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**WORK-LIFE BALANCE IN SLOVENIA'S PRIVATE SECTOR
THROUGH THE PRISMS OF GENDER AND PARENTING: IMPACT
OF THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC**

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

EC – European Commission

EIGE – European Institute for Gender Equality

EU – European Union

ILO – International Labour Organization

MDDSZ – Ministry of Labour, Family, Social Affairs and Equal Opportunities of the Republic of Slovenia (*Ministrstvo za delo, družine, socialne zadeve in enake možnosti Republike Slovenije*)

OECD - Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development

UK – United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland

US – United States of America

UN – United Nations

WEF – World Economic Forum

1 INTRODUCTION

Technological advancements, the rise of remote work, and increased work demands have blurred the boundaries between professional and personal lives, allowing work to intrude upon personal time and space at any moment. This constant interconnectedness, compounded by persistent gender stereotypes that influence perceptions of responsibilities, makes achieving a sustainable and fulfilling prioritization between professional and personal responsibilities a complex and often elusive goal, particularly for women. Consequently, the pursuit of work-life balance has emerged as a pressing societal issue, reflecting broader concerns about gender equality, well-being, and the future of work (Countouris et al., 2023; Bello et al., 2024; Owusu, 2024).

Although current gender models refrain from the emphasis on dichotomies, modern societies still perceive sexual division of labour in accordance with both gender and spheres, typified as public and private (Özbey & Bardakçı, 2019; Ferree, 1990). Despite the prevalence of the dual-earner model in most Western societies, women are still largely expected to handle family and life-related activities, which exist in the private sphere. While both spheres regularly interact for all individuals, women therefore tend to experience more intense and frequent interactions between these spheres than men (Hochschild & Machung, 1989; Deshmukh, 2018). This imbalance is primarily conditioned by existing societal pressures to conform to traditional gender stereotypes and roles, which not only influence perceptions of capabilities and responsibilities but also shape workplace policies and practices, which may be inherently biased and benefit one gender more than another (Gowda & Rao, 2018; Son Hing et al., 2021). This, in turn, creates a significant barrier to achieving true work-life balance, particularly for working mothers, who are still perceived as primary caregivers and face an overload of responsibilities in both spheres (Pace & Scioto, 2021). Because of this, work-life balance has emerged as a reflection of the society's status of gender equality, indicating its progress in dismantling gender stereotypes, promoting equal opportunities, and providing support systems on both the mezzo (organizational) and macro (systemic) levels that allow individuals of all genders to thrive in both their work and personal lives (EIGE, 2019).

The COVID-19 pandemic (hereinafter the pandemic) intensified existing gender disparities in the work-life balance domain. Lockdowns and school closures significantly increased caregiving and household demands, disproportionately impacting women who typically perform a larger share of these responsibilities (Froehlicher et al., 2021; Stefanova et al., 2021). The increased shift to remote work, while intended to offer flexibility, blurred the boundaries between professional and personal lives. The lack of physical separation between work and home led to longer working hours, difficulty setting boundaries, and an increased risk of mental health concerns (Galanti et al., 2021; Countouris et al., 2023). These challenges disproportionately impacted parents, particularly working mothers, due to their

significant caregiving responsibilities (Stefanova et al., 2021). During this period, organizational support became crucial for addressing these challenges and fostering work-life balance. Some companies implemented flexible working hours and provided mental health resources to support their employees. However, the pandemic also exposed the struggles many organizations faced in adapting to evolving employee needs amidst financial uncertainty, which often resulted in inadequate support for work-life balance initiatives (Ahtik et al., 2020; Suff, 2020; SHRM, 2022)

This master's thesis (hereinafter the thesis) seeks to examine the experiences of working men and women with work-life balance in Slovenia's private sector during the pandemic. This examination focuses on personal circumstances of gender and parenthood to reveal how these factors intersected and influenced employees' perceptions and experiences of work-life balance amidst that challenging period. The thesis centers on the private sector because, in contrast to the public sector, private organizations in Slovenia likely faced distinct economic pressures during the pandemic, potentially impacting their capacity to provide work-life balance support. Additionally, there is a need to address the under-researched experiences of work-life balance within this specific sector in Slovenia during the pandemic. The thesis therefore aims to shed light on the prevalence of disparities in work-life balance in the private sector, and therefore highlight the need for comprehensive policy interventions and supportive gender-neutral and family-friendly organizational mechanisms, which can contribute to better work-life balance experiences of all employees, irrespective of personal circumstances, both amidst and outside times of crisis such as the pandemic.

The thesis, which comprises a theoretical and empirical part, utilizes the analysis of both secondary and primary sources. The theoretical part of the thesis is grounded in the systematical analysis of secondary sources, including scientific articles, official statistical data, research papers, legislative guidelines and measures, report analysis, monographs, and similar comparable independent sources of information. The empirical part consists of an analysis of primary data obtained through a survey, disseminated by the purposive sampling method. The survey directly examined experiences with work-life balance in Slovenia's private sector during the pandemic.

The theoretical part of the thesis comprises chapters two and three. The second chapter introduces the concept of work-life balance, including its definitions, development throughout history, and factors that impact its realization. The third chapter deconstructs the phenomenon of work-life balance in Slovenia, accounting for its legislative framework, attitudes of companies towards the promotion of work-life balance initiatives, and the impact of the pandemic on experiences with work-life balance. The empirical part consist of chapter four, five, and six. Chapter four offers a detailed explanation of the structure and components of the research methods, i. e. the survey and interviews. Chapter five elaborates the results of primary data collection, including the descriptive analysis and hypotheses testing. The

sixth chapter provides answers to the posed research questions, offers practical implications, and presents research limitations, together with the potential for future research.

2 WORK-LIFE BALANCE: TOWARDS A CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

This chapter aims to define the concept of work-life balance and establish a comprehensive perspective on this phenomenon, which will be carried throughout the thesis. To enhance understanding of how work-life balance has evolved into its current form, the chapter examines its development with a particular focus on the influence of gender roles across different historical eras. Given the inextricable link between individual, organizational, and societal factors and individuals' experiences with work-life balance, the chapter also explores the impact of such factors on one's ability to achieve work-life balance. Here, a special focus is given to gender and parenthood within the examination between individual factors and work-life balance, which significantly shape societal and self-perceptions of responsibilities and capabilities in the private and public spheres.

2.1 The concept of work-life balance

Literature review reveals that there is no universally accepted definition of work-life balance. The concept as such can be broken down into 'work', 'life', and 'balance'. 'Work' refers to work-related actions, while 'life' includes family and home-related actions, both of which require a certain amount of physical or intellectual abilities to complete. The word 'balance' is provided to give stability to these actions, ensuring each receives appropriate attention. Balance also has a positive connotation, implying a satisfying arrangement between work and family (Bello & Tanko, 2020). Therefore, work-life balance in simple terms can be described as a state of equilibrium, where professional and personal responsibilities receive adequate attention without one domain overshadowing the other, allowing individuals to achieve a sense of fulfillment (Delecta, 2011).

One way to conceptualize work-life balance is through the lens of resource allocation. Hobfoll (1989) proposed the idea that individuals possess finite resources, including time and energy, which they have to strategically distribute and invest across various life domains, including work and family. Reflecting that framework, Kirchmayer (2000, p. 81) defines work-life balance as »achieving satisfying experiences in all life domains, and to do so requires personal resources such as energy, time, and commitment to be well distributed across domains«. Importantly, Kirchmayer also highlights 'commitment' as a finite resource, recognizing that individuals have limited capacity to focus fully on multiple demands. This approach to work-life balance is proactive, meaning that individuals must actively and consciously make choices about how to allocate their limited resources in a way that supports their responsibilities and goals in both professional and personal areas (ibid.)

Another perspective understands work-life balance as an inter-role phenomenon, and conceptualizes its dynamics through role theory. Role theory posits that individuals, as active participants in both public and private spheres, assume multiple roles, each associated with distinct expectations and responsibilities. The demands of one role may clash with those of another, causing interference and making it difficult to meet the responsibilities of the other role. This conflict between roles, known as inter-role or work-life conflict, can hinder an individual's ability to effectively manage both work and personal obligations (Higgins et al., 1992; Adlešič, 2019). Greenhaus and Beutell (1985) identified three ways, in which inter-role conflict can manifest, including time-based conflict (not having enough time for both work and family), strain-based conflict (feeling emotionally drained from work or personal life obligations), and behaviour-based conflict (expected behaviours in one role are incompatible with expected behaviours in the other). This conflict is bidirectional, meaning that it can flow from work to personal life (work-to-family conflict) and from personal life to work (family-to-work conflict) (Greenhaus & Beutell, 1985; Edwards & Rothbard, 2000). Building on role theory, Clark (2000, p. 751) defines work-life balance as »satisfaction and good functioning at work and at home with a minimum of role conflict«, which highlights that work-life balance, unlike work-life conflict, reflects satisfaction with one's performance across multiple roles, and is therefore a positive outcome of the dynamic between them. This perspective also suggests that work-life balance is not merely the absence of conflict but rather the presence of functionality in both domains. Unlike Kirchmayer's definition, it recognizes that roles in the public sphere and private sphere are interconnected and that achieving balance involves actively managing the demands of these roles to minimize conflict and maximize satisfaction, again emphasizing the proactiveness of the concept (ibid.).

When conceptualizing work-life balance, some scholars have struggled with the word 'balance' itself. They argue that the latter implies an artificial and potentially unattainable equal commitment to both personal and professional spheres, suggesting a rigid division of resources. This concept of balance does not accurately reflect the reality that individuals often need to prioritize one role over another based on shifting demands and priorities (Gurney, 2009; Allen et al., 2014). Greenhaus and Allen (2011, p. 174), recognizing the importance of the subjective interpretation of what constitutes a balanced life, offer a more nuanced definition, describing work-life balance as »the extent to which individuals' effectiveness and satisfaction in work and family roles are consistent with their life values at a given point in time«. This definition acknowledges that the ideal balance is not static but rather a fluid concept that evolves alongside an individual's values and circumstances. It shifts the focus from achieving a perfect division of resources to pursuing a personally satisfying and meaningful commitment to work and personal life roles that aligns with one's values (ibid.).

It has also been contended that the concept of 'balance' reinforces the notion of distinct separation between paid employment and other facets of life, failing to fully acknowledge

the interactive and interconnected nature of these domains (Gurney, 2009). Organizational factors, such as work arrangements, management and colleague support, and work-life balance initiatives are recognized as important determinants of one's ability to successfully navigate personal and professional responsibilities (Guest, 2002; Poulouse & Sudarsan, 2014). To address these limitations, alternatives like work-life integration and work-life reconciliation have been put forward. These terms fundamentally suggest a more fluid co-existence and permeability between the domains of work and life, acknowledging that different roles are often intertwined and can mutually reinforce each other (Gurney, 2009; Allen et al., 2014).

To summarize, the term work-life balance is broadly defined and holds subjective connotations within the literature on the relationship between the domains of work and life. What these definitions have in common is their emphasis on the proactive nature of the concept and their portrayal of it as a positive and satisfying outcome of managing the demands posed by both domains. For the purpose of this thesis, work-life balance is understood as the proactive effort of individuals to respond to the demands of their roles in both public and private realms in a personally satisfying and non-conflicting manner. This definition aligns closely with Clark's (2000) perspective, recognizing that the two fundamental domains can intersect and influence each other.

2.2 Historical development of work-life balance

The concept now known as work-life balance began to take shape in response to the increasing influx of women into the workforce during the latter half of the 20th century. These women faced the dual challenge of managing the demands of paid employment alongside traditional family responsibilities (Khateeb, 2021; Greenhaus & Allen, 2011). Although the contemporary understanding of work-life balance claims to be gender-neutral, its foundation was significantly shaped by women's involvement in both the public and private spheres during this period (Khateeb, 2021). Gender roles, defined as »social and behavioral norms that are widely considered appropriate for individuals of a specific sex within a particular culture« (EIGE, n.d.), have significantly influenced the development of the modern concept of work-life balance, as they have historically dictated the perceptions of responsibilities of men and women within different roles at work and at home (Raja & Stein, 2014; Whittle, 2019). Below, the historical evolution of the concept of work-life balance is explored through the lens of gender.

2.2.1 Pre-industrial and industrial era

In the pre-industrial society, family was considered to be the primary unit of production, where economic and domestic activities were closely integrated. Most families engaged in agriculture, and everyone in the family contributed to the labour that was necessary for survival. The household was the center of both life and work, blending the lines between

personal and public spheres (Gordon, 1975). While family organization was based on the patriarchal system and work was divided according to perceived gender roles of men and women, these roles were not rigid, and women frequently participated in manual (mostly agricultural) labour alongside men. The division of labour was based on practicality and necessity, with everyone contributing to the family's overall well-being (Ross & Sawhill, 1976).

The emergence of industrial revolution marked the end of the pre-industrial family structure, in which the public and private sphere were inherently intertwined. With the rise of industrialization, many men were now leaving familial environments to pursue new jobs in factories and similar production centers, resulting in women and kids staying at home (Lappegård et al., 2017). Although a sexual division of labour existed in the pre-industrial era, the industrial revolution intensified and formalized responsibilities within these roles, creating a clear separation between the public and private spheres of life (Saito, 2014). As a result, the breadwinner-homemaker model emerged as a new social structure concerning life and work domains (Pfau-Effinger, 2004; Saito, 2014). This model identified men as the sole financial providers for their families who also contribute to the public economy, while women were recognized responsible for child-rearing, household management, and domestic labour, therefore supporting the family within the private sphere (ibid.). The division established by this model became the dominant social norm in terms of organization of family life, and also had lasting impacts on the development of the concept of work-life balance from the gender perspective, as it set a precedent for viewing work and family responsibilities as separate domains, with men and women having distinct roles within them (Whittle, 2019).

The shift from agrarian to factory-based production, introduced by industrial revolution also heavily impacted labour routines, conditions and requirements. With employment moving from seasonal to permanent and paid work, employers were now the ones to set working hours and conditions (Skidelsky, 2019). As workers spent up to 16 hours in the workplace, reformers campaigned for shorter working hours, better working conditions, and therefore for the opportunity to better allocate resources across the domains of family and work (Hogarth & Bosworth, 2009). This set an important foundation for future discussions on work-life balance, as it contributed to the initial formalization of relevant organizational changes and public policy that impact the capability of individuals to successfully perform their assigned roles in the workplace and beyond (Raja & Stein, 2014).

2.2.2 Post-World War II era

The post-World War II era played the crucial role in the introduction of a new model of organization of family life, i.e., the dual-earner model, which would slowly replace the previously dominant breadwinner-homemaker model (Duxbury et al., 2007). This era also saw the establishment of various labour and anti-discrimination initiatives and laws, which

aimed to establish dignified workplace conditions as well as support the dual-earner model by enabling a gender-neutral access to the public sphere (Khateeb, 2021).

World War II pushed women outside of the private sphere and into the labour market due to wartime production demands (Davis, 2021). Although efforts were made after the war to encourage women to return to their traditional obligations in the private sphere, the post-war reconstruction required a large influx of labour. Consequently, women remained in the labour market in unprecedented numbers even outside of wartime, taking on lower-paid and women-specific jobs, such as sewing, teaching, typewriting, and department store clerking (Barnett, 2004; McDermott, 2023). Within 30 years, women's participation in the labour force in the US grew from 28.6% in 1950 to almost 55.5% in 1980 (Ortiz-Ospina et al., 2018). In Europe, despite the post-war economic growth being slower than in the US, women's participation in the labour force also increased. The rate grew from 34.7% in 1951 to 45,6% in 1981 in the UK (ibid.).

Despite facing multiple barriers upon entering the public sphere, women managed to gain access to some of its benefits and were now able to function in both spheres (Brown, 2021). In contrast, gendered expectations of parenting responsibilities continued to confine men predominantly to the public sphere. Consequently, even with the significant rise of the dual-earner model, women were still perceived as primary caregivers. Here, the first clear instance of work-life conflict or inter-role conflict for women who, unlike men, operated in both public and private sphere is revealed, establishing a precedent that work-life balance is inherently a gendered phenomenon (Hochschild & Machung, 1989; Barnett, 1998; Knežević et al., 2024). While life and work domains were before perceived as completely separate entities, it was now evident that certain linkages form between the two in different dynamics for different individuals. As more mothers entered the workforce, policies regarding parental benefits, such as flexible working hours and maternity leave, became crucial mechanisms for enabling equal workplace participation opportunities to both men and women (Raja & Stein, 2014; Khateeb, 2021).

Besides the adoption of family-related policies that would define certain benefits for employed mothers (and later men), the second half of the 20. century marked the period of various incentives for ensuring dignified and non-discriminatory workplace conditions for workers (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2015; ILO, n. d.). Regulations were established in several areas, including working time, health and safety in the workplace, fair remuneration, job protection, social security, collective bargaining rights, and anti-discriminatory measures (Raja & Stein, 2014; U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2015). As a result, employment organizations and legislative institutions were assigned new responsibilities to create conditions that support work-life balance (Izraeli, 1996).

2.2.3 Contemporary era¹

In the 1990s and early 2000s, the dual-earner model overtook the breadwinner-homemaker model. This was driven by both the rise of consumerism, which heightened the demand for dual incomes, and cultural shifts that embraced women's participation in the workforce (Gornick & Meyers, 2001; Walden, 2001). This new norm of the organization of family life, combined with technological advancements that introduced new forms of remote work and flexible working arrangements, consequently led to changes in perceptions of family and work roles (ibid.).

These shifts shaped public policy and workplace practices to become more gender-neutral and supportive of all employees, irrespective of their personal circumstances (Hubbard, 2016; Khateeb, 2021). Consequently, work-life balance also became a more gender-neutral phenomenon, acknowledging that both men and women experience challenges in navigating the demands of professional and personal responsibilities (ibid.). It has to be noted, however, that women still performed the majority of personal obligations, remaining more vulnerable to experiencing work-life conflict in comparison to their male counterparts (Duxbury et al., 2007). In that period, the increasing recognition of the connection between employee's satisfaction in the workplace and employee productivity as well as retention also resulted in companies adopting various benefits packages for their employees. Working arrangements, workplace policies and managerial support were identified as key factors that influence one's ability to achieve balance across multiple roles (Lockwood, 2003).

The societal understanding of work-life balance since 2010 has undergone a profound transformation, driven by ever-evolving gender roles, further technological advancements, and most recently, the unprecedented disruption of the pandemic (Whittle, 2019; Adams et al., 2022). Traditional gender roles have been increasingly challenged, leading to a greater expectation for men to share family and life-related responsibilities. The concept of active fatherhood, which originally emerged in the 1980s, now fully took shape with a renewed emphasis on fathers' active involvement in caregiving and household responsibilities, reflecting a broader societal shift towards more equitable family dynamics (Pleck, 2010). Simultaneously, rapid technological advancements, particularly the rise of smartphones and constant connectivity, blurred the boundaries between work and personal life. While offering greater flexibility, this connectivity also contributed to the expectation of perpetual availability, leading to concerns about work intensification, digital overload, and burnout. Consequently, the conversation around work-life balance expanded to encompass both physical and mental well-being. Additionally, employment organizations took on an even greater responsibility to define and facilitate the relationship between work and personal life (Groner, 2018; Bello et al., 2024).

¹ For the purposes of this thesis, the contemporary era is defined as the period from 1990 to the present.

The pandemic acted as a societal-scale catalyst, forcing a rapid and widespread adoption of remote work and flexible schedules. This shattered long-held assumptions about productivity and presenteeism, highlighting the viability of alternative work models (Stasiła-Sieradzka et al., 2023). However, it also exposed and deepened existing inequalities, with women, particularly those with young children, disproportionately bearing the brunt of increased caregiving responsibilities (Stefanović, 2023). Furthermore, as the boundaries between work and life became increasingly blurred, companies were now more than ever perceived as responsible for fostering environments that allow employees to disconnect outside of working hours, which would encourage them to prioritize and address their personal demands effectively (Eurogib, 2023).

2.3 Factors affecting work-life balance

The perceptions of responsibilities in the public and private spheres, the definition of balance, and the resources available to achieve it collectively shape one's ability to attain work-life balance. These perceptions, and thus the capacity to achieve work-life balance, are influenced by the continuous interaction of various individual, organizational and societal factors (Edwards & Rothbard, 2000; Poulouse & Sudarsan, 2014). These factors stem from societal views on gender equality, the significance of work, and cultural norms (Žnidaršič, 2021). They also shape individual views on the appropriate level of interaction between role demands, which exist on a continuum from segmentation to integration (Clark, 2000). Segmentation involves keeping professional and personal lives separate, while integration allows these aspects to blend fluidly (Allen et al., 2014). The interplay of these factors results in diverse work-life balance experiences, as individuals navigate their specific environments (Demerouti et al., 2012; Muthu et al., 2015).

2.3.1 Individual factors

Although organizational factors are receiving increasing attention in the public discourse as pivotal to work-life balance, research shows that individual factors continue to act as crucial determinants in shaping personal experiences of work-life balance (Wong et al., 2021). Personality, emotional intelligence, psychological well-being, and demographic factors together with personal circumstances are commonly assessed as significant individual factors that correlate with experiences of work-life balance, collectively shaping each person's unique internal resources and attitudes (Poulouse & Sudarsan, 2014). Below, each factor is deconstructed in a way that its influence on work-life balance is evident.

Personality determines how individuals respond to and engage with others. It is a combination of biological innate dispositions and learned patterns of thoughts, feelings, and behaviours that make each individual unique (Holzman, 2024). These patterns influence how individuals perceive and respond to the world around them, including the demands of their work and personal lives. McCrae and John (1992) introduced a model of five basic

dimensions of personality traits, namely, extraversion (being outgoing and energetic), agreeableness (being friendly and compassionate), conscientiousness (being organized and responsible), neuroticism (being prone to negative emotions), and openness to experience (being curious and imaginative), with each trait existing on a continuum. Understanding where one stands on each trait can provide valuable insights into their typical coping mechanisms, stress responses, and preferred ways of setting boundaries and prioritizing tasks (ibid.). For example, individuals with high levels of conscientiousness, characterized by organization, responsibility, and a strong work ethic, might excel at managing multiple roles and responsibilities. However, they may also be prone to overworking, perfectionism, and difficulty disconnecting from work, potentially hindering their work-life balance (Paulose & Sudarsan, 2014).

Emotional intelligence refers to the ability to perceive, understand, manage, and effectively utilize emotions in oneself and others. It plays a crucial role in navigating the complexities of both professional and personal spheres, enabling individuals to better manage stress, build strong relationships, and make sound decisions even under pressure (Koubova & Buchko, 2013). For instance, someone with higher emotional intelligence can effectively communicate their needs to colleagues and loved ones and implement coping strategies to mitigate stress and prevent burnout. They can also empathize with the needs of their family and colleagues, fostering stronger relationships and reducing conflict. This ability to understand and manage emotions allows individuals to better navigate competing demands and set desired boundaries. Reserach also found that emotional intelligence is positively linked to the utilization of work-life balance programmes, offered by companies (Paulose & Sudarsan, 2014; Kumar & Jyothirmmai, 2018; Nathaya et al., 2022).

Psychological well-being encompasses psychological traits such as self-acceptance, satisfaction, hope, and optimism (Paulose & Sudarsan, 2014). Individuals with higher levels of psychological well-being are better equipped to handle stress and maintain a positive outlook, all of which make it easier to achieve achieving work-life balance. Conversely, low psychological well-being, often characterized by stress, anxiety, and negative emotions, can hinder an individual's ability to effectively manage work and personal responsibilities, leading to feelings of overwhelm and imbalance (ibid.). However, it's crucial to recognize that the relationship between psychological well-being and work-life balance is not unidirectional. While well-being can be an individual factor affecting work-life balance, it is also its outcome. When individuals feel a sense of control over their time and energy, they experience lower levels of work-life conflict, and have the flexibility to pursue personal interests and relationships, their overall well-being is likely to improve. This creates a positive feedback loop, where psychological well-being contributes to better work-life balance, which further enhances psychological well-being (Borowiec & Drygas, 2023; Nwanzu & Babalola, 2023).

Demographic factors, intertwined with personal circumstances, play a significant role in shaping individuals' experiences of work-life balance. Age, for instance, often intersects with career stage and family life cycle, influencing priorities and perceptions of balance. Younger employees might prioritize career advancement and professional development, potentially leading to longer work hours. Older employees, on the other hand might seek more flexibility and time for family or personal pursuits. Gender also intersects with societal expectations and cultural norms, influencing the division of labour at home and perceptions of work-life balance. In particular, gender in intersection with parenthood can significantly impact work-life balance, as individuals navigate the demands of caring for children alongside their professional responsibilities (Paulose & Sudarsan, 2014; Lyness & Judiesch, 2014; Thilagavathy & Geetha, 2021; Adlešič, 2019). As gender and parenthood remain a crucial research focus in experiences of work-life balance, these dynamics are more in-depth explained below.

2.3.1.1 Gender

The significance of gender as a critical individual factor affecting work-life balance is most evident in the division of unpaid labor. Unpaid labour exists in several forms, including: i) emotional labour (managing and regulating one's emotions to support others' emotional well-being); ii) informal care labour (providing care and assistance to family members or friends without monetary compensation); iii) household management (planning and coordinating domestic tasks); iv) household labour (physical tasks such as cleaning, cooking, shopping and maintenance) (Hochschild, 1983; Eichler & Albanese, 2007; Arienzo, 2018; EIGE; n.d.b).

Historically, unpaid labour was perceived as a labour of love, primarily assigned to women who were viewed as more nurturing and emotional. The gender gap in the distribution of unpaid labour within dual-earner households was already identified by Hochschild and Machung (1989) as the 'second shift' or 'double burden', where women, after completing their paid workday, return home to undertake the majority of unpaid domestic work. Recent study by WEF from 2022² shows that women today still perform the majority of unpaid labour, as men's share of time spent in unpaid work as a proportion of total work is 19%, which is one-third the share of time women spend in unpaid work, at 55%. This can be further illustrated by the example of the EU, where 63% of women reported doing household labour every day compared to 37% of men, and 34% of women reported performing informal care labour every day compared to 25% of men (EIGE, n.d.c).

Research shows that individuals who carry a high unpaid workload are more likely to experience adverse outcomes, including stress, decreased satisfaction, emotional exhaustion,

² Research was based on an analysis of 33 countries representing 54% of the global working-age population (WEF, 2022).

physical fatigue, and chronic health conditions, which can all diminish overall well-being (Ervin et al., 2023). As women tend to perform unpaid tasks more intensively, they experience these outcomes more severely than men, facing heightened mental health issues and increased physical health concerns (ibid.). In case of informal care labour, this outcomes can be a manifestation of the 'caregiver burden' or 'caregiver strain', which refers to negative emotional, physical, and psychological consequences due to their caregiving responsibilities (Pace & Sciotto, 2021; CarePartners, n. d.). Employed women who engage in regular informal care labour are thus particularly vulnerable to experiences with work-life conflict, especially time-based and strain-based conflict (ibid.).

Conversely, societal norms and self-perceptions that often discourage men from taking part in unpaid labour can result in feelings of disconnection and unfulfillment in personal life (Ervin et al., 2022). Men may additionally struggle with a profound sense of isolation, particularly when societal norms discourage them from seeking support or expressing vulnerability (Sileo & Kershaw, 2020; Vickery, 2021).

The division of unpaid labour furthermore significantly impacts workforce participation. Women are generally less engaged in the labour market than men and are more prone to working part-time for long durations to manage caregiving responsibilities for children and other family members (Zigante, 2018). In 2023, the employment gap in the EU was 10.2%, with 80.4% of men employed compared to 70.2% of women (Eurostat, 2024a). Additionally, the proportion of part-time workers was disproportionately greater among women (28%) than men (8%), reinforcing the notion that women's role in the economy remains secondary (Eurostat, 2024b). Part-time work is, however, positively related with the ability to achieve work-life balance by decreasing professional demands, reducing job-related stress and minimizing its impact on family life (Lyonette, 2019).

Women are also more likely than men to pursue service sector jobs and public sector roles such as teaching, nursing, clerical work, social work, and caregiving, which are traditionally seen as extensions of domestic responsibilities and are often undervalued in terms of prestige and compensation. These occupations are often also more emotional and care labour-intensive, which aligns with societal expectations of women as nurturing and empathetic (Morgan, 2024; Institute for Women's Policy Research, n.d.). At the same time, vertical segregation is evident in the labour market, with women often occupying lower-paying positions compared to men within the same sector (Lampousaki, 2010). This impacts job satisfaction, work-related stress, and emotional exhaustion, inherently contributing to higher instances of work-life conflict for women (Dilmaghani et al., 2022).

While gender is for women primarily investigated as a negative individual factor affecting work-life balance, performing unpaid labour also cultivates emotional intelligence as well as organizational and problem-solving skills. These skills can be valuable in the workplace and contribute to greater satisfaction with one's professional role, thus positively impacting

work-life balance (Antonopoulos, 2009; Pendergrass et al., 2018). Conversely, men often miss out on the development of such skills due to their typically limited involvement in unpaid labour tasks (Deshmukh, 2018).

2.3.1.2 Parenthood

The current prevalent dual-earner model of organization of family life, in which both parents simultaneously operate in the public and private spheres leads to several challenges in navigating the demands of both domains. Parents often find themselves navigating increased time constraints as they strive to meet work commitments and respond to their children's needs, which can include managing childcare, attending school events, providing emotional support, and nurturing their overall development. Consequently, parents are prone to experiences of time-based inter-role conflict. Research indicates that parents with children under the age of 11 face the highest levels of such conflict (Steiber, 2009; Žnidaršič, 2021; Schulz & Reimann, 2022).

Parenthood might also result in a shift in priorities. This can manifest in a desire for greater work flexibility, reduced work hours, or even career changes to better accommodate family needs (Žnidaršič, 2021). Here, an intersection between parenthood and gender can be drawn. Working mothers are more likely to propose or utilize such benefits than working fathers, often driven by the societal expectation that they bear primary responsibility for childcare and household management. This disparity in the utilization of family-friendly benefits can perpetuate a cycle where women are perceived as less committed to their careers, potentially hindering their career advancement. Women are also more likely to take longer career breaks and work part-time jobs, which additionally impacts their professional prospects and deepens existing economic inequalities (Correll et al., 2007; WEF, 2016; Lyonette & Baldauf, 2019).

The societal expectation that mothers should prioritize family over work can manifest as the 'motherhood penalty,' which implies that mothers experience reduced pay, biased recruitment practices, and overall diminished career prospects compared to their childless peers and male counterparts (Morgan, 2015). This can lead to a sense of unfulfillment, increased stress, and decreased job satisfaction, which all constraint women's ability to have personally satisfying experiences in either or both domains (ibid.). Fathers, on the other hand, are more likely to experience a 'fatherhood bonus,' where having children can enhance perceptions of their responsibility and commitment, potentially leading to increased pay and better career opportunities (Cory & Stirling, 2015).

Part-time work, career breaks, and horizontal and vertical work segregation, which are all the result of gender bias and unequal division of unpaid labour, all influence compensation mechanisms that were historically less favourable towards women. Despite multiple efforts to close the gender pay gap, the latter persists in most societies, reflecting ingrained gendered

perceptions of capabilities and responsibilities in private and public spheres (Schieder & Gould, 2016; Germ, 2023). In 2022, the gender pay gap stood at 12.7% in the EU and 13.2% in the euro area (Eurostat, 2024c). The pay gap is particularly pronounced for employed mothers (Schieder & Gould, 2016; Kochhar, 2023). Lower earnings reduce the financial flexibility needed to outsource unpaid labour, such as childcare and household tasks, further deepening the unequal division of these responsibilities. The need to compensate for lower wages can also compel women to work longer hours or take on multiple jobs. This can all result in higher instances of both time-based and strain-based inter-role conflict (Russell et al., 2019; Barth, 2024).

2.3.2 Organizational factors

The crucial role of organizational factors in fostering or hindering work-life balance is increasingly recognized. Companies are also growingly aware of their role in facilitating work-life balance, recognizing that an employee's ability to efficiently respond to both work and family and life-related demands can significantly impact key organizational outcomes. When individuals feel supported in managing their various roles, it fosters increased job satisfaction, higher productivity levels, reduced absenteeism, and improved employee retention, all of which contribute to a more engaged and productive workforce (IFC, 2020; UN Women, 2022). Below, management support and work-life balance initiatives, including flexible working arrangements and other supportive practices, are presented as key organizational factors affecting work-life balance.

Management attitudes are translated into workplace policies and organizational practices, making them a crucial factor affecting work-life balance (Paulose & Sudarsan, 2014). Management support can be divided into formal support, which involves the formulation and implementation of work-life balance policies and practices, and informal support, which reflects management's encouragement to utilize these initiatives (Žnidaršič, 2021). The personality and emotional intelligence of management representatives play a vital role in informal support, as managers can recognize the unique needs of diverse employees. Research indicates that managers that acknowledge the importance of employees' personal life demands can reduce the occurrence of work-life conflict. This is because management shapes attitudes of loyalty towards the organization and can influence perceptions regarding necessary working hours and availability (Kong, 2013; Zen et al., 2015).

Management attitudes are also crucial for shaping an organizational culture that promotes gender equality through recruitment, rewarding, and promotion practices (Stamarski & Hing, 2015). Recent research by the Young Women's Trust (2023) revealed that 15% of the 907 interviewed employment decision-makers still believed that men were more suited for senior-level positions than women. Furthermore, a survey by Slater and Gordon (2014) showed that 40% of 500 managers expressed hesitation in hiring younger women due to the likelihood of them starting a family in the near future. These attitudes not only perpetuate

the gender pay gap but also impact the persisting unequal division of labour, as managers can reinforce perceptions of responsibilities in the private sphere (Stamarski & Hing, 2015).

Flexible working arrangements, which consist of both formal and informal policies and practices that determine where and when employees will perform their work obligations, can significantly improve individuals' ability to achieve work-life balance (Žnidaršič, 2021). This arrangements among others include remote work (work from home or from location), part-time work, reduced hours, and flexible hours (flexitime or compressed workweek) (Birt, 2023). Flexitime, which refers to flexible working hours where employees can choose their start and finish times within agreed limits, is one of the most popular forms of flexible working arrangements, especially because it is also least costly for employers, since it often requires minimal changes to existing infrastructure and processes. The rise of remote work was particularly evident during the pandemic, and has since then become a viable option of a flexible working arrangement. Both flexitime and remote work can decrease the chances of time-based conflict and enhance one's job satisfaction. Remote work is linked to reduced commute time, and flexitime to greater flexibility in terms of personalized work schedules, which allow employees to tailor their work hours around personal commitments (Kenton, 2022; Onque, 2022).

Organizations can implement a diverse range of work-life balance initiatives that go beyond flexible working arrangements to comprehensively address employee needs. These can include practical support systems like on-site or subsidized childcare and parental leave policies that transverse legal requirements. Additionally, promoting mental and physical well-being through initiatives like co-financing physical health activities, providing stress management workshops, and ensuring access to counseling services can be highly beneficial. Furthermore, educational and team-building workshops on topics such as active fatherhood, gender equality in the workplace, and diversity and inclusion can foster a more supportive and inclusive workplace culture. By providing additional resources and fostering open workplace dialogue, organizations demonstrate a genuine commitment to promoting work-life balance for employees (Grawitch et al., 2006; Ciosmak, 2024). This can lead to employees feeling more valued and supported, ultimately shaping their perceptions regarding their internal and external resources for successfully navigating the demands of both their public and private lives (ibid.).

2.3.3 Societal factors

Societal factors are those that exist on the macro (legislative) level. National policies and measures can significantly influence work-life balance by establishing legal guidelines that either support or hinder companies' efforts to facilitate work-life balance. These policies can create more or less favorable conditions for employees to manage their professional and personal lives effectively. Without state incentives, employers rarely, if ever, contribute to

the work-life balance of their employees (Černigoj Sadar & Kanjuo Mrčela, 2010; Žnidaršič, 2021; Gender Equality Research Institute, 2022).

Stier et al. (2012) examined how national social measures influence the reduction of work-life conflict. They found that access to childcare, along with maternity leave and work flexibility are particularly important macro-level factors in mitigating work-life conflict. Paulose and Sudarsan (2014) also considered the support from one's partner, family, and the broader community as important social factors. However, these factors can vary significantly in their impact depending on the the overall individual, organizational, and societal context.

3 WORK-LIFE BALANCE IN SLOVENIA: IMPACT OF COVID-19

This chapter aims to present the state of work-life balance in Slovenia during the pandemic. It begins with an overview of Slovenia's initiatives to promote work-life balance, both on the national and organizational level, that exist irrespective of the pandemic, highlighting opportunities in this field. The chapter then explores the state-of-the-art of work-life balance in Slovenia's private sector before the pandemic, with a particular focus on gender bias and availability of flexible working arrangements. Further, insights into employees' experiences with work-life balance during the pandemic are offered, examining its impact on both professional and private lives. The chapter concludes with a brief overview of work-life balance in Slovenia in the post-pandemic era. Due to the lack of research specifically focused on the private sector, the information provided in this chapter predominantly reflects the experiences of working men and women in both the public and private sectors in Slovenia.

3.1 Initiatives to promote work-life balance

3.1.1 National level

Work-life balance is recognized in Slovenia as a crucial aspect of family policy. In terms of its characteristics, Slovenia aligns with Nordic/Scandinavian countries, offering policies that provide strong support for efficiently responding to the demands of professional and private life. These policies ensure financially accessible and high-quality public services, promote equal employment opportunities for women, and facilitate family relief and greater autonomy for its members (Mirovni inštitut & MDDSZ, 2021). However, no policies directly address the division of unpaid labour, leading to significant disparities in the utilization of family benefits (ibid.). Below is an overview of Slovenia's key legal rights that support work-life balance, along with information about the utilization of each right, namely: i) maternity, paternity and parental leave and allowances; ii) shorter working hours; iii) breastfeeding break; iv) child protection system; v) right to disconnect.

In Slovenia, parental leave comprises maternity, paternity, and parental leave. Maternity leave consists of 105 non-transferable, compensated calendar days, with 15 days being

mandatory. Paternity leave comprises 15 non-transferable, compensated days. Maternity leave begins before or at the time of the child's birth, whereas paternity leave can be taken within the initial three months post-birth. The recent ratification of the EU Directive 2019/1158 on work-life balance for parents and carers introduced significant adjustments to paternal leave in Slovenia. Previously, fathers could transfer their entire 130 days of parental leave to the mother, while mothers could transfer only 30 out of 130 days to the father. Under the new directive, each parent is now entitled to 160 days of parental leave, with partial transferability. Each parent can transfer up to 100 days to the other, but 60 days remain non-transferable (Official Gazette of the Republic of Slovenia, 2014). In Slovenia, the uptake of paternity leave is relatively high, with approximately 80% of fathers utilizing their full entitlement. However, the utilization of parental leave by fathers has historically been low. In the 1990s, only about 1-2% of men took parental leave. This percentage gradually increased over time, reaching between 6% and 7% from 2011 to 2016. Nonetheless, the rate declined again, with just over 4% of men benefiting from parental leave in 2020 (Mirovni inštitut & MDDSZ, 2021).

Under Slovenian legislation, one parent caring for a child up to the age of three is allowed to work part-time instead of full-time (Official Gazette of the Republic of Slovenia, 2014). In January 2021, Slovenia introduced a policy to cover social security contributions based on a proportional part of the average of the last 12 salaries, up to full work obligations. This measure aimed to encourage fathers to take advantage of reduced working hours due to parenthood (Mirovni inštitut & MDDSZ, 2021). In 2014, 13.7% of women were employed part-time, with 13.6% of them caring for a child or a disabled adult. By 2020, the latest available data shows that 595 fathers and 19.743 mothers were employed part-time (ibid.).

Regarding breastfeeding breaks and compensation, which are available based on a pediatrician's certificate for children aged nine to 18 months, it is important to note that this benefit is allocated to the mother, who must be a full-time employee. The entitlement includes one hour per day, with compensation calculated as a proportional part of the average of the last 12 salaries (Official Gazette of the Republic of Slovenia, 2014). This measure has proven to be largely underutilized in Slovenia, with fewer than 10 women using it annually. This low uptake may be attributed to the availability of parental leave (Mirovni inštitut & MDDSZ, 2021).

Slovenia has developed a comprehensive system of pre-school education and care. When a child reaches 11 months of age, the state provides daycare services in kindergartens, with costs shared between the state and the municipality based on the parents' income level (Official Gazette of the Republic of Slovenia, 1996). According to 2020 statistics, enrollment rates in kindergarten were 54.3% for one-year-olds, 80.1% for two-year-olds, 89.5% for three-year-olds, 93% for four-year-olds, and 95% for five-year-olds (Mirovni inštitut & MDDSZ, 2021). Additionally, in 2020, 88% of kindergartens in Slovenia were public, while 12% were private (ibid.).

The right to disconnect was established with amendments to the Employment Relations Act on November 16, 2023, which stipulates that employees are not required to be available to their employer during periods of rest or justified absences (Official Gazette of the Republic of Slovenia, 2013). This right primarily addresses the challenges posed by the widespread use of digital tools and remote work, which often blur the boundaries between work and personal time. Employers are required to implement measures to support the right to disconnect by November 16, 2024, at the latest (Šket, 2024; Pisnik, 2024).

Additional legal rights that promote work-life balance include: i) the entitlement of employees who care for and protect a child requiring special care to at least three extra days of annual leave; ii) the provision of one additional day of annual leave for each child under the age of 15; iii) the flexibility to use annual leave while considering family obligations; iv) the right for parents of school-aged children to take at least one week of annual leave during school holidays; v) protection against night and overtime work (Gender Equality Research Institute, 2022).

3.1.2 Organizational level

According to the latest data from May 2024, the Slovenian private sector employs nearly 696,000 individuals, representing approximately 73.5% of the country's workforce. However, men dominate this sector, with around 433,000 male employees accounting for about 62% of the total (Statistical Office of the Republic of Slovenia, n.d.).

Successful work-life balance measures that promote gender equality, inclusivity, and a healthy management of professional and personal demands can be successfully implemented across various company sizes, sectors, and activities. Private sector organizations, however, unlike their public sector counterparts, possess an inherent agility to adapt policies and practices that efficiently respond to the workforce's needs, offering a unique opportunity to promote work-life balance beyond the legislative guidelines. Unfortunately, many companies in Slovenia still only implement the minimum requirements for ensuring work-life balance, often due to lack of interest, financial constraints, or limited understanding of its importance and benefits (Žnidaršič, 2021; Humer et al., 2022).

One effort to promote work-life balance and a more balanced representation of women and men in the private sector is the Include.All (Vključi.Vse) award, presented by the Managers' Association of Slovenia (Združenje Manager). This award specifically aims to recognize companies that actively pursue inclusion and diversity strategies and demonstrate a strong commitment to gender equality in management. By highlighting these companies as examples of good practice within Slovenia's private sector, the award emphasizes the importance and benefits of gender-balanced leadership (Združenje Manager, n.d.a).

A more widespread good practice in Slovenia in the field of work-life balance is the Family Friendly Enterprise Certificate (certifikat Družini prijazno podjetje), awarded by the Ekvilib Institute (Ekvilib inštitut) since 2007. This certification recognizes efforts in promoting work-life balance among Slovenian employment organizations. It is available to companies, public sector entities, and non-profit organizations with at least five employees. By 2022, a total of 300 organizations, encompassing over 120,000 employees, received this certificate. The majority of those organizations operate in the private sector. The certification process involves revising existing practices and introducing measures across eight key areas: working hours, work organization, workplace quality and flexibility, information and communication policies, management skills, staff development, compensation and rewards, and family services. The certificate is founded on the principles of equality, non-discrimination, and inclusivity and mandates regular assessments of organizational culture from both management and employees (Hartman et al., 2015).

In 2020, the Ekvilib Institute also introduced the Socially Responsible Employer Certificate (certifikat Družbeno odgovoren delodajalec), which differs from the Family Friendly Enterprise Certificate by focusing more on strategic management of social responsibility. This certificate is based on the principles of the ISO 26000 Standard on Corporate Social Responsibility. The process of obtaining this certificate involves auditing and advisory-analytical steps, and companies can choose to certify in one or all four strategic areas, with work-life balance being one of them. To date, 190 organizations in Slovenia have earned this certificate (Certifikat Družbeno odgovoren delodajalec, n.d.).

Another initiative promoting diversity and inclusivity in both public and private sectors is the Diversity Charter Slovenia (Listina raznolikosti Slovenija). This is a voluntary document that organizations operating in either the public or private sector sign, committing to promote diversity and equal opportunities in the workplace. Signing the charter grants access to a wide peer network, publications, and tools for benchmarking, measuring, and monitoring equal opportunities for all employees, regardless of personal circumstances. Over 215 Slovenian organizations, employing more than 40,000 people, have signed the Diversity Charter so far (Listina raznolikosti Slovenija, n.d.).

Gender equality plans are increasingly recognized as crucial strategic documents for fostering an inclusive organizational culture and promoting work-life balance. However, in Slovenia, this practice is most prevalent in the public sector, including ministries, universities, healthcare facilities, and public research institutions (Krmelj et al., 2022; Flis and Milešević, 2023; Ministry of Education, Science and Sport of the Republic of Slovenia, n.d.). Some private companies also take the initiative to develop such plans independently, demonstrating their commitment to inclusivity. For instance, the company Steklarne Hrastnik d.o.o. has created its own gender equality plan (Steklarne Hrastnik d.o.o., 2024).

An unconventional initiative that aimed to showcase the positive effects of the measures that promote work-life balance in both the public and private sector was a pilot programme, carried out in 2021 in Slovenia in the frame of the 'Dad in Action' (Očka v akciji) project³. The latter engaged four employers in the public and private sector and their male employees to enhance their work-life balance through the promotion of active fatherhood. The programme targeted various aspects including information sharing, training, family involvement, and flexible work arrangements. Among the favoured measures were scheduling meetings in the morning or ending them by 3 p.m., coordinated planning of annual leave, creating flexible working environments and hours, and allowing children to visit the workplace. Participants observed notable differences between the public and private sectors regarding work-life balance, with private sector employees often feeling that company priorities overshadow their personal needs (Humer et al., 2022).

3.2 Work-life balance statistics: before COVID-19

In 2018, the EC conducted a study, examining the state of work-life balance across the EU. The study found that 81% of the 26,578 respondents were either fairly satisfied or very satisfied with their balance between professional and personal demands. In Slovenia, 81% of respondents reported being fairly or very satisfied, slightly above the EU average. Among this group, there were minor gender differences, with 81% of men and 78% of women expressing satisfaction. The study also investigated the availability of flexible working arrangements. While 65% of respondents across the EU had the option to utilize such arrangements, the percentage was slightly lower in Slovenia at 59%. A significant gender difference was revealed in Slovenia, with more men (52%) reporting access to flexible options compared to women (35%). The most widespread flexible working arrangement was flexitime (58% in the EU and 62% in Slovenia), followed by part-time work (53% in the EU and 33% in Slovenia) and remote work (25% in the EU and 24% in Slovenia) (ibid.).

EIGE (n.d.d) highlighted significant gender disparities in the division of unpaid labour in Slovenia, a key dimension of work-life balance: 35% of women reported performing daily informal care labour compared to 27% of men, and 81% of women reported doing daily household chores compared to just 27% of men. Similarly, a study by Fernández-Lozano and Jurado-Guerrero (2021) found that women in Slovenia perform 67% of tasks associated with unpaid labour, indicating a substantial imbalance. Research on labour market accessibility for women and men in Slovenia (Kanjuro Mrčela et al., 2016) revealed that 21.4% of surveyed men agreed that a woman should be willing to reduce her paid work for the benefit of her family, highlighting a persistent gendered perception of responsibilities. A lower, but still high proportion of women (14.1%) also agreed with this statement (ibid.).

³ The project, conducted between 2020 and 2022, was co-financed with funds from the REC Programme led by the EC (Humer et al., 2015).

The research by Kanjua Mrčela et al. (2016) further uncovered substantial gender biases in the Slovenian labour market. Firstly, most management and human resources representatives believed that paternity leave caused more disruption to organizational operations compared to maternity leave, reinforcing the perception that women are less valuable to the workforce. Secondly, over 60% of management and human resources representatives stated they would likely not or definitely not offer a promotion to an expecting mother or father planning to utilize maternity, paternity, or parental leave in the near future. Additionally, 1 in 10 women was demoted to a lower-paying position upon returning from maternity or parental leave, and women felt less supported when utilizing these benefits compared to men (ibid.).

Gender bias in the labour market can be also observed through unequal representation of men and women in leadership positions. In October 2019, only 24.6% of women in Slovenia were board members in companies listed on the stock exchange, compared to the EU average of 28.8%. This disparity worsened over time, with women holding just 23.2% of such positions by April 2024, while the EU average was 34.2%. Additionally, only 5.9% of women in Slovenia hold presidential positions in these companies, compared to the EU average of 8.6% in 2024 (EIGE, n.d.e).

3.3 Impact of COVID-19 on work-life balance in Slovenia

The pandemic, officially announced on March 12, 2020 in Slovenia (Government of the Republic of Slovenia, 2020), profoundly impacted work-life balance. Governments adapted various measures to curb the spread of the new virus, which consequently affected companies' work organization, processes, and conditions, leading many employees to transition to remote work. This shift, together with the relocation of the educational process to the home, created challenges in efficiently responding to professional and personal demands, impacting both employees' and companies' perceptions regarding the importance of work-life balance (Mar et al., 2023). Below, we explore main changes in professional and private spheres in Slovenia, brought upon by the pandemic, together with their implications for work-life balance.

3.3.1 Professional sphere

While the percentage of people working from home had been steadily increasing in the EU since 2010, it saw a significant jump in 2020. In that year, 12.3% of individuals reported usually working from home, up from 5.4% in 2019 (Statista, 2024). This figure rose to 13.5% in 2021 (Eurostat, n.d.d). In Slovenia, the highest share of people consistently working from home was 17.2% in December 2020. However, this number gradually decreased to 8.8% by February 2021 (Statistical Office of the Republic of Slovenia, 2021). The decline continued through 2021 and 2022, with only 2% of people working from home every day by October 2022, while 8% practiced a hybrid arrangement, combining remote work with on-site work (Statistical Office of the Republic of Slovenia, 2022).

Working from home under normal conditions is associated with several benefits, including the elimination of transportation costs, fostering of independence and focus, and increased employee productivity (Gender Equality Research Institute, 2022). Typically, transitioning to remote work involves a strategic relocation of workers, ensuring they have the appropriate equipment and knowledge to work effectively. However, the pandemic was an unprecedented event and companies had little time, resources, and knowledge to appropriately implement work-from-home policies. Many employees did not have proper equipment, a separate space to do work, and sufficient training to adapt to the new work-from-home environment (Ružič, 2023).

Research by Sodja (2020) revealed that workers in Slovenia faced numerous challenges under these conditions, such as the absence of network connections and the need to complete work tasks in an extremely short time. One of the most frequently reported challenges was maintaining focus on work itself. In Slovenia, the share of individuals who struggled to concentrate on work due to personal responsibilities was higher (9.5%) in comparison with the EU average (8.8%) in 2020. Employees also reported worrying about work even when off-duty (23.5%) and feeling that work prevented them from spending desired time with their family (17.8%) (ibid.).

The pandemic significantly increased the number of workers putting in hours outside the standard working schedule, driven both by difficulties focusing on work and by increased work demands. In Slovenia, from April to May 2020, 55.9% of workers reported working outside of regular hours, with 11.5% doing so every day. By February to March 2021, the number of people working outside of standard hours every day had decreased to 9.9%, but the overall percentage of people reporting such work had increased to 56.6% (Sodja 2020, Mar et al., 2023). Research by WEF (2020) found that employees working from home in Europe, North America, and the Middle East experienced an average extension of 48.5 minutes to their workday. This increase was largely due to the heightened use of information and communication technology, especially email, with many messages being sent and received outside regular working hours. Additionally, the number of daily employee meetings increased by 12.9%, and the number of employees attending these meetings rose by 13.5%. This contributed to the 'blurring' of boundaries between professional and personal time, leading to a decreased ability to fully disengage from work after hours and respond in a satisfactory manner to obligations in both domains (ibid.). Research conducted by Mar et al. (2023) in a selected Slovenian private sector company revealed that 63.7% of respondents felt pressured to be available for work outside regular hours. Additionally, 81.9% of respondents reported spending at least one hour addressing work-related demands beyond their standard working hours (ibid.).

The pandemic highlighted several challenges in the professional domain: expectations to always be available, inadequate home working conditions, and (too) high workloads. These

issues increased stress, fatigue, and burnout. Problems like poor communication and ineffective management in organizations, difficulties responding to increased work and personal life demands, and inadequate home office setups, all contributed to these negative effects (Robnik, 2022). This highlighted the need for companies to establish clearer and more structured guidelines for work both during and outside of crisis situations like the pandemic. It also underscored the importance of encouraging employees to disconnect from work after hours. The concept of the 'right to disconnect' gained traction, reflecting a broader movement toward protecting mental health and promoting a healthier work-life balance in response to the challenges intensified by remote work and increased workloads during the pandemic (Korpič Horvat, 2021; Miller, 2024).

While practices of foreign companies highlight various benefits introduced to support employees in balancing professional and personal life during the pandemic, such as mental health assistance programmes, training for working from home, and employee support networks (Brown, 2021), information about similar initiatives in Slovenia remains extremely limited. This gap suggests that Slovenian companies might have relied on temporary, individual-level measures rather than implementing comprehensive, long-term strategies to address these challenges effectively.

3.3.2 Private sphere

The pandemic profoundly affected individuals' personal lives, thereby impacting their ability to maintain a work-life balance. Social isolation measures, mental and physical health challenges, and the increased burden of caregiving responsibilities all contributed to the difficulties individuals faced in responding to the demands of their professional and personal lives (Sodja, 2020).

One of the biggest challenges for employed parents in Slovenia was the relocation of the education process to the home environment. This transition encompassed several significant tasks and adjustments. Parents needed to set up appropriate learning spaces at home, which involved creating a dedicated area conducive to studying and ensuring it was equipped with necessary resources like a computer, internet access, and study materials (Wakefield, 2021; Ružič, 2023). For families where both parents were working from home, responding to work tasks while supervising their child's remote learning became a critical issue. In cases where parents could not be at home, they had to arrange for alternative supervision, which often involved coordinating with other family members or finding external childcare options (Sodja, 2020).

Between December 2020 and mid-January 2021, 60% of parents with elementary school children engaged in distance learning reported that supporting their children's education was a considerable or very large burden on their household. This proportion slightly decreased (to 52%) as kindergartens reopened and in-person schooling resumed for the first three

grades of elementary school towards the end of January 2021 (Statistical Office of the Republic of Slovenia, 2021). Additionally, the all-Slovenian COVID-19 Insight survey revealed that 40% of parents found distance education stressful. They spent an average of 140 minutes per day assisting their youngest elementary school students with schoolwork, with 74% of parents estimating that this was more time than before the pandemic (Aragon, 2020). Parents of school-age children also highlighted several issues with remote education that impacted family dynamics, such as social isolation, decreased motivation in their children, reduced independence, increased irritability, fatigue, diminished learning outcomes, difficulties in keeping up with educational material, and excessive screen time (Kerč et al., 2021).

While research from other countries highlights that the transition to remote education was particularly stressful for women, who traditionally bear more caregiving responsibilities than men (OECD, 2021; Sharma, 2022), and that women experienced higher levels of work-life conflict, there is no specific research on this issue in Slovenia from that period. The only available information is that parents working from home faced significant challenges in concentrating on work tasks due to family obligations, with women reporting these difficulties more frequently (Sodja, 2020). Additionally, EIGE did not provide updated data for this time frame for Slovenia. In the EU during the pandemic, women averaged 62 hours per week on child care, whereas men averaged 36 hours. Additionally, women spent around 23 hours per week on housework, compared to 15 hours for men (EC, 2021).

The pandemic both exposed and exacerbated existing mental health issues. It affected mental well-being through heightened caregiving responsibilities, social isolation, and fears about the virus itself (Kalin, n.d.). For employed individuals, uncertainties in the labour market, rising work demands, increased availability, and unclear work expectations further contributed to mental health challenges. Research by Kerč et al. (2021) highlighted that the main stressors for many private sector employees were social isolation, financial uncertainty, and worries about infecting or being separated from loved ones. These stressors were closely associated with a significant rise in depressive and anxiety symptoms among these workers (ibid.).

3.4 Work-life balance in the post-pandemic era

Since the pandemic, work-life balance in Slovenia has taken on new significance. There is now greater awareness of the measures companies can implement to promote better working conditions, thereby fostering favourable organizational factors that help individuals allocate their time and other resources more effectively across professional and personal demands. Various stakeholders, such as the Chamber of Commerce and Industry of Slovenia, the Managers' Association of Slovenia, and the Association of Employers of Slovenia, are increasingly promoting organizational measures and incentives (Gospodarska zbornica Slovenije, 2022; Združenje delodajalcev Slovenije, 2023; Združenje Manager, n.d.b). These

measures emphasize the importance of proactive management in adapting to the diverse needs and circumstances of employees and ensuring consistent and open communication in the workplace. This helps identify employee needs and fosters a culture where work-life balance concerns can be shared. There is a growing focus on family-friendly incentives, such as organizing activities that family members can attend, as well as initiatives that promote a positive organizational culture, like team-building events, additional workshops, and employee programs (Humer et al., 2022; eVZD, n.d.).

The PROMETHEUS project (Prometej)⁴ served as an example of good practice in promoting work-life balance in the private sector. In response to the detrimental impact of the pandemic on employee well-being, five companies organized a series of workshops and individual coaching sessions for employees on the topic of work-life balance. These workshops covered various topics, including stress management, gender equality, inclusive leadership, and effective communication. Additionally, the companies established a mentoring scheme for promoting work-life balance, appointing mentors in each company who were equipped with the necessary resources to help other employees manage their professional and personal demands more effectively (AmCham Slovenija, n.d.).

Recent data from the Gender Equality Index in the domain of time (EIGE, n.d.f) shows a more equitable distribution among men (24%) and women (26%) who perform informal care tasks every day. However, the percentages for both genders have decreased since the previous data collection. When breaking down this indicator by intersecting inequalities, it becomes clear that women (53%) in couples with children still bear a disproportionate burden of these tasks compared to men (41%). A significant gender disparity persists in daily housework, with 69% of women reporting they do such tasks every day compared to 29% of men. This disparity is even more pronounced among couples with children (75% of women and 30% of men) and without children (83% of women and 19% of men) (ibid.). These disparities illustrate that gender remains a crucial factor affecting the division of unpaid labour in Slovenia. This highlights the need for targeted incentives at both the organizational and national levels to address these disparities and promote gender equality, thereby contributing to more favorable conditions for achieving work-life balance, irrespective of gender.

4 RESEARCH DESIGN

This chapter aims to explain the purpose of the empirical research, its methodological design, and the data analysis methods used. By doing so, this chapter provides a clear understanding of the research framework and approach, offering insights into how the study was structured and executed with representatives of the selected target group.

⁴ The project was carried out by 10 project partners between 2022 and 2024, and was co-funded by the NFM 2014-2020 programme (AmCham Slovenija, n.d.).

4.1 Purpose and goals

The primary goal of the empirical research, which is the key dimension of this thesis, was to explore the work-life balance experiences of individuals working in Slovenia's private sector during the pandemic. The collected data aims to shed light on the differences in these experiences, particularly those arising from various personal circumstances, such as gender and parenthood. By examining these factors, the research seeks to provide a detailed understanding of how different groups were affected. This research also seeks to address the information gap, as there is very limited research on work-life balance in the Slovenian private sector during the pandemic. The study aims to contribute valuable insights that can inform policies and practices to better support employees in managing their work and personal lives during and outside of challenging times. Furthermore, the research hopes to corroborate existing findings on how personal circumstances can influence the work-life balance experiences, providing a comprehensive view of the varied impacts of the pandemic on the workforce, and highlighting the necessity for tailored approaches to support diverse employee needs effectively.

4.2 Research questions and hypotheses

As part of this study, three research questions and four hypotheses were formulated based on existing literature on work-life balance during the pandemic, both in Slovenia and internationally. The research questions were answered using the collected data, and the hypotheses accepted or rejected based on the results. Below, the research questions (RQ) and hypotheses (H) are presented along with the rationale for their selection.

RQ1: Was there a negative correlation between parenthood and the ability of private sector employees to achieve work-life balance during the COVID-19 pandemic?

H1: Working parents found it harder to disconnect from work outside of regular working hours during the pandemic than working individuals without children.

H2: Working parents who worked from home during the COVID-19 pandemic felt more overwhelmed or stressed when trying to balance professional and personal/family responsibilities compared to employed individuals without children who also worked from home.

Rationale behind RQ1: Research indicates that working parents generally find it more challenging to achieve work-life balance compared to their childless counterparts. This is due to the increased share of responsibilities in the private sphere, often leading to time constraints and a reduced ability to effectively manage personal and professional demands (Žnidaršič, 2021). The measures to prevent the spread of the virus in Slovenia, which included relocating the schooling process to home, exacerbated these challenges for parents. Those working from home particularly struggled with focusing on their professional responsibilities amidst these additional demands (Sodja, 2020; Aragon, 2020).

RQ2: What role did gender play in achieving work-life balance during the COVID-19 pandemic for private sector employees?

H3: Working women allocated more time to personal/family responsibilities compared to working men during the pandemic.

H4: Working mothers devoted more time to caregiving responsibilities during the pandemic compared to working fathers.

Rationale behind RQ2: Biological attributes have throughout entire history played the key supportive role in the enhancement of stereotypes about the traditional division of social roles, and have therefore acted as crucial mechanism of discrimination (Rosicki, 2012). Statistics show that women generally perform the majority of unpaid labour, affecting their workforce participation, health outcomes, and overall well-being. This imbalance consequently impacts their ability to achieve work-life balance (Hochschild and Machung, 1989; WEF, 2022). The pandemic exacerbated these differences, disproportionately impacting women, who took on the majority of caregiving responsibilities (Sharma, 2022).

RQ3: What were the main challenges in the field of work-life balance for private sector employees in Slovenia during the COVID-19 pandemic?

Rationale behind RQ3: Challenges such as social isolation, financial insecurity, increased caregiving demands, and the heightened need for availability and connectivity all contributed to making it more difficult for people to navigate their personal and professional demands during the pandemic. The latter also revealed and exacerbated existing mental health challenges for many individuals, regardless of their personal circumstances (Kerč et al., 2021; Mar et al., 2023)

4.3 Survey design

The research was conducted with a quantitative research study based on the collection of primary data. This data was gathered through a survey designed to directly investigate experiences with work-life balance in Slovenia's private sector during the pandemic. The survey not only explored the general experiences of employees but also delved into the specific impact of various factors affecting work-life balance during that period. Among these factors, particular attention was given to the roles of gender and parenthood. The survey included targeted questions to understand how these demographics influenced work-life balance challenges, such as the distribution of domestic responsibilities and the presence of mental health challenges associated with balancing professional and personal obligations.

4.3.1 Sample and Data Collection

The data for the survey was gathered via an online questionnaire created on the platform 1KA. The decision to use an online survey was driven by its ease of dissemination, low cost, and the potential for faster data analysis (Ebert et al., 2018). The survey was active from July 2 to July 9, 2024, and distributed to potential respondents, primarily using a combination of purposive sampling and network sampling, specifically snowball sampling. Purposive sampling was chosen to intentionally select participants who were employed in the private sector during the pandemic, aligning with the research objective (Nikolopoulou, 2023). Network sampling further extended the survey's reach, as respondents could forward it to others with the same characteristic (private sector employment during the pandemic) (Heckathorn & Cameron, 2017). The survey was initially sent to representatives of five Slovenian private sector companies (human resources managers, directors, and marketing executives), who then shared it with their employees. However, the convenience sampling method was also employed by sharing the survey on social media to attract a larger sample. However, this approach resulted in some responses being unsuitable for analysis, as not all respondents met the required criterion of private sector employment during the pandemic.

The survey received a total of 348 responses, of which 273 were valid. Valid responses were those that were fully completed and from individuals employed in the private sector during the pandemic. Individuals who indicated they were not employed in the private sector were redirected to the end of the survey and did not complete it, as their responses would not have been considered valid. Prior to starting the survey, respondents were informed about its topic and purpose and assured that their answers would remain anonymous and used solely for research purposes. Given that the target audience was based in Slovenia, the survey was administered in Slovene, with an English translation provided for the purposes of this thesis. The survey included general demographic questions covering gender, age, parenting status, and primary employment status between 2020 and 2022. The latter was crucial, as only responses from individuals who indicated they were primarily employed in the private sector during that period were included in the analysis. In addition to demographic questions, the survey featured various question formats, including single-choice, multiple-choice, Likert scale, and open-ended questions.

4.3.2 Data analysis method

The obtained responses were analyzed with SPSS Statistics and Microsoft Excel. The relationship between dependent and independent variables was measured and explained with a descriptive method, and hypotheses were tested with Chi-Square and Mann-Whitney U statistical tests.

5 RESULTS

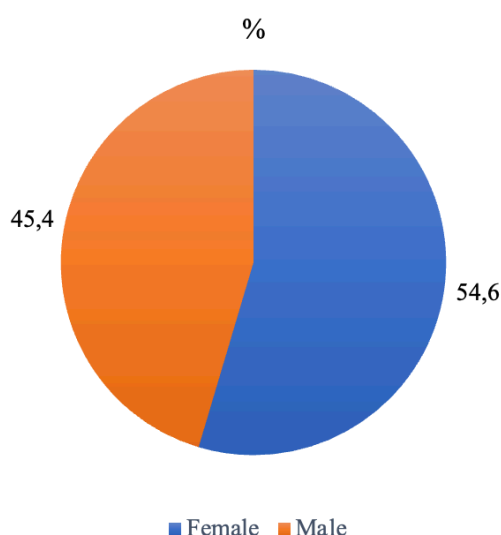
This chapter aims to present the results of the empirical research, specifically the findings of the analysis of the questionnaire. The chapter is structured as follows: i) sample

description (overview of the demographic and relevant characteristics of the respondents who participated in the study); ii) descriptive analysis (summary of the responses to the questionnaire, highlighting key findings and trends); iii) hypotheses testing (application of appropriate statistical tests to determine the validity of the hypotheses).

5.1 Sample description

Out of the initial 348 survey respondents, a total of 273 were included in the final analysis. These selected respondents had fully completed the survey, ensuring that their responses were comprehensive and reliable for the purposes of this study. Additionally, all included respondents were employed primarily in the private sector during the pandemic, which allowed for a focused analysis on this specific segment of the workforce. Among these 273 respondents, the gender distribution was as follows: 54.6% were women, representing a majority within the sample, while 45.4% were men. See Figure 1.

Figure 1: Gender structure of the sample.

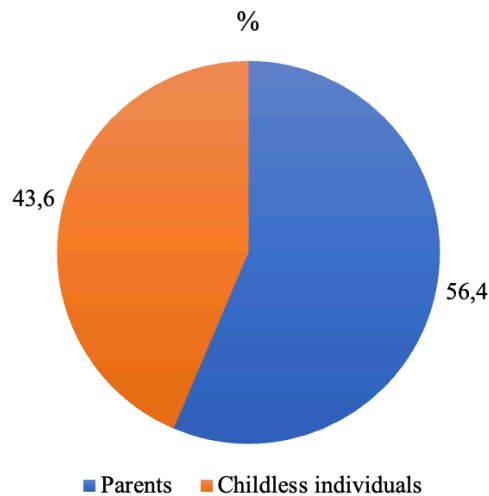


Source: own work.

The mean age of respondents was 39.9 years, with the youngest being 21 and the oldest 61. Age distribution showed that 22% of respondents were 30 or younger, 66% were between 31 and 48, and 13% were 49 or older. Regarding marital status, the majority (77.7%) of respondents reported being married or in a common-law partnership, followed by those who were single (13.2%), divorced (7.8%), and widowed (1.1%). One respondent chose not to disclose their marital status.

In terms of parenthood, 56.4% of respondents had at least one child under the age of 18 between 2020 and 2022, while 43.6% were childless during that period. See Figure 2.

Figure 2: Parenthood profile of the sample.



Source: own work.

Among those with children, most had two children (49.5%), followed by one child (40.9%), three children (9.1%), and four children (0.6%).

5.2 Descriptive analysis

The questions about the demographic profile were followed by inquiries regarding personal experiences with work-life balance during the pandemic. The following sections provide insight into some of those experiences, including the satisfaction levels of individuals regarding their work-life balance during the pandemic, perceived organizational support, and biggest challenges for achieving work-life balance. The narratives presented highlight common themes as well as unique perspectives, offering a comprehensive understanding of the multifaceted nature of work-life balance in this context.

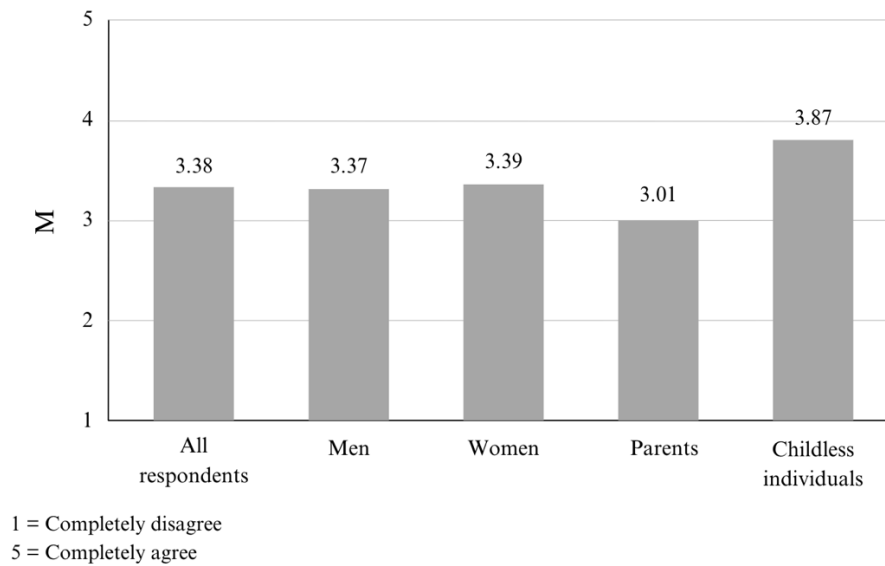
5.2.1 Perceptions of work-life balance during the pandemic

Several questions measured perceptions of work-life balance during the pandemic using a Likert scale (1 = completely disagree, 5 = completely agree). All questions were answered by 273 respondents.

Respondents were asked to rate their (dis)agreement with the statement: »During the COVID-19 pandemic, I successfully balanced professional and personal/family obligations.« The mean score for all respondents was 3.38. Childless individuals had the mean score of 3.87, while parents had 3.01, indicating a clear difference in responses between the groups, with childless individuals agreeing in a higher extent with the statement. In contrast, no notable disparities were seen between the responses of men (3.37) and women (3.39). See Figure 3.

Figure 3: Perceptions of work-life balance during COVID-19.

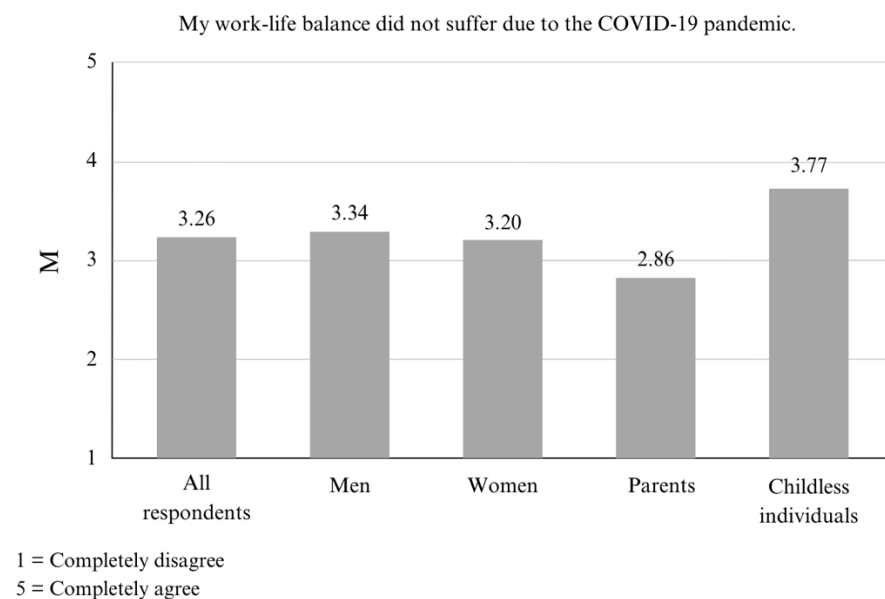
During the COVID-19 pandemic, I successfully balanced professional and personal/family obligations.



Source: own work.

Similar disparities were evident in responses to the statement: »My work-life balance did not suffer due to the COVID-19 pandemic.« The mean score for all respondents was 3.26. Childless individuals scored higher, with a mean of 3.77, compared to parents, who had a mean of 2.86, indicating that childless individuals showed greater agreement with the statement. In contrast, responses between men (3.34) and women (3.20) were similar, showing no notable differences. See Figure 4.

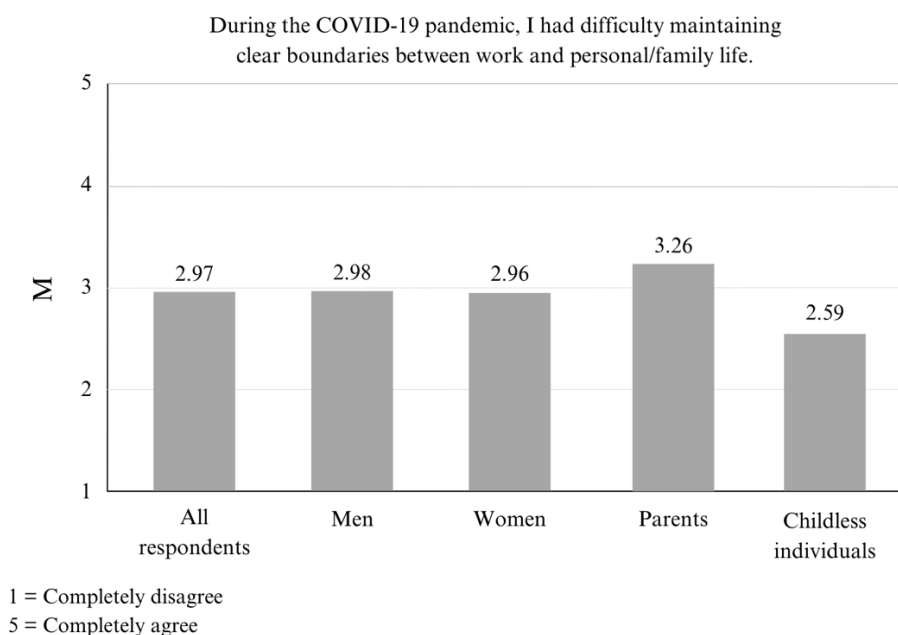
Figure 4: Perceived impact of COVID-19 on work-life balance.



Source: own work.

Respondents also rated their (dis)agreement with the statement: »During the COVID-19 pandemic, I had difficulty maintaining clear boundaries between work and personal/family life.« The overall mean score for respondents was 2.97. Childless individuals had a lower average score of 2.59, while parents scored slightly higher with a mean of 3.26, suggesting that childless individuals expressed less agreement with the statement. Meanwhile, the scores for men (2.98) and women (2.96) were nearly identical, indicating no significant difference between their responses. See Figure 4.

Figure 5: (Un)clear boundaries between work and personal/family life during COVID-19.



Source: own work.

5.2.2 Work from home

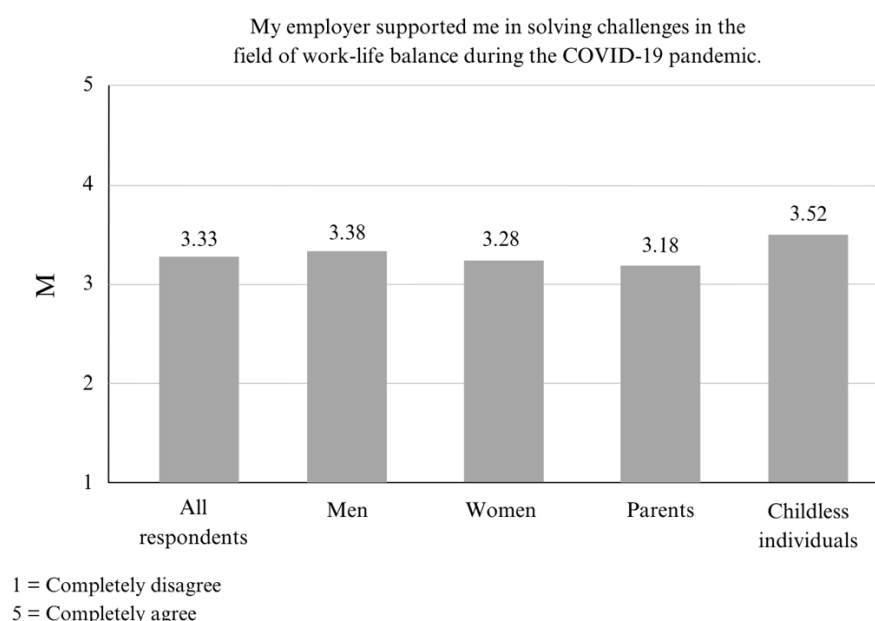
Respondents were asked if they worked from home during the pandemic. 145 respondents (53.1%) stated that they worked from home, while 128 (46.9%) did not. Among those who worked from home, almost 61% were women and 39% were men. Regarding the parenting profile, 57.1% of parents worked from home compared to 47.9% of childless individuals.

5.2.3 Organizational support

The questionnaire aimed to gauge individuals' perceptions of employer support for work-life balance during the pandemic, using three Likert scale statements (1 = completely disagree, 5 = completely agree). A total of 273 respondents rated the statements.

Respondents were asked to evaluate the statement: » My employer supported me in solving challenges in the field of work-life balance during the COVID-19 pandemic.« The average score across all respondents was 3.33. Childless individuals reported a higher mean score of 3.52, compared to parents, who averaged 3.18, suggesting that childless respondents showed greater agreement with the statement. When comparing responses by gender, men had a mean score of 3.38, while women scored slightly lower at 3.28, indicating that men expressed a marginally higher level of agreement. See Figure 6.

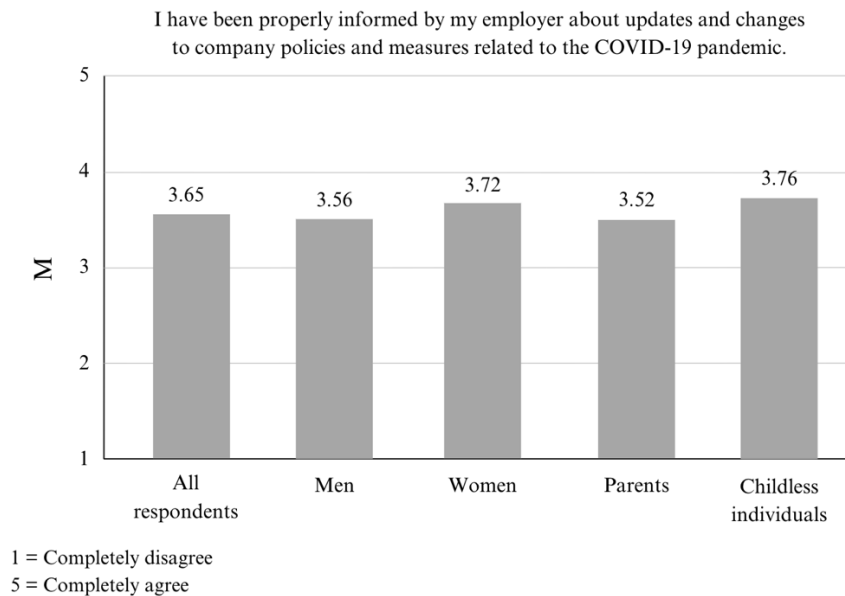
Figure 6: Perceptions of organizational support during COVID-19.



Source: own work.

The respondents were also asked to evaluate the statement: »I have been properly informed by my employer about updates and changes to company policies and measures related to the COVID-19 pandemic.« The overall mean score for all respondents was 3.65. Among them, men had a mean score of 3.56, while women scored slightly higher at 3.72, suggesting that men expressed slightly less agreement with the statement than women. Additionally, childless individuals reported a higher mean score of 3.76 compared to parents, who had a mean of 3.52, indicating a modest difference in perspectives based on parental status. See Figure 7.

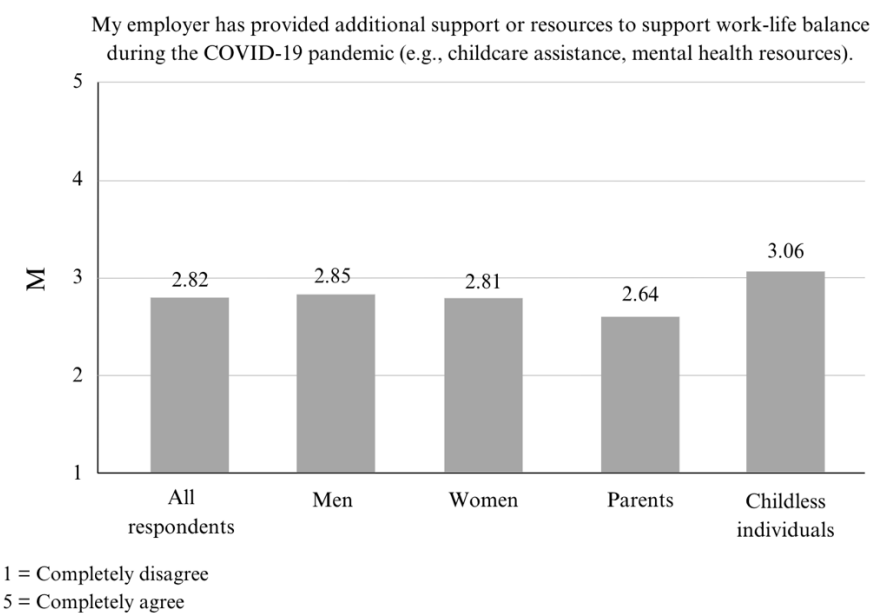
Figure 7: Perceptions of company information flow adequacy during COVID-19.



Source: own work.

The final statement assessed whether employers provided additional support or resources for work-life balance during the pandemic, such as childcare assistance or mental health resources. Mean score for all respondents was 2.82. Men had a mean score of 2.85, and women had a mean score of 2.81. Childless individuals (3.06) had a higher mean score than parents (2.64). See Figure 8.

Figure 8: Provision of additional support for work-life balance during COVID-19.



Source: own work.

5.2.4 Time spent on personal/family obligations

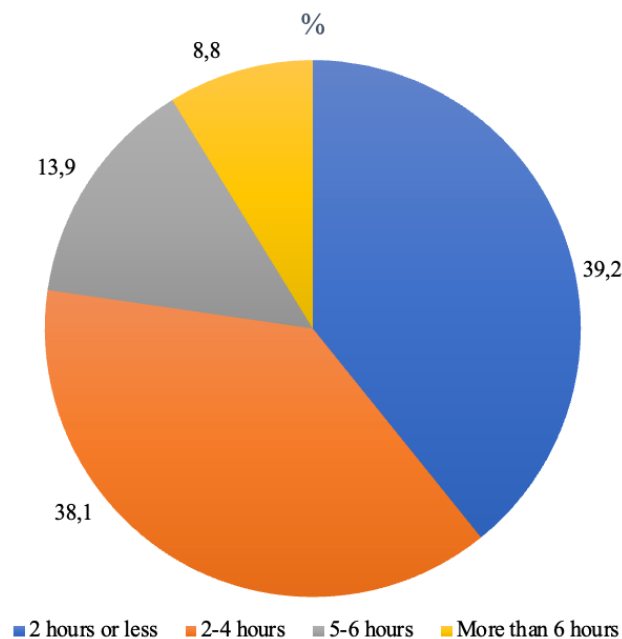
Respondents were asked to provide information about how many hours per day did they spend on average on personal/family responsibilities during the pandemic, like cooking, cleaning, shopping and childcare. Possible answers were 2 hours or less, 2-4 hours, 5-6 hours and 6 hours or more. All respondents (N=273) answered this question.

On average, the majority of respondents chose the option 2 hours or less (39.2%), followed by 2-4 hours (38.1%), 5-6 hours (13.9%), and more than 6 hours (8.8%). See Figure 9.

More men (47.6%) than women (32.2%) chose the answer 2 hours or less as well as the answer 2-4 hours (43.5% of men and 33.6% of women). Conversely, more women chose the answer 5-6 hours (20.1%) in comparison with men (6.5%) as well as the answer more than 6 hours (14.1% of women and 2.4% of men). See Figure 10.

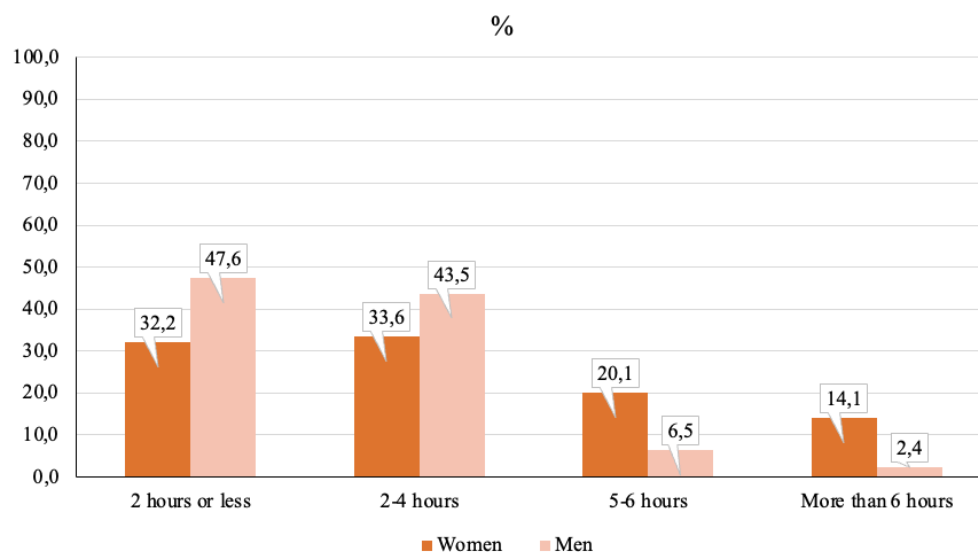
Childless individuals predominantly chose 2 hours or less (64.7%), followed by 2-4 hours (30.3%), 5-6 hours (3.4%), and more than 6 hours (1.7%). In contrast, parents most often selected 2-4 hours (44.2%), followed by 5-6 hours (22.1%), 2 hours or less (19.5%), and more than 6 hours (14.3%). See Figure 11.

Figure 9: Hours spend per day on personal/family responsibilities during COVID-19 - all respondents.



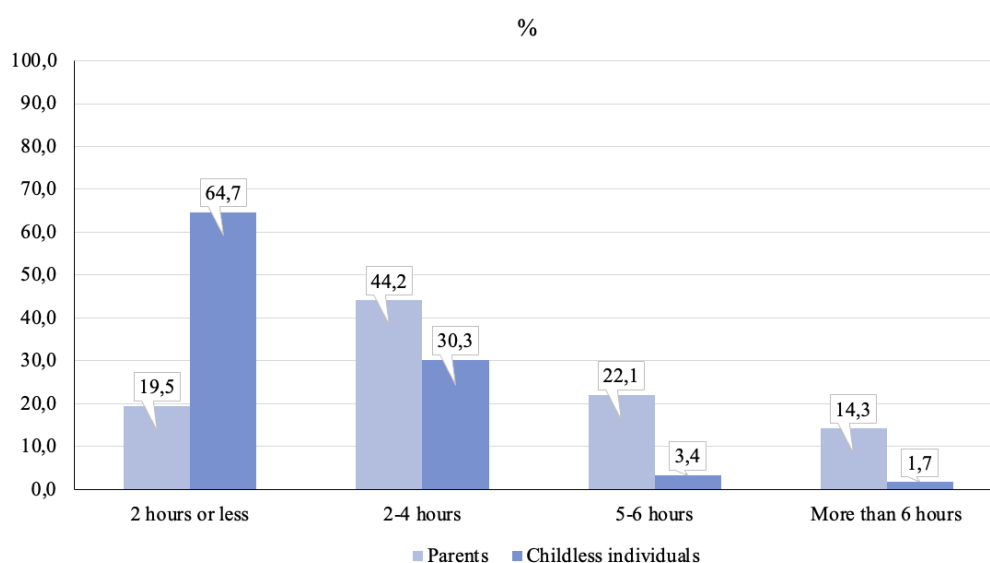
Source: own work.

Figure 10: Hours spend per day on personal/family responsibilities during COVID-19 – gender breakdown.



Source: own work.

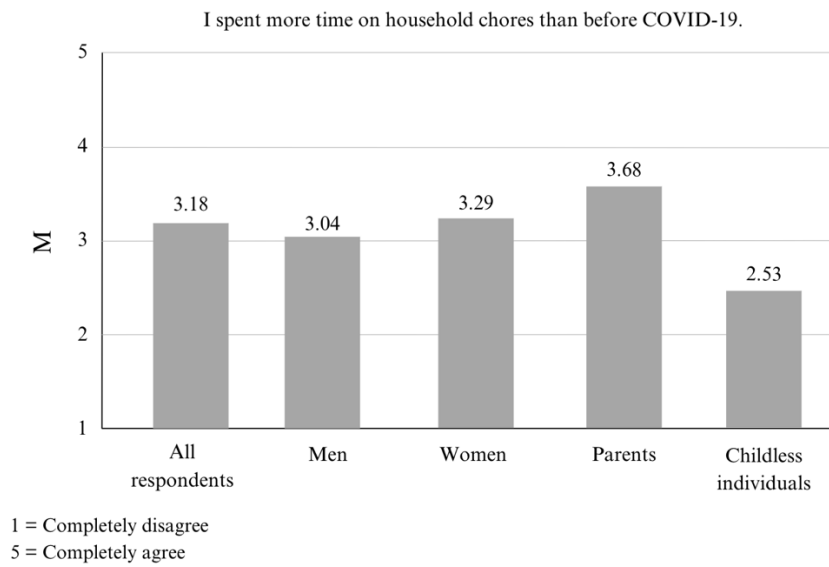
Figure 11: Hours spend per day on personal/family responsibilities during COVID-19 - parenthood profile breakdown.



Source: own work.

Respondents were also asked if they felt they spent more time on personal or household obligations during the pandemic compared to before. The overall mean score for all respondents was 3.18. Among them, parents recorded a mean score of 3.68, higher than the 2.53 mean score of childless individuals. Additionally, men had a mean score of 3.04, while women scored 3.29. See Figure 12.

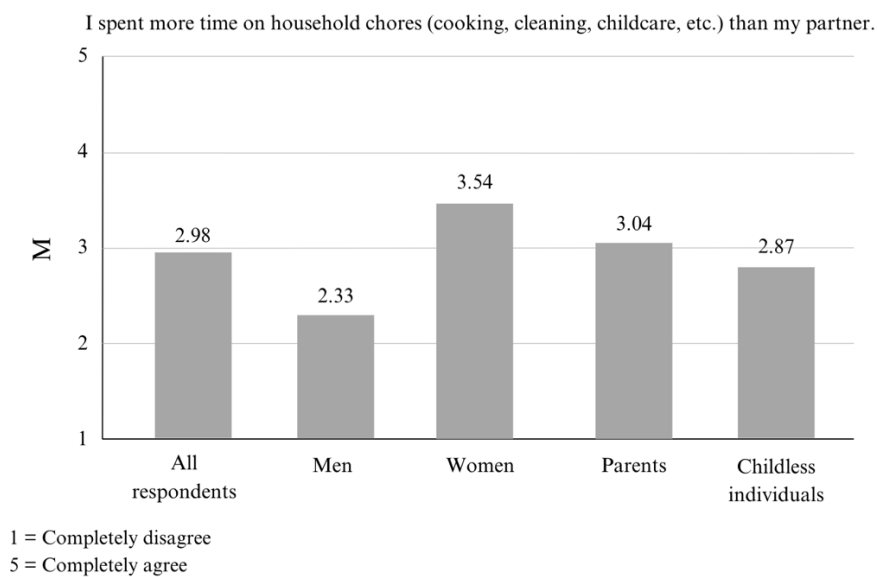
Figure 12: Time spent on household chores: before compared to during COVID-19.



Source: own work.

Another statement assessed perceptions of the division of unpaid labor in the private sphere, specifically whether respondents felt they spent more time on personal/family obligations than their partners. The mean score for all respondents was 2.98. Women (3.54) scored much higher than men (2.33), but the mean score of parents (3.04) was only slightly higher than those of childless individuals (2.87). See Figure 13.

Figure 13: Time spent on chores in comparison with one's partner during COVID-19.



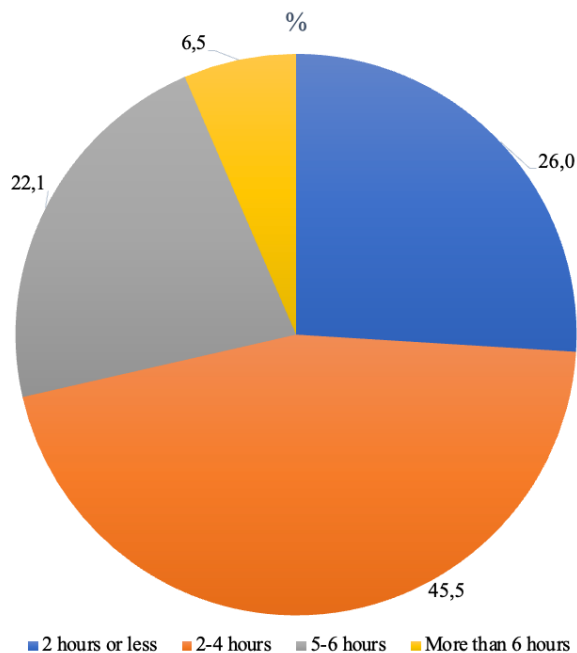
Source: own work.

5.2.5 Childcare

Respondents, who stated they were parents of at least one child under the age of 18 were asked how many hours per day did they spend on average directly on childcare obligations like playing, feeding, helping with school obligations etc. Possible answers were 2 hours or less, 2-4 hours, 5- hours and 6 hours or more. 154 respondents answered this question.

On average, the majority of respondents chose 2-4 hours (45.5%), followed by 2 hours or less (26%), 5-6 hours (22.1%), and more than 6 hours (6.5%). See Figure 14.

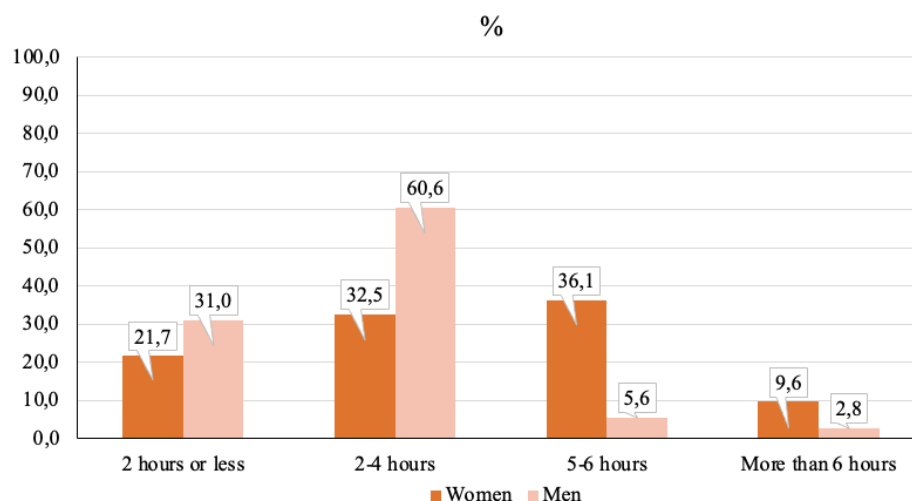
Figure 14: Hours spend per day on average directly taking care of children (all respondents).



Source: own work.

More men (31%) than women (21.7%) chose the option 2 hours or less and the option 2-4 hours (60.6% of men and 32% of women). Conversely, more women (36.1%) than men (5.6%) stated that they spent 5-6 hours per day on average taking care of children. More women than men also chose the option more than 6 hours (9.6% of women and 2.8% of men). See Figure 15.

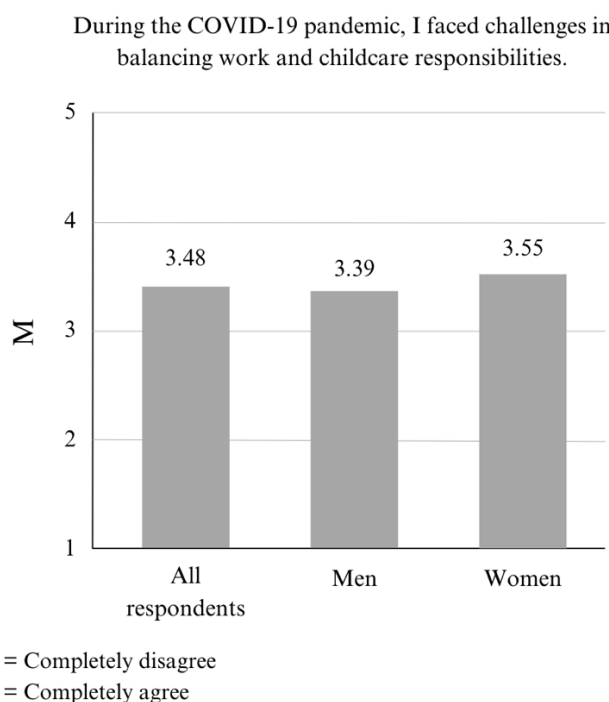
Figure 15: Hours spend per day on average directly taking care of children – gender breakdown.



Source: own work.

154 respondents, who were parents were also asked to express their (dis)agreement with the following statement: »During the COVID-19 pandemic, I faced challenges in balancing work and childcare responsibilities«. The mean score for all respondents was 3.48. Women (M=3.55) scored slightly higher than men (M=3.39). See Figure 16.

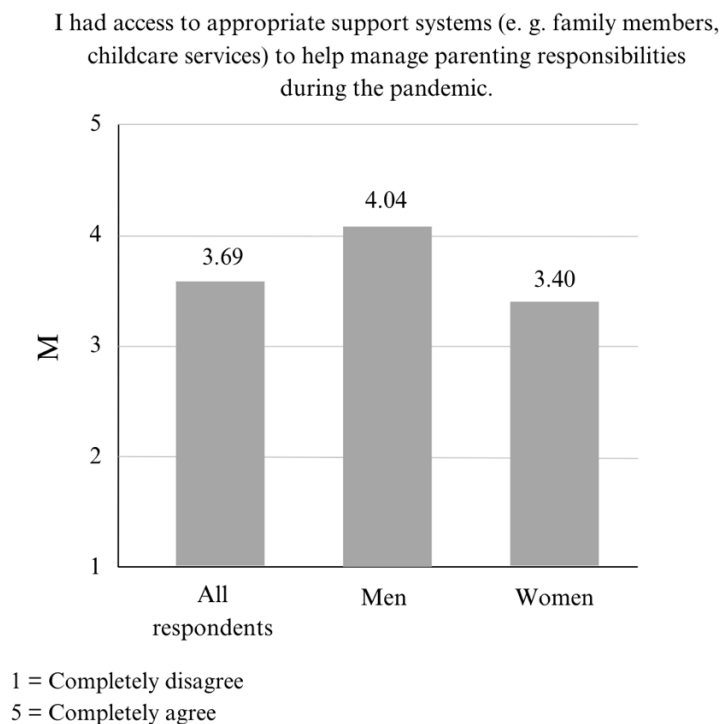
Figure 16: Perceptions of challenges in balancing work and childcare responsibilities.



Source: own work.

Parents were also asked if they had access to appropriate support mechanisms to help manage parenting responsibilities during the pandemic. The mean score of respondents was 3.69. Men (M=4.04) scored higher than women (M=3.40). See Figure 17.

Figure 17: Availability of support mechanisms to help manage parenting responsibilities.



Source: own work.

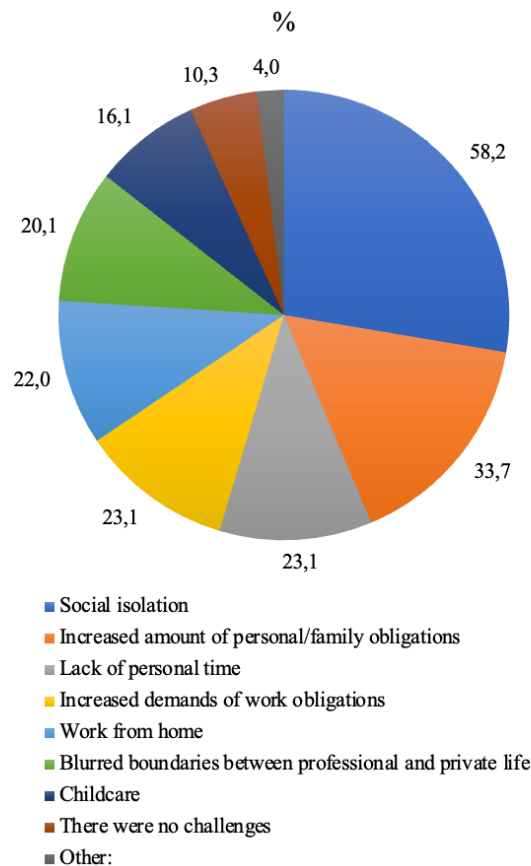
5.2.6 Biggest challenges in the field of work-life balance

Respondents were asked to identify what they perceived as the biggest challenge in achieving work-life balance during the pandemic through a multiple-choice question, with options to select from listed answers or add their own. All 273 respondents answered this question, providing a total of 575 answers, indicating that many chose multiple options.

The most common answer was social isolation, chosen by 58.2% of respondents, followed by an increased amount of personal/family obligations (33.7%), lack of personal time (23.1%), increased demands of work obligations (23.1%), working from home (22%), blurred boundaries between professional and private life (20.1%), and childcare (16.1%).

Additionally, 10.3% of respondents reported no challenges, and 4% chose the 'other' option, which was selected 11 times. These respondents highlighted challenges such as providing care to an elderly family member, lower earnings due to lack of work, and new forms of work organization. See Figure 18.

Figure 18: Biggest challenges in the field of work-life balance during COVID-19.



Source: own work.

Parents were additionally given an optional open-ended question asking them to identify the biggest childcare challenge they faced during the pandemic. A total of 112 respondents who were parents responded, with answers varying in length. The most commonly mentioned challenges included long-distance schooling (helping children with learning and motivating them to do schoolwork), continuous attention to children (leading to a lack of personal time and simultaneous performance of childcare and work tasks), coordinating childcare responsibilities with other family members, and social distancing due to fear of the virus. Less common responses included feeling unsupported by their partner, issues with household communication, and struggles with limiting their children's screen time. Some respondents mentioned that they did not face any challenges.

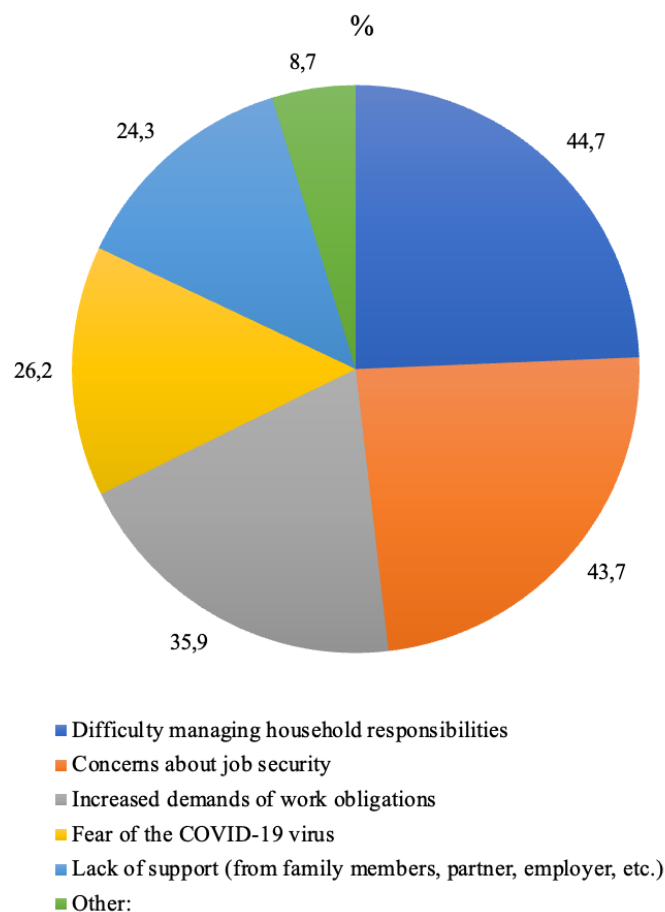
5.2.7 Mental health concerns

Respondents were asked about their experiences of increased stress and/or mental health concerns during the COVID-19 pandemic. Out of a total of 273 respondents, 37.7% reported that they did experience such issues, while 62.3% indicated that they did not. When examining the data by gender, a higher proportion of women reported increased stress and/or

mental health concerns, with 41.6% of women affected compared to 33.1% of men. Additionally, the parenting profile revealed that parents experienced these concerns more frequently than their childless counterparts; specifically, 46.8% of parents reported increased stress and/or mental health issues, whereas only 26.1% of childless individuals did.

Respondents who reported experiencing increased stress and/or mental health concerns were prompted to provide further details about the main sources of their concerns through a multiple-choice question. This question allowed respondents to select from a list of options or add their own responses. A total of 103 respondents answered this question, providing a combined total of 189 responses. The most frequently cited source of stress/mental health concerns was difficulty managing household responsibilities, identified by 44.7% of respondents. This was closely followed by concerns about job security, which was reported by 43.7% of respondents. Increased demands of work obligations were noted by 35.9% of respondents, while 26.2% expressed fear of the COVID-19 virus. Lack of support was a concern for 24.3% of respondents, and 8.7% selected the 'other' category. Among those who selected 'other,' respondents highlighted additional challenges contributing to their stress and mental health concerns. These included the long-distance schooling of children, the responsibility of taking care of a partner's parents, new and unfamiliar work organization methods, and issues within intimate relationships, such as frequent conflicts. See Figure 19.

Figure 19: Factors influencing mental health challenges during COVID-19.



Source: own work.

5.2.8 Additional considerations

The final optional section of the questionnaire invited respondents to share additional considerations related to the topic of work-life balance during the pandemic. Although this section was not widely utilized, with only 8 respondents providing feedback, their insights were nonetheless valuable and varied.

One respondent highlighted a positive aspect of the pandemic; the increase in remote work allowed for the elimination of daily commutes and provided more time to spend with children. However, they also mentioned that this shift introduced a fear of the unknown, which added an extra layer of stress. Another respondent noted that the increased work demands experienced during the pandemic have become a new norm in everyday life. Someone else emphasized that managing professional and personal responsibilities is inherently difficult for parents, regardless of external circumstances such as the pandemic.

The additional considerations also brought some criticism on the questionnaire. For instance, one respondent suggested that the age of the child is a crucial factor in understanding childcare challenges, indicating that different age groups may present unique difficulties. Another respondent stressed the importance of considering one's working conditions during such unprecedented times. Overall, these additional considerations offered different perspectives on the impact of the pandemic on work-life balance, highlighting both the positive and negative aspects of the experiences reported. They also introduced the possible foundation for further research on work-life balance during the pandemic by providing insight into areas the questionnaire did not fully investigate, such as the varying impacts of children's age, specific workspace challenges, and individual working conditions.

5.3 Hypotheses testing

The hypotheses were tested using Chi-Square and Mann-Whitney U tests.

The Chi-Square test is a statistical method used to study categorical data, that compares observed and expected results to determine if any difference between the actual and predicted data is due to chance or indicates a relationship between the variables. It helps to ascertain whether there is a significant connection between them. The Mann-Whitney U test, another statistical method, is used when the dependent variable is measured at the ordinal or continuous level, and the independent variable consists of two categorical, independent groups (e.g., gender, parenthood, employment status as independent variables). This test is useful when the data distribution is not normal. The Mann-Whitney U test assesses whether the distribution of values in one group is significantly higher or lower compared to the other group, making it a good statistical test for non-parametric data analysis.

H1: Working parents found it harder to disconnect from work outside of regular working hours during the pandemic than working individuals without children.

To accept or reject hypotheses 1, it was examined whether working parents and working individuals without children differed significantly in their evaluation of the statement: »During the COVID-19 pandemic, it was easy to 'disconnect' from work outside regular working hours (e.g., in the evening, on weekends).« This statement was measured on a 5-point scale of agreement (1=completely disagree; 5=completely agree). All participants (N = 273) were included in the analysis.

The distribution of responses to the statement deviated from normal, as firstly determined using the Kolmogorov–Smirnov test (K-S (273)=0.258; $p<0.001$). Therefore, the differences were further analyzed using the non-parametric alternative to the t-test, the Mann–Whitney U test.

According to the results in the table below, parents (M=2.73; SD=1.30) agreed on average less with the statement compared to participants without children (M=3.33; SD=1.32). This indicates that parents found it more difficult to disengage from work outside regular hours during the COVID-19 pandemic. The difference between the groups was statistically significant, as the p-value of the statistical test was less than 0.05 (U=6889.50; $p<0.001$). See Table 1.

Based on the analysis, hypothesis 1 can be accepted, which asserts that working parents found it more difficult to disconnect from work outside regular working hours compared to employees without children during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Table 1: Mann-Whitney U test results, hypotheses 1.

Statement	Group	N	M	SD	U	p
During the COVID-19 pandemic, it was easy to 'disconnect' from work outside regular working hours (e.g., in the evening, on weekends)	Parents	154	2.73	1.30	6889.50	< 0.001
	Individuals without children	119	3.33	1.32		

Source: own work.

H2: Working parents who worked from home during the COVID-19 pandemic felt more overwhelmed or stressed when trying to balance professional and personal/family responsibilities compared to employed individuals without children who also worked from home.

To test hypothesis 2, only individuals who reported working from home during the pandemic were included in the analysis (N = 145). This included the examination of whether parents and individuals without children who worked from home during the COVID-19 pandemic differed significantly in their evaluations of the statement: »During the COVID-19 pandemic, I felt overwhelmed and/or stressed when trying to balance work and personal/family responsibilities.« This was measured on a 5-point scale of agreement (1=completely disagree; 5=completely agree).

The distribution of responses to the statement deviated from normal, as determined using the Kolmogorov–Smirnov test (K-S (145)=0.25; $p<0.001$). Therefore, the non-parametric Mann–Whitney U test was used to further analyze the differences.

According to the results in the table below, it is obvious that parents who worked from home (M=3.57; SD=1.04) agreed more with the statement compared to participants without children who also worked from home (M=2.42; SD=1.24). This indicates that parents felt more overwhelmed and stressed when trying to balance work and personal/family responsibilities during the COVID-19 pandemic. The difference between the groups was statistically significant (U=1254.00; $p<0.001$). See Table 2.

Based on this analysis, hypothesis 2 can be accepted.

Table 2: Mann-Whitney U test results, hypotheses 2.

Statement	Group	N	M	SD	U	p
During the COVID-19 pandemic, I felt overwhelmed and/or stressed when trying to balance professional and personal/family responsibilities.	Parents	88	3.57	1.04	1254.00	< 0.001
	Individuals without children	57	2.42	1.24		

Source: own work.

H3: Working women allocated more time to personal/family responsibilities compared to working men during the pandemic.

Hypothesis 3 was tested using a Chi-Square test to examine the relationship between gender (women and men) and the estimated number of hours per day spent on personal/family responsibilities during the COVID-19 pandemic (e.g., cleaning, shopping, cooking, childcare). All participants (N=273) were included in this analysis.

According to the results in the contingency table below, most men spent 2 hours or less on personal/family obligations (47.6%), followed by those who spent between 2 and 4 hours (43.5%). Fewer men spent 5-6 hours (6.5%) or more than 6 hours (2.4%). In contrast, women showed a higher proportion of those individuals who spent between 5 and 6 hours (20.1%) and more than 6 hours (14.1%) on personal/family obligations. See Table 3.

Table 3: Contingency table for hypothesis 3.

			On average, how many hours per day did you spend on personal/family responsibilities during the COVID-19 pandemic (e.g., cleaning, shopping, cooking, childcare)?				
			2 hours or less	2-4 hours	5-6 hours	More than 6 hours	Together
Gender	Female	f	48	50	30	21	149
		%	32.2	33.6	20.1	14.1	100.0
	Male	f	59	54	8	3	124
		%	47.6	43.5	6.5	2.4	100.0
	Both	f	107	104	38	24	273
		%	39.2	38.1	13.9	8.8	100.0

Source: own work.

The significance, presented in Table 4, which is less than 0.05 ($p < 0.001$), indicates statistically significant differences between women and men in the time devoted to personal/family obligations during the pandemic. Specifically, women were more likely to spend more hours on these responsibilities.

Based on the analysis, hypothesis 3, which states that women spent more time on average than men on personal/family obligations during the COVID-19 pandemic, is accepted.

Table 4: Chi-Square test results, hypothesis 3.

	Value	df	p
Pearson Chi-Square	25.446a	3	< 0.001
Likelihood Ratio	27.746	3	< 0.001
Linear-By-Linear Association	21.113	1	< 0.001
N	273		

a. 0 cells (0.0%) have an expected count less than 5. The minimum expected count is 10.90.

Source: own work.

H4: Working mothers devoted more time to caregiving responsibilities during pandemic the compared to working fathers.

Hypothesis 4 was tested using the Chi-Square test to examine the relationship between gender (women and men) and the number of hours per day spent directly caring for children during the COVID-19 pandemic (e.g., playing, homeschooling, feeding). Only those, who reported to be parents of minors between 2020 and 2022 (154) were included in the analysis.

According to the results in the contingency table below, the majority of men spent 2-4 hours on childcare (60.6%), followed by those who spent 2 hours or less (31.0%). Fewer men devoted 5-6 hours (5.6%) or more than 6 hours (2.8%) to childcare. For women, the shares were more evenly distributed, with a larger proportion spending 5-6 hours on childcare (36.1%) compared to men. See Table 5.

Table 5: Contingency table for hypotheses 4.

		On average, how many hours per day did you spend directly caring for your children during the COVID-19 pandemic (e.g., playing, homeschooling, feeding)?					
			2 hours or less	2-4 hours	5-6 hours	More than 6 hours	Together
Gender	Female	f	18	27	30	8	83
		%	21.7	32,5	36,1	9.6	100.0
	Male	f	22	43	4	2	71
		%	31.0	60,6	5.6	2.8	100.0
	Both	f	40	70	34	10	154
		%	26.0	45,5	22.1	6.5	100.0

Source: own work.

The value of the statistical characteristic shown in Table 6, which is less than 0.05 ($p < 0.001$), indicates statistically significant differences between women and men in the time spent caring for their children during the COVID-19 pandemic. See Table 6.

Hypothesis 4, which posits that working mothers devoted more time to caregiving responsibilities during the pandemic compared to working fathers, is accepted.

Table 6: Chi-Square test results, hypothesis 3.

	Value	df	p
Pearson Chi-Square	26.767a	3	< 0.001
Likelihood Ratio	29.513	3	< 0.001
Linear-By-Linear Association	14.840	1	< 0.001
N	154		

a. 0 cells (12.5%) have an expected count less than 5. The minimum expected count is 4.61.

Source: own work.

5.3.1 Summary of hypotheses testing

Table 7 provides an overview of hypotheses testing results.

Table 7: Overview of hypotheses testing.

No.	Hypotheses	Statistical test	Result
1	Working parents found it harder to disconnect from work outside of regular working hours during the pandemic than working individuals without children.	Mann–Whitney U	Accepted
2	Working parents who worked from home during the COVID-19 pandemic felt more overwhelmed or stressed when trying to balance professional and personal/family responsibilities compared to employed individuals without children who also worked from home.	Mann–Whitney U	Accepted
3	Working women allocated more time to personal/family responsibilities compared to working men during the pandemic.	Chi-Square	Accepted
4	Working mothers devoted more time to caregiving responsibilities during pandemic the compared to working fathers.	Chi-Square	Accepted

Source: own work.

6 DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS

This chapter elaborates on the main findings, and therefore provides answers to the posed research questions (with the help of findings of empirical research), offers practical implications, and identifies limitations that identify potential for further research.

6.1 Summary of main findings

RQ 1: Was there a negative correlation between parenthood and the ability of private sector employees to achieve work-life balance during the COVID-19 pandemic?

The research highlights a notable disparity between parents and non-parents in terms of their success in balancing professional and personal obligations during the pandemic. Specifically, less parents ($M=3.01$) than non-parents ($M=3.87$) agreed they were successful in managing their work-life balance during the pandemic. Additionally, the research shows that parents were less likely than non-parents to agree that their work-life balance remained unaffected by the pandemic. Parents also agreed in a lower extent ($M=2.86$) that their work-life balance did not suffer because of the pandemic, compared to those without children ($M=3.77$). This discrepancy aligns with previous studies indicating that parents face greater difficulties in maintaining work-life balance, primarily due to the added responsibilities and pressures of parenting.

Higher demands related to personal/family obligations are well-documented in previous research as key parenthood-related factors influencing work-life balance, often leading to instances of both time-based and strain-based conflict. This research aligns with these previous findings, revealing that during the pandemic, parents frequently cited increased personal/family responsibilities as a major challenge in managing their work-life balance. Specifically, 55.8% of parents identified the heightened volume of personal/family obligations as their main difficulty, making it the most commonly reported issue among this group. In stark contrast, only 5% of individuals without children selected this as a major challenge. Moreover, parents spent significantly more time each day on personal/family responsibilities compared to their childless counterparts. 80.5% of parents reported dedicating over 2 hours per day to these obligations during the pandemic, whereas only 35.5% of non-parents reported same time commitment.

Psychological well-being are critical individual factors influencing one's ability to achieve work-life balance. The study revealed that 46.8% of parents experienced increased stress and/or mental health concerns compared to 26.1% of non-parents. The most frequently identified factors contributing to these challenges were difficulty managing household responsibilities (58.3%), concerns about job security (38.9%), and lack of support from family members, partners, and/or employers (30.6%). Moreover, 54% of parents disagreed

with the statement that it was easy for them to disconnect from work outside of regular working hours, compared to 31% of non-parents.

Organizational support also plays a crucial role in managing work-life balance. The research showed that parents ($M=3.18$) felt less supported when communicating their work-life balance concerns to their employers, compared to non-parents ($M=3.52$). The variability in support is influenced by organizational policies and individual needs, which differ significantly between parents and non-parents, as well as among parents themselves. However, the fact that a substantial number of parents also reported no additional resources were provided indicates a gap in support that needs to be addressed.

In conclusion, the research confirms a negative correlation between parenthood and the ability of private sector employees to achieve work-life balance during the pandemic. The analysis also revealed statistically significant differences between parents and non-parents in their experiences and challenges related to work-life balance.

RQ 2: What role did gender play in achieving work-life balance during the COVID-19 pandemic for private sector employees?

Unequal division of labor, often influenced by persistent gender stereotypes and traditional gender roles, serves as a significant barrier to achieving work-life balance, particularly for women. The empirical research underscores this issue by revealing that during the pandemic, 67.8% of women spent more than 2 hours per day on personal/family responsibilities, compared to 52.4% of men among Slovenia's private sector employees. Furthermore, a higher number of women (34.2%) reported spending over 6 hours daily on these tasks, in contrast to men (8.9%). However, the majority women (63%) agreed that they spent more time on household chores compared to their partner, reflecting a high degree of self-awareness regarding such imbalance.

The division of childcare responsibilities further illustrates the gender disparity. Mothers reported spending more time on childcare tasks compared to fathers. Specifically, 78% of women spent more than 2 hours per day on childcare, whereas 69% of men reported similar commitments. Furthermore, 45.7% of women spent over 5 hours on childcare daily, compared to just 8.4% of men. This data indicates significant gender disparities in unpaid care labour, with mothers bearing a heavier load.

When it comes to balancing professional and personal/family obligations, both men ($M=3.37$) and women ($M=3.39$) reported similar levels of success. There were also only minor differences between men ($M=2.98$) and women (2.96) in (dis)agreeing that they had difficulties maintaining clear boundaries between work and personal/family life during the pandemic. Additionally, both men ($M=3.38$) and women ($M=3.28$) agreed in a similar extent that they felt supported by their employers in addressing work-life balance concerns. Men ($M=2.85$)

also agreed in a slightly greater extent than women ($M=2.81$) that their employer provided additional resources to support work-life balance.

During the pandemic, women identified social isolation (62.4%), increased personal/family obligations (31.5%), blurred boundaries between work and personal life (24.2%), and lack of personal time (23.5%) as their primary challenges in achieving work-life balance. Men also cited social isolation as a significant issue (53.2%), followed by increased personal/family obligations (36.3%) and increased work demands (31.5%) as major challenges. Interestingly, a higher percentage of men (36.3%) than women (31.5%) identified increased personal/family obligations as a key challenge, suggesting that these issues affected men more than previously acknowledged. Women reported higher levels of stress and/or mental health concerns compared to men, with 41.6% of women experiencing such issues versus 33.1% of men.

The hypotheses in this research focused on the unequal division of unpaid labor, revealing that women carried a disproportionate burden of such responsibilities during the pandemic. However, perceptions of respondents of work-life balance did not show significant differences between genders, indicating that deep-seated gender stereotypes continue to shape how individuals view their responsibilities. Based on this research, we can conclude that gender played a somewhat role in shaping the experiences of work-life balance during the pandemic. Women faced a disproportionate burden of unpaid labor, yet this disparity did not translate into noticeably different perceptions of work-life balance compared to men. This underscores the need for further research into how awareness of gender stereotypes influences perceptions of responsibilities and work-life balance.

RQ 3: What were the main challenges in the field of work-life balance for private sector employees in Slovenia during the COVID-19 pandemic?

The research identified social isolation as the predominant challenge in balancing work and private life during the COVID-19 pandemic, with 58.2% of respondents highlighting it as a significant issue. Social isolation can be defined as a work-life balance challenge because it not only affects mental health and well-being but also exacerbates the difficulty of managing professional and personal responsibilities in a confined environment, making it harder to separate work from personal life and maintain a support network.

Increased personal/family obligations were also reported as a significant challenge by 33.7% of respondents. The surge in domestic duties strained individuals' ability to balance work and personal life effectively. At the same time, increased work demands were reported by 23.1% of respondents as a challenge in achieving work-life balance. The pandemic brought about heightened job expectations and pressures, such as adapting to new work environments, technologies, and the need for constant availability. Working from home was cited by 22% of respondents as a significant challenge. Building on this, 44% of respondents

disagreed that it was easy to disconnect from work outside of regular working hours (e.g. in the evenings, on weekends). Blurred boundaries between professional and private life were specifically noted by 20.1% respondents as one of the issues in achieving work-life balance.

16.1% of respondents identified childcare responsibilities as a challenge during the pandemic. The closure of schools forced parents to balance their work duties with the demands of caring for and educating their children at home, complicating the management of work-life balance. Key challenges associated with childcare that parents reported included: i) assisting their children with online schooling, ensuring they understood lessons, and staying motivated to complete their schoolwork, which added an educational dimension to parental responsibilities and required significant time and effort; ii) the need for constant supervision of children during work hours, leading to a lack of personal time, as parents often had to multitask, simultaneously handling childcare and work-related tasks; iii) coordinating childcare responsibilities with other family members, which added logistical challenges to their daily routines and required detailed planning and cooperation to ensure that children's needs were met without compromising work commitments; iv) the necessity of social distancing due to fear of the virus, which further complicated childcare as parents had to limit their children's interactions with others.

10.3% of respondents reported no significant challenges, suggesting that some individuals were able to adapt better to the changes brought by the pandemic or that their conditions for achieving work-life balance did not significantly change in that period. However, 37.7% of respondents reported heightened stress and mental health concerns during the pandemic. The primary reasons cited for these issues were varied: 44.7% pointed to difficulties in managing household responsibilities, while 43.7% were worried about job security. Increased work demands were identified by 35.9% of respondents as a significant stressor, and 26.2% were anxious about the virus itself. Lack of support from family members, partners, or employers was another contributing factor, noted by 24.3% of respondents.

To conclude, individuals employed in the private sector faced a variety of challenges during the pandemic. The interplay between increased household responsibilities, job insecurity, heightened work demands, and anxiety about the virus created a complex web of stressors. These challenges were further compounded by difficulties in managing remote schooling for children, caring for elderly family members, and adapting to new work structures.

6.2 Discussion and practical implications

Work-life balance is recognized as a subjective phenomenon that varies in regard to different outcomes of the interplay between individual, organizational, and societal factors. The implications below aim to encourage companies, policymakers, and other relevant actors to promote gender equality and family-friendly practices in the workplace and beyond,

ensuring a comprehensive approach to work-life balance, regardless of personal circumstances.

According to the answers of the questionnaire, a major gender gap in the division of unpaid labour persisted in Slovenia's private sector during the pandemic, both in terms of household and care labour. Most recent data from EIGE confirms this observation also for the time after the pandemic (EIGE, n.d.f). At the same time, research indicates no real differences in perceptions of men and women regarding their work-life balance during the pandemic. This reveals that gender stereotypes that dictate expected behaviors in one's roles in the private sphere heavily persist and influence one's perceptions of work-life balance. This calls for a comprehensive approach to dismantling gender stereotypes. Such an approach can only be successful with the support of all key stakeholders, including companies. Companies should take more proactive measures to support gender equality in the workplace and beyond by ensuring unbiased recruitment, promotion, and reward systems. Additionally, by promoting active fatherhood, i. e., encouraging working fathers to utilize their parental benefits to the same extent as their female counterparts, companies can help reshape perceptions of responsibilities in the private sphere, thereby increasing fathers' involvement in unpaid labor and relieving the pressure on women. This can be achieved through training on gender stereotypes, implementing supportive measures (re-integration programmes after parental leave), and fostering an inclusive workplace culture. Additionally, management must set an example, ensuring a top-down approach.

The questionnaire reveals that a high proportion of respondents reported difficulties disconnecting from work outside regular working hours, struggling to maintain clear boundaries between their professional and private lives. This challenge was exacerbated by increased work and childcare demands and new ways of work organization, such as remote work. Research shows that the private and professional spheres have increasingly interacted over the past few years, even outside crisis periods like the pandemic, due to the increased use of technology that calls for constant availability and connectivity. The right to disconnect, therefore, emerges as a crucial component, allowing for a more distinct separation of work and personal demands. While this right is now an inherent part of Slovenian legislation, it is up to individual companies to actively practice it. Companies must take the necessary measures, tailored to their specific contexts, to ensure that employees can truly disconnect from work outside of regular working hours.

Quite a few respondents also experienced increased stress and mental health concerns during the pandemic. The existence of such issues remains high even after the pandemic, highlighting the need for ongoing mental health support and interventions. This calls for policymakers to continuously address mental health by implementing comprehensive and inclusive support systems. By doing this, individuals can receive help when needed and manage their mental health more effectively. While it is good if companies take the extra step to provide resources on how to effectively manage mental health, they should at least

foster a supportive work environment that enables employees to have higher chances of attaining good mental health. This includes providing clear guidelines on work organization, encouraging open communication, allowing flexible working arrangements that are especially crucial for those with caregiving obligations, setting realistic workload expectations, and recognizing and addressing employee burnout.

6.3 Limitations and further research

The conducted research had certain limitations that should be considered when providing conclusions. These limitations can also act as a stepping stone for future research on work-life balance in Slovenia, both in the private and public sectors.

The broadness of the research subject should be perceived as a limitation. While the research focused more specifically on employees in the private sector and aimed to investigate experiences related to factors such as gender and parenthood, the analysis could be further improved by focusing on a more narrow group of people. This could be achieved by investigating the experiences of individuals with smaller children, such as those with preschool-aged children, single parents, or parents of children with special needs. More focused research could yield more specific and actionable results. However, it would be much more difficult to reach representatives of these selected target groups, which would possibly result in a smaller sample of respondents.

Another limitation is the gender distribution of the sample, as well as the distribution of parents and non-parents. While these distributions are fairly balanced, it would be beneficial to ensure an even more precise representation of these groups to enhance the validity of the findings. Achieving a more accurate balance could provide deeper insights into the specific challenges and needs of each demographic.

The research also lacked context in some cases. When investigating the role of gender in achieving work-life balance during the pandemic, it would be necessary to check for biased perceptions of individuals regarding their responsibilities, i.e., for the presence of gender stereotypes about their roles. Understanding these biases could provide a more comprehensive view of how gender dynamics influence work-life balance and identify underlying factors that may contribute to disparities. Here, special emphasis could further be provided to the perceptions of men regarding their (in)active participation in the private sphere. This focus could reveal important insights into how men's involvement, or lack thereof, affects overall work-life balance dynamics for both men and women. It can be said that the research also lacked context when investigating long-distance schooling and work from home, as no direct questions about these matters were asked of the participants. Including such questions would provide a more comprehensive understanding of how these factors impacted work-life balance. However, this would require a much more focused and longer questionnaire.

7 CONCLUSION

Work-life balance remains a widespread phenomenon, shaped by a complex interplay of factors that arise from various personal, organizational, and societal dimensions. The pandemic has brought this issue to the forefront, highlighting the challenges and complexities involved in managing professional and personal responsibilities simultaneously. This thesis aimed to investigate the impact of the pandemic on work-life balance, with a particular focus on the personal circumstances of parenthood and gender among private sector employees in Slovenia.

The research revealed a notable disparity between parents and non-parents in terms of their ability to achieve work-life balance during the pandemic. Parents, burdened with increased childcare and household responsibilities due to school closures struggled significantly more than their childless counterparts. The majority of parents identified the heightened volume of personal and family obligations as their main challenge, highlighting the strain of balancing multiple roles. Increased work demands, lack of personal time, and blurred boundaries between professional and private life further intensified the struggle for work-life balance for parents.

Gender also played an important role in shaping work-life balance during the pandemic. Women, particularly mothers, bore a disproportionate share of unpaid labor, including household chores and childcare. This unequal division of labor, fueled by gender stereotypes, exacerbated the difficulties women faced in maintaining work-life balance. Although both men and women reported similar levels of overall work-life balance, women experienced greater challenges related to domestic responsibilities and childcare. This disparity underscores the persistent impact of traditional gender roles on work-life balance, necessitating further research and especially targeted interventions that aim to support the dismantling of persistent gender stereotypes.

The research also highlighted the spread of mental health challenges among private sector employees during the pandemic. Many employees reported increased stress and mental health concerns, often citing the difficulty of managing household responsibilities, job security anxieties, and the need for constant availability due to blurred boundaries between work and personal life. These stressors compounded the existing pressures of balancing professional duties with personal responsibilities, leading to a significant impact on overall well-being. While the pandemic highlighted these issues, it does not mean that they do not exist outside such crisis times. Continuous support for mental health is therefore crucial, both from policymakers and employers, to help break the bias surrounding mental health challenges.

In conclusion, the pandemic has underscored the importance of work-life balance and highlighted the unique challenges faced by parents and women. The findings of this thesis suggest that achieving work-life balance during unprecedented times requires a multifaceted approach that considers the interconnected nature of professional and personal responsibilities. Employers and policymakers must develop and implement strategies that support employees comprehensively, providing the necessary resources and assistance to navigate the overlapping demands of work and life. Future research should continue to explore the impact of gender stereotypes and parenthood on work-life balance, both amidst and outside crisis times like the pandemic, aiming to develop targeted interventions that promote equality and well-being in the workplace and beyond.

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APPENDICES

Appendix 1: Summary in Slovene

Usklajevanje poklicnega in zasebnega življenja se nanaša na sposobnost posameznikov/c, da se odzivajo na zadolžitve, povezane z delom in zasebnim življenjem na način, ki omogoča zadovoljstvo in učinkovitost na obeh področjih. Ta sposobnost je v veliki meri odvisna od prepleta dejavnikov na treh ravneh, in sicer na osebni, organizacijski in družbeni ravni. Ti dejavniki skupaj tvorijo resničnost posameznikov/c ter s tem njihove percepcije o zadolžitvah, ki jih imajo v poklicnem in zasebnem življenju ter o lastnih sposobnostih za njihovo uresničevanje. Čeprav je za vsakršno izkušnjo usklajevanja poklicnega in zasebnega življenja nujen preplet vseh omenjenih ravni, dejavniki na ravni posameznika še vedno ključno določajo sposobnost posameznikov/c, da dosežejo željeno mero vključenosti v zasebno in poklicno življenje. Med tovrstne dejavnike se umeščata tudi osebni okoliščini spola in starševstva, ki sta skozi zgodovino pomembno vplivali na percepcije o odgovornostih, ki jih posamezniki/ce prevzemajo v obeh sferah svojega delovanja.

Čeprav je koncept usklajevanja poklicnega in zasebnega življenja v današnji literaturi spolno nevtralen, je bilo njegovo oblikovanje v drugi polovici 20. stoletja pogojeno z obstojem spolnih vlog, ki so določale neenakomerno porazdelitev obveznosti v zasebnem življenju. Raziskave kažejo, da ženske še danes, kljub visoki ravni zaposlenosti, še vedno v večini opravljajo zadolžitve, povezane z neplačanim delom, vključujoč skrb za dom in družino. To vpliva na njihovo participacijo na trgu dela, psihično in duševno zdravje ter na ohranjanje škodljivih spolnih stereotipov, ki med drugim oblikujejo tudi politike na ravni države in podjetij. Najbolj ogrožene za učinkovito usklajevanje zasebnega in poklicnega življenja so prav zaposlene matere, ki so še vedno dojemane kot primarne skrbnice otrok, tako na družbeni, organizacijski kot osebni ravni. Kakorkoli, pa je starševstvo nasploh povezano s težavami pri usklajevanju poklicnega in zasebnega življenja, saj morajo ti/e posamezniki/ce veliko več časa nameniti družinskim obveznostim v primerjavi s tistimi, ki otrok nimajo.

Usklajevanje poklicnega in zasebnega življenja je v 21. stoletju postalo odraz odnosa družbe do izzivov kot so enakost spolov, dobro počutje in organizacija dela. Vedno večja odgovornost za uspešno usklajevanje obveznosti zaposlenih se pripisuje organizacijskim dejavnikom, torej tistim, ki obstajajo na ravni podjetij. Sem se umeščajo organizacija delovnega procesa, podpora vodstva in politike organizacije, ki so lahko spolno nevtralne in družini prijazne ali pa tudi ne. Čeprav nekatera podjetja prepoznavajo prednosti, ki jih prinaša zadovoljstvo v osebni ter poklicni življenju na produktivnost na delovnem mestu, so ta v večini še vedno individualni akterji, ki posedujejo omejene vire, interes in razumevanje. Zato je med drugim ključna tudi vloga družbene ravni, ki zajema zakonodajne smernice vsake države, ki urejajo ključna podporna področja za zaposlene za lažje usklajevanje njihovih obveznosti, vključujoč starševske dopuste in druge podobne ugodnosti, fleksibilne oblike dela ter delovne pogoje, tj. npr organizacija ur in lokacije dela.

Pandemija COVID-19 je močno vplivala na usklajevanje poklicnega in zasebnega življenja, saj je spremenila način dela in vsakdanje življenje ljudi po vsem svetu. Med pandemijo je veliko ljudi začelo delati od doma, kar je med drugim prispevalo k porastu dela izven delovnega časa. To je prispevalo k zabrisanju mej med poklicnim in zasebnim življenjem ter k negotovosti glede prioritizacije odgovornosti posameznikov/c v vsaki domeni. Hkrati se je z zaprtjem vrtcev in šol povečal pritisk na starše, še posebej na matere, da prevzamejo dodatne obveznosti doma. To je pripeljalo do povečanih občutkov stresa in preobremenjenosti ter okrnilo sposobnost posameznikov/c, da so se v njim zadovoljivi meri odzivale na zadolžitve. Pandemija je tako razkrila in poglobila obstoječe neenakosti ter izpostavila potrebo po boljših podpornih sistemih za usklajevanje poklicnega in zasebnega življenja.

To magistrsko delo se ukvarja z raziskovanjem izkušenj z usklajevanjem poklicnega in zasebnega življenja zaposlenih v zasebnem sektorju med pandemijo COVID-19 skozi prizmi spola in starševstva. Glavni namen raziskave, opravljene v sklopu magistrskega dela, je bil torej proučiti različne izkušnje z usklajevanjem poklicnega in zasebnega življenja različnih zaposlenih, predvsem glede na njihov spol in starševski profil. Poudarek na zasebnem sektorju izvira iz identificirane vrzeli na tem področju, saj je količina informacij na tem področju izredno omejena, še posebej za čas pandemije COVID-19.

Raziskava je potrdila, da sta osebni okoliščini spola in starševstva imeli vpliv na sposobnost posameznikov, da dosežejo ravnovesje med poklicnim in zasebnim življenjem tekom pandemije COVID-19. Ženske, tako matere kot tiste brez otrok, so opravljale večjo količino neplačanega dela, starši pa so izkušali povečan stres med sočasnim odzivanjem na poklicne in zasebne dolžnosti.

Namen raziskave je bil med drugim osvetliti obstoječe neenakosti in prispevati k bolj vključujočemu dialogu na področju usklajevanja poklicnega in zasebnega življenja v slovenskem zasebnem sektorju. Posledično lahko zaključki opravljene raziskave služijo kot smernice za sprejemanje ustreznih smernic in politik različnim deležnikom, tako na organizacijski kot zakonodajni ravni.

Appendix 2: Questionnaire in Slovene

Ta vprašalnik je pripravljen v okviru magistrske naloge z naslovom **Usklajevanje poklicnega in zasebnega življenja v slovenskem zasebnem sektorju skozi prizmi spola in starševstva: vpliv pandemije COVID-19**. Njegov namen je pridobiti poglobljen uvid v strukturo in pogostost izzivov na področju usklajevanja poklicnega in zasebnega življenja, s katerimi so bili zaposleni soočeni tekom pandemije. Vaše sodelovanje pri reševanju vprašalnika tako aktivno prispeva k boljšemu razumevanju vpliva pandemije na sposobnost vzdrževanja ravnotežja med poklicnim in zasebnim življenjem zaposlenih ter omogoča prepoznavo dodatnih področij, ki morda potrebujejo podporo ali prilagojene intervencije.

Ta vprašalnik ne beleži nobenih osebnih podatkov in vsi podani odgovori so uporabljeni izključno za raziskovalne namene. Prosim, da odgovarjate iskreno in premišljeno.

Z reševanjem vprašalnika pričnete s klikom na Naslednja stran. Sodelovanje je prostovoljno, reševanje lahko zaključite kadarkoli.

Iskrena hvala za vaš prispevek!

Zala Primorac

VPRAŠANJA

1: Spol:

- Ženski
- Moški
- Ne identificiram se znotraj binarnega spolnega sistema
- Ne želim odgovoriti

2: Starost:

3: Zakonski stan:

- Samski/a
- Poročen/a / partnerstvo v zunajzakonski skupnosti
- Ločen/a
- Vdovec/ka
- Ne želim odgovoriti

4: Ste imeli med pandemijo COVID-19 vsaj enega otroka, mlajšega od 18 let?

- Da
- Ne

5: Koliko otrok imate?

6: Kakšen je bil vaš primarni zaposlitveni status med leti 2020 in 2022?

- Zaposlen/a v zasebnem podjetju/organizaciji
- Zaposlen/a v javnem sektorju
- Samozaposlen/a
- Študentsko delo
- Brezposeln/a

7: Podajte svoje (ne)strinjanje z naslednjimi izjavami:

	Sploh se ne strinjam	Se ne strinjam	Niti se strinjam niti se ne strinjam	Strinjam se	Popolnoma se strinjam
Med pandemijo COVID-19 sem uspešno usklajeval/a poklicne in osebne/družinske obveznosti.					
Med pandemijo COVID-19 sem se počutil/a preobremenjenega/o in/ali pod stresom, ko sem poskušal/a uravnotežiti delo in osebne/družinske obveznosti.					
Med pandemijo COVID-19 se je bilo enostavno "odklopiti" z dela izven rednega delovnega časa (npr. zvečer, ob vikendih).					
Med pandemijo COVID-19 sem imel/a dovolj prožne ureditve dela (npr. delo na daljavo,					

prilagodljiv delovni čas), ki so mi omogočale, da sem se prilagodil/a osebnim/družinskim obveznostim.					
Moje ravnotežje med poklicnim in zasebnim življenjem ni trpelo zaradi pandemije COVID-19.					
Med pandemijo COVID-19 sem imel/a težave pri ohranjanju jasnih meja med delom in osebnim/družinskim življenjem.					

8: Ste med pandemijo COVID-19 delali od doma?

- Da
- Ne

9: Podajte svoje (ne)strinjanje z naslednjimi izjavami:

	Sploh se ne strinjam	Se ne strinjam	Niti se strinjam niti se ne strinjam	Strinjam se	Popolnoma se strinjam
Med pandemijo COVID-19 mi ni bilo neprijetno z delodajalcem/ko razpravljati o izzivih usklajevanja poklicnega in zasebnega življenja.					
Moj/a delodajalec/ka me je podpiral/a pri reševanju izzivov na področju usklajevanja poklicnega in zasebnega življenja med pandemijo COVID-19.					
S strani delodajalca/ke sem bil/a ustrezno					

obveščen/a o posodobitvah in spremembah politik ter ukrepov podjetja, povezanih s pandemijo COVID-19.					
Moj/a delodajalec/ka je zagotovil/a dodatno podporo ali vire za pomoč pri usklajevanju poklicnega in zasebnega življenja med pandemijo COVID-19 (npr. pomoč pri varstvu otrok, viri za zagotavljanje dobrega duševnega zdravja).					
Zadovoljen/na sem bil/a s stopnjo komunikacije in podpore mojih sodelavcev/članov ekipe pri opravljanju delovnih nalog med pandemijo COVID-19.					

10: Koliko ur na dan ste v povprečju porabili za osebne/družinske obveznosti med pandemijo COVID-19 (npr. čiščenje, nakupovanje, kuhanje, varstvo otrok)?

- 2 uri ali manj
- 2-4 ure
- 5-6 ur
- 6 ur ali več

11: Koliko ur na dan ste v povprečju neposredno posvetili skrbi za svoje otroke med pandemijo COVID-19 (npr. igranje, šolanje na domu, hranjenje)?

- 2 uri ali manj
- 2-4 ure
- 5-6 ur
- 6 ur ali več

12: Podajte svoje (ne)strinjanje z naslednjimi izjavami:

	Sploh se ne strinjam	Se ne strinjam	Niti se strinjam	Strinjam se	Popolnoma se strinjam
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			niti se ne strinjam		
Med pandemijo COVID-19 sem se srečal/a z izzivi pri usklajevanju službe in obveznosti glede skrbi za otroke.					
Imel/a sem dostop do ustreznih podpornih sistemov (npr. družinski člani, storitve varstva otrok) za pomoč pri upravljanju starševskih obveznosti med pandemijo.					

13: Kaj je bil največji izziv pri skrbi za otroke?

14: Podajte svoje (ne)strinjanje z naslednjimi izjavami:

	Sploh se ne strinjam	Se ne strinjam	Niti se strinjam niti se ne strinjam	Strinjam se	Popolnoma se strinjam
Med pandemijo COVID-19 sem težko našel/la čas za lastno sprostitev in odklop od obveznosti.					
Med pandemijo COVID-19 sem moral/a večkrat "žonglirati" z več odgovornostmi (delo, varstvo otrok, gospodinjstva opravila).					
Med pandemijo COVID-19 sem imel/a težave pri ohranjanju jasnih meja med delom in osebnim/družinskim življenjem.					

Med pandemijo COVID-19 sem moral/a svoj delovni urnik prilagoditi potrebam družinskih članov (partner/ka, otroci, starejši oskrbovani člani).					
Izkusil/a sem povečan stres in/ali skrbi za duševno zdravje, povezane z usklajevanjem službenih in osebnih/družinskih obveznosti med pandemijo COVID-19.					
Zaradi obveznosti oskrbe otrok med pandemijo COVID-19 sem moral/a sklepati kompromise pri poklicnem napredovanju ali poklicnem razvoju.					
Več časa sem porabil/a za gospodinjska opravila (kuhanje, pospravljanje, varstvo otrok itd.) kot moj partner/ka.					
Več časa sem porabil/a za gospodinjska opravila kot pred COVID-19.					

15: Kaj so bili za vas največji izzivi, povezani z usklajevanjem poklicnega in zasebnega življenja med pandemijo COVID-19? (možnih je več odgovorov)

- Delo od doma
- Povečan obseg zasebnih/družinskih obveznosti
- Manko časa zase
- Socialna izolacija
- Zamegljene meje med poklicnim in zasebnim življenjem
- Nenehna skrb za otroke
- Povečan obseg dela
- Izzivov ni bilo

- Drugo:

16: Ste med pandemijo COVID-19 doživeli povečan stres in/ali skrbi za duševno zdravje?

- Da
- Ne

17: Če ste doživeli povečan stres ali skrbi za duševno zdravje, navedite dejavnike, ki so prispevali k tem izzivom: (možnih je več odgovorov)

- Povečana delovna obremenitev
- Težave pri obvladovanju gospodinjskih obveznosti
- Pomanjkanje podpore (s strani družinskih članov, partnerja/ke, delodajalca itd.)
- Zaskrbljenost glede varnosti zaposlitve
- Strah pred virusom COVID-19
- Drugo:

18: Kako ste poskušali obravnavati stres in druge težave z duševnim zdravjem med pandemijo COVID-19, da bi ohranili dobro počutje in dosegli ravnotežje med poklicnim in zasebnim življenjem? (možnih je več odgovorov)

- Redna vadba ali telesna aktivnost (npr. joga, hoja, tek, fitnes)
- Vadil/a sem tehnike čuječnosti ali meditacije
- Druženje s prijatelji ali družinskimi člani zaradi čustvene podpore
- Iskanje storitev strokovnega svetovanja ali terapije
- Drugo:

19: Prostor za dodatne komentarje/pojasnila:

Appendix 3: Questionnaire in English

This questionnaire was prepared as part of the Master's thesis titled **Work-Life Balance in Slovenia's Private Sector through the Prisms of Gender and Parenting: Impact of the COVID-19 Pandemic**. Its purpose is to gain an in-depth understanding of the structure and frequency of challenges employees faced in reconciling professional and private life during the pandemic. Your participation in completing this questionnaire will actively contribute to a better understanding of the pandemic's impact on maintaining a work-life balance and help identify areas needing additional support or tailored interventions.

This questionnaire does not record any personal information, and all responses will be used exclusively for research purposes. Please answer honestly and thoughtfully.

You can begin the questionnaire by clicking on the "Next" page. Participation is voluntary, and you withdraw from solving the questionnaire at any time.

Thank you sincerely for your contribution!

Zala Primorac

QUESTIONS

1: Gender:

- Female
- Male
- I do not identify within the traditional binary gender system
- I do not want to respond

2: Age:

3: Marital status:

- Single
- Married / common-law partnership
- Divorced
- Widowed
- I do not want to respond

4: Did you have at least one child during the COVID-19 pandemic, younger than 18 years old?

- Yes

- No

5: How many children do you have?

6: What was your primary employment status between 2020 and 2022?

- Employed in a private company/organization
- Employed in the public sector
- Self-employed
- Student work
- Unemployed

7: State your (dis)agreement with the following statements:

	Completely disagree	Disagree	Neither agree nor disagree	Agree	Completely agree
During the COVID-19 pandemic, I successfully balanced professional and personal/family obligations.					
During the COVID-19 pandemic, I felt overwhelmed and/or stressed when trying to balance work and personal/family responsibilities					
During the COVID-19 pandemic, it was easy to 'disconnect' from work outside regular working hours (e.g., in the evening, on weekends).					
During the COVID-19 pandemic, I had sufficiently flexible work arrangements (e.g. remote work, flexible working hours) that allowed me to adapt to					

personal/family obligations.					
My work-life balance did not suffer due to the COVID-19 pandemic.					
During the COVID-19 pandemic, I had difficulty maintaining clear boundaries between work and personal/family life.					

8: Did you work from home during the COVID-19 pandemic?

- Yes
- No

9: State your (dis)agreement with the following statements:

	Completely disagree	Disagree	Neither agree nor disagree	Agree	Completely agree
During the COVID-19 pandemic, I was not uncomfortable discussing the challenges of balancing work and private life with my employer.					
My employer supported me in solving challenges in the field of work-life balance during the COVID-19 pandemic.					
I have been properly informed by my employer about updates and changes to company policies and measures related to the COVID-19 pandemic.					
My employer has provided additional					

support or resources to support work-life balance during the COVID-19 pandemic (e.g., childcare assistance, mental health resources).					
I was satisfied with the level of communication and support from my colleagues/team members in performing work tasks during the COVID-19 pandemic.					

10: On average, how many hours per day did you spend on personal/family responsibilities during the COVID-19 pandemic (e.g., cleaning, shopping, cooking, childcare)?

- 2 hours or less
- 2-4 hours
- 5-6 hours
- 6 hours or more

11: On average, how many hours per day did you spend directly caring for your children during the COVID-19 pandemic (e.g., playing, homeschooling, feeding)?

- 2 hours or less
- 2-4 hours
- 5-6 hours
- 6 hours or more

12: State your (dis)agreement with the following statements:

	Completely disagree	Disagree	Neither agree nor disagree	Agree	Completely agree
During the COVID-19 pandemic, I faced challenges in balancing work and childcare responsibilities.					
I had access to appropriate support					

systems (eg family members, childcare services) to help manage parenting responsibilities during the pandemic.					
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13: What was the biggest challenge in terms of childcare?

14: State your (dis)agreement with the following statements:

	Completely disagree	Disagree	Neither agree nor disagree	Agree	Completely agree
During the COVID-19 pandemic, I found it difficult to find time for my own relaxation and disconnection from my obligations.					
During the COVID-19 pandemic, I had to "juggle" several responsibilities (work, childcare, household chores) several times.					
During the COVID-19 pandemic, I had difficulty maintaining clear boundaries between work and personal/family life.					
During the COVID-19 pandemic, I had to adapt my work schedule to the needs of family members (partner, children, elderly dependents).					
I have experienced increased stress and/or					

mental health concerns related to balancing work and personal/family obligations during the COVID-19 pandemic.					
Due to childcare obligations during the COVID-19 pandemic, I had to compromise on career advancement or professional development.					
I spent more time on household chores (cooking, cleaning, childcare, etc.) than my partner.					
I spent more time on household chores than before COVID-19.					

15: What have been the biggest challenges for you in balancing work and private life during the COVID-19 pandemic? (multiple choice)

- Work from home
- Increased amount of personal/family obligations
- Lack of personal time
- Social isolation
- Blurred boundaries between professional and private life
- Childcare
- Increased demands of work obligations
- There were no challenges
- Other:

16: Have you experienced increased stress and/or mental health concerns during the COVID-19 pandemic?

- Yes
- No

17: If you have experienced increased stress or mental health concerns, please list the factors that contributed to these challenges: (multiple choice)

- Increased demands of work obligations
- Difficulty managing household responsibilities
- Lack of support (from family members, partner, employer, etc.)
- Concerns about job security
- Fear of the COVID-19 virus
- Other:

18: How have you tried to deal with stress and other mental health issues during the COVID-19 pandemic in order to maintain well-being and achieve work-life balance? (multiple choice)

- Regular exercise or physical activity (e.g. yoga, walking, running, fitness)
- Mindfulness or meditation techniques
- Hanging out with friends or family members for emotional support
- Seeking professional counseling or therapy services
- Other:

19: Space for additional comments/clarifications: