



Engaging Men in Nurturing Care:

Making Care a Shared Responsibility

Progress depends on redesigning policies, services, and cultures to support equal caregiving from the start.

Policy Brief

August 2025





Executive Summary

Across three Southern European countries (Italy, Spain Portugal), fathers increasingly express a strong desire to share caregiving responsibilities from the earliest years of their children's lives. The **State of Southern European Fathers 2024 (SoSEF, 2024)** survey confirms this aspiration — echoing global findings over the past decade — but shows that despite notable reforms in leave policy and childcare provision, fathers' actual participation in caregiving during early childhood (birth to 3 years) remains constrained by persistent economic, structural, and cultural barriers.

In all three countries surveyed, policy frameworks have formally aligned with EU recommendations, including the Work-Life Balance Directive¹ and the Barcelona childcare targets². However, there are significant differences between them. Spain and Portugal demonstrate significant achievement: paternity leave uptake reaches around 85–90%, and childcare provision for under-3s is approaching or exceeding EU benchmarks. However, longer parental leave remains predominantly taken by mothers, and unpaid care work continues to fall disproportionately on women. Italy illustrates the gap between formal compliance and real-world outcomes most starkly: wage replacement rates for parental leave beyond statutory paternity leave are low (~30%), childcare enrolment rates for under-3s are far below EU targets (~28% nationally, <20% in some regions), and cultural expectations continue to position mothers as primary caregivers.

SoSEF (2024) makes clear that across all three countries, **formal rights and legal frameworks alone are insufficient to deliver shared caregiving from children's birth**. National ambition, wage replacement design, childcare infrastructure, workplace practices, and

deeply rooted social norms collectively determine whether fathers can and do participate equally.

This policy brief addresses at a critical moment:

- The European Commission is preparing the next **Gender Equality Strategy 2026–2030**.
- EU institutions are reviewing progress toward the revised **Barcelona childcare targets** and monitoring implementation of the 2019 **Work-Life Balance Directive**.

These policy processes provide a rare and timely opportunity to ensure that **fathers' engagement from the very start of a child's life becomes a core priority for EU and national policymakers**.

In response, this brief offers clear, actionable recommendations to close the gap between policy intent and caregiving practice:

- Strengthen national ambition in policy design by improving wage replacement rates and designing leave systems that encourage fathers' participation starting before birth.
- Expand affordable, high-quality childcare services, targeting regions with the lowest enrolment rates.
- Promote cultural and workplace change to normalize fathers' caregiving roles.
- Embed father engagement in early childhood services, ensuring that services are designed and delivered with both parents in mind.

The time to act is now: fathers across Southern Europe are ready to care from the start but systems, services, and cultures must change to make this aspiration a lived reality and deliver gender-equal caregiving for the next generation.

¹ 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

² Council of the EU. Recommendation on early childhood education and care: the Barcelona targets for 2030 (2022/C 484/01). (2022).





Fathers' involvement in early childhood remains essential but unequal in Southern Europe

Persistent gender inequalities in unpaid care remain one of the core barriers to achieving equality at home and at work. Women in the EU continue to perform almost twice as much unpaid care and domestic work as men³. This imbalance becomes most pronounced during the earliest years of a child's life — a period that is critical for both child development and establishing caregiving patterns that shape family life over the long term.

Early childhood, particularly the birth to 3 years period, represents a “critical window” for promoting shared caregiving and reshaping entrenched gender norms. International evidence — including multiple editions of the **State of the World's Fathers (SOWF) reports** — consistently shows that when fathers engage meaningfully from birth, they are more likely to remain involved throughout their children's lives, contributing to better outcomes for children, greater gender equality in families, and improved maternal well-being⁴. However, these same reports, including regional studies, highlight that despite growing policy frameworks supporting fathers' participation, caregiving during early childhood remains heavily gendered globally.

The [State of Southern European Fathers 2024 report \(SoSEF, 2024\)](#) builds on this global evidence and provides a detailed, regionally specific portrait of fatherhood in Italy, Portugal, and Spain, three countries that have made notable legal reforms in recent years but where caregiving remains far from equally shared.

SoSEF (2024) confirms what earlier SOWF reports and international research have also shown: **fathers increasingly express a strong desire to be present and involved caregivers from the start of their children's**

lives. This aspiration is widespread and not confined to any particular income group or region. Yet the survey illustrates that across the three countries in Southern Europe, this desire is often blocked by a combination of **structural, economic, and cultural barriers**.

SoSEF (2024) also reinforces findings from previous global reports about the powerful role of cultural and workplace norms. Across the region:

- Deep-seated stereotypes continue to cast mothers as the natural caregivers, with 38% of men and 31% of women expressing agreement with at least one traditional gender norm related to caregiving roles.
- Workplace environments further inhibit change: fathers often face stigma, perceived managerial disapproval, and a lack of support when attempting to extend leave or reduce working hours.
- Early childhood services themselves are often perceived as mother-oriented spaces, discouraging fathers' full participation.

In short, SoSEF (2024) confirms what earlier global and regional studies have consistently shown: **legal reforms have expanded fathers' entitlements, but without addressing structural, cultural, and workplace barriers, these policies are not enough** to produce truly shared caregiving — especially during early childhood. Child's first three years of life represent a critical opportunity to establish equality in caregiving roles and promote father engagement, but in Southern Europe today, structural, economic, and cultural barriers continue to prevent fathers from realizing their aspirations to care equally from the start.

³ According to the EIGE [Gender Equality Index](#) 2023.

⁴ van der Gaag, N., Gupta, T., Heilman, B., Barker, G., & van den Berg, W. (2023). *State of the World's Fathers: Centering care in a world in crisis*. Washington, DC: Equimundo.





What SoSEF (2024) report tells us: Fathers increasingly aspire to share care, but practical realities constrain their involvement from the start

The SoSEF (2024) survey provides one of the most detailed snapshots of modern fatherhood in Portugal, Spain, and Italy, with a focus on the earliest years of children's lives. The survey explores how fathers' attitudes, behaviours, workplace conditions, and service environments shape caregiving patterns and reveals significant discrepancies between men's intentions and their lived realities.

Across all three countries, 78% of men and 83% of women believe that fathers' active involvement benefits children's development and half of fathers and 43% of mothers say caregiving is one of the most enjoyable parts of life. Fathers' use of leave remains highly dependent on policy design and national conditions.

In Spain, where policy ambition is highest (16 weeks fully paid, non-transferable paternity leave), approximately 85–90% of eligible fathers take their leave, yet women continue to perform more than 70% of unpaid care and domestic work after leave ends¹ (SoSEF, 2024; EIGE, 2023).

In **Portugal**, uptake of paternity leave also reaches around 90%, childcare enrolment rates for under-3s exceed 50%, and formal policies explicitly promote shared care. Nevertheless, long parental leave periods remain largely taken by mothers (SoSEF, 2024).

In **Italy**, while the minimum 10 days of paid paternity leave is available (meeting EU requirements), uptake of longer parental leave by fathers is around 20%, driven by low wage replacement (approximately 30% of salary) and cultural reluctance. Italy also lags in childcare provision: just 28% of children under 3 are enrolled in ECEC nationally, with much lower rates in Italy's southern regions (SoSEF, 2024; COFACE, 2025).

Access to affordable and high-quality early childhood education and care (ECEC) is another critical enabling factor for shared caregiving, and here too SoSEF (2024) reveals stark national differences:

- Portugal exceeds the revised Barcelona Targets with more than 50% enrolment for children under 3 and near-universal enrolment for children aged 3–6.
- Spain has reached approximately 40% enrolment for under-3s but suffers from substantial regional disparities, with access lower in rural and low-income regions.
- Italy remains far behind, with just 28% enrolment for children under 3 nationally, and less than 20% in some southern regions (SoSEF, 2024; COFACE, 2025).

Cultural norms and workplace environments continue to play a decisive role in shaping caregiving practices:

- Around 38% of men and 31% of women in Southern Europe hold at least one traditional belief about gender roles in caregiving, reflecting enduring stereotypes (SoSEF, 2024).

- Italian fathers are significantly more likely than mothers to report "time scarcity" as a reason for reduced caregiving (76% vs. 61%), highlighting the persistence of the male breadwinner model.
- Fathers often face subtle but pervasive workplace stigma and managerial resistance when seeking to extend leave or work flexibly, further discouraging equal caregiving practices.

Moreover, SoSEF (2024) shows that early childhood services themselves are frequently perceived as "mother-centric" spaces: service design, staff engagement practices, and communication often fail to actively include and welcome fathers, reinforcing their marginalization in the caregiving environment from the very start.

Together, these findings paint a clear picture: **while many fathers in Southern Europe wish to be present and engaged from birth, structural conditions, policy design, childcare infrastructure, cultural expectations, and workplace norms continue to restrict their ability to do so.**





EU policy frameworks set important standards, but implementation and ambition vary significantly across countries

The European Union launched a set of policies aimed at reducing gender inequalities in unpaid care work and supporting parents to better balance paid work and caregiving responsibilities. The following key frameworks define the policy landscape relevant to fatherhood and early caregiving: the EU Work-Life Balance Directive⁵, the Early Childhood Education and Care Barcelona Targets for 2030⁶, and the EU Gender Equality Strategy 2020–2025 — now entering a critical review period ahead of the next cycle.

Now is a critical policy moment.

- In March 2025, the European Commission adopted a **new roadmap for women's rights**, setting out a long-term vision for gender equality.
- The Commission has also launched a **public consultation on the next Gender Equality Strategy (2026–2030), open until August 11, 2025**, providing an opportunity for civil society and governments to ensure that shared caregiving — and specifically fathers' engagement from the very start of a child's life — is fully integrated into future EU policy priorities.

The **EU Work-Life Balance Directive (2019/1158/EU)**, adopted in 2019, was intended to modernize leave entitlements across Europe and promote gender-equal use of leave. It sets **minimum** standards for:

- ✓ 10 working days of paid paternity leave for fathers, at no less than sick pay levels.
- ✓ Four months of parental leave per parent, two months of which must be non-transferable.
- ✓ The right for parents of children up to age 8 to request flexible working arrangements.

The purpose of the Directive is to encourage fathers' take-up of leave and create the conditions for shared caregiving from birth. Its transposition deadline was August 2, 2022, and the European Commission is now monitoring Member States' implementation and compliance. However, as SoSEF (2024) shows, formal

transposition is not enough: real-world uptake depends heavily on wage replacement levels, cultural norms, workplace practices, and national ambition.

The ECEC **Barcelona Targets**, first adopted in 2002 and revised in 2022, set EU-wide goals for childcare participation as a means to support parental employment and reduce gender inequalities in care. The revised targets call for:

- 45% enrolment for children under 3 in formal childcare.
- 96% enrolment for children aged 3 to mandatory school age. While these targets are intended to promote equal caregiving opportunities, especially for mothers' labour market participation, the availability and affordability of childcare services also critically determine whether fathers can share care equitably. As SoSEF (2024) and recent monitoring reports highlight⁷, progress toward these targets remains uneven across the EU, with Southern Europe showing persistent gaps — particularly in Italy and rural areas of Spain.

The **EU Gender Equality Strategy 2020–2025** provides the broad political framework for advancing equality, focusing on priority areas such as gender pay and employment gaps, unequal care burdens, gender-based violence, and stereotypes. While the Strategy acknowledges the unequal distribution of unpaid care as a barrier to equality, it pays limited specific attention to fathers' engagement in caregiving during early childhood.

This combination of EU-level frameworks and national variation creates both a **challenge and an opportunity**: as the EU prepares its next Gender Equality Strategy, and as Member States continue to report on their progress in implementing the EU Work-Life Balance Directive and meeting childcare targets, there is a clear window to prioritize shared caregiving from birth, ensuring that policy ambition matches the aspirations and needs of families in Southern Europe.

⁵ <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/eli/dir/2019/1158/oj/eng>

⁶ https://www.eumonitor.eu/9353000/1/4nvk6yhcbpeywk_j9vvik7m1c3gyxp/vlz27fb07kyx

⁷ COFACE Families Europe & Observatory on Childcare Gaps. (2025). *Childcare and early education: Addressing gaps in access and quality across the EU* (Observatory report), Brussels.





Even where policies exist, fathers' equal participation in caregiving encounters barriers - economic disincentives, childcare gaps, and social norms.

The policies that govern leave entitlements and childcare provision in Southern Europe have advanced substantially over the past decade, aligning formally with the EU's Work-Life Balance Directive and Barcelona Targets. However, as the SoSEF (2024) report makes clear, formal compliance has not translated into equal caregiving on the ground. Throughout Portugal, Spain, and Italy, a combination of structural disincentives, economic constraints, and cultural expectations continues to prevent fathers from participating equally in caregiving during the most formative years of their children's lives.

In Italy, for example, while the minimum statutory leave of 10 days has been established in line with the 2019 Work-Life Balance Directive, uptake of longer parental leave by fathers remains low at approximately 20%. One of the primary reasons is financial: wage replacement for longer parental leave is just around 30% of salary — a level that makes leave economically inaccessible for many families (SoSEF, 2024; COFACE, 2022). This reflects a clear gap between the letter of the law and its practical impact, illustrating how national policy ambition and design choices critically influence whether leave is actually used.

Even in Spain and Portugal — both of which show relatively strong uptake of initial paternity leave (85–90%) — longer parental leave remains disproportionately taken by mothers. **The structure of leave systems and workplace cultures continue to shape caregiving practices, reinforcing patterns where fathers take a short, discrete leave period and mothers assume the bulk of daily care.**

Access to early childhood education and care (ECEC) services plays a similar role. **In Portugal, ECEC enrolment for children under 3 exceeds 50%, a level that supports parents' ability to share care.** In contrast, Italy lags far behind with just 28% coverage nationally and less than 20% in some southern regions — an infrastructure gap that forces families, and

especially mothers, to rely on informal care networks or exit the workforce (SoSEF, 2024; COFACE, 2025). Spain's ECEC coverage approaches 40% nationally but also suffers from regional disparities that restrict equitable access.

Cultural attitudes and workplace norms present additional, deeply rooted obstacles. SoSEF (2024) finds that:

- Around 38% of men and 31% of women in Southern Europe still agree with at least one traditional stereotype about gender and caregiving, perpetuating the expectation that mothers should bear the main caregiving responsibility, especially during early childhood.
- Italian fathers are significantly more likely than mothers to cite “lack of time” as a reason for reduced caregiving involvement (76% vs. 61%), reflecting the enduring prioritization of men's breadwinning role over their caregiving role.
- Fathers report workplace stigma and managerial disapproval when seeking to take extended leave or reduce working hours, particularly in Italy and Spain, deterring them from exercising their rights in practice.

Finally, **early childhood services themselves remain mother-centered in both design and culture:** fathers often feel excluded or marginalized in ECEC settings and family support services, which are not explicitly designed to welcome and engage them as equal caregivers from the start.

Together, these factors create a powerful combination of barriers that perpetuate unequal caregiving despite the existence of laws and formal rights. SoSEF (2024) demonstrates that **wage replacement rates, access to affordable childcare, service design, workplace practices, and persistent cultural norms all shape whether fathers' aspirations to care in early childhood are realized.**





Closing persistent caregiving inequalities requires making early father involvement a national and EU priority

The *SoSEF 2024* report and broader international evidence confirm that even where laws formally support fathers' caregiving rights, economic disincentives, childcare shortages, and enduring social norms prevent many fathers from exercising these rights — especially during the critical early years of children's lives.

To achieve the goal of shared caregiving Southern European must design policies, invest in infrastructure, and promote cultural change to ensure fathers can and do engage as equal caregivers, particularly during the child's first three years of life.

At EU level:

- Strengthen monitoring of EU Work-Life Balance Directive implementation, including systematic reporting on fathers' leave uptake disaggregated by child age (0–3 in particular), duration, and socio-economic profile.
- Promote adequate wage replacement as a key standard for fathers' leave, encouraging Member States to ensure that parental leave is financially viable for all families.
- Explicitly embed fathers' caregiving in child's first years of life in the forthcoming Gender Equality Strategy 2026–2030, recognizing the early childhood period as a critical site for gender equality progress.
- Ensure that progress towards the revised Barcelona Targets is not only measured in enrolment rates but linked to affordability, quality, and equal access for all families — including targeted attention to regions with lower ECEC coverage.

At national level:

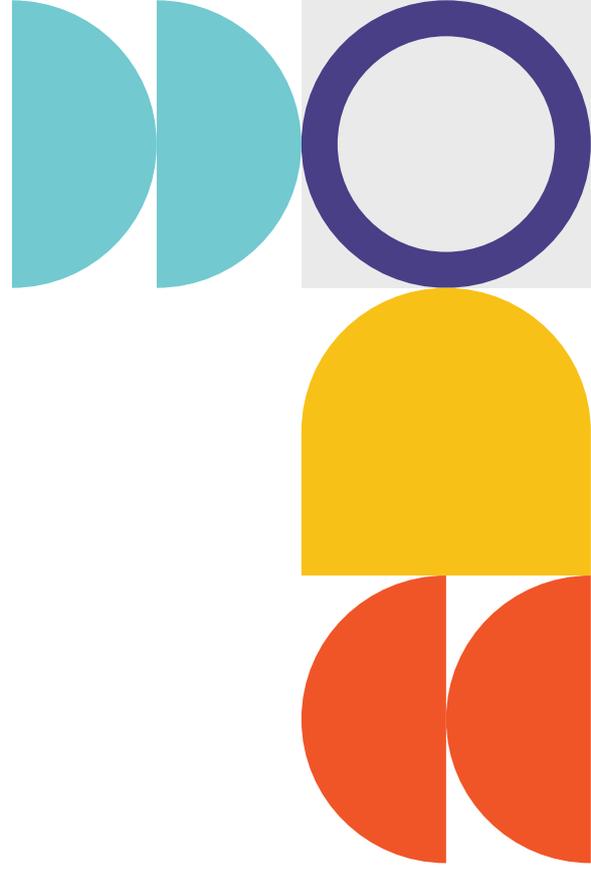
- Increase wage replacement rates for fathers taking parental leave beyond statutory paternity leave, removing financial barriers that prevent longer periods of caregiving engagement.
- Close childcare infrastructure gaps, particularly in underserved regions such as Southern Italy and rural Spain, ensuring universal, affordable, and high-quality services for children under 3.
- Support public campaigns and programs that challenge gender stereotypes around caregiving and normalize fathers' involvement from birth.
- Engage employers in promoting family-friendly workplaces, including addressing stigma around fathers' flexible working and leave-taking.

At service and practitioner level:

- Train ECEC staff, health visitors, and family support professionals to actively engage fathers as equal caregivers, starting from the prenatal period.
- Redesign early childhood environments and communication practices to signal inclusivity and openness to fathers alongside mothers.
- Develop programs and resources that explicitly encourage fathers' participation in ECEC settings and parenting groups.

The *SoSEF 2024* findings reinforce a clear and urgent message: Fathers in Southern Europe increasingly want to share caregiving from birth, but policy design, childcare access, workplace practices, and cultural expectations continue to hold them back. While EU frameworks provide important standards, real progress depends on national ambition, investment, and targeted reforms that close the gap between rights and reality. As the EU prepares its next Gender Equality Strategy and reviews progress on the Work-Life Balance Directive and childcare targets, this is a pivotal moment to make shared caregiving from the earliest years a political, economic, and cultural priority.





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Read more about [EMiNC Initiative](#)

Read the SOSEF full report here: [State of Southern European Fathers 2024: Building Evidence for Engaging Men in Nurturing Care in Italy, Portugal, and Spain](#)

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