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# Finland

*Emilia Leinonen*

## Introduction

In this chapter, Finnish care leave and related employment policies are described and assessed. In Finland, there are currently two types of short-term leave available for employees, namely ‘Absence for compelling family reasons’ (*Poissaolo pakottavista perhesyistä*) and ‘Absence for taking care of a family member or someone close to the employee’ (*Poissaolo perheenjäsenen tai muun läheisen hoitamiseksi*). In addition, a new amendment to the Employment Contracts Act, called ‘Carer’s Leave’ (*Omaishoitovapaa*), came into force on 1 August 2022. There is also a form of long-term leave called Job Alternation Leave (*Vuorotteluvapaa*), although initially this was not developed for caring purposes. Other support measures for working carers include flexible working arrangements such as flexible working hours, flexible working time, working time bank and reduced working hours. Employees with caring responsibilities can also apply for informal Carer’s Leave, even if the employee does not have a formal agreement with a municipality or does not receive an Informal Care Allowance.

In 2022, Finnish social and health policies underwent several changes and reforms, all of which also have implications for working carers’ capacity to combine work and care. The first major change is a health and social services reform, which will transfer the responsibility for organising social and health services from municipalities to ‘well-being services counties’ (Act on Organising Healthcare and Social Welfare Services, 2021: 612). This will also change how these services are organised and funded. A second major reform is the family leave reform, which aims to allocate family care responsibilities more equally between parents and to strengthen equality in working life (Ministry of [Social Affairs and Health](#), 2022a, 2022b). Finally, the implementation of the Directive of the European Parliament and of the Council on work–life balance for parents and carers took place in 2022 ([European Parliament](#), 2019), resulting in a new form of carer’s leave (Finnish Ministry of Justice, 2022).

Analysis of the adequacy of carer leave policies shows that despite existing legislation, working arrangements, available care leaves and future reforms, Finnish working life has elements that make combining paid work

and care responsibilities difficult, especially for women. Finland's labour market is characterised by a persistent gender pay gap, a gender-segregated labour market and uneven distribution of care responsibilities between parents. Furthermore, despite women's greater caring responsibilities, their opportunities to utilise flexible working arrangements are more limited than men's, partly because of the gender-segregated labour market. Although job protection is at a high level, most leave schemes available for people caring for an adult family member are unpaid. In addition, many available flexible working arrangements reduce the employee's monthly income. Thus, while Finnish legislation on employment and care prohibits unequal treatment of employees based on gender, in Finnish working life and in care policies there is still a need for more standardised practices that ensure equal treatment of employees, regardless of their age, gender or caring responsibilities.

## National context

### *Political context*

Finland is a parliamentary republic with 19 regions and over 300 municipalities and is a member of the European Union. The Parliament consists of 200 representatives who are elected for a four-year term. The government formed in 2019 (by the Social Democratic Party, the Centre Party, the Greens, the Left Alliance and the Swedish People's Party of Finland) was led by Prime Minister Sanna Marin from the Social Democratic Party until June 2023. From June 2023, the new government (formed by the National Coalition Party, Finns Party, the Christian Democrats and the Swedish People's Party of Finland) has been led by Prime Minister Petteri Orpo from the National Coalition Party. Until recently, governance has been quite decentralised; all municipalities are self-governing, with the right to levy taxes, and have been responsible for local administration of many community services, such as schools, infrastructure and care services. In 2021, however, the first stage of the new health and social services reform came into effect and changed how services are organised, produced and funded. The objectives of the reform are to ensure that everyone has equal access to health and social services, regardless of their place of residence, but also to decrease the costs of social and health care sector. Since the 2000s and 2010s, several Finnish governments have been trying to make a major reform of the structures of social and health care because of the growing costs (Kröger, 2019). In 2023, the reform transferred responsibility for organising health, social and emergency services from municipalities to the new regional level, that is, to 21 new health and social services counties ('well-being services counties', or 'county councils'). At first, these counties will not have a right to levy taxes, although there is already political discussion on this. The counties'

activities will mainly be funded by central government. The first county elections were held in January 2022 and county councils started their work in March 2022 (Ministry of Finance, 2022; Ministry of Social Affairs and Welfare, 2022b).

### *Economic and labour market context*

Finland is a highly developed country. The largest sector of the Finnish economy is the service sector (69 per cent of GDP in 2020), followed by industry and construction (28 per cent) and agriculture, forestry and fishery (3 per cent) (Statistics Finland, 2021a). Finland can be seen as a dual-earner regime that encourages both men and women, including mothers of young children, to engage in both unpaid care and paid work (Sihto, 2019; Mesäislehto et al, 2022). In December 2021, 73.3 per cent of people of employment age (from 15 to 64) residing in Finland were in the labour force, up from 70 per cent in December 2020. At that time, the unemployment rate stood at 6.7 per cent, having been 7.6 per cent a year earlier (December 2020) (Statistics Finland, 2022). In 2021, the employment rate was 71.7 per cent for women and for men 72.8 per cent. Of all employees, men more often had a permanent full-time work contract than women (in 2020, 40.2 per cent and 34.4 per cent, respectively), while women had a permanent part-time work contract or a fixed-term work contract more often than men (7.1 per cent and 3.4 per cent; 8.8 per cent and 6.1 per cent, respectively, Statistics Finland, 2021c).

There are several laws in Finland that prohibit unequal treatment or discrimination of employees based on gender, parenthood or caring responsibilities (Act on Equality between Women and Men, 1986; Employment Contracts Act, 2001; Non-discrimination Act, 2014). The Act on Equality between Women and Men 1986, for instance, states that the employer's duty is to 'facilitate the reconciliation of working life and family life for women and men by paying attention especially to working arrangements'. Furthermore, in 2022, the Directive of the European Parliament and of the Council on work-life balance for parents and carers (European Parliament, 2019) was implemented in Finnish legislation. Nevertheless, although Finland has established gender-equality policies and is a relatively gender-equal society, there are some gender-equality problems, such as a persistent gender pay gap, a gender-segregated labour market and uneven distribution of care responsibilities between parents (Mesäislehto et al, 2022).

### *Social context*

Finland's total population is 5.5 million, and its population density is 16/km<sup>2</sup> (41.4/sq mi), which makes it a geographically large, rather sparsely

populated country. There are two official languages in Finland – Finnish and Swedish – and Sami is also a recognised national language. Finland is considered a Nordic welfare state with universally available comprehensive publicly funded welfare services and a relatively strong social security system. However, on certain issues it lags somewhat behind its Nordic neighbours; it also displays some features of marketisation and (re)familialism. In Finland, women predominantly do full-time work but, as highlighted earlier, there are elements in Finnish social policy and the labour market that generate gender inequalities and make reconciliation of work and care difficult for women. Notably, the care of small children is more often women's responsibility: for instance, 92 per cent of women use the (subsidised) child home-care leave, which allows a parent to care for children under the age of three at home ([Finnish Social Insurance Institution, 2021](#)). The Finnish labour market is also rather gender segregated: 70 per cent of jobs in the public sector are occupied by women, affecting the pay gap between the genders as salaries are lower in the public sector than in the private sector ([Statistics Finland, 2018](#)). In August 2022, however, Finland's family leave system was reformed. The main goals of the reforms were to allocate family leave entitlements more equally between parents, strengthen equality in working life and reduce the gender pay gap. In the new reform, in addition to pregnancy leave (total of 40 working days), both parents get parental leave with parental benefits for 160 working days (320 days in total, [Finnish Social Insurance Institution, 2022b](#)).

Familialistic features are also visible in arrangements for care of older persons. Finland is one of the most rapidly ageing countries in the world. In 2000, the proportion of individuals in Finland aged 65 years and older was 15 per cent; it had increased to 22.7 per cent in 2020, and is projected to reach 28 per cent by 2050 ([Statistics Finland, 2021a](#)). Family members in Finland are not legally responsible for caring for their ageing parents or other adult family members. Instead, according to the Constitution of Finland (section 19), welfare services should be available for all in need for care. Despite this, there have been major changes in provision of care for older persons in recent years: today, only older persons with the most extensive care needs receive services, and most older people with care needs receive less formal help than before ([Kröger and Leinonen, 2012](#); Kröger, [Puthenparambil and Van Aerschot, 2019](#)). An ageing-in-place policy also emphasises home care instead of institutional care, which has led to a further increase in the responsibilities of families, in particular in arranging care for their ageing relatives.

In fact, in Finnish care policy legislation there seems to be an underlying assumption that older people have family members or friends helping them arrange the care services they need ([Kalliomaa-Puha, 2017](#)). Moreover, family members are also seen as a potential care resource in Finnish eldercare policies and municipal strategies ([Ahosola, 2018](#)). Thus, 'informal' care has been, and still is, a significant element of care in Finland. Approximately

50,000 carers have a contract with their municipality and receive the Informal Care Allowance and support services, but it is estimated that Finland also has an additional 350,000 carers providing care to relatives who are ill, disabled or ageing. There are no exact statistics available on how many employees give support, care and help to their close ones, but it has been estimated that 1.4 million regularly provide help for family members and relatives (Vilkko et al, 2014) and that over 700,000 employees are combining paid work with family care (Carers Finland, 2022). Other estimates suggest that without the care provided by family members, the cost of long-term care would be €2.8 billion higher (Kehusmaa, 2014).

In the next section, the available care leave policies are introduced and briefly described. One of the reasons for developing these leaves has been the growing need for options for care leaves for employees caring for an older family member (Jolanki, Szebehely and Kauppinen, 2013). In Finland, there are currently two types of short-term leave available for employees, Absence for compelling family reasons (*Poissaolo pakottavista perhesyistä*) and Absence for taking care of a family member or someone close to the employee (*Poissaolo perheenjäsenen tai muun läheisen hoitamiseksi*). In addition, a new amendment to the Employment Contracts Act called Carer's leave (*Omaishoitovapaa*) came into force on 1 August 2022. There is also a form of long-term leave called Job alternation leave (*Vuorotteluvapaa*).

## Carer leave policies

### *Short-term leaves*

#### *Absence for compelling family reasons*

The Employment Contracts Act (section 7) permits an employee's absence for compelling family reasons. An employee is entitled to temporary absence from work because of unforeseeable and compelling reasons due to an illness or accident suffered by a family member. The law does not specify who is considered a family member, but the Ministry of Economic Affairs and Employment of Finland has defined a family member as an employee's relative in ascending or descending line or his/her spouse's/live-in spouse's relative in ascending or descending line.

The leave is available to all workers with an employment contract in Finland. Employees must notify their employer of their absence and its reason as soon as possible. On request, the employee must present proof of the reasons for the absence (for instance, a medical certificate) and for its discontinuation. Duration of leave and other arrangements are based on necessity and agreement between the employer and the employee. The duration is not specified in the Act, but should be only temporary: some collective agreements specify a duration of one or two days. The Employment Contracts Act does

not require the employer to pay the employee remuneration for the duration of the absence, but in some collective agreements this is required.

### *Absence for taking care of a family member or someone close to the employee*

A new amendment to the Employment Contracts Act's Section 7 was made in 2011. If it is necessary for an employee to be absent in order to provide special care for a family member or someone else close to them, the employee is entitled to a temporary absence from work. The amendment differs from the absence for compelling family reasons in that it allows a longer absence from work and does not specify the family members as strictly as the Act's original Section 7. The employee must be caring for a family member or 'someone else close' to the employee, including more distant relatives and friends. According to the Employment and Equality Committee report on changing the Employment Contracts Act 2010, a 'family member' or 'someone close' usually refer to an employee's relatives or friends, or their spouse or live-in partner's relatives.

The underlying reason for care is 'special care needs', which means that the care receiver needs the employee's help with their activities of daily living. The leave is available to all workers with an employment contract in Finland and is based on agreement between the employer and employee. The employer must try to arrange the work so that the employee may be absent from work for a fixed period, which is specified in some collective agreements to be one week. The employer is not required to pay the employee remuneration during the absence, and no other compensation for loss of earnings during the leave is available. The employee has a right to return to their former position/duties, but if this is not possible, the employee is offered equivalent work in accordance with their work contract.

The duration of leave is based on 'necessity', that is, how long the family member needs the employee's help, and agreement between the employer and the employee. As such, there are no limits as to how often the leave may be taken, as it is based on necessity. Returning to work in the middle of a period of leave must be agreed by both employer and employee. If an agreement cannot be reached, the employee may discontinue their leave for a justifiable reason by informing their employer of their return no later than one month before the date of return to work. On request, the employee must present proof of the grounds for the absence (for example, a medical certificate about a family member's illness).

### *Carer's Leave*

Carer's Leave is a new amendment to the Employment Contracts Act which came into effect on 1 August 2022. According to this amendment, an employee has a right to have up to five days off during a calendar year

if the employee's immediate presence is needed because their relative or someone else close to them needs a considerable amount of support or assistance because of serious illness or injury. In addition, an employee has a right to Carer's Leave in the case of palliative care of their relative. Here the amendment specifies that 'relative' refers to an employee's child, parent, spouse, live-in partner or a person who is in a registered partnership with the employee. 'Someone else close' to the employee refers to 'a person who lives with the employee'.

The employee must notify their employer about the Carer's Leave and its estimated duration as soon as possible. On request, the employee must present proof of the reason for the leave. The leave is unpaid but entails more rights than the 'absence' policy outlined earlier. For Carer's Leave, the employee's job and position are protected and, in contrast to the absence, the leave is a subjective right and does not require negotiation with their employer. The amendment is a part of the implementation of the Directive of the European Parliament and of the Council on work-life balance for parents and carers ([European Parliament, 2019](#)). The aim of the Directive is to promote gender equality in work life and reconciliation between work and family. In Finland, the Carer's Leave includes only the minimum requirements of the Directive. For example, the Directive recommends that the leave should be paid, but doesn't require it. In Finnish legislation, family leaves are generally unpaid but there are many exceptions to this in different collective agreements – for instance, in some collective agreements the first three months of parental leave are paid.

### *Long-term leave*

#### *Job alternation leave*

Job alternation leave is an arrangement designed to allow employees to have career breaks while also improving the employment potential of unemployed jobseekers through a fixed-term work experience. An employee, in accordance with a job alternation agreement made with the employer, is released for a fixed period from their work duties covered by their service relationship, and the employer agrees to hire, for a corresponding period, a person registered as an unemployed jobseeker for a fixed-term work experience in the job alternator's place.

While the job alternation leave was not initially designed for care leave purposes, nowadays the programme is described as an opportunity to have a longer leave that can be used for studying, leisure or taking care of children or other relatives ([Finnish Employment Office, 2022](#)). All employees with an employment or a service contract have the right to take the leave, but there are certain conditions that an employee must meet. The employee needs to have worked for at least 20 years prior to the leave (family leaves are



included in the work-history calculations), have a continuous work contract with the same employer for at least 13 months prior to the leave (with no more than 30 days of unpaid leave), and their working hours must be at least 75 per cent of full-time working hours. An employee cannot retire right after the leave; the upper age limit is three years below the old-age pension age. After the leave, an employee must have at least a five-year employment period before applying for a new job alternation leave.

The employee is entitled to a job alternation allowance (70 per cent of the unemployment allowance). The allowance is earnings related if the employee is a member of an unemployment fund. However, if the employee is not a member of an unemployment fund the job alternation allowance is 70 per cent of the basic unemployment allowance and is paid by the Finnish Social Insurance Institution. In Finland, most employees receiving job alternation allowances are members of an unemployment fund: in 2013, only 171 employees received the allowance from the [Finnish Social Insurance Institution \(2022c\)](#). While the home care allowance reduces the amount of job alternation allowance, a housing allowance, child allowance or Informal Care Allowance does not affect the amount of job alternation allowance. The job alternation allowance also accrues pension.

The minimum duration of a job alternation leave is 100 successive calendar days, up to a maximum of 180 calendar days. The leave ends immediately if the employee becomes eligible for a parental allowance or parental leave. The employee has the right to return to their former position and duties, but if this is not possible, the employee is offered equivalent work in accordance with their work contract. In this sense the employee's job is protected – however, if grounds for dismissal are fulfilled, an employee can also be dismissed.

[Table 2.1](#) summarises the carer leave options available in Finland as of November 2023.

## Other support measures

### *Flexible working arrangements*

Other important and quite widely used support measures applicable to many working carers are connected to flexible arrangements for work and working time. Compared to other European countries, Finland stands out as regards the number of different kinds of flexible arrangements available for employees ([Toppinen-Tanner and Kirves, 2016](#)). The Finnish Working Hours Act recognises four types of working time flexibility: flexible working hours, flexible working time, working time bank and reduced working hours, all of which can be used to reconcile work and care. In 2020, 71 per cent of employees reported having a flexible working hours system in

Table 2.1: Carer leave schemes, Finland (November 2023)

Leave details			Eligibility				
Leave name and introduced	Time period	Compensation	Worker/employee status	Qualifying period	Person needing care	Evidence	Notice period and process
Absence for compelling family reasons, 2001	Unspecified but short term	Unpaid	All with an employment contract	–	Family member	Employer can ask for medical certification	Notify employer ASAP
Absence for taking care of a family member or someone close to the employee, 2011	Unspecified but short term	Unpaid	All with an employment contract	–	Family member or someone close	Employer can ask for medical certification	Notify employer ASAP
Carer's Leave, 2022	5 days per annum	Unpaid	All with an employment contract	–	Family member or someone close	Employer can ask for medical certification	Notify employer ASAP
Job Alternation Leave, 2003	100–180 days	70% of one's unemployment benefit for a maximum of 180 days	Contracted employees working at least 75%	20-year work history; 13 months with employer	Family member or someone close	Employer can ask for medical certification	Notify employer ASAP

use at their workplace, and 64 per cent had a working time bank system (Keyriläinen, 2021).

Flexible working hours can be agreed between an employer and an employee, allowing the employee to determine the beginning and end of daily working hours, to a certain extent. A flex-period, which either shortens or lengthens the daily working time, can be up to four hours per day. During a four-month follow-up period, the total number of flexible working hours used to shorten the regular working hours cannot exceed 20 hours, and overtime hours cannot exceed 60 hours (Act on Working Hours 872/2019, 12 §). Flexible working time means that an employer and an employee can agree that an employee may determine where and when they work. At least half of regular working hours can be used in a flexible working time arrangement. On average, regular working hours cannot exceed 40 hours per week (Act on Working Hours 872/2019, 13 §). If a working time bank system is used in a workplace, employees can save their extra working hours, overtime hours and other working hours based on flexible working hours (up to 60 hours during a four-month period) to be used later as flexi-leaves. Employees can also change their overtime pay to flexi-leaves, but the maximum number of saved hours cannot exceed 180 hours per calendar year (Act on Working Hours 872/2019, 14 §). Reduced working hours means that for social or health reasons, an employee can also ask for reduced working hours, that is, to work less than the regular working hours, in which case the employer must seek to arrange work so that the employee can work part time. The agreement on reduced working hours is valid for 26 weeks (Act on Working Hours 872/2019, 15 §).

### *Carer leave and tax deductions*

The Act on Support for Informal Carers 2006 recognises family care. The support includes: an 'Informal Care Allowance'; respite and substitute care during the respite; necessary social and health care services; and other supportive services such as training and health and well-being check-ups. Employees with caring responsibilities can apply for 'Informal Carer's Leave', even if the employee does not have a formal agreement with a municipality or does not receive an Informal Care Allowance. The Informal Care Allowance varies from the minimum amount of €423 to a maximum of €847 (in 2022). The maximum allowance is paid if the carer is unable to participate in employment. According to the Social Welfare Act (1301/2014), municipalities can arrange leave for working carers without a formal agreement under the same principles that are available to informal carers with a formal agreement, that is, at least two or three days off per month depending on the intensity of care. Furthermore, an employee who has a child with a long-term illness or disabilities can receive partial childcare

leave until the child turns 18. The employee must have been employed by the same employer for at least six months during the previous 12 months in order to be eligible for the partial leave.

The tax credit for household expenses means that a person is entitled to a tax credit if they are using for-profit or non-profit services and paying for care work done in the person's own home or in their relative's home. The care work includes caring for children, persons with disabilities or older persons, and can include washing, feeding and other care tasks such as assisting a person, for instance, with visiting the bank. The maximum credit for household expenses is €2,250 per person per year. A person who receives an Informal Care Allowance cannot receive a tax credit for household expenses that are based on paid care work ([Finnish Tax Administration, 2022](#)).

## COVID-19 pandemic response and implications for employed carers

Compared to other European countries, Finland has been relatively successful in restricting the spread of the coronavirus. During the first wave of the pandemic in 2020, schools and all public cultural venues were shut. Although these restrictions were lifted in June 2020, during the second and third waves, public services such as libraries were closed, secondary and tertiary education were mostly delivered via distance learning and remote work increased significantly. In 2021, the proportion of employees doing remote work was 41 per cent ([Mesiäislehto et al, 2022](#)). [Mesiäislehto et al \(2022\)](#) assessed the impact of COVID-19 on gender equality in Finland in terms of employment, income, family life and working conditions. The restriction measures particularly affected specific employment sectors, such as the service industry (restaurants, bars) and tourism, which are female dominated. Employment decreased by over 75,000 persons, among whom 46,000 were women and 29,000 men, but employment figures recovered for both men and women in the spring of 2021 and in fact were then higher than at any point since the financial crisis of 2008 ([Mesiäislehto et al, 2022](#)).

Some adjustments to unemployment benefits were made at the beginning of the pandemic (Räsänen, Jauhiainen and Pyy-Martikainen, 2020), but no additional financial support was targeted specifically at families apart from a temporary flat-rate benefit to parents unable to work due to school closures. Families were hit by the crisis, but women's work and care reconciliation were particularly affected during the first wave of the pandemic, albeit temporarily ([Mesiäislehto et al, 2022](#)). However, it was not only families with children who were impacted by the crisis – the situation of older persons was also difficult, especially during the first wave of the pandemic. As in many other countries, the Finnish Government recommended that all persons aged 70 years or over should stay in quarantine-like conditions

from March 2020 onward. According to [Aaltonen et al \(2021\)](#), the situation of older persons living at home and receiving family care and support was more difficult compared to those older persons living in intensive service housing (institutional care): to receive the care or support they needed, they could not follow the social distancing recommendations and were, in that sense, more vulnerable to the virus and possible infection. [Aaltonen et al \(2021\)](#) further argue that older persons who received help, care and support from their families were forgotten in the crisis preparation and management plans. During the pandemic, governmental budget allocations were made to eldercare services, but most of these were for healthcare services: support was given to healthcare districts to fund equipment costs, and municipalities received additional subsidies for arranging basic services ([Mesiäislehto et al, 2022](#)).

[Sihto, Leinonen and Kröger \(2022\)](#); also [Eurocarers/IRCCS-INCRA, 2021](#)) found that the impacts of the pandemic on the situation of carers were also quite severe. Finnish carers suffered from a lack of services for themselves and those they cared for, a lack of contact with other people and an overall lack of support measures, such as the protective masks available to professional care workers. The report highlighted that the situation was especially difficult for carers whose caring responsibilities were most intense: their services were cancelled more often, and they more often reported a decline in their mental well-being compared to other carers. Younger carers worried more about their financial situation than others. Overall, carers did not receive enough support or services, nor was their situation adequately acknowledged in the government's policy responses to the crisis.

## Adequacy of carer leave policies

### *Short-term and long-term leaves*

There are no recent statistics on the number of employees using the two forms of short absences: for compelling family reasons and for taking care of a family member. In 2013, a report was made for the Ministry of Economic Affairs and Employment of Finland by the Finnish Institute of Occupational Health ([Kauppinen, 2013](#)). One of the report's aims was to evaluate the right of absence for taking care of a family member or someone close to the employee, which was at that time a new amendment to the Employment Contracts Act (Section 7a). The report was based on a follow-up survey of employees (450 respondents) and health and safety representatives and heads of occupational health and safety (3,185 respondents). Approximately 20 per cent of the employee respondents cared for a family member or someone close to them. Of those with caring responsibilities, 24 per cent felt that it would be difficult to raise the need for leave or an absence with their supervisor. These respondents felt that the new amendment would facilitate

work and care reconciliation at least ‘quite a lot’ (45 per cent). However, there was little knowledge of the amendment (only 15 per cent of the employees were aware of it). Moreover, employee respondents felt that the amendment could potentially increase inequality between men and women because women have more caring responsibilities. In addition, 70 per cent of employee respondents felt that, because it was unpaid, the absence based on the amendment was not used. In total, 40 per cent of safety representatives were aware of the amendment. However, in most cases the amendment was not applied because there were other ways to organise absence from work and reconcile work and care. These included the possibility of agreeing a temporary absence with the supervisor, use of flexible or reduced working hours, use of a working hours bank, use of job alteration leave, changing the holiday bonus for days off and the possibility to work from home.

According to another survey (n=435) (Kauppinen and Silfver-Kuhlampi, 2015), unpaid absence from work and flexible working hours were the two most common arrangements when an employee’s family member needed help or assistance. Those respondents who received the Informal Care Allowance more often used unpaid absence and other arrangements, which reduced the number of their working hours (such as part-time work and work time bank). Absence for taking care of a family member or someone else close to the employee has been criticised because the law does not guarantee an absolute right to such absence (Kallioma-Puha, 2019). Since the absence is based on an agreement between the employee and the employer, the employer can refuse to agree to the absence and is under no obligation to state the reason for doing so. One way of reinforcing the right to an absence is to oblige the employer to give a statement of reasons for declining it. Another major problem is that the absences are unpaid (Kallioma-Puha, 2019), including those enabled by the recently adopted European Union (EU) Directive on carer’s leave (European Parliament, 2019). In Finland, most informal carers, both with and without an official agreement, are women, which means that taking advantage of the leave provisions associated with the new Directive will negatively affect women’s income. Furthermore, employees may not be able to afford to take unpaid absences.

In Finland, the opportunities to take long-term care leaves are quite limited. Only 8 per cent of the respondents of the earlier mentioned survey study (Kauppinen and Silfver-Kuhlampi, 2015) reported that they used job alternation leave. It is worth noting changes in the eligibility criteria for job alternation leave in the past decade. Two significant changes have been to the duration of the leave and to the duration of the employee’s work history: before 2016, the eligibility criteria included only a ten-year work history with the possibility to have a 360-day leave (Finnish Social Insurance Institution, 2016). Between 2005 and 2012, the number of employees receiving a job alternation allowance rose from 16,800 to 22,500 (HE,

2014: 36). Most users were women from the municipal social and health care sector. In 2021, the number of employees receiving the allowance from unemployment funds dropped to 5,000, mainly because of tighter eligibility criteria (The Federation of Unemployment Funds in [Finland, 2022](#)). Thus, a longer absence from work is not a realistic option for many employees. Furthermore, the new government has suggested abolishing the job alternation leave in 2024 to reduce public spending.

In 2010, the amendment to the absence for taking care of a family member was opposed: it was feared that it would increase employment costs and have negative consequences for women's participation in working life ([Jolanki et al, 2015](#)). The same concerns that were addressed in discussions on the right to absence for taking care of a family member are also addressed in the government's proposals for the new carer's leave. It is estimated that, on one hand, the leave may facilitate the reconciliation of work and family life in difficult and stressful situations, since the carer's leave is a subjective right; on the other hand, since the leave is unpaid, low-income employees may not be able to use it at all. Although the new carer's leave is part of the implementation of the EU Directive that aims to promote better work–life balance for parents and carers ([European Parliament, 2019](#)), the assumption in the legislative work seems to be that the majority of users will be women. The governmental proposal for carer's leave includes an impact assessment of the new leave, and it is stated there that carer's leave will not promote women's participation in working life (HE, 2021: 129). However, in the same governmental proposal it is suggested that since male employees have more possibilities for flexible working hours, the opportunity for carer's leave could enhance female employees' possibilities to care for their family members. In other words, the government proposal suggests that carer's leave would bring flexibility to female employees' working lives, but only in terms of flexibility to *care*, which echoes the old story of women's double duty, not better work–life balance for all genders.

All in all, it is reasonable to argue that the length of the carer's leave is not adequate in the most intensive caring situations, such as in palliative care, even if it could be combined with the absences for compelling family reasons and for taking care of a family member. It is probable that, in the case of an accident or a sudden illness, the absence for compelling family reasons will be used first, and if the need for an employee's presence with their family member continues, the carer's leave could be used. It is nevertheless important to recognise that all legislative measures related to the absences in question require joint agreement between employee and employer, which can also increase openness in workplaces about employees' caring responsibilities ([Kauppinen and Silfver-Kuhlampi, 2015](#)), regardless of their age or gender. Furthermore, the Directive on work–life balance requires all EU member states to ensure that their legislation prohibits discrimination and unequal

treatment on the basis of taking the carer's leave or parental leaves, using the flexible working arrangements or using the right for absence for compelling family reasons or taking care of a family member ([European Parliament, 2019](#)). In Finland, the Act on Equality between Women and Men 1986 prohibits that kind of discrimination as indirect gender-based discrimination.

### *Other support measures*

The development of the quality of working life in Finland is assessed in the Working Life Barometer, conducted annually by the Ministry of Economic Affairs and Employment of Finland. It seems that, in terms of overall availability of flexible working time arrangements, there are some differences between male and female employees. According to the latest Working Life Barometer ([Keyriläinen, 2021](#)), 71 per cent of all employees reported having a flexible working time system in their workplace in 2020, male employees (73 per cent) reporting this slightly more often than female employees (69 per cent). In total, 64 per cent of employees reported having a working time bank system in their workplace. Male employees (68 per cent) reported more often than female employees (59 per cent) that it was possible for them to use their overtime hours as days off. In addition, 63 per cent of all employees reported that they could 'always' run their own or family errands during working hours, again men more often (68 per cent) than women (58 per cent). Employees in the municipal sector had fewer possibilities to run their errands (42 per cent) than others.

Overall, in terms of gender equality, work–care reconciliation seems to be more difficult for female employees, since they usually have more caring responsibilities but their possibilities for flexible working time are not as good as those of male employees. However, flexible working arrangements are not solely positive, as their use might be a result of a forced necessity, not of a voluntary choice. Furthermore, flexible working arrangements, and reduced working hours in particular, also have negative consequences on working carers' economic situation, especially if the employee is forced to refuse the possibility to do full-time work. In addition, the need for flexibility in work might have more nuanced effects on the employee's situation: they might need to turn down new work assignments, work trips and other social events at the workplace ([Kauppinen and Silfver-Kuhlampi, 2015](#)).

In 2017, three out of four family carers with a formal family care agreement were women ([Leppäaho et al, 2019](#)). Out of those aged under 68 years with formal family care agreement, approximately 28 per cent had a full-time job and 10 per cent had a part-time job, whereas out of those aged from 30 to 60, approximately 50 per cent had a full-time or a part-time job (personal communication from [Tillman, 2019](#) cited in [Kallioma-Puha, 2019](#)). There are some indications that male family carers (aged 18–62) are



more often unemployed than female family carers (Mikkola et al, 2016). If the carer has a full-time job, usually they receive only two days off from family care work per month (Kalliomaa-Puha, 2019). It is interesting that only half of family carers with a formal agreement used their statutory days off (Leppäaho et al, 2019). This is partly explained by the quality of the substitute carers and the difficulties in receiving substitute care in the care receiver's own home: in 2017, only 5 per cent of leaves were organised as home care (Kalliomaa-Puha and Tillman, 2016; Leppäaho et al, 2019; Kalliomaa-Puha, 2019). Since the Informal Care Allowance is discretionary, however – that is, the municipality decides how much funding is allocated to informal care per year, how many formal agreements can be concluded and for how long (Association of Finnish municipalities, 2022) – it is unlikely that municipalities will offer days off from family care to family carers without an agreement. According to Noro (2019), only 500 carers without an agreement have received discretionary days off (there are no statistics on how many of these carers were working carers).

It has been argued that the Informal Care Allowance is turning into an income support option for retired carers who care for their partner, since the number of retired informal carers is rising (Jolanki et al, 2015). In 2019, in total 48,700 persons had a formal agreement on informal care, among whom 57 per cent were aged over 65 (Association of Finnish Municipalities, 2022). However, the Informal Care Allowance could compensate some of the working carer's earnings loss, although the level of the allowance is quite modest (the minimum allowance is €423.61 per month, Ministry of Social Affairs and Health [2022b]). If a working carer receives the Informal Care Allowance, the municipality also has to grant certain services to the allowance receivers: these services include annual health checks, and the previously mentioned carer leaves with substitute care (in an institution or done by a substitute carer) (Act on Support for Informal Carers, 2006). In addition to these services, the municipalities can offer services for working carers that support them in combining work and care; for instance, municipalities can offer home care and day care or grant a personal assistant (Noro, 2019). This depends, however, on the municipality.

## Conclusion

The Nordic welfare states rely heavily on high labour force participation, but at the same time the expectation that families will provide informal care is embedded in Finnish social and care policies (Rostgaard et al, 2022). The growing emphasis on home care of older adults is accompanied by the growing responsibilities of informal networks and carers, which means that family care has been brought into long-term care policy 'through the back door' (Kodate and Timonen, 2017). The emphases on high labour

force participation and informal care provision are contradictory, especially from the gender perspective. Still, in Finland, working female carers often combine care with full-time work (Sihto, 2018). There are many aspects of Finnish working life that have an impact on gender equality, in particular the persistent gender pay gap, the gender-segregated labour market and uneven distribution of care responsibilities between parents. What is most alarming in terms of gender equality is that female employees, despite having more caring responsibilities, have fewer possibilities for flexible working arrangements. This is further amplified by the 'refamilialisation' process of care, which has increased the care responsibilities of families, especially women.

Attitudes in workplaces in general also have an effect on gender equality: according to the Equality Barometer (Attila et al, 2018), only one quarter of respondents felt that men are encouraged to use their parental leaves. If it is difficult for men to use the right for parental leave, staying on a longer care leave is probably even more difficult (Kalliomaa-Puha, 2019). Furthermore, although Finland stands out its large number of flexible working arrangements, it seems that the right to flexibility is not as widely known, or at least not as widely implemented, as one might assume (Kalliomaa-Puha, 2019). There is particularly low awareness of the right to an absence, even among safety representatives in workplaces. Overall, flexibility in working time is important, as it acknowledges different family and care situations; but it should not be the only way of supporting employees with care responsibilities, as it has several downsides, especially if the employee's caring responsibilities are intense. Using flexible working arrangements may reduce an employee's monthly salary or increase feelings of inferiority as an employee compared to other employees. Also, the use of absences, especially if the need for absence happens often, may lead to a fear of being labelled as a difficult employee (Kauppinen and Silfver-Kuhlampi, 2015; Kalliomaa-Puha, 2019), even though the job is quite well protected.

Since the population of Finland is ageing, the family responsibilities of caring or arranging care for ageing family members are likely to rise. Finnish employment legislation has thus far barely recognised the position of employees caring for their ageing relatives, especially when compared to the opportunities provided to working parents (Jolanki et al, 2013). Of course, flexible working arrangements also help those employees who are caring for their older relatives, but compared to the number and variety of leaves and other support measures available for working parents caring for their children, the situation of carers of older people is rather poor. In that sense, the new Carer's Leave, despite being unpaid and modest in length, is an important reform. However, if a longer care leave is needed for more intensive care, there is only one option available – the Job Alternation Leave – and only if the employee meets the strict eligibility criteria.

Gender equity and renewal of the social and health care system and the parental leave system have been two major goals of the current government, but their effects on regional and gender equality remain to be seen. The COVID-19 pandemic has without doubt increased the use of flexibility in working life, but not equally: remote working is more common among managers and upper-level office workers than among lower-level office workers or in the female-dominated care sector. All in all, the most problematic issue in terms of Finnish care leaves is that they are predominantly unpaid; this endangers the employee's income level, career development and pension level if the care responsibilities force the employee to reduce their working hours in the long term. To enhance employees' ability to combine work and care without sacrificing their income level too much, especially in the situation of palliative care, policy makers should consider broadening the use of the Informal Care Allowance. The Act on Support for Informal Carers 2006 already allows such use, but it seems that too often the decision-making process in the municipalities takes too much time or it does not fit the criteria of the municipalities (Kallioma-Puha, 2019). Although Finnish legislation on employment and care prohibits unequal treatment of employees based on gender, in Finnish working life and care policies there still is a need for more standardised practices that ensure equal treatment of employees, regardless of their age, gender or caring responsibilities.

Overall, the available forms of flexibility in work and possibilities to take leaves in Finland are important and could be transferable to other countries. However, all available policies lean towards a familialistic approach. People are living longer and healthier lives than ever, but that does not change the fact that many need support and services at some point. There are indications of policy changes in the content of care provided and in the division of responsibilities: what part of care is a public responsibility and what is intended to be provided by the families (Rostgaard et al, 2022). As the coverage of formal services for older people especially is declining, families are expected to take more responsibility in arranging and providing care – 'leaving the informal carers to pick up where the public sector left' (Rostgaard et al, 2022: 208). In Finland, the carer is usually a woman, making familialism a gender issue.

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