

## Quality employment and quality public services – Summary Childcare

**Employment quality** consists of four dimensions:

- *Job content*: complexity of tasks, time constraints, emotional efforts, task variation and predictability, task intensity, autonomy, social support, task information, ... .
- *Working environment*: environmental risks, ergonomics, contact with other persons, health & safety risks... .
- *Employment conditions*: employment contract, career perspectives, wages, training & education, working hours,... .
- *Industrial relations*: voice, employee (re)presentation, collective agreements, right to strike...

### 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. However, the Swedish government realized that provision and affordability is not enough to convince parents to make use of the available childcare services, quality of services has to be high as well. 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, characterized by (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. However, in a strive for an every higher quality of childcare services by implementation of more and more educational requirements to the job, the Swedish government has to realize that this additional complexity puts increasing pressure on the already complex job content of childcare workers and diminishes the actual 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*

Employment quality of childcare workers in the *UK* is very low. There are multiple reasons, but the most important one is the far-reaching marketization of the childcare market and the lack of rules imposed by the state. Competition in childcare means downward pressure on the employment conditions (wages, employment contracts, working hours, other entitlements ...) and the lack of quality rules have a negative impact on the working environments (near busy streets or without outside playroom) and the job content (differs greatly between childcare facilities). Moreover, trade unions are near to invisible in the childcare sector and 84% of the childcare workers is not covered by collective labour agreements. On societal level, a conservative view on childcare causes a general undervaluation of the job, as if only female skills are sufficient to become a childcare worker. The bewildering range of qualifications, without recognition of the government nor consequences with regard to wage-level, have to be a real point of concern. Moreover, trade unions have to actively recruit childcare workers and negotiate better employment conditions and quality conditions in childcare facilities. Trade unions could also strive for more public control on both quality of childcare services as employment quality of childcare staff and for a strengthening of public childcare (organized by the municipalities) as a counterpart for the privately organized care to the bottom that currently exist 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, the central government has imposed some rules which really help to increase the employment quality

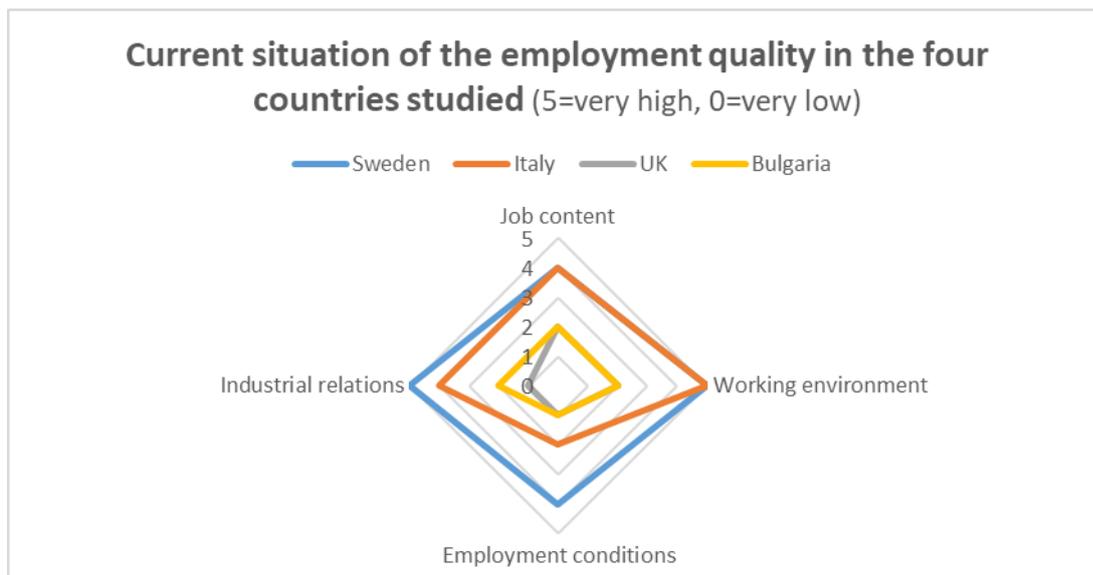
of childcare staff. High quality standards and control are combined with high educational requirements and a number of obligatory training hours annually for childcare staff. This professionalization is beneficial for the job content and social standing of childcare staff. These standards are imposed 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 are seldom permanent and the wages are already stagnant for some years. Moreover, there exists a trend to outsource publicly owned childcare facilities to private partners, which is even more detrimental for the employment conditions, for example regarding holiday pay or retirement entitlements. In sum, Italy combines some positive and negative trends.

*Key concern: stable and secure employment contracts*

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, the employment quality is very low. The average age of childcare workers is over 50 years old and the sector experiences difficulties attracting new workers. And this should not be surprising, wages for childcare workers are close to ground level, the work is intensive and both physically (noise!) and psychological demanding and the social standing is generally very low. On top, 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 and private companies and the informal sector are increasingly filling the gaps. In response, the government rapidly has to undertake action to make jobs in childcare more attractive for young people. Basic employment conditions have to improve and to attain the ambitious goals, investments in education and training of childcare workers will be necessary. Trade unions should also focus on the informal childcare sector in Bulgaria.

*Key concern: higher wages & better training*

Summarizing 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 identified some common trends as well. In every country studied, the job of childcare worker is becoming **more and more complex** and often uncertain. This complexity 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*, the job of childcare worker offers little security as employment contracts are short, no collective labour agreements are available and health and safety requirements are only to a limited extent regulated. This uncertainty in employment conditions, working environment and industrial relations also adds to the complexity of the job.
- In *Italy*, the combination of stagnant wages, temporal employment contracts and increasing quality standards put pressure on the job content and employment conditions of childcare workers.
- In *Bulgaria*, working groups are huge, tasks are repetitive and pay is low. High work pressure (job content) combined with little generous employment conditions make working in childcare uncertain and complex.

We identified some common elements that play a role in making childcare jobs more complex in every country:

- Increased **administrative burden**.
- Children become **more diverse** and have different family backgrounds.
- As governments implement more complex educational and pedagogical goals to the tasks of childcare workers, their **work packages become more and more difficult**.

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

- Governments offer **no budget** to attract more (skilled) childcare workers.
- To have a better **control** on the expenditure, some countries centralize power to the administration, diminishing local autonomy to customize childcare services to local needs.
- Restraints on budget 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 less or stagnant resources is having **detrimental personal and work related outcomes**:

- Childcare workers have 80% more chance at psychological illnesses than the average worker (*Sweden*)
- 84% of staff not covered by CLA's (*UK*)
- Having a second job is norm rather than exception (*Bulgaria*)
- 50% of childcare staff report 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 **marketization** of childcare services are okay if a clear regulatory framework exists, for example in Sweden and Italy. If such a framework is absent, marketization might lead to a **race to the bottom** with regard to the employment quality and the quality of childcare services, such as illustrated by the UK example.

Policy choices clearly impact the employment quality of childcare workers. Although we identified more or less the same policies (in theory or in practice) in each country, the employment quality

differs greatly. This could be attributed to 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 grown weaknesses. Employment quality in the UK has plummeted in recent years due to a cocktail of detrimental policies. Moreover, the conservative family based opinion on childcare, which is still present, aggravates the situation. Finally, in Bulgaria some positive policies which can increase the employment quality could be distinguished but still have to be implemented in practice.