LUNDS UNIVERSITET
HUMANISTISKA OCH TEOLOGISKA FAKULTETERNA

She Does It All: The Devaluation of Caregiving in EU Work-Life Balance Policy

A WPR analysis of the EU Work-Life Balance

Amayah Togba

AVD. FÖR MÄNSKLIGA RÄTTIGHETER
HISTORISKA INSTITUTIONEN
Kurskod: MRSK62
Termin: Vårterminen 2025
Handledare: Georgia de Leeuw
Omfång: 10068

HUMAN RIGHTS STUDIES
LUND UNIVERSITY

Abstract

This thesis explores how mothers as workers, care, and gender equality are constructed in EU work-life balance policy. The aim is to contribute to a deeper understanding of how institutional visions of equality are constructed and what they include or exclude. The analysis focuses on two central policy documents: the 2019 Work-Life Balance Directive and the 2017 Commission initiative on work-life balance for working parents and carers. By implementing Nancy Fraser's justice principles and models alongside Carol Bacchi's "What's the Problem Represented to Be?" (WPR) approach, the analysis examines how caregiving, work and autonomy are framed.

The study finds that EU policy largely defines gender equality through uniform labour market participation. Caregiving is represented as a barrier to employment rather than a right or value in its own terms. While the policy promotes formal rights such as parental leave and flexible work, these are shaped by economic logic and primarily support those already in stable employment. Informal care, structural inequalities, and diverse caregiving realities are largely left unaddressed. This conclusion highlights the disconnect between symbolic goals and material support for care. Equality remains tied to paid work, and caregiving is only valued when compatible with economic participation. The study argues for broader, more inclusive policy visions that support caregiving as a legitimate social contribution whether or not it occurs alongside formal employment.

Keywords: work-life balance, caregiving, mothers, gender equality

Hon gör allt: Nedvärderingen av omsorgsarbete i EU:s politik för balans mellan arbete och privatliv

Denna uppsats undersöker hur mödrar som arbetstagare, omsorg och jämställdhet konstrueras i EU:s politik för balans mellan arbete och privatliv. Syftet är att bidra till en djupare förståelse för hur institutionella visioner om jämställdhet formas och vad de inkluderar respektive utesluter. Analysen fokuserar på två centrala policydokument: Arbetslivsbalansdirektiv från 2019 och Kommissionens initiativ från 2017 om balans mellan arbete och privatliv för arbetande föräldrar och vårdgivare. Genom att tillämpa Nancy Frasers rättviseprinciper och modeller tillsammans med Carol Bacchis analysverktyg "What's the Problem Represented to Be?" (WPR), granskas hur omsorg, arbete och autonomi ramas in.

Studien visar att EU:s politik i stor utsträckning definierar jämställdhet genom likformig arbetsmarknadsdeltagande. Omsorg framställs som ett hinder för sysselsättning snarare än som en rättighet eller ett värde i sig. Även om politiken främjar formella rättigheter som föräldraledighet och flexibelt arbete, formas dessa utifrån ekonomisk logik och gynnar främst dem som redan har en stabil anställning. Informell omsorg, strukturella ojämlikheter och olika omsorgsrealiteter lämnas i stort sett utan åtgärd. Slutsatsen lyfter fram ett glapp mellan symboliska mål och faktiskt stöd för omsorg. Jämställdhet förblir kopplad till betalt arbete, och omsorg värderas endast när den är förenlig med ekonomisk delaktighet. Uppsatsen argumenterar för en bredare och mer inkluderande policy visioner som erkänner omsorg som ett legitimt samhällsbidrag. Oavsett om det sker inom eller utanför formell sysselsättning.

Table of contents

1. Introduction

Gender equality is a core value of the European Union.[1] Over the years, the EU has introduced several strategies, policies and legal instruments aimed at improving the position of women, particularly in the labour market.[2] A key priority has been to increase women's employment rates across member states, with work-life balance policies promoted as a way to help women reconcile work with caregiving responsibilities.[3] Today, this goal is reflected in instruments such as the Work-life balance Directive and the European Pillar of Social rights, alongside broader strategies like the EU Gender Equality Strategy 2020-2025, which collectively seek to promote equal sharing of care responsibilities, strengthen social protection, and support access to leave and flexible working arrangements.[4]

Despite ambitious equality goals, many women continue to experience that their role in society is not fully recognised or valued. A recent report shows that 41 percent of European mothers feel their caregiving work is overlooked, both economically and socially. Moreover, 29 percent of European mothers are dissatisfied with the duration of maternity leave, and 44 percent with the allowances received during that period. At the same time, EU discourse continues to prioritise policies that promote labour market participation, without addressing the deeper structural powers that shape how care, motherhood and work are organised.[5]

While these measures aim to meet goals of gender equality and economic prosperity, feminist scholars argue that gender equality strategies that focus on the inclusion of the labour market can reinforce structural inequalities if they leave underlying gender norms around care and autonomy unchallenged.[6]

---

[1] European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights, *EU Charter of Fundamental Rights – Title III: Equality*, https://fra.europa.eu/en/eu-charter/title/title-iii-equality (accessed 26 May 2025).
[2] European Commission (2024), *Women's situation in the Labour market*, https://commission.europa.eu/strategy-and-policy/policies/justice-and-fundamental-rights/gender-equality/women-labour-market-work-life-balance/womens-situation-labour-market_en (accessed 21 Mars 2025).
[3] Ibid.
[4] European Comission, *European Pillar of Social Rights*, https://employment-social-affairs.ec.europa.eu/policies-and-activities/european-pillar-social-rights-building-fairer-and-more-inclusive-european-union_en (accessed 8 April 2025).
[5] Make Mothers Matter, *State of Motherhood in Europe 2024*, https://makemothersmatter.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/03/MMM-State-of-Motherhood-in-Europe-2024.pdf, (accessed 3 April 2025), p. 7.
[6] Emanuela Lombardo and Petra Meier (2016), 'Policy', in *The Oxford Handbook of Feminist Theory*, eds. Lisa Disch and Mary Hawksworth (Oxford: Oxford University Press, p. 617.

This raises critical questions on what kind of caregiving is supported in EU policy discourse? And how is motherhood articulated in relation to rights and gender equality? What happens to those who provide care outside the formal labour market?

1.1. Purpose and research questions

The purpose of this study is to critically examine how EU policy discourse frames mothers, caregiving and gender equality within the context of work-life balance. By analysing the 2019 Work-Life Balance Directive and the 2017 Commission initiative, the study aims to uncover how certain forms of care are legitimised or overlooked, and how policy structures shape which caregiving roles and rights are recognised. The study analyses this through a feminist and discourse-oriented lens and WPR model, with the aim of exploring how ideas about equality are constructed in policy and what perspectives or experiences are made visible, overlooked, or excluded in that process.

Research questions

- How are mothers, in relation to work-life balance, acknowledged, addressed, or excluded in EU policy discourse?
- How are gender equality and caregiving represented in EU policy discourse and what visions of these concepts are made possible or foreclosed through this framing?

1.2. Material and source criticism

1.2.1 Primary Material

This study is based on a qualitative analysis of two central EU policy documents: the Work-Life Balance Directive and the Commission's Communication title: An initiative to Support Work-Life Balance for Working Parents and Carers. These materials were selected because they represent key elements in the EU's current approach to promoting gender equality in relation to caregiving, work and family life.[7]

[7] Directive (EU) 2019/1158 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 20 June 2019 on work-life balance for parents and carers and repealing Council Directive 2010/18/EU, OJ L 188, 12.7.2019. https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=CELEX:32019L1158; European Commission, *An Initiative to Support Work-Life Balance for Working Parents and Carers*, COM(2017) 252 final, Brussels, 26 April 2017. https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=CELEX:52017DC0252

Adopted in 2019, the Directive is a binding legislation and establishes minimum standards for paternity, parental, and carer's leave, as well as the right to request flexible working arrangements.[8] The initiative serves as the discursive foundation, describing the political motivations, problem definition, and gender equality objectives behind the directive. Together, the two documents offer both legal and discursive insight into how the EU defines and approaches the relationship between caregiving, gender equality and labour market participation.

The accompanying 2017 initiative functions as a non-binding policy document that outlines the rationale behind the directive. The directive was retrieved from the EUR-Lex Legal portal, and the initiative was accessed through the European Commission's official website.[9] Both sources are institutional and widely used in EU legal and political studies, which makes them suitable for a critical analysis of how the EU frames social policy and equality.

This selection allows for an analysis that goes beyond the surface and focuses on how these documents construct rights, responsibilities and social norms. In particular, the study focuses on how mothers, caregiving, and gender equality are discussed in relation to workers rights, entitlements, and how these are shaped by broader assumptions about care, work, and autonomy. The material also reflects the EU's role as both normative and legislative actor in shaping policy across member states.

1.2.1 Scope and Delimitations

This thesis does not analyse the full text of the directive or initiative. Instead, selected sections were chosen based on their relevance to the thesis analytical focus on caregiving, gender equality, flexible work, and parental entitlements. In the directive, this includes Recitals 6, 10, 11, 34 and 35 as well as Articles 5, 6 and 9.[10] These articles directly address rights and entitlements related to leave and flexibility in connection to work-life balance. Article 4, which addresses paternity leave, is not a main focus of the analysis, as the study primarily centers on mothers in relation to the study's topics. However, male-focused aspects of the directive may be referenced in a comparative or supporting manner where relevant. Articles dealing with technical, procedural or implementation matters such as 10-22, were

[8] Directive (EU) 2019/1158, pp. 86-88.
[9] Directive (EU) 2019/1158 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 20 June 2019 on work-life balance for parents and carers and repealing Council Directive 2010/18/EU, OJ L 188, 12.7.2019, https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=CELEX:32019L1158, (accessed 1 april 2025)
[10] Ibid., pp. 79-80, 86-88.

excluded, as they are not directly relevant to the discursive focus of the study.[11]

From the initiative, the analysis focuses primarily on pages 2-6 and 8-10, which include the problem framing, policy rationale, and socio-economic justifications. Annexes and statistical sections are excluded, as the study does not aim to evaluate quantitative outcomes but instead focuses on the discursive reasoning that legitimises EU work-life policy. This study also limits its scope to EU-level documentation and does not include national implementations or legal challenges. While some of these national variations would be relevant, they fall outside the aims and analytical structure of this thesis. In the same way, this study does not offer an in-depth analysis of how men or fatherhood are represented in EU policy, as the primary lens is focused on how mothers and caregiving are constructed.

1.2.3 Source criticism

The directive and the initiative are official EU documents, published through institutional platforms such as EUR-lex and the Commission's website. While they are considered reliable and formal sources in legal sense, they are not neutral descriptions of reality. These are produced within specific political and institutional contexts, and they aim to promote certain values, priorities and solutions. Because of this, it is important to read them critically and reflect on how they represent different social roles, like mothers, caregiving and work.

Following Bacchi's WPR approach, the documents are treated not just as policy texts, but as part of a broader discourse, one that helps shape how problems are defined and whose perspectives are included or excluded. In this study, the material is analysed to understand what ideas about gender equality and care are recognised and which ones are left out. This also means being aware of how the EU, as an institution, emphasises economic goals like economic growth, social cohesion and productivity, which can influence how care is represented. Recognising these texts as actors in policy discourse rather than passive legal instruments enables a more critical engagement with their assumptions, silences, and ideological foundations.

[11] Directive (EU) 2019/1158, pp. 88-91.

1.3. Research ethics considerations

This study has been conducted in accordance with established academic ethical principles. The analysis is based entirely on public documents, which means that no personal data has been collected and no individuals have been contacted or involved. There are therefore no risks of harm or breaches of confidentiality. All documents used are publicly accessible via EU platforms. No sensitive information has been handled. While the study does not involve human participants, ethical considerations also extend to how subjects are represented in discourse. The analysis does not claim to represent the experience or voices of all women or mothers. Rather, it aims to critically examine how mothers, care and gender equality are framed within EU policy discourse. Care has been taken to approach these topics with sensitivity and respect, acknowledging the diversity of caregiving experiences. The researcher has sought to remain aware of personal positionality and to avoid imposing a singular agenda, in line with feminist and ethical commitments.

2. Previous research

This chapter presents selected feminist literature that forms the foundation for understanding how mothers, care and gender equality are constructed and represented in public and policy discourse. The review brings together both foundational and contemporary contributions, aiming to offer a broad thematically focused perspective. Although feminist motherhood studies are well established, recent scholarship that explicitly examines how motherhood is framed in European policy context, particularly in relation to rights, care and equality remain limited. While the selected studies are situated in different national and cultural contexts, they collectively inform a broader understanding of the issues. In response to this gap, the literature is organised thematically to capture both cultural-ideological and institutional dimensions of the topic.

The first two themes explore how motherhood and mothers are shaped by cultural norms and societal expectations. *Theme 1* discusses the ideal of "intensive mothering" and how this produces narrow standards for what constitutes a good motherhood. *Theme 2* focuses on the "ideal worker" norm and individual choice and autonomy in relation to work-life balance in the Norwegian context. The final two themes address how institutions and policies construct motherhood. *Theme 3* looks at how maternal care, rights and needs are acknowledged or overlooked in policy discourse. *Theme 4* highlights feminist efforts to reframe stay-at home mothers and the devaluation of care through critical approaches, challenging dominant power structures and normative ideals.

2.1 Norms of "good motherhood"

This section draws on two authors: Dillaway and Paré, and Schmidt et al. In *Locating Mother: How Cultural Debates About Stay-at-Home Versus Working Mothers Define Women and Home* Dillaway analyzes how U.S cultural discourses construct and uphold rigid binaries between "stay at home mothers" and "working mothers" that leaves little room for hybrid or flexible identities.[12] Stay at home mothers are idealised as the "good mother" who is selfless and nurturing while working mothers, due to their employment, are often portrayed as

[12] Heather Dillaway and Elisabeth M. Paré (2008), "Locating Mother: How Cultural Debates About Stay-at-Home Versus Working Mothers Define Women and Home", *Journal of Family Issues* 29(4), pp. 437-438, 442. DOI: https://doi.org/10.1177/0192513X07310309.

neglectful or deviant for failing to embody "intensive mothering" which is a model of mothering that is rooted in self-sacrifice, constant presence in the domestic sphere and unpaid work.[13] Similarly, Schmidt et al., in *What makes a good mother? Two decades of research reflecting social norms of motherhood* their review of literature from western democratic countries, including Europe, identified five dominant norms of mothering ideals that define what constitutes a "good mother": these include the "present mother", "future-oriented" mother, "public mother" and "happy mother".[14] These norms reflect neoliberal expectations that mothers must be physically present, emotionally in control and maintain happiness all while putting these expectations secondary to their professional success.[15] These expectations, paired with limited institutional support, create contradictory pressures that often lead to guilt, emotional stress and constrained maternal agency.[16] Furthermore, the authors explain that various social actors, including family, peers, institutions, and media, actively reinforce these ideals, shaping how motherhood is understood, performed and judged.[17]

2.2 Ideal worker norm and the performativity of balance

This section begins with Joan C. Williams book: *Unbending gender: Why Family and Work Conflict and What to do about It*, in which she analyzes how the ideal worker norm marginalises caregiving and reinforces structural inequality in the U.S.[18] Williams conceptualises the "ideal worker" as someone fully available to their employer, without interruptions for family life, a model historically based on male breadwinners with wives at home.[19] As women started entering the workforce, it was expected of them to emulate male standards of work.[20] Mothers who cannot meet these standards often face what Williams calls the "maternal wall": stalled promotions, lower expectations and exclusion from career tracks.[21] Moreover, Williams shows how part-time roles are systematically devalued often

[13] Dillaway and Paré, pp. 444-445.
[14] Alice Schmidt, Margrit Eichler and Annette Nierobisch (2022), "What Makes a Good Mother? Two Decades of Research Reflecting Social Norms of Motherhood", *Journal of Family Theory & Review* 15(1), pp. 57, 62-64. DOI: https://doi.org/10.1111/jftr.12488.
[15] Schmidt et al., pp. 62-65.
[16] Ibid., pp. 65-67.
[17] Ibid., p. 62.
[18] Joan C. Williams (2000), *Unbending Gender: Why Family and Work and Conflict What to Do About It*, Oxford University Press, pp. 64-65.
[19] Williams, pp. 65-70.
[20] Williams, p. 65.
[21] Williams, pp. 69-73.

leading to lower pay, fewer benefits and minimal advancement that leads to trapping many women in dead-end positions.[22]

While Joan C. Williams reveals how structural norms like the ideal worker model penalise caregiving and push mothers into rigid labour expectations, Siri Øyslebø Sørensen offers an analysis of how individual choice and autonomy are framed within postfeminist and neoliberal discourse, especially in the context of work-life balance and motherhood in Norway.[23] She argues that "choice" is not simply an expression of agency, instead it becomes something women are expected to show.[24] They must appear as if they are making independent choices, even though their options are limited.[25] Mothers face pressure surrounding financial responsibility, rigid job expectations and childcare options.[26] Sørensen identifies three dominant types of motherhood that showcase the pressures mothers face: the "part-time working good mother", who balances part-time paid work with childcare and is culturally affirmed as the "exceptional career woman" who manages high-level work and motherhood but is portrayed as rare and almost unrealistically capable; and the "failing career woman", who cannot meet either ideals and is subtly blamed for lacking balance.[27] These characters reflect societal expectations shaped by financial demands and fixed job structures, all of which are obscured by neoliberal rhetoric of personal choice and autonomy.[28] Rather than reflecting real agency, the language of choice acts performatively, legitimizing hierarchies under the guise of individual freedom.[29]

2.3 Policy Discourses and human rights law

This section begins with Guerrinas article: "Mothering in Europe: Feminist Critique of European Policies on Motherhood and Employment" analysis of how EU maternity and parental leave policies emphasise formal equality and economic productivity, while neglecting the recognition and support of care-giving needs.[30] She particularly critiques the

---

[22] Ibid., pp. 72-74.
[23] Siri Øyslebø Sørensen (2017), "The Performativity of Choice: Postfeminist Perspectives in Work-Life Balance", *Gender, Work & Organization*, 24.3, pp. 297-298. DOI: https://doi.org/10.1111/gwao.12163
[24] Ibid., p. 308.
[25] Ibid., p. 298.
[26] Ibid., pp. 304-307.
[27] Ibid., pp 304-306
[28] Ibid., pp. 308-309.
[29] Ibid., p. 304.
[30] Roberta Guerrina (2002), "Mothering in Europe: Feminist Critique of European Policies on Motherhood and Employment", *European Journal of Women's Studies* 9(1), pp. 55-59. DOI: https://doi.org/10.1177/1350506802009001381.

Pregnant Workers Directive and the Parental Leave Directive, arguing that they promote formal equality while neglecting substantive support for caregiving.[31] This reflects a deeper dichotomy in EU equality policy that focuses on protecting women as workers, rather than prompting their rights as mothers and full citizens.[32] For example, Guerrina highlights how access to leave is frequently tied to employment status which excludes those in precarious or informal work, many of whom are women.[33] Guerrina argues that this policy fails to encourage a redefinition of social structures of oppression that are particularly evident for working mothers and that influence women's choices about motherhood and employment.[34] Instead of challenging the male-breadwinner model, the EU's approach often reinforces it by focusing on labour force participation while neglecting unpaid care.[35] She concludes that resolving tension between public life and private responsibilities requires more than formal equality, it demands cooperation between the EU, national governments and employers to design socioeconomic structures that will allow women to reconcile their role as a mother and worker.[36]

Building on the above policy critique, Bach-Golecka examines how motherhood is addressed in European human rights law, highlighting the gap between provisions of human rights treaties in motherhood and their limited practical implementation.[37] For instance, although Article 25 in the UDHR affirms the right of mothers and children to special care and assistance", it primarily focuses on pregnancy and the immediate postpartum period.[38] Bach-Golecka contends that this right should be understood as an ongoing and structured responsibility of public authorities to provide social assistance specifically formulated to address the needs of mothers and children and distinct from general welfare provisions.[39] Similarly, she critiques Article 33 of the Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union, that while it proclaims the right to paid maternity and parental leave, it is often implemented in ways that fail to provide substantive support.[40] Ultimately, she concludes that

---

[31] Ibid.
[32] Ibid., p. 56.
[33] Ibid.
[34] Ibid.
[35] Ibid., p. 64.
[36] Ibid.
[37] Dobrochna Bach-Golecka (2022), "Motherhood and law: Reflections on human rights provisions and selected judgements of the European courts", *Studia Iuridica* 90, p. 25. DOI: https://doi.org/10.31338/2544-3135.si.2022-90.2.
[38]Ibid., pp. 30-31.
[39] Bach-Golecka, pp. 28-29.
[40] Ibid., 38-39.

this persistent disconnect between legal texts and their implementation reflects a broader failure to translate human rights principles into lived realities for mothers.[41]

2.4 Feminist reframings of motherhood and domestic work

In "Feminism and Stay-at-Home Motherhood: Some Critical Reflections and Implications for Mothers on Social Assistance", Marks contends that feminist analyses of motherhood have prioritised women's access to paid labour and state-supported childcare as essential to gender equality.[42] However, she critiques this approach for marginalizing stay-at-home mothers, particularly those on social assistance by overlooking caregiving as a valid and socially valuable choice.[43] Drawing on Canadian, American and European contexts, she argues that both liberal and socialist feminists have typically framed motherhood through the biased lens of economic independence, often treating full-time caregiving as economically vulnerable or personally disempowering.[44] For many women, particularly those in low-income paid or insecure jobs, staying at home may be a deliberate choice in response to lack of access to child care, income, and community support.[45] Yet in both North America and Britain, welfare reforms over the past decade have increasingly pressured mothers, especially single mothers to meet the same standards as men by participating in paid work and proving their worth through economic productivity.[46]

Furthermore, feminist legal scholar Emanuela Sedacca, highlights the issue of how care and domestic work carried out in the private sphere has long been separated from economic life and as a result made invisible or devalued.[47] She explains how this separation has contributed to framing caregiving as something natural to women, rather than as legitimate labour.[48] Tasks such as child-rearing or household care are often viewed as acts of love, not as work that deserves recognition, income security, or legal protection.[49] This narrative continues to shape how certain forms of labour, particularly unpaid caregiving, are excluded from

---

[41] Ibid., pp. 53-54.
[42] Lynne Marks (2004), "Feminism and Stay-at-Home Motherhood: Some Critical Reflections and Implications for Mothers on Social Assistance", *Atlantis: Critical Studies in Gender, Culture & Social Justice*, p. 73.
[43] Marks, pp. 73-74.
[44] Ibid., pp. 73, 75.
[45] Ibid., pp. 73-75.
[46] Ibid., p. 77.
[47] Nathalie Sedacca (2022), 'Domestic Workers, the "Family Worker" Exemption from Minimum Wage, and Gendered Devaluation of Women's Work', *Industrial Law Journal* 771, pp. 777.
[48] Ibid.
[49] Ibid., pp. 771, 776-778.

definitions of productivity and rights.[50] Sedacca argues that unpaid care work is essential to the functioning of society and should be recognised as a foundational contribution to the economy.[51] This perspective aligns closely with Mark's call to reframe caregiving as a personal dependency, but as a valuable and necessary form of social participation that deserves institutional support.

[50] Ibid., pp. 774-779.
[51] Ibid., pp. 779-780.

3. Theoretical framework

This chapter presents the theoretical framework used to analyse how the EU Work-life Balance Directive constructs care and mothers in relation to work, family-life and gender equality. The analysis implements Nancy Fraser's feminist theory of justice, with a focus on two of her normative principles: antiandrocentrism and income equality.[52] These principles function as critical tools to examine what values and assumptions are embedded in the policy texts and what kinds of subjects are made visible, supported or excluded. In addition, Fraser's concept of the universal breadwinner and caregiver parity models are used to contrast the directive's framing. These models help reveal how work norms in relation to gender equality are conceptualised. The framework is applied throughout the analysis to explore how care is understood and positioned in relation to rights, recognition and social participation.

3.1 Nancy Fraser's normative principles and models

3.1.1 Antiandrocentrism and the universal breadwinner model

The principle of antiandrocentrism challenges the assumption that male-coded life patterns, such as full-time, uninterrupted wage work represent the model for all. Fraser argues that when policies assume this model, they risk reinforcing a narrow idea of who counts as a full citizen which in their perception is someone who has no caregiving responsibilities and can always prioritise work.[53] This principle expects women to assimilate into structures built around male norms, instead of questioning those norms or accommodating caregiving as a legitimate and shared responsibility.[54]

Fraser's universal breadwinner model captures this logic. The universal breadwinner model is the idea that in order for men and when to be equal in access to carers women should follow male standards of work.[55] It reflects a vision of equality where women are brought into the workforce on the same terms as men, but without reconstructing the social organisation of

[52] Nancy Fraser (1994), *After the Family Wage: Gender Equality and the Welfare State*, Political Theory, Vol. 22, No. 4, pp. 591-618.
[53] Ibid., p. 600.
[54] Ibid., pp. 599-600.
[55] Clare Chambers (2024), 'Liberalism, Feminism and the Gendered Division of Labour' in Catriona McKinnon and Dario Castiglionde (eds), *Freedom and Equality: Essays on Liberalism and Feminism*, Oxford University Press, p. 103.

care.[56] This approach, while often framed as progressive, leaves the gendered division of labour intact and positions care as an obstacle to overcome rather than as a valuable and shared societal responsibility. This understanding is also strengthened by Clare Chambers feminist liberal critique of the model. Chambers challenges the liberal emphasis on formal equality, arguing that liberal-democratic states often seek *gender parity* by encouraging women to integrate into paid labour without deconstructing the gendered division of labour.[57] This form of equality is often structured around male norms and maintained by liberal neutrality, which masks structural disadvantages as personal choices.[58] Chambers also critiques how policies shaped by the universal breadwinner logic reward men who participate in care through for example paternity leave, while penalising women who continue to take on unpaid caregiving roles thereby reinforcing neoliberal values that only recognise care when it disrupts male coded norms.[59]

3.1.2 Income equality and caregiver parity

Fraser's principle of income equality is not only about equal pay, but also about whether different social roles, particularly caregiving, offer economic security.[60] This principle is especially relevant in the context of EU work-life balance policy, to analyse if gender equality is tied to labour market participation and how and to what extent care work is economically supported. The principle helps expose how caregiving affects access to benefits, income and long-term financial stability and how certain groups of families are systematically disadvantaged.

In a postindustrial context, Fraser argues that state benefits are often tied to employment, making it harder for caregivers, especially women to achieve economic security.[61] This logic assumes that equality can be achieved by supporting more women into work, while leaving the underlying structure of how care is valued untouched. The result is a policy model that rewards those who mirror the full-time uninterrupted employment norm and penalises those who do not. Fraser's caregiver parity model captures this understanding. It presents a system where informal caregiving, even when paid, is treated as a socially necessary labour

[56] Fraser, pp. 602-604.
[57] Chambers, pp. 101-102.
[58] Ibid., pp. 108-109, 103-104.
[59] Ibid., pp. 111-113.
[60] Fraser, p. 598.
[61] Fraser, pp. 603-604.

deserving of financial and institutional support.[62] Chambers strengthens this analysis and argues that women are often penalised for caregiving in a way that men are not. In liberal policy frameworks, men who take leave are rewarded and praised, while women who reduce hours or stay home face long term disadvantaged, such as lower pensions, lost benefits and reduced employability.[63]

The selected principles from Fraser's theory are used in this study as analytical tools to explore how the EU Work-life Balance Directive framed the relationship between care, work and gender equality. The analysis pays particular attention to how female workers, specially mothers are positioned in relation to both work and caregiving, and how different forms of care, including informal caregiving and formal childcare are represented in policy. These perspectives help as to how different social roles particularly caregiving and work are positioned in relation to rights, recognition and economic security. By combiniíng Fraser's principles of antiandrocentrism and income equality with Bacchi's WPR approach this framework supports a critical and contextual analysis of how gender equality and care are constructed. Rather than measuring the success or failure of the policy, the aim is to investigate how equality is defined: Who is seen as the ideal citizen? What kinds of care are legitimised? And which family models are supported or foreclosed?

[62] Ibid., p. 608.
[63] Chambers, p. 101-102.

4. Methodological approach

This study applies a poststructuralist discourse analytical approach, implementing Carol Bacchis, "What the Problem Represented to be?" (WPR) framework.[64] This methodology comes from the idea that policy texts do not merely reflect societal problems but actively participate in constructing them.[65] Bachi's approach is deeply influenced by Michel Foucault's theories of discourse and power, emphasizing how knowledge and meaning are produced through language and institutional practices.[66] In line with this, Bergström and Boréus emphasise that discourse is not merely a linguistic expression but also a societal practice but also a societal practice embedded in power relations.[67]

The term "policy" is generally associated with an action, something that initiates or responds to an issue. There is often an underlying assumption that policy is something inherently positive, created to solve a problem. But solving a problem presumes that one exists, even when that problem isn't clearly defined. In most government policies, the problem isn't stated outright, instead it's implied through the idea that something needs to be improved or changed. This is exactly where the WPR approach becomes relevant. It invites us to question and make visible the implicit problem representation that shapes public texts and policy discourse.[68]

This method is well suited to studies aiming to reveal implicit ideologies, underlying assumptions, and silences within seemingly neutral policy documents. I am especially interested in how this approach helps uncover the power dynamics and normative ideas hidden within what often appears as neutral or technical policy language. For this study, WPR supports a closer examination of which roles and family models are made visible, such as the dual full-time earner model and how care is framed in relation to work. I use it to explore what kind of caregiving is recognised and what is unacknowledged, and how mothers are positioned within this discourse. Rather than claiming neutrality, I see this method as a way to question dominant representations and allow room for approaching the topics differently by rethinking care, equality and work-life balance.

---

[64] Göran Bergström och Kristina Boréus (2017), *Textens mening och makt*, 4th edn, Lund: Studentlitteratur, p. 271.
[65] Carol Bacchi, *Analysing Policy (2009), What's the Problem Represented to be?*, Frenchs Forest: Pearson, pp. 1-2.
[66] Bergström and Boréus, pp. 271, 259.
[67] Ibid., p. 255.
[68] Bacchi, Introduction.

The WPR model is built around six guiding questions that examine how policies construct societal problems and legitimate specific understandings of the world. For this study three of six questions have been selected due to their relevance for analyzing how mothers, care, work and family-life are framed in the selected EU policy documents as well as the practical limitations of the studies word count. These questions are chosen based on their capability to expose how policy constructs ideas about mothers, care, gender equality and how such constructions affect understandings of public and private responsibilities, work-life balance, and social rights.

1. *What's the 'problem' represented to be?*
2. *What presuppositions or assumptions underlie this representation of the 'problem'?*
3. *(4) What is left unproblematic in this problem representation? Where are the silences?*

The *first question* is about making the problem visible and comprehensible at a basic level.[69] Essentially, it is about determining what kind of problem the issue is classified as.[70] In the context, the question examines how specific an issue such as caregiving or mothers is made visible as a "problem" within policy texts. Is care framed as an obstacle to labour market participation? A private responsibility? A public good? The aim is to identify the discursive logics that shape how these subjects are categorised. For this study the question is used to analyze how EU policy documents define the challenges of work-life balance and maternal care, and which aspects are prioritised or excluded.

The second question encourages a closer examination of the assumption and background knowledge that addresses how the 'problem' is framed in the policy.[71] It focuses on the underlying logic or rationality that makes a particular understanding of the issue and certain responses to it seem reasonable or even inevitable.[72] In this context, this includes assumptions about gender roles, economic productivity and autonomy. The question seeks to examine which ideals such as the "ideal worker" or self-sufficiency are reproduced and how these contribute to the normalization of certain family models while treating others invisible. In the context of the study, it allows for a deeper analysis of how policy legitimises specific expectations on mothers, care work and equality.

The *third question* focuses on what is left unquestioned or silenced within the policy's representation of the problem.[73] Rather than looking only at what is said, this question draws

[69] Bergström and Boréus., p. 273
[70] Ibid.
[71] Ibid.
[72] Ibid.
[73] Ibid., p. 274.

attention to what is left out and excluded from the discussion.[74] In this study, the question is used to explore how different dimensions of motherhood and caregiving are made (in) visible in the policy documents. This includes analyzing which social groups or experiences are emphasised or overlooked and how work, and care is presented within the policy discourse, and how the principle of gender equality is defined.

The WPR model is particularly useful in relation to the research questions for this study because it offers tools to analyse how policy texts construct and problematise care, gender equality and mothers in relation to work-life balance not only in terms of what is said but also what is left unsaid. The method creates space to examine the values, assumptions, norms and silences that sustain seemingly neutral policy language and reveals how the certain family models, such as full-time employment, are positioned as normative. In this study, the three selected WPR questions will be applied consistently and systematically across the thematic structure of the analysis. This structure is designed to analyse how mothers in relation to care and work are problematised, which assumptions make those perceptions possible and what dimensions are left invisible. Fraser's normative principles and models are used as interpretive tools throughout the analysis to critically engage with how the policy discourse frames care in relation to rights, recognition and social participation. This integrated approach allows for a deeper understanding of how the subjects are constructed in EU work-life balance.

[74] Ibid.

5. Shaping equality: How the EU policy constructs gender equality, care, and work

This chapter analyses how care, mothers and gender equality are constructed in the EU's Work-Life Balance Directive and Commission Initiative. The analysis follows a thematic structure and is guided by three selected questions from Bacchi's WPR model: What is the problem represented to be? What assumptions underlie this representation? And what is left unproblematic or silenced? Fraser's principles on antiandrocentrism and income equality alongside the universal breadwinner model and caregiver parity are used throughout the analysis to analyse how the selected policy documents frames the relationship between care, work and what visions of (gender) equality are made possible.

5.1 Managing motherhood: EU narratives and silences of care and Work-life Balance

5.1.1 Framing mothers in relation to paid work and the issue of autonomy

This section examines how the policy constructs work-life balance in relation to mothers and the labour market participation. The analysis applies the three selected WPR questions through the analysis. The focus lies in analysing how the female worker, specifically mothers, is positioned in EU policy discourse.

In both the directive and initiative, mothers with caregiving responsibilities are consistently framed as a challenge to women's labour market participation. The policy states that "a major factor contributing to the underrepresentation of women in the labour market is the difficulty of balancing work and family obligations" and that caregiving responsibilities often lead women to "drop out of the labour market entirely".[75] Similarly the Commission's initiative identifies "inadequate measures to reconcile work with care responsibilities" as having a "disproportionate impact" on women, often leading them to reduce working hours or leave the labour force altogether.[76] The phrases used here are "underrepresentation", "disproportionate impact" and "dropping out" frames reduced labour market participation as a problem that needs correction. Within this narrative, reduced labour market participation becomes something that needs to be fixed, rather than a legitimate response to caregiving

[75] Directive (EU) 2019/1158, recital 10, p. 80.
[76] European Commission, *An Initiative to Support Work-Life Balance*, COM(2017), p. 4.

responsibilities. The issue is not framed as a question of the need for care or how it is structurally supported, but rather the way that they manage their working lives is seen as problematic. This subtly pathologises mother's decisions and cast caregiving, particularly when it occurs outside the formal economy, as something to be discouraged. Instead of uncovering the reason behind their decision and how they can be better supported, the narrative assumes that stepping back from paid work means failure. The possibility of valuing informal caregiving, or supporting mothers who prioritise childrearing, is left unaddressed. What emerges is a policy discourse more concerned with correcting deviations for the sake of economic goals rather than understanding or accommodating the realities of care.

Furthermore, what is not on the surface is that this assumes that full and continuous participation in paid employment is the ideal norm for all, and that deviation from it is inherently undesirable. This representation aligns with what Fraser describes as the universal breadwinner model, where gender equality is pursued by encouraging women to follow standards for male workers which includes prioritising full-time, uninterrupted employment.[77] From this perspective the problem is not understood as care being undervalued or unsupported, but that mothers fail to maintain full presence in the labour market. In this case, the EU policy discourse supports Fraser's argument that policies uphold male standards and should require women to become like men.[78] According to the antiandrocentrism principle, the policy texts reinforce this model of work shaped around the male norm which is one that assumes constant availability for paid labour and offers little structural accommodation for care.

This representation raises questions about what is left unproblematic in the policy's framing. For example, the texts do not explore why women might choose to reduce work in favor of caregiving, nor do they address the social and institutional factors that constrain such choices. The main policy goal is to encourage women's labour market participation without addressing the options or the lack of options or lack of options that pressure women to balance care and work within systems not built to support them. This silence suggests an uncritical acceptance of the current economic and social organisation of work and care. This connects directly to Sørensen's analysis of how "choice" operates within neoliberal and postfeminist discourse, where women are expected to act as if they are choosing freely, even when their options are shaped by rigid job structures, financial pressures and limited childcare support.[79] In the context of the analysis, autonomy becomes a performance where women are compelled to

[77] Chambers, p. 103.
[78] Fraser, p. 599.
[79] Sørensen, pp. 308-309.

appear as self-managing and economically independent, even when their choices are constrained. Rather than offering structural support, the policy places responsibility on individual mothers to balance care and work.

The main goal appears to be increasing women's participation in the labour market, without addressing the male worker norm that assumes full availability for paid work and places the burden of balancing care and employment on women. According to the caregiver parity model, the policy texts do not recognise informal caregiving as a legitimate form of labour deserving of recognition and institutional support. From this perspective, mothers are implicitly encouraged to conform to a narrow standard of equality that is rooted in economic performance without meaningful support. The notion of choice is present, but not the conditions that make real choice possible. What is left unproblematised here is the assumption that unpaid care should remain invisible unless it can be aligned with formal employment. The directive's silence on unpaid care and limited engagement with alternative understandings of equality suggests that its vision of equality remains tied to labour market norms and male-coded standards.

5.1.2 Care as a labour tool, not as a right or value

This section explores how formal childcare and caregiving are framed in EU policy as tools to enable labour market participation, rather than as societal responsibilities within intrinsic value.

In both the Work-life Balance Directive and the Commission Initiative, care is consistently represented as an obstacle to employment. It is framed as a "problem" when both parents, including the primary caregiver who are most often women, are active in paid employment.[80] Recital 11 of the directive states that "childcare and long-term care are important tools to remove obstacles to employment, especially (for) women".[81] Similarly, the initiative highlights that limited access to care services leads women to "reduce" their working hours or "drop out" of the workforce altogether.[82] In this case, formal care is not valued for its intrinsic worth but for its role in encouraging labour market participation. This representation assumes that the primary purpose of care infrastructure is to serve economic productivity, rather than to support care in itself.

[80] Bacchi, p. 3.
[81] Directive (EU) 2019/1158, recital 11.
[82] European Commission, *An Initiative to Support Work-Life Balance*, COM(2017), p. 12.

While the policy promotes the expansion of childcare services, it does so primarily to support labour market participation, especially for mothers. Care is framed as a means to maintain productivity, not as a societal responsibility with value in its own right. This framing reinforces an ideal economic participation, instead of questioning how care could be integrated in broader models of equality, ones that are not exclusively tied to work-life balance or labour market inclusion. The underlying assumption is that caregiving can be solved through market-compatible adjustments, without challenging the deeper organisation of work or questioning why care is marginalised in the first place. Rather than questioning the structures under which work and care operates, the policy assumes that caregiving can simply be managed around existing norms.

By applying the vision of caregiver parity model, what's missing is recognition of care as a legitimate basis for entitlement, deserving of institutional and economic support. The policy does not acknowledge care as a legitimate basis for entitlement, nor the economic insecurity that often follows when care work is unsupported. Institutional support is largely reserved for those who conform to labour market expectations, while those who provide care outside of those structures whether by choice or necessity are left without meaningful recognition or security. This creates a situation where mothers are either pushed to adapt full-time employment or left without meaningful alternatives, especially in lower-income households where paid care is unaffordable or inaccessible. The framing fails to consider how employment-centered policies implicitly devalue care work and exclude those whose caregiving cannot be easily reconciled with market participation.

This raises the question of whether the central "problem" is exclusively gendered division of labour itself or the lack of support for families who organise care and work differently. Rather than positioning one life model as ideal, a more just policy approach would recognise and support caregiving regardless of who performs it or whether it takes place alongside paid employment. This includes supporting mothers who take on primary caregiving without financial penalty and encouraging shared caregiving in dual-income or single-parent households. The current policy does not engage with these possibilities. Instead it reinforces a narrow model of equality focused on labour market availability, without addressing the structural conditions that limit real choice. It assumes a homogenous worker-citizen ideal, and in doing so, overlooks the legitimacy of other ways of living and contributing.

What is left unproblematised is how this logic affects families differently. There is little attention to how class, income, migration status or employment type shape caregiving realities. While the initiative notes that disadvantaged children benefit from access to care services, it fails to explore how parents in those households experience caregiving or how the unequal burden of care interacts with border inequalities.[83] The assumption that more formal childcare leads to automatic empowerment ignores how unequal conditions shape access, choice, and outcomes. The policy's silence on these intersecting factors risks reinforcing a model where care is valued only when it enables economic productivity, not when it serves social or emotional needs. In this way, care continues to be treated as a private issue rather than a collective responsibility. The directive does not ask how care might be valued differently nor does it suggest alternative ways to organise work in ways that accommodate caregiving. By equating equality with paid employment, the EU policy narrows scope for meaningful support, overlooking both the value of care and the realities of those who provide it under diverse and unequal conditions.

5.2 Conditional rights and the logic of labour market conformity

5.2.1 The limits of flexible work arrangements

This section examines how the EU Work-Life balance Directive constructed flexible working arrangements as a solution to the conflict between care and employment.

The directive presents the issue as helping workers, especially mothers, to remain in employment while managing care responsibilities. Article 9 introduces the right to request flexible working arrangements, such as reduced hours, remote work, or adjusted schedules, until the child reaches the age of eight.[84] Recital 34 explains that such flexibility should reflect "the needs and preferences of both workers and employers."[85] However, this language already reveals a contradiction: while the policy calls it a right, its implementation is highly conditional. The burden lies on the worker to initiate a request, while the employers retain the power to accept or reject it based on business needs. The problem is constructed as one of

[83] European Commission, *An Initiative to Support Work-Life Balance*, COM(2017), p. 13.
[84] Directive (EU) 2019/1158, p. 88.
[85] Ibid., p. 83.

individual time management, not as structural incompatibility between standard work models and unpaid care responsibilities.

This contradiction becomes even more apparent when looking closer at the limitations surrounding article 9. Recital 35, which explicitly states that employers "should have the possibility to limit the duration of flexible working arrangements," indicating that even when granted, the right may be temporary and revocable.[86] This further reflects the assumption that caregiving must adapt to the needs of the labour market, not the other way around. While the policy encourages workers to adjust their working patterns to fit their personal needs, it simultaneously places limits on that flexibility, showing that the interests of the employers are prioritised. This is particularly problematic for workers in precarious or informal employment, many of whom are women. Moreover, this framing constructs care as a private challenge that must be managed by individuals, rather than a collective social responsibility.

Further paradox appears in Recital 11, where it claimed that access to flexible work "has been shown to have a positive impact in reducing the relative amount of unpaid family work undertaken by women and leaving them more time for paid employment".[87] This positive description stands in contrast to the fact that there are no binding protections to ensure that flexibility is actually available in practice, especially not for those in insecure or low-paid jobs. The idea that flexibility empowers women is repeated in the policy, but the support needed to make that reality across different job types and income levels is largely missing. The underlying assumption here is that the mere existence of flexibility options ensures empowerment, without accounting for who has actual access or the capacity to make use of such rights.

The tension is also visible in the Commission's initiative. It recognises that high childcare costs, financial disincentives, and lack of formal support are some of the main reasons why second earners, who are mostly women, are pushed out of the labour market.[88] Even though the directive presents flexible working arrangements as a way to respond to these barriers, it does not include any binding or universal protections. This means that access to flexibility is not something guaranteed, but rather something that depends on job type, income level or

[86] Ibid., p. 83.
[87] Ibid., p. 80.
[88] European Commission, *An Initiative to Support Work-Life Balance*, COM(2017), p. 4.

employer goodwill. What remains unproblematised is how flexible work policies may indirectly reinforce class-based inequalities by being more accessible to higher-income or more secure workers.

From an income equality perspective, this reflects a deeper tension in the policy: those who adapt to labour market norms are more likely to access rights and benefits, while those who take on more caregiving particularly in lower-paid or non-standard roles, risk long term financial insecurity. Flexible arrangement may allow mothers to manage work and care in the short term, but if these arrangements come with reduced income, weaker pension rights, or lower job security, the cost of caregiving continues to fall disproportionately on women. Rather than addressing this imbalance, the directive leaves the economic burden of flexibility on individuals, reinforcing existing inequalities between those who can afford to reduce hours and those who cannot. This framing assumes that the burden of resolving work-care conflict lies with the individual mother, rather than questioning how work itself might be recognised to accommodate care more equally.

These critiques align with Fraser's income equality and caregiver parity principles. A policy that only recognises caregiving when it coexists with employment ignores both economic insecurity that caregiving can produce and the societal value it holds.[89] Instead of offering unconditional support for care, the directive reinforces a narrow choice of either take part in full-time worker norm and receive support, or step outside of it and risk being excluded from benefits, rights and recognition.

This framing aligns with what Sørensen critiques in her analysis of how autonomy is represented within neoliberal and postfeminist discourse. In the initiative the “right” to flexible working under Article 9 is presented as a tool to help parents reconcile employment with care. However, as shown in this analysis, the right is highly conditional and can risk being inaccessible to those in precarious or low-paid jobs. Applying Sørens critique, this shows how policies like this frame women’s decisions as autonomous and freely made, even when those decisions are shaped by limited childcare options, financial pressures and rigid labour market expectations. Furthermore, this aligns with my finding that the directive reinforces a model where autonomy is expected, but not materially enabled.

[89] Fraser, p. 608.

The initiative itself highlights that economic disincentives, high child care cost and lack of formal support disproportionately "push" second earners, who are mostly women, out of the worker force.[90] Yet, despite recognising these barriers, the directive does not offer targeted or enforceable protections for those most affected. From an income equality perspective, this reflects a fragmented policy logic: flexible work becomes a class-based privilege rather than a universal right. This gap between problem recognition and structural limitations are critically explored in Guerrina's analysis of EU maternity and parental leave policy. She explained that policies offer formal equality, in theory granting all parents similar rights, while also neglecting substantive support for caregiving.[91] As shown in this analysis, access to flexible working arrangements and entitlements is often shaped by employment status, income level, and job security. This reinforces a model where equality is measured by participation, not support. Rather than challenging structural inequalities, the policy risks reproducing them, offering rights that are inaccessible for those who need them most.

5.2.2 Access, design and the unequal conditions of leave

This section examines how the EU Work-Life balance Directive frames rights and entitlements in relation to caregiving, parental leave, and gender equality. This section also considers the structure of parental leave provisions and how their design reflects broader power dynamics within families and labour markets.

At a surface level, the directive offers a range of minimum standards: paternity leave, carer's leave, parental leave and protections for returning to work.[92] These rights are presented as instruments to promote gender equality and help reconcile work and care. Recital 6 explicitly links work life balance to "closing gender gaps in earnings and pay" and promoting equal sharing of care responsibilities.[93] The initiative also refers to the European Pillar of Social Rights, which affirm rights to gender equality, time off, and accessible care services.

However, when analysed through a WPR lens, the framing of rights is shaped by implicit assumptions about labour market participation and economic productivity as central to gender

[90] European Commission, *An Initiative to Support Work-Life Balance*, COM(2017), pp. 4-5.
[91] Guerrina, pp. 56-57.
[92] Directive (EU) 2019/1158, pp. 86-88.
[93] Ibid., p. 79.

equality. The “problem” here is not framed as caregiving being unsupported or undervalued, but instead that care disrupts women’s labour market continuity. The directive proposes a “solution” by extending leave and flexibility not to support care itself, but to help women return to work efficiently. This framing positions rights as instruments of reintegration rather than tools for transforming how care is recognised and supported. The underlying assumption is that participation in paid employment is the most legitimate and valued form of social inclusion. From an income equality perspective, this reflects a system where rights are conditional based on employment status, earnings history or employer discretion. For example, while Article 8 guarantees payment during parental leave[94], it allows member states to set conditions that may exclude part-time, precarious or informal workers disproportionately affecting women.

This logic becomes even more visible in how the directive structures and distributes different types of leave. Parental leave is individualised and non-transferable, which aims to encourage both parents to participate in caregiving.[95] Yet in practice, mothers take the majority of leave, while fathers are praised for taking even short periods. This dynamic reflects what Chambers identifies as the “praise and punishment” mechanism in liberal gender equality policy where men are praised and rewarded for stepping into care, while women are economically and socially penalised for prolonged caregiving.[96] This double standard is built into the system where women are expected to return to work quickly, while caregiving is only recognised when it demonstrates male flexibility and not when it reflects women's everyday responsibilities, reinforcing the principle of androcentrism. The silence around these gendered expectations reinforces androcentric norms and overlooks the relational inequalities that shape who can afford to “share” care.

Moreover, the duration of leave is often inadequate in meeting diverse caregiving needs. For example, carers leave is limited to just five working days per year, and parental leave typically spans four months per parent, with only two of those months being paid and non-transferable. These limited timeframes assume that caregiving can be neatly scheduled, and that both parents are equally positioned to share time off. Yet for many mothers, especially those recovering from childbirth or managing long term care responsibilities, this

[94] Directive (EU) 2019/1158, p. 88.
[95] Ibid.
[96] Chambers, pp. 101-103.

structure is too rigid. The policy does not consider that some mothers may desire or need longer periods of leave. In connection to Lynn Marks, staying at home can be a deliberate response to lack of childcare, income, or support structures, particularly for women in low-income or insecure employment.[97] This further confirms how caregiving decisions are often shaped by structural constraints rather than pure preference. This reflects deeper silences in the policy, namely, the lack of recognition that caregiving decisions are often shaped by material inequality, not individual preference.

The idea of transferring parental leave evenly may also create vulnerabilities, particularly in situations of domestic inequality or abuse. In households where one partner has greater financial or social power, the division of leave can be manipulated to force the mother back to work before she is ready under the guise of gender equality. The directive fails to address these relational dynamics, assuming that all families operate within conditions of fairness and mutual decision-making. From a caregiver parity perspective, this neglect reflects a narrow and idealised view of the family, one that erases the complexities of caregiving in unequal or constrained situations. From this angle, rights do not function as a protective guarantee but as tools of conformity rewarding those who align with the norm of full-time employment while disadvantaged those who cannot. Mothers who take on the majority of care, whether by autonomous choice or necessity, continue to face economic penalties and social devaluation. This is especially true for single parents, carers of children with additional needs, or those with limited labour market access.

While the directive offers "equal" rights on paper, it fails to account for the unequal conditions under which those rights are exercised. This is particularly given that the Commission explicitly frames work-life balance policy as a way to "reduce the risk of poverty and social exclusion for children".[98] Yet without target, inclusive support for diverse caregiving situations, this goal remains unfulfilled in practice. As this analysis has shown, the directive mirrors the logic of protecting mothers as workers and not as mothers of full citizens. This raises questions about how the EU understands and operationalises its own social rights commitments, particularly under the European Pillar of Social Rights. Principles such as gender equality and Work-life balance are presented as foundational values, yet the structures and design of leave entitlements reflect a narrow, employment-centered vision of

[97] Marks, pp. 73-77.
[98] European Commission, *An Initiative to Support Work-Life Balance*, COM(2017), p. 13.

equality that leaves care itself unaddressed.[99] Moreover, the initiative provides little reflection on how these rights should be implemented across diverse social realities. and the structure and design of leave entitlements reflect a narrow, employment-centered vision of equality. What's more, the initiative provides little reflection on how these rights should be implemented across diverse social realities. The lack of targeted discussion around accessibility, caregiving diversity or marginalised groups suggests that the EU's commitment to equality remains more symbolic than substantive in this area.

[99] European Commission, *European Pillar of Social Rights*, https://employment-social-affairs.ec.europa.eu/european-pillar-social-rights-20-principles_en (accessed: 8 April 2025.)

6. Results and discussion

6.1. Results

This chapter aims to answer the study's three research questions.

RQ1: How are mothers in relation to work-life balance, acknowledged, addressed, or excluded in EU policy discourse?

Mothers are mainly acknowledged in policy as workers whose caregiving responsibilities threatened their ability to remain in full-time employment. The Work-Life Balance Directive and the Commission's initiative frame caregiving as a barrier that causes women to reduce hours or exit the labour market. This framing positions mothers' caregiving responsibilities as a problem for economic productivity rather than a role within intrinsic value. Rights such as parental leave and flexibility are presented as tools to keep mothers in the workforce, but they are highly conditional and primarily accessible to those already in stable employment. Mothers in precarious, informal, or low-income jobs are often excluded from these protections. The policy's silence on informal caregiving, structural inequalities, and long-term care needs reflects a narrow vision that expects women to adapt to existing work norms rather than questioning how these norms are structured. Mothers who cannot conform to the ideal of the economically independent worker are largely rendered invisible.

RQ2:How are gender equality and caregiving represented in EU policy discourse, and what visions of these concepts are made possible or foreclosed through this framing?

Gender equality is primarily defined though equal or parallel labour market participation. The policy promoted equal sharing of care through non-transferable parental leave and access to flexible work, yet these measures operate within an economic logic. Equality is seen as achieved when women match male-coded work patterns, not when caregiving itself is valued or supported. Fathers are encouraged to take on more care, often praised for doing so, while mothers continue to face pressure to "balance it all". Structural inequalities such as unequal access to childcare, economic vulnerability, and social norms around care, are left

unaddressed. The directive does not propose alternative models of care, such as recognising unpaid caregiving as legitimate work or ensuring social protections for full-time carers. This forecloses visions of equality that are grounded in care, interdependence, and collective responsibility and instead reinforces an individualised model where care is only valued when it does not interfere with paid work.

6.2. Discussion

The analysis reveals not only how caregiving is framed in policy, but also what kind of society this framing envisions. When equality is narrowly defined through labour market participation, other ways of contributing such as caregiving and childrearing are overlooked and marginalised. This reflects a deeper ideological commitment to market based-citizenship, where rights and recognition are earned through paid work. Rather than asking how care could be supported or restructured collectively, the policy continues to treat it as something that individuals who are most often women must manage on their own. In doing so, it misses an opportunity to reimagine equality not only in relation to existing norms, but as a broader right to live and care with dignity, regardless of one's employment status.

What remains absent from the current framework is the understanding of caregiving, both formal and informal as a right in itself. While human rights instruments, such as in Article 25 of the UDHR and Article 33 of the EU Charter, include protections for mothers and children, they tend to focus on pregnancy and early postnatal periods.[100] They fall short of acknowledging motherhood and caregiving as ongoing social role that require sustained institutional support and protection.[101] This disconnect between symbolic protections and structural support reflects a broader failure to view care as something that should be protected, recognised, and publicly sustained.

This disconnect becomes even clearer when we consider the broader social expectations placed on mothers. As previous research shows, dominant norms of "good motherhood" expect women to be present, self-sacrificing, emotionally stable and always available, while also remaining professionally active and economically independent.[102] These contradictory

[100] Bach-Golecka, pp. 30-31
[101] Ibid.
[102] Dillaway and Paré, pp. 444-445.

expectations are not equally placed on men. Men are praised for 'taking more space' in caregiving roles, while women are expected to manage it all by default. There is no parallel societal pressure on fathers to "balance it all". As a result, women are not only judged by whether they manage both spheres successfully, they are not conditioned to believe they must.

This internalised pressure connects to broader patriarchal and neoliberal ideology, which conditions women that with enough effort, they can and should "do it all". But instead of questioning why women carry the double burden of paid work and unpaid care, policy frameworks reproduce this logic by encouraging balance without challenging the structures that make that balance impossible for many. This does not mean women are less capable than men, it points instead to the urgent need to examine why systems expect women to play out both roles, and why care is still seen as a private rather than a social responsibility.

As Sedacca highlights, the separation of the private and public sphere has long contributed to the devaluation of care.[103] Mothers who take in more care continue to face economic and social penalties. A gender-equal policy must recognise caregiving, whether formal or informal as legitimate work, ensure institutional support, and embed caregivers rights and the right to caregiving work within human rights frameworks, such as CEDAW and EU equality frameworks, beyond employment. Substantive, not just formal, equality must include these perspectives. Equality should not only mean equal access to work, pay or parental leave, it should also mean that all individuals regardless of gender, can make autonomous choices without being limited by structural constraints. Only then can true freedom of choice and real (gender) equality be realised. After all, it is mothers who gave birth to the next generation of workers and taxpayers and yet this social function continues to be undervalued in both economic and policy terms. These patterns reflect the influence of capitalist and patriarchal systems that constantly devalue caregiving by treating it secondary to paid labour. As a result policy frameworks are shaped by norms that prioritise economic productivity, reinforcing structures that marginalise care and those who provide for it.

[103] Sedacca, p. 777.

Future research could further explore how alternative models of social protections such as universal caregiver allowances or non-employment-based entitlement might better support diverse caregiving realities, particularly those excluded from formal employment structures. This could include examining how policies might be designed to reduce economic vulnerability among mothers. Such studies could also help identify best practices for embedding caregiving rights more firmly within both national legislation and international human rights frameworks.

7. Summary

This thesis explores how mothers as workers, care, and gender equality are constructed in EU work-life balance policy. The aim is to contribute to a deeper understanding of how institutional visions of equality are constructed and what they include or exclude. The analysis focuses on two central policy documents: the 2019 Work-Life Balance Directive and the 2017 Commission initiative on work-life balance for working parents and carers. By implementing Nancy Fraser's justice principles and models alongside Carol Bacchi's "What's the Problem Represented to Be?" (WPR) approach, the analysis examines how caregiving, work and autonomy are framed.

The study finds that EU policy largely defines gender equality through uniform labour market participation. Caregiving is represented as a barrier to employment rather than a right or value in its own terms. While the policy promotes formal rights such as parental leave and flexible work, these are shaped by economic logic and primarily support those already in stable employment. Informal care, structural inequalities, and diverse caregiving realities are largely left unaddressed. This conclusion highlights the disconnect between symbolic goals and material support for care. Equality remains tied to paid work, and caregiving is only valued when compatible with economic participation. The study argues for broader, more inclusive policy visions that support caregiving as a legitimate social contribution whether or not it occurs alongside formal employment.

8. Reference list

Printed sources

Books

Bacchi, Carol, *Analysing Policy: What's the Problem Represented to Be?*, Frenchs Forest: Pearson Education, 2009.

Williams, Joan C., *Unbending Gender: Why Family and Work and Conflict What to Do About It*, Oxford University Press, 2000.

Bergström, Göran & Boreus, Kristina (red.), *Textens mening och makt: Metodbok i samhällsvetenskaplig text- och diskursanalys*, 4 uppl., Lund: Studentlitteratur, 2018.

Electronic sources

EU sources

European Commission (2017), *An Initiative to Support Work-Life Balance for Working Parents and Carers*, COM(2017) 252 final, Brussels, 26 April 2017. https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=CELEX:52017DC0252

Directive (EU) 2019/1158 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 20 June 2019 on work-life balance for parents and carers and repealing Council Directive 2010/18/EU, OJ L 188, 12.7.2019. https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=CELEX:32019L1158

European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights, *EU Charter of Fundamental Rights – Title III: Equality*, https://fra.europa.eu/en/eu-charter/title/title-iii-equality

European Commission (2024), *Women's situation in the Labour market*, https://commission.europa.eu/strategy-and-policy/policies/justice-and-fundamental-rights/gender-equality/women-labour-market-work-life-balance/womens-situation-labour-market_en (

European Comission, *European Pillar of Social Rights*, https://employment-social-affairs.ec.europa.eu/policies-and-activities/european-pillar-social-rights-building-fairer-and-more-inclusive-european-union_en,

Books and chapters

Chambers, Clare, 'Liberalism, Feminism and the Gendered Division of Labour' in Catriona McKinnon and Dario Castiglionde (eds), *Freedom and Equality: Essays on Liberalism and Feminism*, Oxford University Press, 2024.
https://doi.org/10.1093/9780191919480.003.0006

Lombardo, Emanuella & Meier, Petra, 'Policy', in *The Oxford Handbook of Feminist Theory*, eds. Lisa Disch and Mary Hawksworth (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016.
https://doi.org/10.1093/oxfordhb/9780199328581.013.32

Academic journals

Bach-Golecka, Dobrochna, "Motherhood and law: Reflections on human rights provisions and selected judgements of the European courts", *Studia Iuridica* 90, 2022. DOI: https://doi.org/10.31338/2544-3135.si.2022-90.2.

Dillaway, Heather & Paré, Elisabeth M. Paré (2008), "Locating Mother: How Cultural Debates About Stay-at-Home Versus Working Mothers Define Women and Home", *Journal of Family Issues* 29(4), 2008. DOI: https://doi.org/10.1177/0192513X07310309.

Fraser, Nancy, "After the Family Wage: Gender Equality and the Welfare State." *Political Theory*, vol. 22, no. 4, 1997.

Guerrina, Roberta, "Mothering in Europe: Feminist Critique of European Policies on Motherhood and Employment", *European Journal of Women's Studies* 9(1), 2002 DOI: https://doi.org/10.1177/1350506802009001381.

Marks, Lynne, "Feminism and Stay-at-Home Motherhood: Some Critical Reflections and Implications for Mothers on Social Assistance", *Atlantis: Critical Studies in Gender, Culture & Social Justice*, 2004.

Sedacca, Natalie, Domestic Workers, the "Family Worker" Exemption from Minimum Wage, and Gendered Devaluation of Women's Work', *Industrial Law Journal* 771, 2022.
https://doi.org/10.1093/indlaw/dwac005

Schmidt, Alice, Margrit Eichler and Annette Nierobisch, "What Makes a Good Mother? Two Decades of Research Reflecting Social Norms of Motherhood", *Journal of Family Theory & Review* 15(1), 2022. DOI: https://doi.org/10.1111/jftr.12488.

Sørensen Øyslebø, Siri, “The Performativity of Choice: Postfeminist Perspectives in Work-Life Balance”, *Gender, Work & Organization*, 2017, 297-298. DOI: https://doi.org/10.1111/gwao.12163