work irregular hours or during off-peak times (e.g., early mornings or late evenings). It is even more complicated for those caring for persons with

disabilities.
Informality of Policies: most micro-enterprises and micro-CSOs operate without formal HR policies. Instead, they rely on informal, trust-based arrangements among team members. This flexibility is beneficial but can lead to inconsistencies and over-reliance on goodwill.
Burnout and Emotional Strain: Care responsibilities, especially long-term elder or disability care, contribute to emotional fatigue and burnout. This is exacerbated when individuals lack support networks or work alone (e.g., freelancers or sole proprietors), but also adds up even if there is flexibility within the team, the tasks still should be implemented.

Challenges faced by different sectors:

Service-Oriented Sectors (e.g., private kindergartens): These sectors often require physical presence, making flexibility harder to implement. Staff shortages due to caregiving responsibilities can significantly disrupt operations.
Freelancers and Individual Entrepreneurs: While they enjoy more autonomy, they also face greater pressure to maintain income while managing care duties, often without backup or support.
Team-Based Micro-Enterprises: In small teams, informal weekly planning meetings and mutual support help manage workloads. However, the absence of formal backup systems can still pose risks during emergencies.

Equal Opportunities Ombudsperson Office (2021) prepared a set of recommendations on improving the balance of care and work responsibilities. Few of them might be relevant to micro-enterprises and/or micro-CSOs, calling to:

- expand care services for dependent family members to help them reconcile their care and work commitments. The availability of care services at municipal, level would improve the situation;

- provide a mandatory right to remote work arrangements, where the nature of the work permits, for persons caring for sick adult family members and persons with disabilities;

- introduce an obligation for the employer to adopt a Work Regulation/ Description of remote (teleworking) work procedures that applies to all employees, regardless of marital status and other attributes attributable to the individual, with the exception of employees whose nature of their work precludes the use of teleworking;

- strengthen the competence of the State Labour Inspectorate to monitor and control the implementation of the family and work reconciliation measures provided for in the Labour Code.

3.2 Financial, cultural, and structural obstacles

Financial. Micro-enterprises and/or micro-CSOs often operate on tight budgets, especially NGOs reliant on project-based funding. This limits their ability to offer paid leave, hire temporary replacements, or invest in care-related infrastructure. But they allow flexible work arrangements. There is an absence of targeted government incentives or subsidies to support family-friendly practices in small organizations. In terms of service infrastructure, short-term childcare services are the most lacking, or there is a lack of flexibility in existing services. Workers who care for sick, elderly family members or relatives with disabilities are also calling for better facilities (www.manoteises.lt).

Source: https://manosveikata.lt

Cultural. Despite legal provisions for shared parental responsibilities, societal expectations still often place caregiving duties on women. Men taking parental leave or caring for sick children may face subtle ridicule or skepticism from peers or employers. Older employees tend to value loyalty and flexibility more, while younger workers are perceived as more rights-focused and less willing to compromise on personal time.

Structural Limitations

Absence of HR: Most micro-enterprises and micro-CSOs lack dedicated HR personnel, making it difficult to formalize or enforce care-related policies.
No Written Policies: Flexibility is typically managed through verbal agreements and mutual trust, which can lead to misunderstandings or unequal treatment.

In addition to the existing challenges, it is important to consider the role of technology in facilitating family-friendly policies. For example, the use of remote work tools and flexible scheduling software can help employees balance their work and caregiving responsibilities more effectively. Unfortunately, micro-enterprises and micro-CSOs do not have finances either to buy software or have staff to adapt open-source software to the needs of their enterprise or organisation.

4. Impact and benefits of equal care policies

4.1 Employee well-being, retention, and productivity

While HR specialists in big corporate companies consider that an imbalance of personal and professional life is a threat to the organization and prioritizing work-life balance is a prerequisite for an organization to have happy, healthy, and engaged employees, this is usually not the case for the micro-enterprises and/or micro-CSOs (Krazauskiene R., 2024). While a feeling of greater job satisfaction increases motivation to perform well, one of the reasons why people decide to work in micro-enterprises and/or micro-CSOs is the possibility to combine unpaid work - care responsibilities - with the paid work. Employees in micro-enterprises and/or micro-CSOs appreciated being treated with empathy and understanding, especially during personal crises. Organisations with supportive environments reported high employee loyalty and low turnover. One participant noted having employees who had stayed for over 20 years, attributing this to mutual respect and flexibility. While care responsibilities can reduce short-term productivity, the long-term benefits of employee loyalty, reduced absenteeism, and a positive work culture often outweigh these costs.

Survey "Experiences at the workplace after childcare leave" (Lithuanian Diversity Charter, 2023) analyzed the experiences of parents who have returned to work after child care leave and the efforts of employers to retain their employees. The answers were not disaggregated by the size of the enterprise, though. The results showed that two-thirds of workers with a child returned to their former workplace after parental leave. One-third (32%) changed jobs, mostly for several reasons: one in four wanted to leave before parental leave (25%), 23% were influenced by the fact that the employer did not offer flexible working hours, the salary was not as high as that of their other colleagues (22%), and there were no opportunities for career development and/or professional growth (21%). Almost half (45%) did not have the opportunity to work flexible hours when they returned to work. This was most often the case for those on lower incomes, as well as for those living in rural areas and those who changed jobs after parental leave. One in three workers (28%) say they feel they must choose between spending time with their family and pursuing their career.

4.2 Evidence on the advantages of gender mainstreaming in care responsibilities

In general, micro-enterprises and micro-CSOs that embrace gender mainstreaming and care-friendly policies tend to foster more cohesive, supportive and resilient teams. These organizations are better equipped to handle unexpected absences and maintain continuity. Gender-sensitive policies contribute to a more inclusive and empathetic workplace. They encourage open communication, mutual support, and a sense of shared responsibility. But among Lithuanian micro-enterprises and micro-CSOs these policies are not formalized. Although not always explicitly advertised, organizations known for their supportive culture are more attractive to potential employees, particularly those with caregiving responsibilities. Leaders and staff of micro-enterprises and micro-CSOs acknowledged that care-friendly policies enhance an organization’s reputation, especially in sectors where empathy and social responsibility are valued. However, this reputation is often built informally through word-of-mouth rather than strategic branding.

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5. Best practices and case studies

No case studies were identified due to the cultural and social environment regarding micro-enterprises and micro-CSOs, that do not require specific formal measures, as flexible work arrangement is their forte.

Conclusion

Micro-enterprises and micro-CSOs in Lithuania demonstrate a strong commitment to integrating care responsibilities into their organisational cultures, despite facing significant financial and structural barriers. Their reliance on informal, trust-based systems reflects both a strength and a vulnerability. While these systems foster flexibility and empathy, they also lack the consistency and protection that formal policies can provide.

To support these organizations, policymakers should consider:

- Introducing targeted financial incentives for care-friendly practices.
- Providing templates and guidance for formalizing flexible work arrangements.
- Promoting awareness campaigns to challenge gender stereotypes and normalize shared caregiving responsibilities.

By addressing these challenges, Lithuania can further empower its micro-organizations to lead by example in creating inclusive, resilient, and equitable workplaces.

Collection of good practices

CAREdiZO partners aim to collect good practices from across Europe. You may check this file to find about micro enterprises microCSOs already identified. This file will be updated regularly through various project activities such as training workshops and from input of our participants of our digital community of practice.

If you are a CEO, head of the Human Resources department, or an employee in a very small enterprise or civil society organization and you have adopted good practices regarding care and the integration of gender equality (at a formal or informal level), please contact the CAREdiZO program partners in your country or fill out this form (https://forms.gle/HYa46W4h9gPtbbLH8) to be included in the CAREdiZO collection of good practices.

Conclusions

This research report for the CAREdiZO project, focuses on discovering gender mainstreaming and family-friendly policies within the complex landscape of micro-enterprises and micro-CSOs across Greece, Lithuania, Cyprus and Bulgaria. While these institutions represent the majority of the economic and civil landscape in the EU, their efforts at gender mainstreaming and creating family-friendly environments show signs are both promising but uncertain. CAREdiZO researchers noted a lack of data in almost all partner countries on gender mainstreaming and family-friendly policies within micro-enterprises and micro-CSOs, and thus making it challenging to conduct large-scale desk research and thus choosing to form focus groups.

A central finding in all partner countries was the adoption of informal HR policies when it comes to gender equality or family-friendly practices. This approach allows for flexibility, support and empathy inside the organizations and are often managed through informal, trust-based arrangements and verbal agreements. On the other hand, such strategies might be inconsistent, partially protecting the employees and not being that transparent.

One of the most pressing barriers towards forming such policies are the financial and HR resource constraints. For instance, many micro enterprises and micro CSO often operate without dedicated HR staff, a fact that makes it difficult for such institutions to have a consistent flow on replacement systems and development and monitoring relevant policy. Many of them also depend on project based funding, making it difficult to support paid leave and hire staff temporary replacements since there is a lack of governmental support.
Another persisting barrier are cultural and societal barriers that are deep rooted in all societies. They are mainly linked with traditional gender roles for persons with caring responsibilities, since the social contract that care is primarily a woman’s responsibility is still disproportionately pertaining. In addition, male employees who would like to take e.g. a parental leave may face discrimination and social pressures. These stereotypes, unfortunately, still shape workplace dynamics.

Additionally, operational challenges in a team with few members may hinder the operation of the whole organization. The absence of even one employee may have an impact on task distribution, potentially leading to unbearable workload and burnout among the remaining members of the team, especially if other complementary support mechanisms do not exist.

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Apart from existing obstacles, one can identify a positive impact of practices applied within these organizations. For instance, the presence of flexible work arrangements (e.g. flexibility in working pure, remote work) adds value for the employees and boosts their well being, loyalty and job satisfaction. In this way, these Micro Enterprises or CSO's can have higher retention rates and increased productivity reducing at the same time the caregiver burden.

Another positive impact even in informal policy adoption is the reputation building of such enterprises. When a workplace has a supportive and empathetic culture they may attract and retain talented staff, creating more value than formal branding efforts.

Concluding, this research serves as a critical foundation for understanding the challenges, opportunities, and current practices in gender mainstreaming and family-friendly policies among the micro-enterprises and micro-CSOs ecosystem in partner countries. In other words, its scope is primarily diagnostic. For anyone interested in learning more real life examples, as mentioned also in a previous chapter, a complementary second report will be developed under the CAREdiZO project focusing on applied good practices in case studies of mocro-enterprises and micro CSOs. This collection can inspire and support other organizations into drafting or bettering their family friendly, work life balance, and gender mainstreaming policies.

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Annexes

Desk research report guidelines/questionnaire

Country: 1. Introduction (1 page)

This section provides an overview of the project context and objectives of the desk research.

Annexes

2. National context *(1-2 pages)*

2.1 Overview of survey data (if available) on micro-enterprises in the country and their level of awareness regarding the key issues.

2.2 Overview of survey data (if available) on micro-CSOs in the country and their level of awareness regarding the key issues.
This can include:
Data for the presence of micro-enterprises and micro-CSOs in the country, including sector distribution and employment statistics.

Identify existing survey data (if available) on micro-enterprises' and micro-CSOs awareness, attitudes, and challenges regarding gender mainstreaming and family-friendly policies.

Investigate any documented efforts, policies, or incentives that encourage micro-enterprises and micro-CSOs to adopt inclusive workplace practices.
(please make sure that these are not the same as in the first desk research report).
If data is not available, use this section to provide a broader national context beyond actual statistics. Leverage your own knowledge of the ecosystem, drawing from your experience working with micro-enterprises and micro-CSOs.

Annexes

3. Challenges and barriers *(maximum 3 pages)*

3.1 Common challenges in adopting gender-sensitive care policies

- What are the most frequently cited/observed challenges that micro-enterprises and micro-CSOs face when implementing gender-sensitive care policies?
- How do these challenges vary across different sectors and organizational structures?
- What are the perceptions of leadership and employees regarding the feasibility of integrating equal care policies?

3.2 Financial, cultural, and structural obstacles

- What financial constraints prevent micro-organizations from adopting family-friendly policies (e.g., budget limitations, lack of government incentives)?
- How do cultural attitudes and societal norms influence decision-making around parental leave, elder care, and flexible work arrangements?
- What structural limitations (e.g., lack of HR capacity, absence of policy frameworks) hinder the effective implementation of care-related policies?

Annexes

4. Impact and benefits of equal care policies *(maximum 3 pages)*

4.1 Employee well-being, retention, and productivity

- How does the presence (or absence) of family-friendly policies impact employee well-being, job satisfaction, and work-life balance?
- What is the effect of equal care policies on employee retention rates in micro-enterprises and micro-CSOs?
- Are there measurable productivity gains associated with organizations that implement care-related benefits?

4.2 Evidence on the advantages of gender mainstreaming in care responsibilities

- How do micro-organizations that actively endorse gender mainstreaming compare in performance to those that do not?
- How does gender mainstreaming affects hiring more experienced staff, their profitability?
- How applying gender mainstreaming affects the social image of a micro enterprise/organization and its overall acceptance?
- How do gender mainstreaming policies influence workplace culture, team dynamics, and overall inclusivity?

Annexes

5. Best practices and case studies *(1 page)*
This will serve the purpose of D2.2 Good practices collection and results | if the material overlaps with case studies and best practices gathered for 3.1 (please check) we can use the relevant ones for D2.2

Disclaimer The research questions above serve as a guide and should be adapted to reflect the specific context of each partner's country.

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