



THE FLEXIBILITY STIGMA AND THE AMBITION GAP: REVISITING THE UNPAID FEMALE LABOR MODEL IN GREECE

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Abstract:

This study discusses the sustained unpaid gendered caregiving services—including the discriminatory parental time-allocation patterns—that define and determine the unpaid female labor model observed globally. In employing a comparative and integrative literature analysis, drawing from peer-reviewed academic articles, research reports, surveys, fact sheets, and international case studies across different disciplines, this paper subsequently focuses on Greece. Sustained caregiving responsibilities and extensive unpaid care and services provided by women—and especially mothers—have been creating barriers to women’s employment and employability. The care burden impact along with the flexibility stigma, the ambition gap and the motherhood penalty have been reducing women’s employability, stalling the march towards equality. When it comes to men’s caregiving, change is happening, but not fast enough. As regards parental time allocation, current studies show that Greece is one of the most challenging countries for working mothers in Europe, societal expectations repeatedly demanding that women prioritize family over employment. Greek women’s labor market performance is deteriorating, while that of men’s is improving or left unaffected. Female employment in Greece is still the second lowest in the EU—just above Italy—and lags far behind the EU average. There seems to be no child penalty for men in Greek society, whereas women’s employment decreases by as much as 37.9% when the first child arrives. Greek women with children have been forced to excel in parental time allocation, literally becoming experts in time management. They provide most of the housework and childcare services in heterosexual dual-earner couple households. Research confirms that motherhood is punished in the Greek labor market. The motherhood penalty in Greece results in substantial lifetime income loss for women: lower employment rates; reduced career prospects and income; pressures to work part-time, stay home or accept less demanding positions/salaries, and inevitably lower pensions. In conclusion, among European countries, Greece is not the place to have a child. The childcare gap in Greece, despite declining birthrates, makes it extremely hard for mothers to return to work after

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childbirth or excel in their careers. Accordingly, this paper contributes to the research in the field by re-addressing the gender gaps and provides additional and targeted recommendations on how to eliminate the discriminatory gendered time-allocation pattern, namely the sustained and deep-rooted gender gaps or discriminatory patterns: e.g., childcare gap, employment gap, wage gap, leadership gap and pension gap.

Keywords: gender, parental time allocation, childcare gap, motherhood penalty, pension gap, stupid curve

1. Introduction and background

“Women in Greece who work full-time are not the majority because they are still overwhelmingly responsible for unpaid care work, while flexible, affordable childcare and supportive workplace policies remain limited. Full-time employment often comes at an unsustainable personal cost.” (AGEE, 2025)

This study discusses the sustained caregiving responsibilities and extensive unpaid services that have been creating barriers to employment and employability for women, especially mothers whose services go beyond childhood. For those women who are employed, these barriers determine working hours, salaries, promotions and professional advancement. For example, current evidence confirms that the gender pay gap doubles over the course of a woman’s career (Martini & Doss, 2026). Following my participation in the London School of Economics and Political Science (LSE) lecture series in Athens, held in collaboration with the National and Kapodistrian University of Athens (NKUA) February 27, 2026, this paper examines the unpaid female labor model, subsequently focusing on Greeceⁱⁱ (Kamberidou, 2026).

Despite the progress made in the past decades, there are still fewer women employed as compared to men. In the EU, for example, data from April 2025 shows that 70.8% of women aged 20 to 64 are employed compared to 80.8% of men (Eurostat, 2025). The employment gap is the widest in Romania, Italy and Greece, expanding even further when children enter the picture. Women’s employment rates decrease when they have children, and about [one-third](#) of women who have become mothers turn to part-time work, whereas the opposite is usually true when men become fathers (AGEE, 2025). Obviously, existing policies are not enough.

Globally, women provide 75% of unpaid care and services. The "Care Burden Impact" (WEF, 2024) has been restricting women's workforce participation and economic

ⁱⁱ This paper was inspired by LSE Professor Almudena Sevilla’s presentation on gender roles and parental time allocation in the UK, and primarily her introduction on new models of parental time allocation that explicitly account for on-call care, namely the continuous responsibility, monitoring, and availability that accompanies parenting but is largely invisible in standard datasets. Almudena Sevilla, Professor of Economic and Social Policy within the Department of Social Policy at LSE, has been appointed Commander of the Order of the British Empire (CBE) for her contributions to economics and the advancement of women in the field.

advancement, ultimately stalling the march towards equality, according to the World Economic Forum's Global Gender Gap Report. Women carry out three times more of the daily unpaid care of children, homes and the elderly than men, and while the care economy is getting increased attention, this part is often forgotten (WEF, 2024; WEF, 2025).

Moreover, research indicates that flexible work arrangements, or rather the "flexibility stigma" (Lean In, 2025), is one of the biggest factors holding women back at work, along with the ambition gap, which is a result of sustained unpaid caregiving services. The *State of the World's Fathers* (SOW) research report shows that 122 countries have been offering paternity leave, and 186 countries maternity leave on a national level since 2022. Nevertheless, their findings reveal that men took on average only 22,5 days, whereas women took 192,3 days (Barker, 2024; SOW, 2023).

When it comes to men's caregiving, change is happening, but not fast enough. The report documents that men are doing more care work than they did in the past, but no country in the world has yet achieved equality when it comes to the daily time spent. The *State of the World's Fathers* research report (SOW, 2023) also argues that thousands of women and men around the world are calling for fundamental changes in policies, power structures, and social norms around both paid and unpaid care work. Certainly, getting to full economic and political equality for women and girls requires men and boys to step up, to do their share of the care work and to become advocates for the care economy. Men's participation in care would support and facilitate women's employability and work-life balance.

Additionally, it is important to observe that Education plays a vital role in the time devoted to childcare. Research confirms that highly educated parents—mothers and fathers, both parents—devote more time to childcare than less educated parents (Gimenez-Nadal & Molina, 2020).

Accordingly, before focusing on Greece, this paper begins with a discussion on the discriminatory gendered time-allocation pattern, to wit, the unpaid female labor model and its consequences, such as the ambition gap, the flexibility stigma, the broken rung, the care burden impact, burn-out, boundary intrusion, emotional overload, the motherhood penalty and the gendered parenthood wage gap.

2. The Flexibility Stigma and the Ambition Gap

A recent study by Lean In and McKinsey & Company titled *Women in the Workplace 2025* (the 11th edition) reveals that many companies in the United States are deprioritizing women and that the flexibility stigma may be limiting women's advancement and contributing to this downward trend. For instance, not only do women in the United States remain underrepresented at all career levels, but company commitment to their advancement is steadily declining (Lean In, 2025), despite the repeatedly documented fact that companies that prioritize gender diversity see bigger gains.

This is the largest study on the state of women in corporate America, now in its 11th year, with over 1,000 companies and almost 500,000 employees participating (Lean In, 2025). For the 2025 *Women in the Workplace* report, researchers collected information from 124 U.S. and Canadian organizations employing approximately 3 million people. They surveyed 9,500 employees to assess talent pipeline data, employee experience, HR programs and policies, in addition to conducting interviews with 62 HR leaders. What I found quite alarming is that only half of the companies were prioritizing women's career advancement, and there was a notable decline in commitment to gender diversity, which is becoming a trend that they have been observing in the past years. Could these very alarming findings be a foreboding of what's to come in Europe?

When it comes to flexibility, their findings show that women who work remotely are stigmatized. In other words, they are less likely to get promoted or have a sponsor at work (e.g., managers, colleagues and officials helping them or supporting them to advance), whereas women who work on-site have a better chance. In contrast, men receive similar levels of sponsorship and support, regardless of where they work. According to the findings, the flexibility stigma is one of the biggest factors holding women back. Another astonishing result shows that when women use flexible work arrangements, coworkers tend to assume they are less engaged and less productive, but that is not the case when men work remotely or use flexible work arrangements.

For the first time since the launch of this annual study in 2015, there is a notable *gender ambition gap* in the desire of women to advance! It seems women are less interested in being promoted than men, and this gender gap is extensive not only in senior-level positions, but in the entry-level ones as well. The ambition gap is highest at the entry level, where just 69% of early-career women want a promotion versus 80% of their male counterparts, and at the senior level, where 84% women want to be promoted versus 92% of their male counterparts (Lean In, 2025).

One of the reasons for this ambition gap, as noted in the study, is that women do not receive the same support to advance as their male counterparts in the company. The second reason documented is that women continue to carry more responsibilities or additional work at home. For example, almost 25 percent of entry-level and senior-level women said that their personal obligations (housework and children) made it hard for them to accept additional work, versus just 15 percent of comparable men. According to the findings, women with partners were more than three times as likely as men with partners to be responsible for all or most of the housework. However, it is very important to point out here that for those women who received the same career support as that of the men, this gendered ambition gap tended to disappear (Lean In, 2025).

Nonetheless, a significant gender gap remains in managerial and executive leadership positions, not only in the United States but globally; consequently, the "broken rung" is still holding women back. The "broken rung" (broken career ladder) refers to a systemic barrier, a hierarchical structure as regards obstacles to taking the first step to advancement or being promoted from entry-level roles to managerial positions. It occurs early in women's careers, unlike the "glass ceiling", which can occur at senior levels. The

"broken rung" creates barriers, making it harder to gain visibility and experience for leadership positions. Emerging research indicates that the gender gap at the first step up to management leads to cumulative disadvantages in women's career progression, as women are passed over at this initial stage, causing them to leave (to wit, the leaky pipeline) or stagnate in their careers, in other words causing lasting imbalances in the leadership pipeline (Grant & Levasseur, 2025; Kamberidou, 2026; Kamberidou, 2025).

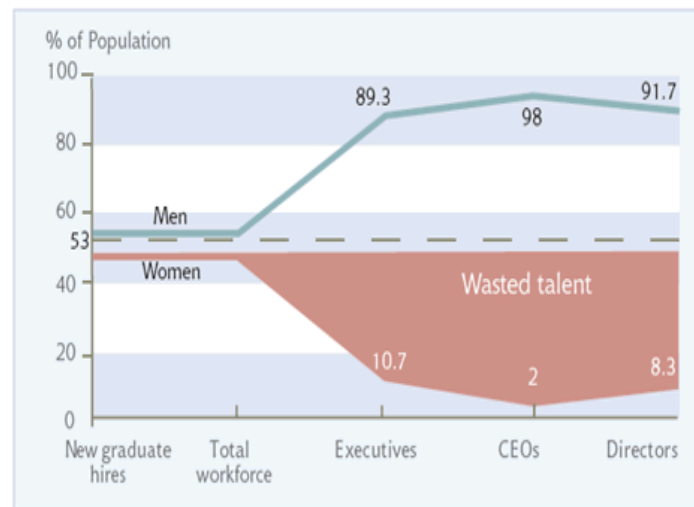
As documented in the Lean In and McKinsey & Company *Women in the Workplace 2025* report, two in 10 companies in the United States are placing low or no priority on women's career advancement, and this rises to three in 10 for women of color. Additionally, one in four companies has limited or fewer remote and hybrid work options, and approximately one in six has cut back on formal sponsorship and discontinued or reduced career development programs tailored for women.

More analytically, the following six key findings are documented in the *Women in the Workplace 2025* report: firstly, women are now less interested in advancing. For the first time since the beginning of this study in 2015, women are markedly less likely than men to say they want to be promoted. Secondly, the "broken rung" is still holding women back. Thirdly, women leaders are under extra pressure. Women in senior levels are experiencing burn-out and see greater barriers to the top. Fourthly, the flexibility stigma is hurting women since they are usually penalized for working remotely as opposed to men. Fifthly, although diversity matters to corporate America, there is a downward trend regarding their commitment. Finally, fairness and inclusion pay off, but there's still a lot of work to be done.

Apparently, the "stupid curve" (Kamberidou, 2011) still prevails. The "stupid curve"—a phrase coined by former Deloitte U.S. Chairman Mike Cook in 2008—emphasizes this significant wastage of internal talent. For example, Australia's Chief Executive Women (CEW) organization, using this term, had released a report published in 2009 that included a diagram-image of the "stupid curve", according to which Australian organisations selected 90% of their leaders from their male employees, from only 50% of their workforce (the male half), the other 50% (the female half) was overlooked, underutilised and devalued. In other words, men had a 9 times better chance of reaching the executive level. As argued in the study, by failing to recognise and promote women, organizations missed out on a significant and measurable competitive advantage. The stupid curve refers to the extent of this wastage of talent (Kamberidou, 2011).

A pattern which seems to be continuing today in the United States, as indicated in the Lean In and McKinsey & Company 2025 report, which also warns us that: "*The decisions leaders make now will determine the future of women and the workplace. We're at a critical moment. Corporate America is at risk of backsliding on women, just as AI is reshaping how we work. What leaders choose to do in 2026 will have a lasting impact.*"

Fig 1: The "Stupid Curve"



Source: The CEW CEO Kit edition 2, EOWA Australian Census of Women in Leadership 2008

Image-graph: In the Chief Executive Women (CEW) report published in 2009.

2.1. Boundary intrusion and emotional overload

When speaking of flexible work arrangements and working remotely, it seems that Nancy Pascall's warnings in the 1990s have come true. At two European Commission workshops in Brussels in 1993 and in 1997 Nancy Pascall—of the European Commission's Directorate-General for Information Society and Media (DG INFSO), today DG Connect— persistently argued that although the technological revolution would open a lot of opportunities, flexibility and accessibility were at the same time drawbacks that would lead to social isolation, insecure positions, and unclear boundaries between work and leisure. She also argued, in the 1990s, that women, principally of low income and education, have no space dedicated to their work, other than their homes. It is therefore within women's private sphere that the boundaries or the division between the public and private spheres will be brought down (Pascall, 1993; Pascall, 1997).

Pascall (2012) advocates "*the engendering of technology*" using a holistic approach that will not bring down the boundaries between the private and public spheres. An approach that entails the creation of new dynamic communities, to wit, women's agency and financial empowerment, in addition to getting more women involved in the design, the production and the use of technology.ⁱⁱⁱ

Current studies discuss these unclear boundaries, for instance a paper published January 9, 2026 in *Gender, Work and Organization*, focusing on technology, work-life conflict and well-being, argues that technology blurs physical and temporal borders and

ⁱⁱⁱ While technology is changing our world, gender diversity in tech is lacking. More analytically see study on the digital divide: the exclusion of a sizeable part of the workforce from the digital market economy, and women in particular, suggests that we still have a very long way to go (Kamberidou & Pascall, 2020). Also see *Women's Agency and Entrepreneurship in the Digital Age* (Kamberidou, 2025).

can heighten role conflict and stress levels (Doargajudhur, Hosanoo, Rughoobur-Seetah, & Lichy, 2026).

Specifically, the authors argue that although technology was initially perceived as easy to use and useful, increasing flexibility, cost efficiency and operational performance, it later became a source of stress and *"boundary intrusion"*, blurring work–life boundaries and revealing unintended negative consequences for well-being. The same factors that motivated the adoption of technologies to achieve flexibility also introduced challenges for women, and in particular challenges regarding emotional strain, security and technical issues, increasingly blurring the boundaries between women's personal lives and their work due to constant device connectivity and gendered caregiving expectations, among other things (Doargajudhur et al., 2026).

In this study, qualitative data were collected through 32 semi-structured interviews with women entrepreneurs, in which the female participants reported that being *"always available"* not only increased their stress but also caused them to experience *"emotional overload"*. Many participants described difficulties disconnecting from work:

For example, participant 2 said, *"I feel like I am working all the time...hard to take breaks...it is overwhelming because I also have my duties at home."*

Participant 3 said, *"It's like I never switch off...I feel exhausted and as if I can never unplug...even late at night, I check messages because I don't want to lose clients...it is draining."*

Participant 19 said: *"I find it difficult to disconnect...I am always working and checking messages even at night...my mind feels like it is always on."*

Certainly, this applies to men as well, but it is important to point out that women are the ones who have to deal with the additional unpaid female labor pattern: e.g., gendered caregiving expectations and the *"care burden impact"* (WEF, 2024).

Moreover, the cost of doing unpaid work has increased significantly for women, especially today. A plethora of studies argue that women have been outperforming men in terms of educational attainment, and consequently, the cost of doing unpaid work has risen. This is also emphasized in the current Global Gender Gap Report and Index of the World Economic Forum (WEF, 2025).

Regardless of higher educational attainment, women continue to face an uneven playing field, with less career support and fewer opportunities to advance, since the unpaid female labor model still prevails, among other things. The gap between women's representation in the total workforce and in senior leadership widens as women's education levels rise. This is a clear disconnect between educational attainment and economic engagement, which shows the inefficiency or failure of current systems to evaluate and apply women's skills into economic decision-making roles and leadership.

This deep-rooted gender order is clearly reflected in the current Global Gender Gap Report and Index of the World Economic Forum (WEF), according to which, if we continue at this pace, it will take us 123 years to close the overall global gender gap, namely, to reach full parity (WEF, 2025).

The next World Economic Forum Report will be out in June 2026. Hopefully, we will see some improvements, and not the continuation of the gender ambition gap and

the declining trend observed in women's advancement in organizations, companies and multinationals in the United States, clearly documented in the Lean In and McKinsey & Company research report on *Women in the Workplace* (Lean In, 2025).

2.2. Women's higher exit rates from academia: the motherhood penalty

A plethora of studies have been documenting the effects of parenthood on careers, especially for women. Even in professions or fields with more flexible schedules, the motherhood penalty persists. For instance, in academia, even in Denmark, a country which is a global leader in gender equality (ranking 3rd in the EU with a score of 71.8/100), and has both paid parental leave and subsidized childcare, the impact of having children on women's careers is enormous.

This is confirmed in a revealing large-scale study – published by the Centre for Economic Performance, the London School of Economics and Political Science (LSE) and the Economic and Social Research Council-ESRC (Cairo, Ivandic, Lassen, & Tartari, 2026; Kwon, 2026).

In this study, Cairo, Ivandic, Lassen and Tartari (2026) focus on the academia in Denmark and on how parenthood affects gender gaps in university careers. The persistent child penalties women confront, especially in competitive environments, is spotlighted in this research, which uses population-wide administrative and survey data linked to productivity and promotion records. Their findings show that women, after having their first child, are 29% less likely to be employed at a university.

Additionally, as regards the women in academia who are mothers, the findings indicate that they are responsible for substantially more childcare-related services than their fathers. The study also showed that flexible schedules and working arrangements did not reduce the motherhood penalties. According to their findings, one in three women exits academia following motherhood (the leaky pipeline). Men also experience a decline in academic employment when they become fathers, but the effects are considerably smaller (Cairo et al., 2026).

Childbirth for women in academia results in a decline in research output and tenure attainment, whereas men's paths are unaffected by parenthood. Women report five times more childcare responsibilities, especially unpredictable tasks (e.g., emergencies like taking child to the doctor, picking up sick child from school, being more likely to take care of their children at night and during sick days, being responsible for doctor visits and nursery pick-ups etc.), patterns that persist regardless of the educational attainment of their partner/husband or grandparent support (Cairo et al., 2026).

More analytically, the study published by the Centre for Economic Performance, which is based at the London School of Economics and Political Science (LSE), uses multiple large data sets to investigate how the direct effects of parenthood influence academic career outcomes (Cairo et al., 2026). According to the findings of the study, the career trajectories of women and men are similar before becoming parents, but their paths separate entirely after the birth of their first child.

Using data from various Danish registries, Cairo, Ivandic, Lassen, and Tartari (2026) collected information from 13,347 parents enrolled in a PhD program at a Danish university between 1996 and 2017: parents who had their first child after the first year of their doctoral studies. This information was combined with publication histories from Elsevier's Scopus citation database, in addition to responses from a survey conducted at Danish universities in 2017, covering topics such as work–life balance, career aspirations and childcare.

With reference to the impact of parenthood on men and women, their findings showed that, eight years after the arrival of the first child, women were 29% less likely to be employed at a university than if they had not become mothers; for men, the drop was 14%. Additionally, mothers who left academia (leaky pipeline) experienced a 12% reduction in earnings, and not only! If we consider the impact of parenthood on research, according to the findings, these women were less likely to find work in laboratories or at research institutes. This implies that many women, after having children, not only exit academia but also completely abandon research (Cairo et al., 2026).

In examining the differences in career paths for the mothers and fathers who remained in academia, the findings show that the chances for tenure for mothers fell to 35%, three to four years after the birth of their child, and 23% lower after eight years, whereas fathers did not experience any visible changes.

When considering the "publish or perish" pattern, an aphorism describing the pressure on academics to continually publish in order to maintain and advance in their careers, women and mothers in particular are affected negatively.

Although men continued to publish and have the same number of publications after becoming fathers, women who were mothers experienced a significant drop in research output: 31% fewer publications than did fathers eight years after the birth of their first child. Even in Denmark, a country with higher levels of gender equality, the impact of having children on women's careers is huge, implying lower productivity, especially during the early years of parenthood. Undeniably, women in academia take on significantly more caregiving responsibilities for children than men, which leads to lower productivity or the leaky pipeline, namely a wastage of talent (the stupid curve). The parenthood penalty was even more noticeable among mothers who were trained in academic departments that had no women in senior positions. This demonstrates the importance of having female mentors and role models.

3. The unpaid female labor model in Greece

The female employment rate in Greece has risen significantly over the last four decades. It went from 35.8% in 1981 to about 60% in 2024 and early 2025, namely, 6 out of 10 women, in the 20-64 age group, are employed. However, female employment in Greece is still the second lowest in the EU, just above Italy (Matsaganis et al., 2025). Despite the increasing female workforce in Greece, in comparison to past decades, traditional gender roles persist, with women juggling domestic and public life, responding to many and

diverse needs as regards the sustained unpaid female labor model: childcare, housework, dependent adults, extended family members such as elderly parents, in-laws and in many cases family members with disabilities (Kamberidou, 2026).

As a result of these multiple caregiving responsibilities gender gaps: like the gender employment gap, the wage gap (or pay gap), the leadership gap and consequently the pension gap are being reproduced, ultimately perpetuating gender inequalities (Kamberidou, 2026), including the deprioritization or downward trend of women's employment and advancement.

For example, current studies show that women in Greece are still the main caregivers. Greek women usually leave the labor market to take care of their children and/or other dependents, and as a result are exposed to prolonged financial insecurity. The care penalty and the motherhood penalty dominate. Although parental leave policies in Greece support shared responsibility, it is the women who usually take them. Additionally, women choose to work part-time or they take career breaks, or else, they choose to return to the labor market in less specialized and less demanding positions which means less money, lower salaries, with no future prospects for promotions or advancement, and in the end lower pensions (Kamberidou, 2026; Kasdagli et al., 2025; Lean In, 2025; Matsaganis et al., 2025; Tverdostup & Sabouniha, 2024).

Undoubtedly, meaningful solutions require addressing the deep-rooted gender order, namely anachronistic social stereotypes, as women's activities and achievements outside the home have intensified in Greek society. This has resulted in the deepening or magnification of the "Multitasking Whirlpool"^{iv}, a term I coined in 2018 to describe this discriminatory gendered time-allocation pattern, which is intensified even further when women are married and have children.

^{iv} "Multitasking Whirlpool": Term coined by Dr. Irene Kamberidou, copyright May 14, 2018© <https://www.nlg.gr>. Term-concept registered to Notary Public. Additionally, Intellectual Property Rights (IPR) date available from Hellenic/National Postal Service (ELTA) June 2018. See also article published in Springer in 2020 defining term: <https://doi.org/10.1186/s13731-020-0114-y>, Springer Nature Link: <https://rdcu.be/b4sWF>.

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"The superwoman-superhuman identity"

SPRINGER NATURE Link: <https://rdcu.be/b4sWF>



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<https://link.springer.com/article/10.1186/s13731-020-0114-y>

The multitasking whirlpool is a term I use to best describe women's—repeatedly documented for decades—experience and pattern of being pulled in all directions: juggling professional, social, family and domestic obligations while pursuing individual/personal or creative goals and needs.

The multitasking whirlpool is a result of sociocultural expectations related to gender role ideologies that have led to *'the having to do it all pattern'*, specifically the superwoman-superhuman identity. Inevitably, women are experiencing multiple levels of tension and contradictory feelings due to conflicting social roles or the superwoman identity (Kamberidou, 2020; Kamberidou, 2025).

In Greece, housework remains a gendered activity, even with couples where the wife works more hours than the husband, something observed globally. Research findings published in 2024 by the Vienna Institute for International Economic Studies, argue that *"the absolute largest gender-based inequality in housework is recorded in Greece"*. According to their findings: *"80.5% of the housework time of dual-earner couples in Greece is performed by the wife, whereas the husband contributes only 19.5%"* (Tverdostup & Sabouniha, 2024: 20), and these figures do not include childcare!

Tverdostup and Sabouniha (2024) examine the gender disparities in paid work and housework in Europe, with regard to couples, and specifically, as they put it, spousal worktime and spousal housework time allocation. Their empirical evidence documents

that women do most of the domestic duties, including childcare and housework. In reference to Greece, they argue that, even if (or when) women achieve equality with men in terms of their labor market commitment and work hours—like they have in Finland—Greek women still invest significantly more time in housework. As for parental leave systems, evidence throughout Europe shows that they do not necessarily lead to a reduction in the gender gap related to unpaid childcare, despite the fact that European Directive 1158/2019—which was included in Greek legislation in the year 2021—improved parental leaves and extended their duration.

A recent study by *Women On Top*, a Greek organization for the professional and economic empowerment of women, and a hub for networking—which recently changed its name to WHEN-Equity, Empowerment and Change—published a qualitative and quantitative study in 2025 which addresses the gender gap in unpaid care in Greece, and it focused on men.

It focused on men primarily during the COVID-19 pandemic, because for many Greek men, it was the first time they spent so much time at home with their children, due to the lockdowns. The *Women On Top* quantitative survey included 504 participants who were private sector employees, consisting of 297 women and 207 men between the ages of 18-54. The participants were either parents of children up to 12 years old, or individuals intending to have children within the next one to four years (Kasdagli, Theodorikakou, Moschovakou, & Kelepouri, 2025).

In their research Kasdagli et al. (2025) also took into account the recent legislation changes concerning the extended/increased paternity leaves offered in Greece. They examined 4 specific leaves: paternity leave; special maternity protection benefit; childcare leave (or child raising leave); and parental leave. Unfortunately, their findings showed that we still have a very long way to go, namely, they confirmed the gender-based unequal sharing of care responsibilities among Greek families.

It is essential to note here that Sevilla and Smith (2020) also analyzed the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the gender division of childcare responsibilities within UK families, using a sample size of 4,361 respondents aged 18-60. As was the case in Greece, their findings showed that women in the UK continued to bear most of the childcare responsibilities despite changes in employment status. Before the pandemic, women were responsible for 65.3% of childcare duties, and during the pandemic, for 65%, a workload equivalent to a full-time job.

Looking at the bright side, in examining the findings on Greece, I need to point out that the *Women On Top* study acknowledged that over the last decades, a shift has been noted in young men's perceptions about their roles as fathers. I'm happy to say that a growing number of Greek men today are recognizing the importance of fatherhood and demanding a better balance between work and family life, from the first months of their baby's life. Greek men are now more willing to share responsibilities and spend time at home to take care of the house and the children.

With regard to those fathers in Greece who make use of parental leave and paternity leave, and use these two leaves to actually take care of their child or children,

the study showed that: It strengthens their bond with their children and their partner or wife; it supports a mother's professional growth as well as her financial independence; the participation of fathers in childcare, which includes domestic duties (like housework, taking the kids to their sport events or lessons and other after school activities); and it nurtures a new generation with a perception of gender equality (Kasdagli et al., 2025).

However, I need to reiterate that *we still have a very long way to go*, because the 2025 *Women On Top* study indicates that in Greece— as was the case in the UK during the pandemic—gender stereotypes prevail, with care responsibilities perceived as a woman's job.

Secondly, Greek men usually avoid taking parental leave due to fear of social judgment, in other words, social stigmatization, or else being perceived as losing their masculinity, as defined by anachronistic gender stereotypes. Thirdly, and most significantly, in view of financial or economic factors, since men usually make more money or have higher salaries, or hold better positions than women, viz. the gender pay gap and the gender leadership gap prevail in Greece.

As previously cited, European Directive 2019/1158 was incorporated into Greek Law (4808) in the year 2021, extending paternity leave to 14 days immediately around childbirth. The law also introduced a four-month paid parental leave for both parents, provided they worked for the same employer for at least one year. Parental leave in Greece is partially subsidized by the Public Employment Service (DYPA) and is available to either parent for child-rearing up to age eight. It includes flexible working hours and arrangements, part-time work for parents, and working remotely, among other things. I need to point out again that, despite the extension of parental leave in Greece, men seem to avoid it due to fear of workplace judgment, social stigma, lack of awareness, and because it's only partially subsidized. With reference to the latter, as cited above, men usually have higher salaries or earn more money than women, so they do not take it. According to the *Women On Top* findings, men are less likely to use parental leave: 47% of fathers had not used any leave (Kasdagli et al., 2025).

Men usually view paternity leave and parental leave as a way to support their partners or wives rather than actively or exclusively engage in childcare. In other words, not as a given and primary duty, role or obligation as fathers, but as helping or supporting their wives or partners, as babysitting or as doing them a favor (Kamberidou, 2026).

Gender stereotypes, including those in the workplace culture, do not encourage men in Greece to take parental leave. This applies to many European countries, as confirmed in a study on *the Gender Gap in Time Allocation in Europe* by the IZA Institute of Labor Economics, which shows that men devote more time to paid work than women, and women more time to childcare than men, and especially in countries of the South of Europe and in Mediterranean countries which share certain common traits, like Greece, Italy, Spain, Malta and Portugal (Gimenez-Nadal & Molina, 2020).

Greek women with children (and especially working women) have been forced to excel at managing their time, literally becoming experts in time management. As

previously mentioned, this was confirmed in a study by Tverdostup and Sabouniha (2024), who examined data for 10 European countries: Greece, Germany, France, Belgium, Estonia, Finland, Poland, Romania, Luxembourg, and the United Kingdom. They discussed the gender disparities in paid work and housework in Europe, and their empirical evidence confirmed that women performed most of the domestic duties, including childcare and housework, in heterosexual dual-earner couple households.

4. The child penalty in Greece and the parenthood wage gap

It seems that among European countries, Greece is not the place to have a child. Despite the declining birth rates, the childcare gap in Greece persists, making it extremely hard for mothers to return to work after childbirth or to continue and excel in their careers.

Women's labor market performance is deteriorating, while that of men's is improving or left unaffected, according to a study on the Motherhood Penalty in Greece, published in 2025 by ELIAMEP, which is the Greek acronym for the Hellenic Foundation for European & Foreign Policy. The Head of the Greek and European Economy Program of ELIAMEP Manos Matsaganis and his team of researchers argue that this phenomenon, dubbed the motherhood penalty, could also be called the child penalty (Matsaganis, Fløt, Papalexatouten, Nicolitsas, & Dapi, 2025).

Their study compares Greece, where female employment is low and child penalties are large, to Norway, where female employment is high and child penalties are virtually non-existent. It is necessary to reiterate that female employment in Greece is still the 2nd lowest in the EU (just above Italy), and lags far behind the EU average (75.8%).^v

In Greece, there seems to be no child penalty for men, while women's employment decreases by as much as 37.9% when the first child arrives. This is in line with the experience of other South European countries, such as Spain (38.2%) and Italy (32.9%). In contrast, the child penalty is significantly lower in Denmark (14.1%) and Sweden (8.9%), and a trivial 3.3 % in Norway (Kleven, Landais & Leite-Mariante, 2024).

When discussing gender stereotypes, data on Greece from the 2024 Eurobarometer survey showed that 70% of the respondents believed that family life suffers when mothers work full-time, and 48% believe women should prioritize family over career (34% in the EU as a whole). The Greek respondents were also asked to state whether they agreed or disagreed with the following statement: *"If the father's pay is lower than that of the mother's, then the father is the one who should give up work to look after the children, if a family decides one parent has to do so."* In Greece, only 40% "totally agreed" or "tended to agree" with this statement, while in the EU as a whole, 51% (Matsaganis et al., 2025).

^v Although the female employment rate, as previously mentioned, has risen significantly over the last four decades, from 35.8% in 1981 to about 60% in 2024 and early 2025, data from late 2024 indicates that Italy has 67.1% overall employment and Greece a 69.3%. This means that 69.3% of people aged 20 to 64 in Greece were employed in 2024. This figure, while representing a significant rise from 60.8% in 2019, places Greece as one of the lowest in the EU, below the 75.8% EU average (Matsaganis et al., 2025).

However, looking at the bright side, it seems traditional norms are changing, if we take into account that in the 2009 Eurobarometer survey, only 23% agreed in Greece and 48% in the EU as a whole. It is also important to note that in the 2024 survey, 46% of those who agreed were women. On the contrary, in the EU as a whole, there was little difference in the responses: 51% for women versus 50% for men. In Greece, the share agreeing was greatest (57%) among women aged 25-39, and lowest among men of the same age group (29%). On the other hand, as a whole, attitudes to parental leave appear to be a lot more relaxed, both in Greece and the EU (Matsaganis et al., 2025).

With reference to paternal attitudes and gender stereotypes in Greece, 84% of the respondents agreed that *“taking parental leave is enriching for a father”*, while an equally large majority disagreed that *“men taking parental leave show a lack of ambition for their career”* (82%), notably higher than the EU average which is 81% and 77% respectively (Matsaganis et al., 2025).

Nevertheless, the Greek labor market penalizes motherhood. The motherhood penalty in Greece results in substantial lifetime income loss for women. The negative effects women face in employment after having children are presented in the recent policy paper co-authored by Greek and Norwegian researchers, who explore how cultural norms, institutional policies and social attitudes affect employment rates and career prospects, ultimately shaping parental decisions and gender equality in the workplace. Women in Greece confront reduced career prospects and lower employment rates, which often means accepting lower-level positions with reduced income, pressures to work part-time or stay home after having children (Matsaganis et al., 2025).

According to Pinelopi Theodorakakou, co-founder and Head of Programs & Impact from [WHEN](#) (previously known as Women On Top), an organization in Greece dedicated to women’s economic empowerment and gender equality in the workplace: *“Women in Greece who work full-time are not the majority because they are still overwhelmingly responsible for unpaid care work, while flexible, affordable childcare and supportive workplace policies remain limited. Full-time employment often comes at an unsustainable personal cost”* (AGEE, 2025).

The Alliance for Gender Equality in Europe (AGEE, 2025) argues that Greece is one of the most challenging countries for working mothers in Europe, with societal expectations repeatedly demanding that women prioritize family over employment. Lack of accessible, affordable, and flexible childcare in Greece keeps mothers out of the workforce or restricted to part-time or informal jobs and excluded from leadership and entrepreneurship. Women usually bear an unequal burden of unpaid care work, with about 91% of mothers spending at least an hour daily on household chores compared to only 30% of men with children. Of course, this is not limited to Greece. Women in Malta, Portugal, and Latvia also find it especially hard to balance work and family, and not only.

It is vital to note that multinationals punish motherhood, especially if you consider the parenthood wage gaps. Current research shows that multinationals are not only paying mothers too little, but they are paying fathers too much. Multinationals cultivate and reproduce gender inequalities, as confirmed in an empirical study, using an

extensive database of micro-level data of over 36,500 employees in 57 countries (van der Straaten, Pisani, & Kolk, 2024).

Although multinational enterprises are widely recognized for providing employment to a significant number of women around the globe, empirical evidence suggests that existing gender inequalities may be aggravated rather than alleviated in their subsidiaries. In their study Van der Straaten, Pisani and Kolk (2024) show that parenthood is a key factor contributing to the gender wage gap. Their study focuses on the role of firms and specifically multinationals because they are important economic agents that provide employment to a great number of women, in addition to determining hiring and promotion policies, ultimately controlling wages.

Their findings show that mothers earn less than their childless female peers, while fathers earn more than their childless male peers! In short, motherhood is punished, and the gender wage gap, along with the underrepresentation of women in leadership roles, is promoted, perpetuated and reproduced in multinationals.

The role of multinationals in the creation of these parenthood wage gaps cannot be denied. If we don't act now, we will lose the women who could become future leaders (wastage of talent), especially in the new digital landscape, and we will continue to face the effects of this loss on our economy. In other words, we need to put an end to the continuation of the "stupid curve" (Kamberidou, 2011): the wastage of internal talent in companies, corporations, firms, universities, and organizations that are deprioritizing women and gender diversity.

5. Concluding remarks and recommendations: Closing the childcare gap

Women's labor market performance is deteriorating in Greece, while that of men's is improving or left unaffected, and the Greek labor market is also penalizing motherhood. There seems to be no child penalty for men, while women's employment decreases by as much as 37.9% when the first child arrives. Traditional gender roles persist along with the childcare gap. As has been documented in this study, the absolute largest gender-based inequality in housework is recorded in Greece, in addition to the motherhood penalty, which results in substantial lifetime income loss for women. Gender stereotypes, including those in the workplace culture, do not encourage men to take parental and paternity leaves, although policies in Greece support shared responsibility.

As regards parental time allocation, which is influenced by the childcare gap, this paper showed that Greece is one of the most challenging countries for working mothers in Europe, with societal expectations repeatedly demanding that women prioritize family over employment.

Before focusing on Greece, this article confirmed that the care burden impact, along with the motherhood penalty (or child penalty), the flexibility stigma, and the ambition gap, have served as barriers to women's employability, stalling the march towards equality.

Regardless of higher educational attainment, women continue to face an uneven playing field, with less career support and fewer opportunities to advance, since the unpaid female labor model still prevails, and not only in Greece.

The gap between women's representation in the total workforce and in senior leadership widens as women's education levels rise. Furthermore, the notable ambition gap (women's lack of desire or choice to advance), the flexibility stigma, and the declining commitment to gender diversity have been reproducing the gender gaps in employment, wages/salaries, leadership roles and pensions.

This study discussed the barriers to women's employment and employability, such as the unpaid female labor model as regards the childcare gap, sustained caregiving responsibilities, and extensive unpaid services, among other things.

In Greece, for example, there is a large childcare gap, namely, there is no general entitlement to full-time, state-supported early childhood education and care (ECEC), according to the fact sheet of the European Observatory on Family Policy. In contrast, the fact sheet shows that there is no childcare gap in Sweden, Denmark, Estonia, Finland, and Slovenia, since these five countries transition from well-compensated parental leave to full-time, state-supported early childhood education and care (ECEC), usually starting before 20 months. These five countries provide early ECEC, parental leave durations over 10 months, integrated systems under education ministries, fees based on income, subsidized fees or free services, among other things (Serapioni, 2025).

However, apart from these five countries, the childcare gap documented in the European Union has been perpetuating and reinforcing gender inequalities and economic losses, since families are forced to rely on expensive private facilities and services, or else mothers are forced to leave the workforce. Care responsibilities disproportionately impact women, creating barriers to advancement; consequently, workplaces require policies that counteract these inequalities.

Accordingly, to achieve equal sharing of care responsibilities—as documented repeatedly in this paper—we need to sensitize men and boys to participate, to join in on equal terms, among other things, as care is the foundation that holds societies together.

It is important to make paternity leave and parental leave mandatory (in addition to increasing the duration of paternity leave) for fathers in the public and private sectors, and especially fathers who hold executive positions or leadership roles, as they can serve as role models and mentors. In order for men to stop avoiding or refusing to apply for paternity and parental leave, visibility is needed to reproduce participation. To reiterate, we need male role models and mentors. Moreover, providing full income coverage (not partial) is non-negotiable; fathers will not take these leaves since they make more money (e.g., gender wage/pay gap and leadership gap), unless they become mandatory.

Inevitably, cultural and institutional changes are necessary to challenge stereotypes and create a supportive environment for both women and men to use parental leave effectively and achieve equal sharing of care responsibilities. Could we apply or adapt the more successful childcare policies and practices documented in

Denmark, Sweden, Estonia, Finland, and Slovenia to our societies, in Greece, for example?

To accomplish this, we need to first address the socio-cultural dimension, such as historical legacies, economic and political structures, broader gender inequalities, social stereotypes, gender gaps (e.g., childcare gap, gender pay gap, employment gap, leadership gap and pension gap). We need also consider and deal with the gender devaluation of women's work, in other words the subtle processes by which women's work and contributions are minimized, undervalued or devalued in the labor market as they have been reproducing gender stereotypes and consequently the gender gaps and skills shortages revealed in the current Global Gender Gap Report and Index (WEF 2025), otherwise we wouldn't need 123 years to reach full parity.

It is essential to recognize that the established gender gaps in the labor market persist due to the underrepresentation of women in executive or leadership roles in most professions. It is also important to acknowledge that child penalties are intensified in highly competitive environments, and especially in work environments that have no female role models or mentors (Cairo et al., 2026; Kamberidou, 2026; Kwon, 2026).

"To revive the global economy and improve gender parity, we need sustained and systematic efforts to get women into leadership roles," argues Sue Duke (2024), the Head of the Global Public Policy and Economic Graph Team, LinkedIn. Why, may you ask? Because we need visibility—which means more role models and mentors—to increase and reproduce participation, as previously cited. We have to stop the downward trend. For instance, the Global Gender Gap Report shows the hiring rate of women into leadership roles is steadily declining, at a time when artificial intelligence (AI) is transforming the workplace.

Consequently, it is crucial to get more women into senior positions. This means inclusive approaches to upskilling, reskilling and career growth that include training, sponsorships and mentorship programs, especially in pre-management and middle-management roles. Policymakers must demand measures and actions that firms, corporations, companies and universities will be required to take to support women from the beginning of their careers so as to put an end to the ambition gap. This involves accountability and penalties, in addition to eliminating the gendered parenthood wage gap observed in multinationals.

Undoubtedly, subtle discrimination is harder to spot and tougher to deal with, so we must alert, sensitize or educate both women and men about second-generation gender discrimination and create safe workspaces that support women's growth and transition to leadership roles, and especially the development of a leadership mindset (Kamberidou, 2013; Kamberidou & Pascall, 2020).

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Conflict of Interest Statement

The author declares no conflicts of interest.

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