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Family-Friendly Policies and Remote Work: Revisiting the Work-Care Conflict in a Post-Covid Labour Market

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Abstract The COVID-19 pandemic has had a profound impact on the structure of the labour market, a shift which has had gendered consequences. In particular, women have been disadvantaged by the increased burden of care. The aim of this article is to assess family-friendly policies in Ireland regarding the work-care conflict and the rise of remote working arrangements. To achieve this objective, a feminist policy analysis methodology will be used. The research suggests that Ireland, as a liberal welfare state, must invest further in family-friendly policies, primarily regarding increased access to childcare and family leave. Using the impacts of COVID-19 as a learning experience, this article highlights the areas in which Irish policies should be improved in order to account for the difficulty of balancing care and work; it focuses in particular on the long-term sustainability of remote work.

Key Words remote work, care work, work-life balance, covid-19, feminist policy analysis

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Introduction

The equal distribution of unpaid care work between men and women is a key component in addressing gender inequality in the labour market. It impacts access to employment, working hours and potential for promotion, in addition to equality in pay and working conditions (Russell *et al.* 2019). Care work, referring to the care of persons (children and dependent adults) and to other unpaid work performed within the household and community (Esquivel and Kaufmann 2017), has historically been undertaken by women. However, the feminisation of the workforce attributable to the demands of neoliberal capitalism has slowly begun to shift the balance, resulting in the work-care conflict (Fraser 2016). In Ireland, the work-care conflict is visible through comparatively low rates of full-time labour participation for women, further exacerbated by Ireland's liberal welfare model which prioritises the role of the family in performing unpaid care work (McGauran 2021).

In March of 2020, the structure of the labour market was abruptly impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic, resulting in job losses and the implementation of alternative working arrangements such as remote work. The pandemic policy response in Ireland has had gendered consequences, highlighting the importance of family-friendly policies that value care work. As we move forward from the lockdowns characterising the first stages of the COVID-19 pandemic, remote working arrangements have risen in popularity and are expected to become normalised for many in the long-term (Ireland, Department of Enterprise, Trade and Employment 2021c), thereby marking a permanent shift in the labour market. Therefore, family-friendly policies concerning care and employment must be reconsidered within this context, taking into account the challenges that remote working arrangements may pose for the work-care conflict, female labour participation, and gender equality more broadly.

The aim of this article is to revisit family-friendly work and care policies in Ireland and to explore their role in mitigating the work-care conflict, focusing in particular on the rise of remote working arrangements in light of the COVID-19 pandemic. To achieve this, this article specifically aims to:

- To explore the Irish policy response to the COVID-19 pandemic regarding work and care.
- To identify the challenges surrounding Irish family-friendly policies in mitigating the work-care conflict and promoting gender equality moving forward.

Methodology

Policy analysis refers to the identification, examination, explanation and understanding of the content, cause, and consequences of social policies (McPhail 2003). Although social policy analysis frameworks have been widely theorised and applied in practice, many are criticised for their gender-neutral assumptions which fail to take into consideration their differentiated

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impact on women and men (McPhail 2003). A feminist policy analysis framework remedies this by analysing policies with the goal of supporting gender equality. This approach allows for the identification of inconsistencies and contradictions in policies. McPhail (2003) identifies the principles underlying feminist policy analysis frameworks as: the goal of making women visible in policy and ending sexist oppression; the respect for core feminist values; the acknowledgement of multiple feminisms and multiple identities; and the acknowledgement that every policy issue is a woman's policy issue.

Literature Review

Gender, Care and Work

Care work, specifically family care work, is an activity performed primarily by women (Ferrant *et al.* 2014). For Tong (2017), the correlation between gender and care is understood within the context of biological fact and cultural norms in which care work is considered a woman's responsibility on account of both her biological ability to bear children and the patriarchal society's child-rearing obligations. Busby (2011) states that this has created the assumption that women are naturally better equipped to take on caring responsibilities within the home, thus placing them within the private sphere. Hence, a dichotomy emerged assigning men as 'breadwinners' and women as 'homemakers', a presumption which remains today.

Fraser (2016) conceptualises the relationship between unpaid care work and gender as being inherently linked to the neoliberal capitalist economic order which undermines the value and capacity of care work. For Fraser (2016), the neoliberal capitalist order contributes to the societal devaluation of care work through its goal of incorporating everyone into the labour market, corresponding with the push for increased capital accumulation (production). This is a paradox as care work is an indispensable background condition for the possibility of sustained capital accumulation. This leads to the institutionalisation of women's subordination by placing social reproductive work below formal paid activities; and to the work-care conflict which has emerged by pushing care work into the private sphere whilst simultaneously incorporating women into the labour force – thus limiting their capacity to perform these social-reproductive activities. Whilst the increase in female participation in the workforce may contribute to, or be seen as a sign of, gender equality (James 2009; Blome 2011), it also marks a shift towards the commodification and privatisation of care work (Fraser 2016).

For women in particular, the amalgamation of traditional gender roles and ineffective family-friendly policies make balancing unpaid care work and full-time employment difficult (Ferrant *et al.* 2014). Family-friendly policies, referring to policies that benefit and help to balance both work and family life (Chzhen *et al.* 2019), are commonly criticised for their high cost in a shrinking welfare state characteristic of neoliberal capitalism (Ferrant *et al.* 2014). However, the true cost of neglecting efficient family-friendly policies is understated. According to Glynn (2020), women are on average losing twice as much in wages in comparison to their male counterparts due to their increased caregiving responsibilities. Women's lower earnings in employment and shorter working lives, attributable to their caring responsibilities, also

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contribute towards lower potential income in the long-term, a reduction in pension entitlements, and a greater risk of poverty in old age (Gregory 2010). Additionally, the work-care conflict plays a part in increasing the wage gap between men and women and reducing the quality of female employment due to time and energy limitations (Ferrant *et al.* 2014).

Family-Friendly Policies

Family-friendly policies ease the work-care conflict by contributing to improved work-life balance; increasing female labour participation; and benefiting individuals, economies, and societies more broadly (European Commission 2018). Whilst policies only constitute one aspect of the overall gender equality (or inequality) system, they do play an important role in the structural relationship between and within the family, market, and state (Saraceno and Keck 2011). These include, amongst others, policies aimed at the development of leave regulations and working time policies, the provision of childcare and child allowances (Blome 2011).

Unpaid care work is inextricably linked to the family, market and state. In some nations, the family and community are central to the provision of unpaid care work. In others, the state plays a large role in the provision of care through the social welfare system. In neoliberal capitalist nations, care work is commodified and the private market system dominates (Barry 2021). For this reason, family-friendly policies are largely linked to national social welfare systems (Pankratz 2009). Ricci (2019) identifies a correlation between the structure of the welfare state and the strength of family-friendly policies. The Nordic model welfare state, as exemplified by Sweden and Iceland, consistently ranks highest in family-friendly policies. On the opposite end of the spectrum, the liberal welfare model, present in Ireland and the United Kingdom, consistently ranks lowest. This is because the Nordic welfare model occupies an active role in the provision of care. Conversely, the liberal welfare model consists of anti-poverty policies (McGauran 2021) with minimal state interference, thus relegating the provision of care to the family and the market (Pankratz 2009).

There are various indicators which can be used to measure family-friendly policies relating to work and care. The consensus by Blome (2011), Chzhen (*et al.* 2019) and Boeckmann (*et al.* 2012) is that childcare provision, the availability of parental leave, and the regulation of working time are the most effective family-friendly policy indicators.

Flexible Working Arrangements

Flexible working arrangements refer to the ability for employees to define and/or adjust employment and working hours (Rubery *et al.* 2016), including part-time work (Blome 2011). Flexible working arrangements are believed to encourage work-life balance and increase the participation of women (particularly those with children) in the workforce (Blome 2011) by giving them more capacity to manage the competing demands of family and work (Alon *et al.* 2020). However, flexible working conditions are not risk-free and may be associated with longer working hours and increased stress (Bouzol-Broitman *et al.* 2016).

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Family Leave

A lack of maternity, paternity and parental leave contributes to the gendered division of unpaid labour as men's attachment to the workplace is strengthened while women take on additional parenting responsibilities (Rehel 2014). Although family leave is widely recognised as a crucial element of family-friendly policies, it is not only parents who undertake unpaid care work. Neither Blome (2011), Chzhen (*et al.* 2019) or Boeckmann (*et al.* 2012) allude to the important role of non-parental carers. Many individuals participating in informal care for dependent adults struggle to combine care and work, thus 'choosing' to exit the labour force due to the difficulty of managing conflicting roles (Arksey 2002). The provision of informal adult care impacts female labour participation, especially in cases where this care is time-intensive (Russell *et al.* 2019). Accordingly, the provision of extra support for carers in the workplace will be treated as a family-friendly policy indicator for the purpose of this article.

Childcare

Childcare is widely acknowledged as one of the most important aspects to the success of family-friendly policies which contribute to alleviating the work-care conflict (Blome 2011; Boeckmann *et al.* 2012; Chzhen *et al.* 2019). For Blome (2011), the provision of publicly provided childcare is the best strategy towards increasing female labour participation, addressing declining birth rates, and promoting gender equality. Furthermore, childcare must be accessible, affordable and of high quality, particularly for parents with children aged between 0 and 3 where this is lacking the most (Blome 2011; Chzhen *et al.* 2019).

Child Allowance

Monetary benefits such as child allowances play an important role in women's decisions to return to the workplace. For example, a high marginal tax rate may discourage a married woman with children from re-entering the labour market as it results in less income overall. Means-testing for childcare allowances and benefits would result in a similar dilemma (Smith *et al.* 2003).

COVID-19: Gendered Impacts on Work and Care

The impact of the pandemic has placed immense pressure on the labour market through a sharp rise in unemployment and furlough, a reduction in working hours for many, and a considerable shift in working arrangements to accommodate health and safety measures such as through remote work (Alon *et al.* 2020). These drastic changes to the labour market have had a deeply gendered impact (Gearhart *et al.* 2018; Bahn *et al.* 2020). Through the pandemic, women were more likely than men to leave their jobs to accommodate for the closure of daycares, schools and adult services (Collins *et al.* 2020). A Eurofound report (Weber *et al.* 2021) found that, across EU member states, whilst men experienced a greater reduction in working hours, women were more likely to leave their jobs to manage increased care work. Women were also more

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likely to avail of furlough opportunities than their male counterparts in dual-earner households.

The gendered impact of the pandemic on formal employment is also visible in the private sphere of care due to the increased demand for care work caused by the closures of schools; the lack of extra support from childcare facilities, paid carers and grandparents; and the increased number of sick people (Bahn *et al.* 2020). Social distancing measures have almost eliminated access to external support, thus resulting in childcare which must be provided within the home (Alon *et al.* 2020). Not only has the pandemic increased care work of parents, but also the care and support of elderly, disabled and medically vulnerable people.

The interconnection between work and care is further illuminated by the practice of remote work (Rubery and Travora 2021). Across the EU, around 37% of employed people began working from home due to the pandemic, 26% of which were caring for children under 12 (Rubery and Travora 2021). The introduction of remote working arrangements has further exacerbated the work-care conflict. Rubery and Travora (2021) have reported that, in the EU, 24% of women compared to 13% of men have been prevented from giving time to their remote work due to family responsibilities. Conversely, 32% of women working from home reported their work responsibilities prevented them from giving time to their families, as opposed to 25% of men (Bisello *et al.* 2020). In April of 2020, nearly a half of those teleworking reported working in their free time to meet work demands regularly due to the difficulty of balancing caring responsibilities (Sosterio *et al.* 2020).

Context

The Irish Context

Ireland has the highest share of individuals with caring responsibilities across the European Union (Eurostat 2019), the majority of which is undertaken by women (Russell *et al.* 2019). The unequal distribution of care work between men and women is at its highest during the primary working years, between the ages of 30–64, when careers are established and consolidated (Russell *et al.* 2019). Furthermore, only 57% of women with children under 3 years of age are employed, and only 35% of women with a child aged 14 or under are working full-time (McGauran 2021). In 2014, there was also double the rate of part-time female workers compared to part-time male workers (Ireland, Central Statistics Office 2015). Economically, these trends in care and work cause a significant gender wage gap with women earning between 55–82% of men's average incomes which, in turn, impacts other work-related benefits such as pension entitlements.

The statistics mentioned above demonstrate Ireland's liberal welfare model which emphasises individual responsibility. The Irish welfare state predominantly consists of anti-poverty policies with 'relatively weak social rights, means-tested assistance, and a benefits system largely used by those with low-incomes' (McGauran 2021, p.44). As a result, it is the responsibility of the household/family to either provide for care themselves or to source it

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through the private market due to low state provision (Russell *et al.* 2019). This is also called the ‘familialisation’ of care wherein it is the norm for care to be provisioned within the family due to a lack of government support (McGauran 2021). Further, Ireland's social welfare structure is based upon a male-breadwinner model, or more recently, a primary-breadwinner model (McGauran 2021). In Ireland, 62% of households are dual-earners, whereas 38% consist of either single-earner or one-and-a-half-earner households (Ireland, Central Statistics Office 2016). In single-earner households, 72.3% of earners are men (Ireland, Central Statistics Office 2016).

Irish Family-Friendly Policies

This section will outline the realities of family-friendly work and care policies in Ireland using the family-friendly policy indicators identified above.

Flexible Working Arrangements

The Irish government has proposed legislation for employees to request flexible working arrangements, including the right to request part-time work. However, accepting such requests remains at the discretion of the employer and employees have no legal recourse should the request be denied (Ireland, Citizens Information 2021d).

Family Leave

The Maternity Protection Acts 1994 and 2004 entitle women working in Ireland to 26 weeks of maternity leave (Ireland, Citizens Information 2021a). This is ranked amongst the lowest in the EU (Saraceno and Keck 2011; Chzhen *et al.* 2019). The Paternity Leave and Benefit Act 2016 entitled new fathers employed in Ireland to two weeks of unpaid leave from work (Ireland, Citizens Information 2020a), similarly ranking amongst the lowest in the EU (Chzhen *et al.* 2019). In terms of carers leave, employees in Ireland are entitled to unpaid time off between 13 and 104 weeks to provide care to someone without risk of losing employment. Although this is unpaid, there is a possibility of claiming social welfare benefits such as carers benefit or carers allowance (Ireland, Citizens Information 2020b). As of 2016, 76% of Carers Allowance recipients were female (McGauran 2021).

Childcare

Ireland has a comparatively low number of children under 3 enrolled in a formal childcare facility at only 29%. Conversely, 98% of children between the age of 3 and the age at which they begin their mandatory primary education are enrolled in a childcare facility, largely attributable to the Early Childhood Care and Education Programme (ECCE) (Chzhen *et al.* 2019). Affordability is the primary barrier to childcare in Ireland with the average fee for two children enrolled in a private childcare facility amounting to 29.2% of the average family income (Chzhen *et al.* 2019). To put this into context, childcare fees range from 7.6% of the average wage in Sweden to almost 50% in the United Kingdom (Blome 2011). For lone parents,

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childcare costs are the highest across the European Union (McGauran 2021). Aside from affordability, accessibility is another barrier to access to childcare in Ireland which has one of the lowest hours of operation for childcare facilities across the European Union at only 4 hours on average (Blome 2011). However, in terms of the quality of childcare, Ireland boasts one of the best across the continent with a child-to-staff ratio 3:1 for the youngest and 6:1 for 2–3-year-olds, which is only matched in the United Kingdom and Denmark (Blome 2011).

Child Allowance and One-Parent Family Payment

Parents or legal guardians with children under 18 are entitled to 140 euro a month in non-taxable child benefits, regardless of income status (Ireland, Citizens Information 2021b). Additionally, the One-Parent Family Payment (OPFP) is available for single parents receiving no child maintenance payment until the child reaches the age of 7 (Ireland, Citizens Information 2021c). Prior to 2015, the OPFP was available to single parents until the child reached 18 years old, or 21 if in full-time education. As of 2016, 99% of recipients of the OPFP were women (McGauran 2021).

COVID-19 Policy Response in Ireland

Ireland has implemented several policies concerning work, specifically remote work, and care as a result of the pandemic. It is outlined in the National Remote Working Strategy (Ireland, Department of Enterprise, Trade and Employment 2021d) that, on account of the pandemic, public sector employees will be able to avail of flexible working opportunities such as teleworking, flexible shifts, staggered shifts, longer opening hours and weekend working. This is not the case, however, for private sector workers. This is coupled with plans for the Irish government to begin the process of implementing policies to give employees the Right to Request Remote Work and the Right to Request Flexible Work (Ireland, Department of Enterprise, Trade and Employment 2021a). Furthermore, throughout the pandemic, the Irish government did not provide help in the provision of childcare services to healthcare workers or other essential workers, despite acknowledging the difficulty for them in balancing work and care. Additionally, only public sector workers were given access to special parental leave on account of the pandemic (Rubery and Travora 2021). On a positive note, the nature of the pandemic has created an incentive for the implementation of mandatory sick leave in Ireland. As such, the right to sick leave will be conferred from 2022 through the Sick Leave Bill 2021, starting with 3 days of sick pay in 2022 and increasing to 10 paid sick days by 2025 at a rate of 70% of wages (Ireland, Department of Enterprise, Trade and Employment 2021b).

Results

This section aims to identify the primary challenges in the Irish context regarding family-friendly policies considering both the increased popularity of remote work and the liberal nature of the welfare state. Using McPail's (2003) feminist policy analysis framework, which aims to analyse policies with regard to their gender implications, these challenges will be

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discussed regarding the work-care conflict, female labour force participation, and the long-term sustainability of remote working arrangements.

Lack of Affordable and Accessible Childcare

Childcare policies in Ireland discourage a dual-earner, dual-caregiver model by failing to take into consideration the role of unpaid care work in limiting women's participation in the labour market – thus hindering women's earning potential and pension benefits as well as increasing their risk of poverty in old age (Gregory 2010). Furthermore, these childcare policies devalue care work as an activity undeserving of paid compensation (Fraser 2016), thus increasing women's dependence on the state or on their (often male) partners to provide financially while they engage in unpaid care work. They assume that remote work will allow families to better balance work and care and support the dichotomisation of gender roles while negating any responsibility for bringing men, corporations, or governments (through the welfare model) into caring roles. In addition, childcare policies in Ireland sustain the pattern of women being viewed as private actors by pushing childcare into the margins of the private sphere (Busby 2011). They overlook the needs of single or low-income parents (predominantly women) who may face additional hardship in paying market price for childcare services, further contributing to their marginalisation and lack of social mobility. This issue is further exacerbated by the significant reduction of the One-Parent Family Payment since 2015 (McGauran 2021).

Lack of Support for Parents

Overall, it can be concluded that Irish family-friendly policies fail to support parents. In terms of the regulation of working time, the failure to provide legal recourse for flexible working arrangements (Ireland, Citizens Information 2021d) shows that commitment to mitigating the work-care conflict is largely symbolic. In terms of family leave policies, they can be said to penalise women for their roles as mothers by failing to provide adequate maternity leave, thus leading to worse labour market outcomes for mothers, decreased likelihood of job-continuity, and poorer health outcomes for children (Baker and Milligan 2008). Further, they devalue the role of gender in performing unpaid care activities, in particular by failing to give men access to sufficient paternity leave which would contribute towards increasing male involvement in care work (Rehel 2014). As such, these policies do not support men's uptake of care responsibilities.

Lack of Support for Carers

Ireland has some of the most extensive support for carers across the European Union in terms of leave policies (McGauran 2021), offering between 13 and 104 weeks without risk of losing employment (Ireland, Citizens Information 2020b). However, the generous provision of leave is diluted by the lack of state investment in other areas, such as through the state provision of care or access to flexible working arrangements. As most carers are women, they are the ones primarily being disadvantaged by the stark policies of the liberal welfare state. As such, family-friendly policies concerning carers are insufficient in mitigating the work-care conflict.

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Although little research has been conducted on the impact of remote working arrangements for non-parental carers, it must not be assumed that remote work will allow carers to more easily balance their care responsibilities for dependent adults alongside paid work, as this care can be labour and time intensive. The lack of family-friendly policies aimed at supporting carers in balancing paid work with care work devalues the importance of caring for the elderly, sick or disabled, and lacks consideration for women's unpaid labour. The fact that 76% of carers are women points to the government failing to address the dichotomisation of gender roles and care work through a lack of gender-responsive policies which acknowledge the role of gender in the provision of care work. Instead, family-friendly policies in Ireland aimed at carers serve to further propagate the familialisation of care work for dependent adults, paradoxically representing an absence of the state from care work whilst simultaneously increasing women's dependence on either the state or men through the need for financial support.

The National Remote Working Strategy

There are various challenges which, in the context of the work-care crisis, can be deduced from the National Remote Working Strategy. Firstly, it is assumed that remote working arrangements make balancing childcare with paid work easier for households. The National Remote Working Strategy states:

Remote work also provides the opportunity for better work/life balance and allows families to spend more time together. In this respect, mitigating the costs of early learning childcare is a significant benefit of remote working. In Ireland, the net cost of early learning and childcare is 28 percent of the average wage of a couple, while the EU average is notably lower at 12 percent.

(Ireland, Department of Enterprise, Trade and Employment 2021d, p.10)

This statement suggests that the Irish government believes that the inaccessibility and unaffordability of childcare can be alleviated through remote work. This assumption was warned against by Rubery and Travora (2021) who affirm that remote work is not a solution to the problem of care brought about by the closure of schools and childcare facilities and is in direct contradiction with the actual experience of working women throughout the pandemic.

Secondly, the report assumes that remote work will reduce the need for sick days. It states:

Productivity increases come from remote workers benefitting from a quieter work environment which allows them to concentrate on complex tasks and from a reduction of sick leave.

(Ireland, Department of Enterprise, Trade and Employment 2021d, p.13)

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In addition to being at odds with the recent implementation of the Sick Leave Bill of 2021 (Ireland, Department of Enterprise, Trade and Employment 2021b), this statement also contrasts with Dugarova's (2020) recommendation to invest in increased access to sick leave as a legacy of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Lastly, the report fails to challenge the core of the work-care crisis:

For those with caring responsibilities, remote working can have a positive benefit on parents, allowing them to work schedules that accommodate both their personal and professional demands. In particular, remote working can make it easier for women with families to stay in or re-join the workforce.

(Ireland, Department of Enterprise, Trade and Employment 2021d, p.9)

This statement acknowledges the link between gender and care work, and its impact on the sustainability of remote work. However, the report does not make any attempt to address the underlying issues pertaining to the gendered distribution of unpaid care work, despite the potential for remote work to accelerate gender role-reversal in care (Dugarova 2020; Alon *et al.* 2020).

Overall, the National Remote Working Strategy, as a document aimed towards improving the long-term sustainability of remote work, can again be said to devalue the role of care and therefore to increase women's dependence on the state by pushing them out of the labour market. In addition, the document does not acknowledge the additional burden of care faced by single or migrant women, and how this might affect their ability to engage in remote work. Further, the document fails to support men's uptake of caring responsibilities or even acknowledge the role of gender in care work. In terms of the relationship between care and the liberal welfare state, the document upholds the traditional Irish liberal ideology by continuously relegating care to the private sphere.

Conclusion

The research suggests that Ireland has been unwilling to commit to investing in family-friendly policies due to an amalgamation of lasting gender roles which place women in the home and its status as a liberal welfare state. Whilst the policy response to the COVID-19 pandemic has indicated that the Irish government is broadening its interpretation of the liberal welfare state by going beyond anti-poverty policies through its investment in long-term remote work, few of these investments contribute towards mitigating the work-care conflict. Despite this, the pandemic has illuminated the necessity for improved family-friendly policies due to the blurring of boundaries between the public and private spheres as well as the proven disadvantages faced by women working remotely. This is particularly important for single, low-income or migrant women. However, it should be also acknowledged that incentivising a dual-earner, dual-carer model through family-friendly policies is not a process with a

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guaranteed outcome of increasing gender equality. The mitigation of the work-care conflict must go beyond the scope of family-friendly policies to be effective, incorporating gender mainstreaming on a much broader scale as well as changing attitudes towards gender roles.

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