

QUALITY  
EMPLOYMENT AND  
QUALITY PUBLIC  
SERVICES IN  
CHILDCARE

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**KU LEUVEN**

**H:VA**

RESEARCH INSTITUTE FOR WORK AND SOCIETY

# QUALITY EMPLOYMENT AND QUALITY PUBLIC SERVICES IN CHILDCARE

## Summary

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# Introduction

This study investigates the employment quality of childcare staff in Bulgaria, Greece, Sweden and the UK. Country experts drafted four in-depth reports on the current state and trends in childcare staff employment quality, based on a questionnaire and these are available on the EPSU website.

To measure employment quality, a distinction was made between four dimensions:

1. job content such as workload and autonomy;
2. working environment including pressure and occupational safety and health (OSH) risks;
3. employment conditions, with factors such as contract type, wages, working time arrangements, career opportunities, etc.; and
4. voice and representation covering social support, employee voice and representation.

Together, these generic dimensions enable to measure employment quality in different institutional and industrial contexts and for different occupations and groups. An overview of our conceptualisation of employment quality with a specific focus on childcare staff can be found in the report, *Framework of quality employment literature review – understanding employment quality in childcare services*, available on the EPSU website.

Our main findings are presented in this summary. Firstly, conclusions and main recommendations are formulated per country, stressing the differences we found in employment quality. Secondly, some general trends are identified, focusing at the commonalities between those four countries.

# 1 | Individual country studies: diversity in trends?

In *Sweden*, childcare is a universal right of the child. Affordability and provision of childcare are legally secured, while, quality of service has been a key focus for the government. To accomplish this goal, the Swedish childcare sector has to meet high quality standards and to be able to do so, the sector has to attract and preserve a skilled workforce. Employment quality is key to the Swedish childcare system, characterised by a mostly highly skilled childcare staff which enjoy autonomy and challenging tasks, reasonable employment conditions, a good working environment and function within a good system of industrial relations. In striving for ever higher quality services, childcare workers are faced with an increasing number of tasks, including greater requirements for children's learning and the documentation of learning advancements. However, the training and education of childcare staff is not keeping up with those increasing demands. In addition, the administrative tasks that were added to the task package of childcare workers, has reduced childcare staff's contact time, which research has shown is an important variable for the job satisfaction of childcare workers. More work requires more staff and more resources. In addition, the responsible municipalities have to take into account the socio-economical background of the children which are being taken care of in a childcare facility when determining the resources assigned to that facility.

**Key concern: training and an increase in the number of staff**

Employment quality of childcare workers in the *UK* is very low. There are multiple reasons, but the most important one is the far-reaching marketisation of the childcare market and the lack of rules imposed by the state. Competition in childcare means downward pressure on employment conditions (wages, employment contracts, working hours, other entitlements) and the lack of rules on quality have a negative impact on the working environment (near busy streets or without outside play areas) and job content (differs greatly between childcare facilities). Moreover, trade union density is very low, especially in the private childcare sector where coverage of collective labour agreements is also very low. At a societal level, a conservative view on childcare causes a general undervaluation of the job, as if only female skills are required to become a childcare worker. The bewildering range of qualifications, without official recognition or clear link to wage levels, are a major point of concern. As a way forward, the recruitment of childcare workers in trade unions, especially in the private sector, should be a priority, as well as trying to extend the coverage of collective labour agreements. Trade unions could also strive for more public control on both quality of childcare services and employment quality of childcare staff and for a strengthening of publicly provided childcare as a counterpart to the privately organised race to the bottom that currently exists within British childcare facilities.

**Key concern: every dimension of employment quality should be improved**

Although the provision and affordability of childcare services in *Italy* greatly differs between regions, in 2015, the central government established an integrated childcare system for children from 0 to 6 years with the specific intend to increase both the quality of childcare services as well as the employment quality of childcare staff. This reform included the implementation of high quality standards and monitoring combined with high educational requirements and a number of

obligatory training hours annually for childcare staff. This professionalisation is beneficial for the job content and social standing of childcare staff. These standards are imposed on both public and private childcare facilities, which is a prerequisite to prevent a race to the bottom regarding employment conditions in the private market. However, there are other issues with the employment quality of Italian childcare workers. Employment contracts differ greatly between private and public childcare services, many jobs are part-time and the wages have stagnated for several years. Moreover, there exists a trend to outsource publicly owned childcare facilities to private partners, which is detrimental for the employment conditions, particularly, for example, for holiday pay or retirement entitlements. In sum, Italy combines some positive and negative trends.

**Key concern: stable and secure employment contracts, higher wages**

The *Bulgarian* government has quite ambitious plans for the national childcare system. Child development, educational goals and female labour market participation are key to those plans. However, a huge gap exists between theory and practice. Childcare in Bulgaria differs greatly between regions and in general, employment quality is very low. The average age of childcare workers is over 50 and the sector faces difficulties in attracting new workers. And this should not be surprising, wages for childcare workers are very low, the work is intensive and both physically (noise!) and psychologically demanding while the social standing of the job is generally very low. Furthermore, the infrastructure is mostly outdated. As a result, both the quality of service as well as the employment quality in public childcare facilities is rather low in Bulgaria. Although exact data are lacking, there appears to be a trend for private companies as well as the informal sector to expand as a result of the insufficient provision of public childcare services. However, such a trend is likely to be detrimental for the employment quality of childcare staff, especially in the informal sector. In response, the government should act rapidly to make jobs in childcare more attractive for young people. Basic employment conditions have to improve and to attain the ambitious policy goals, investments in education and training of childcare workers will be necessary.

**Key concern: higher wages & better training**

Summarising our findings, the following figure presents a comparison of the four dimensions of the employment quality in the four countries studied.



## 2 | General trends

Although the diversity in the employment quality of childcare workers differs to a great extent among the four countries studied, we did identify some common trends. In every country studied, the job of childcare worker is becoming *more and more difficult* and often uncertain. This difficulty can stem from trends in each of the four dimensions of employment quality.

- In *Sweden* the administrative burden, together with ever more educational demands, make the job content of childcare workers more complex.
- In the *UK*, there is often little security as employment contracts are short and collective agreement coverage, in especially the private sector, is low while there is limited regulation of health and safety requirements. This uncertainty in employment conditions, working environment and industrial relations also adds to the difficulty of the job.
- In *Italy*, the combination of stagnant wages, part-time and temporary employment contracts and increasing quality standards put pressure on the job content and employment conditions of childcare workers.
- In *Bulgaria*, class sizes are very large, tasks are repetitive and pay is low. High work pressure (job content) combined with poor employment conditions make working in childcare uncertain and difficult.

We identified some recurrent elements that play a role in making childcare jobs more difficult:

- high or increasing administrative burden;
- children become *more diverse* and with different family backgrounds;
- with governments implementing more complex educational and pedagogical goals, the tasks of childcare workers and their *work packages become more and more difficult*.

In addition to this increase in difficulty, *no additional resources* are being given to the childcare sector. In many countries, *austerity* has played a role in this lack of resources.

- Governments provide no additional funding to attract more (skilled) childcare workers.
- Restraints on budgets are also causing a general *lack of training* and on-the-job-learning in some countries. However, training could help childcare workers to cope with the extra complexity. Other employment conditions, such as pay or secure employment contracts, are negatively influenced by this budgetary situation as well.

This combination of more complexity with fewer or stagnant resources is having *detrimental personal and work-related outcomes*:

- childcare workers have 80% more risk of psychological illnesses than the average worker (*Sweden*);
- large share of staff in private sector not covered by collective bargaining (*UK*);
- having a second job is not uncommon (*Bulgaria*);
- evidence of childcare staff reporting high levels of emotional distress (*Italy*).

Two more *additional risks* regarding the employment quality of childcare workers were identified:

- the *prejudice that childcare work requires merely female skills*. On the contrary, to be able to deal with all the (additional) complexity of the job, childcare workers should receive even more education and on-the-job training;

- experiments with *marketisation* of childcare services should not lead to a decline in employment quality if a clear regulatory framework and (well-resourced) monitoring bodies exist, for example like in Sweden and Italy. If such an accompanying framework is absent, marketisation can lead to a *race to the bottom* with regard to employment quality and the quality of childcare services, as illustrated by the UK example.
- Policy choices clearly impact the employment quality of childcare workers but also observe a certain path dependency: past policies are still influencing the employment quality and will keep doing so in the future. Employment quality in Sweden is historically high but experiences more and more pressure from diverse policies. Employment quality in Italy is positively influenced by recent policies, but still has some historical weaknesses while employment quality in the UK has been affected by a cocktail of detrimental policies. Finally, in Bulgaria some positive policies which can increase the employment quality could be distinguished but still have to be implemented in practice.