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Transforming Working Time for Gender Equality: the Four-Day Week as a Driver of Organisational Change*

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1. *Introduction*

Despite regulatory progress and the implementation of policies promoting equality, women continue to face multiple obstacles in accessing the labour market and advancing in their professional careers in many European Member States. One of the most evident manifestations of such inequality is occupational segregation, which unfolds along both horizontal and vertical dimensions. Horizontal segregation refers to the tendency of women to be concentrated in sectors and professions with a predominantly female presence, generally characterised by lower economic and social recognition. Vertical segregation, on the other hand, highlights the underrepresentation of women in senior and managerial positions, revealing the persistence of barriers that hinder access to roles of greater responsibility and opportunities for career advancement. Another critical issue, often connected with

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these two phenomena, lies in the difficulty of reconciling private and professional life: women, indeed, continue to bear a disproportionate share of family responsibilities and unpaid care work, which consequently limits their full participation in the labour market[1].

This article analyses the main and most effective regulatory and contractual responses to the phenomenon of female occupational segregation, examining how everyday organisational practices – in particular those relating to working-time management – create and reproduce gender gaps and assessing the role played by institutions, legal systems and social partners in creating, confirming or counteracting such inequalities within the EU framework. Indeed, "time" constitutes the central element of the main existing work-life reconciliation tools: the use of leaves means – from the worker's point of view – a trade-off between the time allocated to professional activity and that dedicated to private life[2]; similarly, "part-time" work entails the renunciation of a portion of working hours in exchange for a greater amount of time for personal life; conversely, the most recently developed flexible work arrangements allow the work schedule to be adapted to individual needs and preferences of the worker, reconciling work time with free time without sacrificing one for the benefit – or to the detriment – of the other.

This article argues that working-time regulation should no longer be understood merely as an instrument of work-life reconciliation but as an organisational governance tool capable of promoting substantive gender equality.

[1] Aa.Vv., *The future of gender equality in the EU*, ETUI, 2026, pp. 16-18; ANPAL, *Conciliazione vita lavoro: sviluppo di policy. Analisi comparata internazionale*, 2019, pp. 6-11; Staffieri, *Armonizzazione dei tempi di vita e di lavoro*, in *DPL*, 2023, 29, pp. 1773-1774; Romano, Petruccioli, *Gender diversity management, culture inclusive e sfide dell'attualità. Una review sistematica della letteratura*, in *ESS*, 2020, 1, pp. 224-226, describe the phenomenon of *flex-insecurity*, whereby increases in female employment have not translated into improved labour-market access or job quality.

[2] Militello, *Tempi di lavoro e conciliazione. L'orario di lavoro scelto come strumento di parità*, in Aa.Vv., *Diritto di conciliazione. Prospettive e limiti della trasposizione della direttiva 2019/1158/UE*, in *Quaderno DLM*, 2023, 14, pp. 41-42, refers to a division between time allocated to productive work and time devoted to reproductive, care and assistance work. With regard to working time from a gender perspective: Chung, *Flexible working arrangements and gender equality in Europe*, European Commission, DG JUST, 2024; Lazzeroni, *Genere e tempi di lavoro*, in *MGL*, 2020, 1, pp. 43-57; ILO, *Working Time and Work-Life Balance Around the World*, 2022; Santagata de Castro, *Work-life balance, flessibilità dell'orario di lavoro e discriminazioni*, in this journal, 2023, 1, pp. 47-83. Concerning the individual right to work-life balance, see Zucaro, *Il diritto all'equilibrio vita-lavoro*, Giappichelli, 2024.

Methodologically, the article adopts a comparative legal approach combining the analysis of EU legislation, national implementing measures and selected best practices. The legislative analysis is complemented by an examination of collective bargaining, which is considered as an essential mechanism through which statutory rights are translated into organisational practices.

The research proceeds as follows. It begins by outlining the EU work-life balance regulatory framework, with a specific focus on Directive 2019/1158/EU ("WLB directive") and the implementation of flexible working arrangements (FWAs)[3]. It then traces the connection between flexibility and gender equality by cross-examining the organisational facilitators of FWAs with the corporate drivers of gender-equity policies, thereby identifying the conditions under which working-time flexibility can effectively foster gender-inclusive change. This analytical framework provides the basis for examining its most recent and innovative manifestation: the four-day working week. Finally, the analysis contextualises this instrument within the Italian employment landscape by evaluating both recent legislative proposals and company-level collective practices through a gender lens.

2. *Work-life balance as a driver of gender equality within the European legal framework*

The European legislator has recently adopted a series of measures that, directly or indirectly, affect the organisation of work across Member States from a gender perspective. These interventions follow the adoption of the European Pillar of Social Rights, which has proven to be a valuable tool for labour market inclusion and for managing structural vulnerability in the workplace.

Within the Pillar, principle no. 2 ("Gender Equality") and principle no. 9 ("Work-Life Balance") are of particular significance for the present analysis. The comparison with art. 33 ("Family and Professional Life") of the EU Charter of Fundamental Rights ("the Charter"), on which it is based, highlights several innovations. First, the Pillar emphasises the balance between

[3] Directive 2019/1158/EU of the European Parliament and of the Council of 20 June 2019 on work-life balance for parents and carers and repealing Council Directive 2010/18/EU.

professional activity and family life – an aspect that is less explicitly stated in the title of art. 33 – and downgrades the concept of "professional life" to the narrower term "professional activity": this choice reflects contemporary challenges linked to digitalisation, overproductivity and overworking, which increasingly hinder the ability to "disconnect" from work[4].

The content of the Pillar's provision goes beyond that set out in the Charter in several respects. First, principle no. 9 extends the personal scope of the provision beyond parents to include carers, thereby recognising that care within the family context now extends beyond the care of children to include the care of sick or elderly people. Second, art. 33 of the Charter provides, as means of reconciling family and working life, the rights to protection against dismissal on grounds related to maternity, to paid maternity leave and to parental leave following the birth or adoption of a child. The Pillar represents a step forward in this respect as well, supplementing leave – the traditional means of work-life balance – with two additional mechanisms: the right to request flexible working arrangements and access to care services. With regard to leave, principle no. 9 specifies that it must be "suitable" and that women and men have equal access to special leaves of absence. In this respect, several scholars have credited principle no. 9 with moving beyond the gendered, mother-centred approach reflected in art. 33 of the Charter. In particular, while art. 33(2) expressly refers to "paid maternity leave", the reference to "parental leave" is not accompanied by an equivalent qualification as to payment. This textual asymmetry has been regarded in the literature as reinforcing a model in which care responsibilities remain primarily associated with women, rather than encouraging their more equal sharing between men and women[5].

Together with principle no. 2, principle no. 9 was subsequently operationalised through the WLB directive, which is part of the EU strategy to combat female occupational segregation[6].

[4] Eurofound, *Working anytime, anywhere: The quality of working time in the EU*, Publications Office of the EU, 2026, pp. 17-18. Maserati, *Prevedibilità dell'orario di lavoro e programmabilità dei tempi liberi nel rapporto full-time*, in *RGL*, 2025, 1, pp. 51-53.

[5] See Bell, *The principle of equal treatment and the European Pillar of Social Rights*, in *DLRI*, 2018, 160, 4, pp. 786-791; McGlynn, *Work, Family and Parenthood: the European Union Agenda*, in Conaghan, Rittich (eds.), *Labour Law, Work and Family*, Oxford University Press, 2005, pp. 217 and 228.

[6] For a general overview of the legislative measures driven by the European institutions, see Aa.Vv., *The future of gender*, cit., pp. 8-15.

The rationale guiding the European institutions in this field has evolved over time, in parallel with changes in societal attitudes towards the issue across different national contexts. The earliest legislative interventions, grounded in the traditional "male breadwinner" model, were gradually replaced by the "dual-earner" or "dual-career" paradigm[7]. However, this transition long collided with the "gender-blind" structure of directive 2003/88/EC[8]. By privileging flexibility in working-time arrangements in favour of employers and by conceptualising non-working time merely as rest and recuperation for a worker assumed to have no external care responsibilities, it proved structurally deficient in protecting those outside this paradigm[9]. While subsequent instruments – such as those on pregnant workers, parental leave and part-time work[10] – contributed to supporting women in managing care responsibilities, they failed to promote an equitable sharing of such tasks with male workers[11]. The focus on part-time work as the primary reconciliation tool further reinforced this imbalance. Rather than fostering substantive equality, part-time often consolidated the gendered division of care and served employers' organisational needs more than workers' genuine choices[12]. Ultimately, the limitations of traditional leaves and their unequal

[7] Romano, Petruccioli, *cit.*, pp. 229-232; Scarponi, *"Work life balance" fra diritto UE e diritto interno*, in *WP C.S.D.L.E. "Massimo D'Antona"*, 2021, 156, pp. 2-5; Calvellini, *Flessibilità e work-life balance: un percorso tra realtà e retorica*, in *Labor*, 2021, 4, pp. 410-413.

[8] Directive 2003/88/EC of the European Parliament and of the Council of 4 November 2003 concerning certain aspects of the organisation of working time. Hereafter the "working-time directive".

[9] Zucaro, *Conciliazione vita-lavoro e gender gap nella cura. L'evoluzione legislativa nel prisma del quadro normativo europeo*, in *RGL*, 2022, 2, pp. 311-313, describes the first EU work-life balance measures as adopting a "mother-friendly" approach, based on the assumption that women alone were responsible for caregiving.

[10] Respectively: Council Directive 92/85/EEC; Council Directive 96/34/EC; Council Directive 2010/18/EU; Council Directive 97/81/EC. Directive 2019/1158/EU repeals directive 2010/18/EU. See Chieregato, *Conciliazione vita-lavoro: la nuova Direttiva UE sull'equilibrio tra attività professionale e vita familiare*, in *LG*, 2020, 2, pp. 126-128; Scarponi, *cit.*, pp. 2-5.

[11] Chieregato, *A Work-life balance for all? Assessing the inclusiveness of EU Directive 2019/1158*, in *IJCL*, 2020, 36, I, pp. 8-11.

[12] The literature on the subject is extensive: Barbieri, Cutuli, Guetto, Scherer, *Part-time employment as a way to increase women's employment: (Where) does it work?*, in *IJCS*, 2019, 60, 4, pp. 249-268; Beham, Baierl, Eckner, *When does part-time employment allow managers with family responsibilities to stay on the career track? A vignette study among German managers*, in *EMJ*, 2020, 38, 4, pp. 580-590; Brollo, *Occupazione femminile e flessibilità dei tempi di lavoro: il part-time*, in Brollo, Serafin (eds.), *Donne, politica e istituzioni: il tempo delle donne*, Forum Editrice

uptake by men and women, combined with the highly gendered concentration in part-time employment, have reinforced occupational segregation and the gender employment gap across European labour markets.

In response, the WLB directive explicitly aims to "achieve equality between men and women […] by facilitating the reconciliation of work and family life for workers who are parents, or carers" (art. 1), recognising that "limited incentives" for male caregiving and the lack of awareness-raising in this area "reinforces gender stereotypes and differences between work and care" (recital 11)[13]. To overcome these limitations, the directive introduces both new and strengthened individual rights to "paternity, parental and carers' leave", alongside the "right to request flexible working arrangements".

Among these, the latter represents one of its most innovative features: under art. 9, workers with children up to at least eight years of age, as well as carers, are entitled to request FWAs under certain conditions, recognising the value of flexible working hours to balance private life and professional activity. Pursuant to art. 3 of the directive, flexible working arrangements shall mean "the possibility for workers to adjust their working patterns, including through the use of "remote working arrangements", "flexible working schedules", or "reduced working hours" (emphasis added). This responds directly to the difficulties of balancing private and professional life within an occupational context characterised by extended and variable working hours[14]. Crucially, working-time programmability – the employer's inability to unilaterally alter it and the worker's ability to modify its duration

Universitaria Udinese, 2013; De Marco, *Disparità di genere e part-time involontario*, in *iQual*, 2025, 8; Calvellini, *cit.*, pp. 420-429; Militello, *Tempi di lavoro*, cit., pp. 45-49.

[13] Recital (6) of the Directive, on the other hand, states that work-life balance policies should contribute to gender equality by promoting women's participation in the labour market and the fair sharing of caregiving responsibilities between men and women. On the topic, Chung, *Flexible working arrangements*, cit., pp. 1-3. Concerning the instruments for the legal protection of parental rights within the context of Italian labour law, see Vallauri, *Genitorialità e lavoro. Interessi protetti e tecniche di tutela*, Giappichelli, 2020.

[14] Recital (10) of Directive 2019/1158 states: "work-life balance remains a considerable challenge for many parents and workers with caring responsibilities, in particular because of the increasing prevalence of 'extended working hours and changing work schedules' (emphasis added), which has a negative impact on women's employment". On the topic see also Salazar, *Conciliazione vita-lavoro: principio da costruire legislativamente e culturalmente*, in *DPL*, 2025, 21, pp. 1288-1292.

and allocation – becomes central when flexibility is conceived as a reconciliation tool[15].

By intervening on this second dimension of time programmability, the WLB Directive introduces a possibility to modify the traditional regulation of working time which, until now, has remained an area almost entirely subjected to the employer's control[16]. Moreover, by establishing a worker's right to request a flexible work organisation for reconciliation needs and imposing on the employer the obligation to provide a response, the European legislator has introduced a mechanism that – despite its limited prescriptive power, since any adjustments remain subject to the employer's approval – enables an effective assessment of organisational choices, paving the way for a judicial balancing between these choices and the individual worker's right to work-life balance.

In this perspective, it may also be argued that such a right could be invoked by workers in light of the "protective" safeguards provided by art. 21 ("Non-discrimination") and art. 23 ("Equality between women and men") of the Charter, which, together with the anti-discrimination directives, elevate non-discrimination to a general principle of EU law[17]. This approach finds further support in art. 11 and 12 of the WLB directive, prohibiting less favourable treatment or retaliatory dismissal against workers who exercise their rights to leaves, time off from work and FWAs[18].

From this perspective, a combined reading of the WLB directive and EU anti-discrimination legislation remains essential: while the former primarily introduces procedural rights (beyond the regulation of leave en-

[15] Calvellini, *cit.*, pp. 413-417, refers to the two concepts through the notions of a *minimal* or *defensive* dimension in the former case, and a *maximal* or *expansive* dimension in the latter. Militello, *Tempi di lavoro*, cit., pp. 43-45, emphasises the importance of the 'predictability' of 'working time' in the former case and of the 'right to influence the organisation of working time' in the latter. Maserati, *cit.*, pp. 43-45.

[16] Militello, *Tempi di lavoro*, cit., pp. 41-42 and 55-61, refers to dir. 2003/88/EC as "gender blind".

[17] Scarponi, *cit.*, p. 12 ff., argues that the Directive enables this by clearly defining rights holders and employers' obligations. According to Zucaro, *Conciliazione vita-lavoro*, cit., pp. 313-317, the Directive paves the way for recognising discrimination based on family caregiving responsibilities as a protected ground under EU anti-discrimination law. Waddington, Bell, *The right to request flexible working arrangements under the Work-life Balance Directive – A comparative perspective*, in *ELLJ*, 2021, 12, 4, pp. 520-521.

[18] Art. 11, Directive 2019/1158/EU. On the subject, see Chieregato, *Conciliazione vita-lavoro*, cit., pp. 130-133.

titlements), the latter confers rights of a substantive nature. Indeed, since caregiving responsibilities remain highly gendered, it appears probable that workers requesting FWAs will frequently belong to a group protected by anti-discrimination regulation on the basis of one or more protected grounds: gender, in the case of women (but also men) with caring responsibilities; disability, where the request is submitted by a worker with a disability; or, via discrimination by association, in the case of individuals who are not characterised by a protected ground but who are nonetheless closely associated with an individual who is so characterised[19].

Some questions remain as to the actual capacity of these two regulatory frameworks, when considered together, to achieve a genuine redistribution of care responsibilities from a gender perspective. This appears particularly interesting when considering that different work-life balance models can be identified within the European framework[20]: a "Mediterranean model" (including countries such as Italy and Spain), where family is considered the primary provider of assistance and care and where collective bargaining still plays a pivotal role in regulating the issue; a "Nordic model" (such as in the Netherlands, in Sweden or in Denmark), where a strong social State is accompanied by the interaction of both public and private conciliation policies; and a "Continental model" (such as that found in Germany and France), where a combination of public policies and economic incentives for the private sector is in place. Moreover, it is important to consider that the implementation of the WLB directive has been quite heterogeneous across the Member States, making it complex to identify a common pattern behind it[21]. This structural divergence, which ranges from bare-minimum

[19] Waddington, Bell, *cit.*, p. 527. A recent development concerning the extension of the obligation to provide reasonable accommodation in the field of disability was marked by the *Bervidi* judgment of the Court of Justice, delivered on 11 September 2025 (CJEU, 11 September 2025, case C-38/24, *Bervidi, G.L. v AB SpA*). The Italian referring court asked whether that obligation also extends to caregivers of disabled children. Relying on *Coleman*, the literal interpretation of art. 2(1) of Directive 2000/78/EC and its overall objective, the Court recognised indirect discrimination "by association".

[20] On the topic, see Salazar, *cit.*, pp. 1288-1292.

[21] Pursuant to art. 18 ("*Reporting and Review*") of directive 2019/1158/EU, Member States are required to submit data concerning the implementation of the directive at national level by 2 August 2027, thereby enabling the Commission to prepare an official report. On the implementation of the directive, see De la Corte-Rodríguez, *The transposition of the Work-Life Balance Directive in EU Member States (II): Considerable work still to be done*, European network of legal experts in gender equality and non-discrimination, 2023.

statutory compliance (as seen in countries aligning strictly with the ten-day paternity limit or the five-day carers' leave) to highly evolved frameworks typical of the Nordic and certain Continental systems, is far from neutral. Crucially, these diverse legislative interventions on work-life balance contribute to defining a specific national regulatory framework that is subsequently shaped and complemented by the initiatives of social partners, who play a pivotal role in resolving the concrete challenges linked to the promotion of gender equality.

2.1. *Working-time flexibility as a measure to promote gender equality*

The implementation of the WLB directive remains highly fragmented with regard to its most innovative instrument: flexible working arrangements. Their gender-equality potential, however, depends not only on formal availability but heavily on the substantial conditions governing access, use and institutional recognition. Member States diverge significantly as regards the typologies of adjustments available, whether workers hold an absolute or relative right to use them, the personal scope of entitlement and applicable statutory time limits[22].

First, national legislators have introduced a wide range of instruments aimed at improving work-life balance. Part-time work remains the mechanism most commonly promoted across Member States[23], often in combination with reconciliation schemes providing for flexibility both in the place of work – through, for example, teleworking – and in working time, by means of arrangements such as flexitime. The architecture of these national measures is closely linked to the legal nature of the entitlement granted to the workforce, establishing a sharp dichotomy between an absolute right to the arrangement and a merely relative right, which instead subordinates the adjustments to managerial approval. Crucially, while an absolute right to part-time work is widely integrated into the majority of domestic frameworks, broader FWAs (including teleworking and flexitime) generally constitute only a relative right. Notable exceptions are found in Portugal,

[22] De la Corte-Rodríguez, *cit.*, pp. 103-106.

[23] This is registered, for example, in Austria, Belgium, Spain, Hungary, Latvia, Poland and Slovenia.

Hungary, Ireland and Romania, where teleworking constitutes an absolute right for all workers[24].

Similarly, the personal scope of flexible work-life balance entitlement varies considerably across the European landscape. Albeit to a limited extent, a statutory distinction is drawn between public and private sector provisions in certain jurisdictions[25]. A more pronounced divergence emerges regarding the specific categories of eligible workers, dictated primarily by the maximum age of children up to which parents may claim these instruments (ranging from 8 to 15 years), as well as by the restrictive targeting to the narrow categories covered by the WLB directive. Conversely, several Member States opt for universal workforce entitlement: in Austria, part-time work and telework are recognised for all public sector employees; in Belgium, part-time work in the form of a four-day week is recognised within public employment; in Spain, all private sector workers with demonstrable reconciliation needs hold flexible working entitlements; finally, the Netherlands grants identical rights to all employees, provided that the employer retains at least ten workers[26].

This comparative overview shows that national legislation provides only a variable baseline for access to flexibility; its gender-equality potential ultimately depends on how social partners adapt and develop such measures within specific sectoral, territorial and organisational contexts[27]. Accordingly, assessing the gender-equality potential of working-time flexibility requires a cross-analysis of, on the one hand, the factors shaping its adoption and use within organisations and, on the other, the rationales underpinning corporate gender-equality and inclusion policies. Company-level collective bargaining is particularly relevant in this respect, as it is the level at which statutory rights are translated into organisational practices and adapted to specific workplace conditions.

The first analytical dimension concerns the conditions that enable or, conversely, hinder the adoption of flexible working-time arrangements within organisations. "Sectoral" characteristics are particularly significant in

[24] Eurofound, *Working anytime, anywhere*, cit., p. 57.

[25] This is registered, for example, in Austria and Belgium, where a distinction is made between public and private sector.

[26] De la Corte-Rodríguez, *cit.*, pp. 103-106.

[27] ILO, *The contribution of social dialogue to gender equality*, December 2020.

this respect[28]. Flexibility in the organisation of working time may be introduced relatively easily in some sectors, such as finance and real estate, whereas work organisation appears less adaptable in education, healthcare, commerce, social services, manufacturing and construction. In addition, "company size" constitutes a further structural factor influencing the decision to adopt flexible arrangements[29]. Previous research has shown that large companies are generally better positioned to implement a range of flexible arrangements, given the substantial resources they can invest. Similarly, such arrangements may also be introduced in small enterprises, especially as a result of simplified management structures and the possibility of relying on informal agreements within a limited workforce. Conversely, medium-sized enterprises often face greater difficulties, given the scale of resources required to maintain production while lacking the flexibility to rely on informal arrangements, which may prove impracticable in organisations characterised by a larger workforce and multiple departments[30]. Furthermore, workers' "occupational level" must also be taken into account: empirical data show that both skill level and hierarchical position significantly affect access to these measures, with highly skilled employees and managers tending to enjoy greater access to flexibility arrangements. Lastly, the degree of "influence exercised by trade union representatives", together with their stance on the issue, is equally significant, particularly in the context of collective bargaining aimed at securing flexible arrangements that adequately reflect workers' needs. The broader "national context" also plays a pivotal role in the dissemination of FWAs, with available data suggesting that positive attitudes towards such instruments are more common in labour markets with an established tradition of flexibility, whereas scepticism may arise where flexibility is less widespread[31].

Among the non-structural factors mediating corporate flexibility are "employers' willingness" and the prevailing "organisational culture". From the employer's perspective, the potential benefits of flexibility in-

[28] On the topic, see: Eurofound, *Working anytime, anywhere*, cit., p. 32; Chung, *Flexible working arrangements*, cit., pp. 8-10; Jacobi, Hamjediers, Naujoks, *Tailored to Women, Provided to Men? Gendered Occupational Inequality in Access to Flexible Working-Time Arrangements*, in *SIR*, 2025, 176, pp. 1181-1182.

[29] Jacobi, Hamjediers, Naujoks, *cit.*, pp. 1183-1184.

[30] Chung, *Flexible working arrangements*, cit., pp. 33-39.

[31] Chung, *Flexible working arrangements*, cit., pp. 48-53.

clude improved productivity and overall organisational performance, greater employee well-being and engagement, a healthier organisational culture, and lower absenteeism, work-related stress, illness and replacement costs[32].

The factors outlined above – capable of influencing organisational flexibility across different national, sectoral and corporate contexts – are equally identifiable in relation to the dissemination of work-life balance measures within broader gender equality programmes. In general, the strategic drivers prompting companies to implement these arrangements can be categorised into three distinct operational rationales. The "organisational driver" reflects the recognition that workload distribution affects both gender equality and individual and collective well-being, with implications for organisational productivity. The second driver, the "economic" one, responds to the need for greater financial support for arrangements – such as leave entitlements – that remain inadequately compensated. Finally, the "cultural driver" promotes interventions aimed at addressing disparities within the territorial context[33] in which the company is located and operates.

According to the literature, work-life balance measures and the flexibilisation of working hours exert positive effects across several dimensions that historically feed the gender gap. Primarily, flexibility supports women's continued participation in full-time employment. Certain flexible working arrangements and working-time reductions, such as the "four-day working week" examined in the subsequent sections, render full-time employment more attractive to women who currently work part-time to reconcile paid work with care responsibilities, potentially narrowing the pay gap associated with part-time employment[34]. Furthermore, while flexibility does not automatically guarantee a gendered redistribution of care burdens and family responsibilities, it nonetheless establishes the material conditions for a more equitable allocation of workloads and unpaid care work by enabling male workers to use such arrangements, ultimately fostering broader female labour market participation.

[32] On the topic, see ILO, *Guida per l'organizzazione dell'orario di lavoro*, 2025, pp. 1-2; De Spiegelaere, Piasna, *Perché e come ridurre l'orario di lavoro*, ETUI, 2018, pp. 26-45.

[33] Staffieri, *Armonizzazione dei tempi*, cit., pp. 1775-1779, categorises the three rationales underpinning WLB measures.

[34] Maraziotis, *Flexibility for equality: Examining the impact of Flexible working time arrangements on women's convergence in working hours*, in *BJIR*, 2024, 62, pp. 410-414.

Crucially, the gender impact of work-life balance measures depends significantly on the context in which they are implemented. As the previous analysis of organisational flexibility demonstrates, neither flexibility nor work-life balance measures are inherently gender-equal; their long-term efficacy depends on their design, workplace culture and their capacity to challenge, rather than reproduce, deeply rooted gendered assumptions about care work.

At the macro level, national attitudes towards gender equality and the size of the gender gap shape both the scale of intervention required and the conditions for achieving lasting results. Moreover, the specific characteristics of each productive sector, together with the gender composition of its workforce, are equally decisive for the development of effective work-life balance measures. This has implications, for instance, with regard to the intended beneficiaries of the measures adopted, who may constitute either the majority or the minority within a given sector, thereby generating the risk of marginalisation precisely of those individuals whom such measures are intended to include.

At the company level, similar dynamics may be observed, further shaped by the significance of organisational culture, both in terms of prevailing conceptions and structures of work and with regard to sensitivity to issues of Diversity, Equity and Inclusion. These elements assume particular importance when employers decide whether to adopt a comprehensive "gender mainstreaming" strategy across organisational and decision-making processes[35]. Furthermore, flexibility measures are increasingly interpreted through a gendered lens, with potentially adverse consequences for both women and men. Women remain disadvantaged by the assumption that they use, or will eventually use, flexible arrangements primarily for care purposes. Men who use such measures to manage family and care responsibilities, rather than for training or performance-related purposes, may likewise face negative repercussions[36].

Against this background, collective bargaining has often intervened in areas where legislation remains hesitant, pioneering the gender-sensitive management of working and non-working time. The concrete in-

[35] Chung, van der Lippe, *Flexible Working, Work-Life Balance, and Gender Equality: Introduction*, in *SIR*, 2020, 151, pp. 375-378.

[36] Jacobi, Hamjediers, Naujoks, *cit.*, pp. 1183-1184.

itiatives implemented by social partners and companies can be mapped across the same economic, cultural and organisational drivers previously identified.

The "economic rationale" drives companies to negotiate paternity, parental and carers' leave exceeding statutory minimum standards in duration and compensation, introducing highly flexible options such as hourly utilisation[37]. In addition, company-level collective agreements frequently expand paid time off for specific family contingencies, such as children's integration in nursery, medical appointments and care in the event of illness of children or of persons for whom the worker is recognised as a caregiver. Furthermore, companies design sophisticated welfare schemes that offer financial incentives and flexible benefits, including welfare credits for educational services, childcare subsidies, health screening grants, discounts for cultural events and training courses, as well as corporate bonuses upon childbirth or adoption.

Welfare schemes also form the core of interventions governed by a "cultural rationale", frequently deployed to compensate for structural shortcomings in local public infrastructures and services, for example through the establishment of services and partnership arrangements related to early childhood facilities and care provision. The corporate adoption of DE&I strategies and organisational models should likewise be understood as an integral part of this culture-driven approach[38]. These frameworks integrate a wide range of gender equality initiatives, from the drafting of ethical codes and corporate codes of conduct to the implementation of work-life balance measures and the unbiased organisation of work activities. Furthermore, they include the design of training and awareness-raising initiatives on diversity and equal opportunities, as well as systematic research and gender demographic monitoring – both within the company and across the broader sector – aimed at formulating targeted policy interventions[39]. In this way, a diversity-sensitive perspective can be structurally embedded across all corporate decision-making and organizational processes.

[37] Altilio, *La parità di genere nella contrattazione collettiva aziendale*, Adapt WP, 2025, 3, pp. 10-22; ILO, *The contribution of social*, cit.

[38] Staffieri, *Armonizzazione dei tempi*, cit., pp. 1773-1774.

[39] Santoni, Crespi, *Conciliazione famiglia e lavoro tra smart-working e diversity management. Una riflessione su pratiche e nuove semantiche*, in *ALSS*, 2022, 1, pp. 54-59; Altilio, *La parità di genere*, cit., pp. 27-28.

Finally, the "organisational rationale" leads companies to adopt advanced measures for the management of work activities, including flexible working hours, working-time accounts, facilitated part-time work, remote working and the adoption of shortened working weeks[40]. For instance, working-time accounts (such as the Italian *banca delle ore*) allow workers to accrue credits from overtime or unused leave, which may subsequently be used for training, health-related absences or work-life balance purposes[41].

In shaping the execution of work, collective bargaining operates on two analytical axes: spatial and temporal flexibility. With regard to the former, digital innovations have undoubtedly increased the remote execution of work through smart working, without affecting workers' overall remuneration[42]. However, while remote work has become an established work-life balance tool, its long-term efficacy has gradually been questioned, especially because it may significantly interfere with the amount of time devoted to work-related tasks, increasingly resulting in hyperconnectivity and thereby undermining the boundary between professional and private life that it was, conversely, intended to strengthen[43]. On the other hand, temporal flexibility involves the modulation of daily and weekly schedules based on the intersection of workers' needs and business predictability. In this domain, collective bargaining encompasses a wide range of established measures aimed at ensuring a degree of flexibility in entry and exit times

[40] On the topic, broadly, ILO, *Guida per l'organizzazione*, cit., pp. 20-26; Staffieri, *Pari opportunità e contrasto alla violenza di genere nella contrattazione collettiva*, in *DPL*, 2024, 47/48, pp. 2778-2779; Altilio, *La parità di genere*, cit., pp. 10-22; Chung, *Flexible working arrangements*, cit., pp. 5-7; Staffieri, *Armonizzazione dei tempi*, cit., pp. 1775-1779; Senatori, *La «nuova» conciliazione vita-lavoro e la contrattazione collettiva: una sfida che si ripete*, in *RGL*, 2022, 4, pp. 596-611.

[41] Moreover, it is possible to identify also working-time accounts based "on solidarity", built from the donation of hours by both the company itself and other workers. ILO, *Guida per l'organizzazione*, cit., p. 27; Altilio, *La parità di genere*, cit., pp. 10-22.

[42] Altilio, *La parità di genere*, cit., pp. 10-22.

[43] Calvellini, *cit.*, pp. 423-429; Militello, *Il work-life blending nell'era della on demand economy*, in *RGL*, 2019, 1. On the general issues concerning agile work, see Santagata De Castro, Monda (eds.), *Il lavoro a distanza: una prospettiva interna e comparata*, in *Quaderno DLM*, 2023, 13. For a general reflection on remote work and gender equality, see at least: Gabriele, *Il diritto alla disconnessione e il tempo per la cura: la dimensione multilevel e le prospettive di tutela*, in *DML*, 2023, 3; Schiavetti, *La parità di genere nei luoghi di lavoro, tra work-life balance e nuove tecnologie*, in *Federalismi.it - Focus: Lavoro, Persona, Tecnologia*, 2023, 4; Jansen, De Angelis, *Remote work vs part-time employment: a new work-family balance?*, INAPP WP, 2025, 139; Santoni, Crespi, *cit.*, pp. 45-66; Tinti, *Il lavoro agile e gli equivoci della conciliazione virtuale*, in *WP C.S.D.L.E. "Massimo D'Antona"*, 2020, 419.

(commonly referred to as "flexitime"), as well as flexibility in the management of lunch breaks and the personalised planning of weekly schedules[44]. These traditional arrangements are increasingly complemented by more recent experiments promoting the "four-day working week" as part of a broader reconsideration of work organisation, which may also pursue gender-equality objectives, as will be discussed in the next section.

3. *Working-time reduction: the potential of the four-day working week to achieve gender equality*

The previous section has shown that working-time organisation constitutes a central dimension of work-life balance policies and, more broadly, of organisational strategies capable of promoting gender equality. Against this background, the analysis now turns to the "four-day working week" (hereafter, also, "4DW"), the most ambitious recent attempt to rethink working-time organisation, and examines its potential implications for gender equality.

The four-day working week constitutes a new model of work organisation whereby standard weekly working hours are distributed over four days rather than five. Two principal modalities may be distinguished: the first entails a reduction in the overall number of weekly working hours without any loss of salary (a "reduced four-day week"); the second consists in the redistribution of the standard weekly working hours over four days without any reduction in total hours, commonly described as "compressed four-day week[45]". Both models have gained increasing attention in light of recent developments, including the reorganisation of work during and in the immediate aftermath of the Covid-19 pandemic, as well as broader labour market dynamics such as the phenomenon of "great resignations" and the persistent gender employment gap[46].

[44] ILO, *Guida per l'organizzazione*, cit., pp. 20-26.

[45] Del Frate, *Studio sulla flessibilità funzionale dell'orario di lavoro*, Giappichelli, 2024, p. 128; Chung, *Flexible working arrangements*, cit., pp. 76-78; Carcano, *Accordi sulla "settimana corta": vantaggi e limiti*, in *DPL*, 5, 2024, p. 298.

[46] Aa.Vv., *Work Time Reduction: A Critical Analysis of the Main Arguments for Adopting a 4-Day Workweek*, in Machado (ed.), *Human Resource Management in a Disrupted World, Lecture Notes on Multidisciplinary Industrial Engineering*, Springer Nature Switzerland, 2025, pp. 334-337.

The four-day working week is not an entirely new instrument; rather, it must be placed within a broader series of interventions which, at both international and supranational levels, have progressively contributed to the reduction of working time[47]. Given the centrality of working hours within the Western model of labour regulation – where they function as the primary metric for measuring work performance and determining remuneration – their regulation has historically proven complex, considering also that they are managed across multiple regulatory levels, such as statutory legislation and collective bargaining[48].

This structural complexity is likewise evident in the implementation of the four-day working week. As a form of working-time reduction, this instrument must be assessed within the broader framework outlined above: not as an inherently gender-equal model, but as an organisational arrangement whose effects depend on its design, the surrounding institutional context and its interaction with wider equality policies.

To fully evaluate its transformative potential, it is necessary to examine the principal drivers encouraging the adoption of the four-day working week across three distinct yet interconnected analytical perspectives: that of workers, that of companies and employers, and that of society at large. From the employees' standpoint, the reduction of working time – particularly in the form of a "reduced" four-day week – fosters substantial improvements in working conditions. These include enhanced work-life balance, reduced physical and mental fatigue, lower occupational stress and expanded opportunities for personal self-realisation and overall quality of life[49]. From the employers' perspective, organisational benefits include enhanced individu-

[47] ETUC, *Bargaining for working time reduction. ETUC Study on Working Time Reduction in Collective Agreements*, 2025, pp. 36-46; Eurofound, *Working time reduction and its impact on productivity: A systematic literature review*, 2026. Del Frate, *Prove di sostenibilità per la c.d. four day week, tra contrattazione collettiva e poteri unilaterali*, in Aa.Vv., *Tempi di lavoro, misure di conciliazione e welfare negoziale tra legge e contratto collettivo*, Adapt University Press, 2024, pp. 67-70; Aa.Vv., *Work Time Reduction*, cit., pp. 334-337; Cabrita, *Four days a week? Europe debates shorter working times*, Eurofound, 6 October 2025; Cazzola, *Politically (in)correct - Settimana corta o weekend lungo?*, in *Boll. Adapt*, 2023, 14.

[48] Ferrante, *L'orario di lavoro tra presente e futuro*, in *LLI*, 2022, 8, 1, pp. 115-125; Del Frate, *Prove di sostenibilità*, cit., pp. 77-80; Aa.Vv., *Analisi e formulazione di ipotesi di riduzione di orario di lavoro a parità di salario*, Inapp paper, 2026, 63, pp. 7-9.

[49] De Spiegelaere, Piasna, *cit.*, pp. 25-45; Aa.Vv., *Work Time Reduction*, cit., pp. 338-340; Carcano, *cit.*, pp. 300-301.

al and collective productivity, lower absenteeism rates and reduced turnover-related costs[50]. Additional time available to workers may also be devoted to training and professional development, thereby strengthening human capital within the enterprise[51]. Furthermore, the adoption of the four-day working week requires a structural reorganisation of workloads and business processes, offering an opportunity to modernise workplace models alongside broader transformations driven by digitalisation and sustainability goals. In addition, higher employee satisfaction and well-being foster staff retention, thereby supporting long-term organisational growth and enhancing corporate reputation[52]. Indeed, in contemporary labour markets, adopting innovative and socially responsible working models – as occurs with the implementation of DE&I frameworks – constitutes a significant competitive advantage in attracting talent[53]. Finally, at the macro-societal level, the four-day week promotes social, economic and environmental sustainability. On the one hand, reduced commuting and the periodic closure of workplaces can lower energy consumption and carbon emissions, while additional non-working time may foster more sustainable individual consumption patterns and civic participation[54]. On the other hand, positive impacts extend to broader employment dynamics: a reduction in individual working hours can facilitate job redistribution, thereby generating new employment opportunities, while more adaptable schedules enable older workers to extend their participation in the labour market, strengthening the sustainability of pension systems and mitigating demographic pressures[55].

The implementation of the four-day working week is shaped by the same structural, organisational and cultural conditions previously identified in relation to flexible working arrangements. Although these factors operate differently depending on whether a "reduced" or a "compressed" four-day week is involved, they remain decisive in determining both the feasibility of the measure and its capacity to promote gender equality.

[50] Eurofound, *Working time reduction*, cit., pp. 5-9 and the research conducted in Chapter 3 (pp. 32-37).

[51] Chung, *Flexible working arrangements*, cit., pp. 76-78.

[52] ETUC, *cit.*, pp. 15-18; Eurofound, *Working time reduction*, cit., pp. 42-44.

[53] Jain, Chouliara, Blake, *From Five to Four: Examining Employee Perspectives Towards the Four-Day Workweek*, in *AD*, 2025, 15, 3, 114, pp. 5-8.

[54] De Spiegelaere, Piasna, *cit.*, pp. 35-37; Aa.Vv., *Work Time Reduction*, cit., pp. 344-345; Carcano, *cit.*, pp. 300-301; ETUC, *cit.*, pp. 20-21.

[55] De Spiegelaere, Piasna, *cit.*, pp. 32-35; ETUC, *cit.*, pp. 21-23.

At the structural level, the effects of a four-day working week vary considerably according to workers' individual circumstances, sectoral characteristics and the broader regulatory environment. Worker uptake of the arrangement and individual outcomes are heavily conditioned by heterogeneous personal and caregiving commitments, specific job roles, pre-existing shift patterns and commuting frequency and duration[56]. Sectoral characteristics are equally decisive: the 4DW may prove especially beneficial in highly stressful sectors or in occupations characterised by high turnover, where improved working conditions could enhance retention and overall performance[57]. Conversely, factors such as seasonality, the structure of production chains involving interdependent departments, and the maintenance of international or global business relations with clients and stakeholders require tailored solutions and deep financial evaluations[58]. Finally, institutional and national frameworks significantly shape the implementation of the four-day working week. Financial incentives – such as the availability of public subsidies – are closely intertwined with the legal architecture governing working time: the choice of the appropriate regulatory instrument, whether statutory legislation or collective bargaining, thereby represents a pivotal element[59]. Moreover, this regulatory dynamic is linked to and influenced by both national collective bargaining coverage and the country's prevailing work culture[60].

At the organisational level, the effective adoption of the four-day week relies on the internal capacity of companies to redesign work in ways that make shorter working weeks sustainable. Introducing this measure requires a comprehensive reorganisation of workloads, alongside coherent wage policies and robust negotiation processes involving all relevant parties. This holistic approach is critical to prevent the 4DW from being reduced to a mere vehicle for cost-cutting or performance intensification, without a real commitment to enhancing workers' well-being[61].

[56] Eurofound, *Working anytime, anywhere*, cit., pp. 25-26; Du Bois, Baert, Sterkens, Derous, *From Policy to Practice: Unraveling Individual Uptake of Compressed Work Schedules*, in *HRMJ*, 2025, 64, pp. 1229-1230.

[57] Eurofound, *Working time reduction*, cit., pp. 9-10 and 62-63.

[58] Jain, Chouliara, Blake, *cit.*, pp. 5-8.

[59] Del Frate, *Studio sulla flessibilità*, cit., pp. 148-153.

[60] On the role of collective bargaining in the regulation of working time, see ETUC, *cit.*

[61] ETUC, *cit.*, pp. 12-13. This concern is particularly salient in the case of compressed working weeks. On the topic, see Du Bois, Baert, Sterkens, Derous, *cit.*, pp. 1237-1240.

Finally, at the cultural level, the long-term effectiveness of the four-day week depends on dismantling deeply entrenched workplace norms, particularly those linked to presenteeism and long-hours commitment models[62]. Without a genuine shift in managerial culture and evaluation metrics, shorter working hours risk reproducing informal career penalties and marginalising workers who use them.

Against this background, the potential contribution of the four-day working week to gender equality, which constitutes the primary focus of the present analysis, requires separate consideration. In this respect, the literature has identified several interrelated mechanisms through which this instrument may support more equal labour-market outcomes and a fairer distribution of care responsibilities.

A first mechanism concerns women's participation in the labour market. By improving work-life balance, enhancing predictability and programmability of working time, and making full-time employment more attractive, the four-day working week may encourage women's participation in paid work[63]. Given the high incidence of female part-time employment and the associated gender pay gap, the 4DW may also facilitate transitions from part-time to full-time employment, thereby contributing to narrowing both pay disparities and career inequalities[64]. Furthermore, since many of the most remunerative and senior positions currently presuppose long and uninterrupted working hours, a shorter standard working week may remove this barrier, opening access to leadership roles previously perceived as incompatible with family responsibilities[65]. A second mechanism relates to the redistribution of unpaid care work. The uptake of the four-day week by male workers may encourage a more balanced sharing of caring duties within households, while also challenging the stigma traditionally attached to reduced or flexible working arrangements when used for family-related reasons[66]. This shift is reinforced by a broader erosion of the "ideal worker"

[62] Eurofound, *Working anytime, anywhere*, cit., pp. 9-12. Chung, *Flexible working arrangements*, cit., pp. 79-81.

[63] Chung, *Flexible working arrangements*, cit., pp. 76-78; De Spiegelaere, Piasna, *cit.*, pp. 27-31; ETUC, *cit.*, pp. 23-24.

[64] Aa.Vv., *Work Time Reduction*, cit., pp. 341-343.

[65] Chung, *Flexible working arrangements*, cit., pp. 79-81; Chung, *A social policy case for a Four-Day Week*, in *JSP*, 2022, 51, 3, p. 557.

[66] By collectively reducing working hours for all employees, this mechanism also removes the social "excuses" that have historically allowed men to opt out of domestic and care

norm: by moving the measure of commitment away from presenteeism and towards tangible outcomes, the four-day week helps normalise the fact that every worker – regardless of gender – holds responsibilities beyond the workplace, thereby dismantling a stigma that has historically and disproportionately affected women[67]. Finally, these changes may generate broader economic effects at household level, including higher family income resulting from increased female labour market participation and a greater capacity to organise and access childcare services. Furthermore, by remaining within full-time employment regimes, women can also better protect their pension entitlements and long-term wage growth, in this way addressing the gender pension gap at its root.

Despite its potential benefits, the four-day week also entails significant risks and limitations for gender equality. Introduced in isolation and on a purely voluntary or corporate-led basis, it is unlikely to reverse structural inequalities in unpaid care or to foster gender equality in the labour market. Working-time reduction is part of a broader cultural transformation – much like gender equality itself – which relies on the coordinated action of multiple institutional actors. When individual companies take the lead in implementing such arrangements without State coordination, governments may be less inclined to intervene, both in terms of working-time regulation and for the promotion of equality policies[68]. A further concern arises from the operational design of the model, especially regarding the distinction between a "reduced" and a "compressed" four-day week. Concentrating standard weekly hours into four extended working days, as in the case of the "compressed" model, often proves incompatible with children's schedules and caregiving routines. If the model is imposed as a general organisational measure, it could potentially amount to indirect discrimination against workers with primary care responsibilities, who

activities. See: Mullens, *Time for a feminist future? A study on the impact of a 30-hour workweek on women's lives*, PhD dissertation, Vrije Universiteit Brussel, 2023, p. 225; Chung, *A social policy case*, cit., pp. 557-559.

[67] See Chung, *Flexible working arrangements*, cit., pp. 79-81, 92; Chung, *A social policy case*, cit., pp. 557-559; De Spiegelaere, Piasna, *cit.*, p. 65; Mullens, Glorieux, *Reducing weekly working hours: Temporal strategies and changes in the organization and experiences of work-Results from a qualitative study of a 30-hour workweek experiment*, in *TS*, 2023, 32, 2, pp. 162-163.

[68] Chung, *Flexible working arrangements*, cit., pp. 48-53.

are still predominantly women[69]. From a socio-cultural perspective, the four-day week may also reinforce rather than dismantle traditional gender roles. As a matter of fact, additional free time for women is often absorbed by unpaid domestic and care work, thereby reinforcing women's role as primary caregivers. Moreover, if the measure is adopted individually or voluntarily – resembling contemporary part-time models – it may attract a strong flexibility stigma, especially when associated with care or maternity. This can generate informal career penalties, slower wage growth and reduced access to promotion, ultimately contributing to a two-speed gender-segregated labour market[70] in which high-level positions remain tied to a long-hours culture.

4. *The Italian case: gender inequalities and four-day working week experiments*

Both models of the four-day working week described have gained traction in several Member States through legislative initiatives and collective agreements. An increasing number of experiments is also observable in Italy. Consistent with the aim of this study – to assess whether working-time reorganisation, conceived through a flexible and gender-aware lens, can serve as a driver of female inclusion rather than a source of further marginalisation – this section and the following one examine the Italian context and the conditions under which the 4DW might promote substantive gender equality.

First and foremost, the examination of certain data concerning the current condition of the Italian labour market – from a gender perspective – helps to understand and highlight the need to introduce innovative labour market organisation measures capable of improving some of the critical indicators that remain still present[71].

[69] Du Bois, Baert, Sterkens, Derous, *cit.*, p. 1237; Del Frate, *Studio sulla flessibilità*, cit., p. 150; De Spiegelaere, Piasna, *cit.*, p. 50.

[70] Chung, *Flexible working arrangements*, cit., p. 80, uses the concept "*two-tiered labour market system*" talking about the obstacles against career and remuneration prospects. Also, Chung, *A social policy case*, cit., p. 556.

[71] Data are taken from: Esposito (ed.), *Rapporto annuale sul mercato del lavoro e politiche di genere (Gender Policy Report)*, INAPP, December 2025. For an overview of EU data and trends, refer to the study by Aa.Vv., *The future of gender*, cit., pp. 18-38.

In 2025, the employment rate of the female population remains lower than that of the male population (53.9% compared with 71.4%), while concerning the unemployment rate of individuals, the gap is more limited, though still worrying (7.4% for women and 6.2% for men). By contrast, the disparity is far more pronounced in relation to the inactivity rate, which stands at approximately 41.7% for women, almost double that recorded for men (23.9%)[72]. Compared with 2024, a slight increase in women's employment rates can be observed: however, this growth is concentrated in the 45-64 age group; instead, for men, together with a similar rise in employment rates among those aged over 55, an increase in employment is also evident in the 25-34 age group[73].

A factor that significantly affects labour market participation indicators is parental status. According to data for 2025, having a child of dependent age produces markedly different effects on the labour market position of men and women: the employment rate for men remains on average 30% higher than that for women. Particularly alarming figures emerge with regard to maternal unemployment – which tends to be approximately double that of fathers – as well as non-participation in the labour market, which again is roughly twice as high for women as for men. An additional cause for concern is that these figures do not improve substantially as the age of dependent children increases, thereby highlighting the long-term effects of motherhood on women's employment prospects and career opportunities[74].

An analysis of the data concerning the underlying reasons for non-participation in the labour market indicates that "education and vocational training" constitutes the principal reason among economically inactive men aged 25-34 (45.5%). For women, by contrast, the predominant reason is "family-related responsibilities", accounting for 43.9% in the same age group. This proportion increases further among those aged 35-44 (61.5% for women compared with 4.6% for men) and remains consistently higher than that recorded for male workers across all subsequent working-age groups[75]. Finally, with regard to the contractual arrangements characterising newly employed individuals, the proportion of part-time contracts among women

[72] Esposito (ed.), *cit.*, p. 10.
[73] Esposito (ed.), *cit.*, p. 16.
[74] Esposito (ed.), *cit.*, pp. 11-12.
[75] Esposito (ed.), *cit.*, pp. 19-20.

stands out: 48.7% of newly employed women are engaged on a part-time basis, compared with 27.5% of newly employed men[76].

The aforementioned data depict female employment in Italy as still facing significant challenges, structurally linked to deep-rooted critical issues relating to a work culture characterised by prolonged working hours and a persistently patriarchal allocation of care responsibilities within households. This situation continues to be reinforced by the inadequacy of regulatory instruments designed to counteract such tendencies. Alongside a comparatively generous period of maternity leave of five months, there exists a paternity leave entitlement of negligible duration[77] – ten days, corresponding to the minimum required under the WLB directive – and parental leave which, although generous in terms of its overall duration available to families (ten months, extendable to eleven), remains negatively affected by its limited financial coverage[78]. Similarly, Legislative Decree No. 105/2022, implementing the WLB directive, merely grants priority access to smart working for working parents (with children up to 12 years of age or disabled children), workers with disabilities and workers with caregiving responsibilities towards dependent family members requiring assistance. Yet, because the employer retains the final decision, this priority falls short of creating a genuine right to flexible working[79].

Within this context, the implementation of novel working-time flexibility measures – such as the four-day working week – assumes a potentially transformative significance, challenging both traditional organisational structures and entrenched cultural norms[80]. In Italy, this evolution has been driven primarily by innovative company-level collective agreements, alongside legislative reform proposals aimed at reshaping national working-time regulation.

[76] Esposito (ed.), *cit.*, pp. 21-22.

[77] Draft law no. 2228/2025, introducing equal parental leave for fathers, was rejected on 27 February 2026.

[78] While compensation may reach up to 80% of salary for three months, it is reduced to 30% of remuneration for the remaining period.

[79] See Dagnino, *Sull'attuazione della Direttiva UE 2019/1158: il nodo del "lavoro flessibile"*, in *LG*, 2023, 2, p. 140 ff.

[80] Chung, *Flexible working arrangements*, cit.

4.1. *Legislative initiatives and corporate practices: evaluating short-week models through a gender lens*

This section reviews the main legislative proposals and collective bargaining practices concerning the four-day working week in Italy, with a view to assessing their potential and limitations from a gender equality perspective.

Between 2022 and 2024, four legislative proposals on working-time reduction were introduced in Parliament, namely no. 142/2022, no. 1000/2023, no. 1505/2023[81] and no. 2067/2024. Although none was ultimately approved – with the most recent one, a synthesis of earlier initiatives, being rejected in March 2026 – together they illustrate the gradual evolution of a regulatory debate around the four-day working week.

Regarding their scope of application, proposals no. 142/2022, 1000/2023 and 2067/2024 applied to both the public and private sectors, whereas proposal no. 1505/2023 targeted exclusively the private sector.

The regulatory design of working-time reduction also varies, even if only to a limited extent, across the four proposals. All of them envisaged the possibility of implementing the reduction through a four-day working week. However, they differ as regards the extent of the proposed reduction: proposal no. 142/2022 envisaged a reduction of standard weekly working time to up to 34 hours, while proposals no. 1000/2023 and 2067/2024 reduced it to up to 32 hours; by contrast, proposal no. 1505/2023 merely referred to a reduction in weekly working time without being more specific. Despite these differences, all four proposals share one essential feature, namely the maintenance of workers' previous remuneration. The proposals also differ with regard to the regulatory instrument governing the implementation of the new working-time regime. The first proposal relied primarily on statutory intervention, while the remaining proposals entrusted

[81] For a discussion on the first three proposals, see: Del Frate, *Studio sulla flessibilità*, cit., pp. 143-148; the articles in *Boll. Spec. Adapt*, 2024, 4, by: Alifano, Martini, Sala, Virgili, *La riduzione dell'orario di lavoro: le proposte di legge*; Marchiotti, Zanella, Zaniboni, *Oggetto, finalità e ambito di applicazione delle proposte di legge in materia di riduzione dell'orario di lavoro*; Biundo, Chirico, Prosdocimi, *Il ruolo della contrattazione collettiva nelle proposte di legge sulla riduzione dell'orario di lavoro*; Nardo, Sannipoli, *L'organizzazione del tempo di lavoro all'interno delle tre proposte di legge relative alla riduzione dell'orario di lavoro*; Altilio, Catalano, Guerra, Papini, *Incentivi e sanzioni per la riduzione dell'orario di lavoro: l'analisi delle proposte di legge*.

implementation to collective bargaining – at national level in no. 1000/2023 and at any bargaining level in no. 1505/2023 and no. 2067/2024. The latter proposal is particularly noteworthy because it combined the two regulatory approaches: it initially entrusted the implementation of working-time reduction to collective bargaining, subsequently providing that, once the period of application of the support measures had expired, the statutory standard working time laid down in art. 2 of Legislative Decree no. 66/2003 would be amended accordingly.

Institutional support, in the form of financial incentives and dedicated governance structures, occupies a central place across all four proposals, reflecting the awareness that a reduction in working time can only be sustainable if accompanied by appropriate economic and organisational support. To ensure the financial viability of working-time reduction while preserving workers' remuneration, the proposals provided for a range of measures. First, with the exception of proposal no. 1000/2023, all acts envisaged the use of specific funds: proposal no. 142/2022 provided for the establishment of a *Fondo di incentivazione alla riduzione dell'orario di lavoro* to support employers implementing a reduction in working time of at least 10%; proposals no. 1505/2023 and 2067/2024 identified the *Fondo Nuove Competenze* as the primary financial instrument. Secondly, all four proposals provided for social security contribution exemptions of varying scope for employers introducing reduced working-time schemes. Finally, proposals no. 1000/2023 and 2067/2024 envisaged the establishment of a "National Observatory on Working Time". Under the latter proposal, the Observatory – composed of experts in labour law and business organisation, as well as ministerial and trade union representatives – would be responsible for monitoring the effects of collective agreements reducing working hours, assessing the effectiveness of training schemes and for reviewing investments in new technologies.

The gender dimension receives uneven attention across the four proposals. Work-life balance and the reconciliation of "individual and family time with social time, working time, training, cultural activities and service provision", within a broader commitment to economic, environmental and social sustainability, were identified among the objectives of proposals no. 142/2022, no. 1000/2023 and no. 2067/2024. By contrast, proposal no. 1505/2023 contained no explicit reference to gender equality or to the promotion of women's employment. The rationale underpinning the re-

lationship between working time and gender equality is expressed clearly in proposals no. 1000/2023 and 2067/2024: the current organisation of working time is one of the structural factors contributing to the gender pay gap[82], since women are more likely to reduce or interrupt their participation in paid employment to take care of family responsibilities. This dynamic is particularly significant in a labour market where remuneration remains closely linked to working time, thereby reinforcing the traditional allocation of unpaid care work within households, according to which the lower earner – typically the woman – is more likely to withdraw from the labour market. Against this background, proposal no. 2067/2024 expressly provided that the reduction in working time might not be compensated through an increase in overtime, thereby seeking to preserve the intended effects of the measure. As a whole, although gender equality constituted one of the principal justifications advanced in support of working-time reduction, none of the proposals systematically incorporated a gender perspective into the design of the measure. Rather than shaping its regulatory architecture, gender equality primarily operated as a policy objective underpinning the reform.

Having examined the legislative proposals put forward regarding the reduction of working hours, the focus now turns to analysing how certain companies have implemented the four-day working week through company-level collective agreements. The aim is to map the main models and technical solutions in corporate practice. This analysis serves as a basis for assessing, in the concluding section, under which implementation conditions the 4DW can effectively promote gender equality.

First, attention must be devoted to the rationale underlying the adoption of the 4DW. Where the measure has been introduced with the explicit aim of facilitating the reconciliation of personal and professional life, employees' well-being is more likely to become an explicit organisational objective and to be structurally embedded into work organisation. This is the case with the four-day working weeks introduced at Leonardo S.p.A.[83] – where individual well-being and the harmonisation of working and

[82] The reference made in the proposal is to the work of Goldin, *Career and family: women's century-long journey toward equity*, Princeton University Press, 2021.

[83] Arts. 17.1-17.6 of the agreement, signed on 20 December 2023, https://fiomcgil-taranto.it/wp-content/uploads/2024/01/2023.12.20-Verbale-di-Accordo-per-il-rinnovo-del-Contratto-Integrativo-Aziendale-Leonardo.pdf.

non-working time are central considerations – as well as at Lavazza[84], Intesa Sanpaolo[85], Fastweb[86], and Luxottica[87], where corporate welfare measures and work-life balance policies are conceived as strategic responses to contemporary cultural and social transformations.

Another critical issue concerns the technical and practical modalities through which the four-day week is adopted within corporate environments. In this respect, a primary structural distinction can be drawn between companies applying the 4DW universally across their entire workforce and those designing the policy for specific groups of workers or operational units. Most company-level agreements favour a universal scope of application, sometimes managing the adoption through department-specific schedules. For instance, differentiated short-week schemes have been introduced across various departments at Lamborghini[88], whereas at Leonardo S.p.A. the measure has been experimented within operational units whose activities cannot be performed remotely. In other cases, such as Luxottica, implementation is conditional upon the participation of all staff within the same operational area to ensure less complex and more effective organisation of work. A further technical variation relates to whether the scheme is mandatory or voluntary. The former model is exemplified by Lavazza – which enforces a collective closure on Fridays – and Lamborghini, which has restructured the ordinary collective working schedule. The voluntary

[84] On the agreement, signed on 23 November 2022, see Aa.Vv., *Analisi e formulazione*, cit., pp. 19-20 and Valente, *Per una storia della contrattazione collettiva in Italia/150 - Il contratto integrativo Lavazza, tra formazione ed eguaglianza*, in *Boll. Adapt*, 2023, 9.

[85] On the agreement, signed on 26 May 2023: Porcheddu, *Smart working e 'settimana corta' in Intesa Sanpaolo: un esempio di 'transizione digitale' negoziata*, in *DRI*, 2023, 3, pp. 852 ff.

[86] The agreement was signed on 26 July 2023, https://www.fistelcisl.it/wp-content/plugins/pdf-poster/pdfjs/web/viewer.html?file=https://www.fistelcisl.it/wp-content/uploads/2023/07/20230726FASTWEB_FastwebAir_accordointegrativo-3.pdf&download=true&print=true&openfile=false, pp. 4-6.

[87] On the agreement, signed on 30 November 2023, see Sacconi, *Il mio canto libero – Accordo Luxottica frutto di un complesso scambio aziendale tra produttività e orario*, in *Boll. Adapt*, 2023, 42; Alifano, Porcheddu, *Per una storia della contrattazione collettiva in Italia/188 - L'accordo Luxottica: un presidio di territorio oltre la "settimana corta"*, in *Boll. Adapt*, 2024, 6; Aa.Vv., *Analisi e formulazione*, cit., pp. 26-27.

[88] On the agreement, signed on 5 December 2023, Zaniboni, *Per una storia della contrattazione collettiva in Italia/181 – Flessibilità e conciliazione vita-lavoro: le parole d'ordine dell'Ipotesi di Contratto integrativo aziendale di Automobili Lamborghini*, in *Boll. Adapt*, 2023, 44.

model, by contrast, is favoured by Intesa Sanpaolo, which leaves workers free to opt for the instrument.

A third structural dimension emerges in companies where work-life balance constitutes a primary objective of the 4DW. In these contexts, the reduction of working time is rarely implemented as an isolated measure; rather, it forms part of a broader framework encompassing targeted instruments in support of parenthood and employee well-being. For example, in the most recent renewal of its company-level collective agreement concluded in December 2025[89], Intesa Sanpaolo expressly undertook the short working week as a dedicated tool for supporting working parents. In particular, the company guarantees a "very short week" (*settimana cortissima*) consisting of 7.5 daily hours over four days (for a total of 30 hours per week, distinct from the standard 9x4 model used elsewhere in the group), for parents with children up to three years of age, while ensuring full pay. Similarly, Leonardo S.p.A. has coupled working-time reduction with broader corporate welfare initiatives, including nurseries[90] and birth bonuses.

Corporate practices reveal a further trend: the implementation of the four-day week as part of a broader set of spatial and temporal flexibility measures. A prominent example is the provision of remote working arrangements alongside the four-day week, as established in company-level agreements of Lamborghini, Sace S.p.A.[91], SIAE[92], Lavazza, Intesa Sanpaolo and Fastweb. Further noteworthy practices include the use of working-time accounts (*banca delle ore*) – as provided for at Lamborghini, Lavazza and Intesa Sanpaolo – as well as flexitime arrangements in entry and exit from work, also introduced at Lavazza and Intesa Sanpaolo.

[89] The agreement was signed on 24 December 2025. Very interesting is the *Accordo Genitorialità ("*Parenthood Agreement*")*, available at https://www.falcri-is.com/wp-content/uploads/2025/12/20251224_Accordo-Genitorialita-DEF.pdf, 4*b*.

[90] An agreement has been recently signed between 2A, Engineering, Eni, FiberCop, Fincantieri, Intesa Sanpaolo, ITA Airways, Leonardo, and Open Fiber to establish the "*Cresciamo il futuro"* Foundation, with the aim of creating an extensive national network of nurseries accessible to all employees of the participating companies. See https://www.leonardo.com/it/press-release-detail/-/detail/22-10-2025-nasce-la-fondazione-cresciamo-il-futuro.

[91] The agreement, signed on 20 December 2023, is available at the following link: https://www.sace.it/docs/default-source/le-nostre-persone/vivere-in-sace/contratto-integrativo-aziendale-sace-spa.pdf?sfvrsn=40771bb9_1.

[92] On the agreement, signed on 15 December 2023, Altilio, *Per una storia della contrattazione collettiva in Italia/203 - CCNL Siae: misure sperimentali e innovative per il personale non dirigente*, in *Boll. Adapt*, 2024, 17.

Finally, a crucial criterion emerging from the Italian four-day working week experiences concerns the participatory governance mechanisms surrounding the introduction of flexibility measures. Employee and trade union involvement in the design and negotiation of the 4DW has played a central role at Lamborghini, Lavazza and Luxottica. These participatory governance mechanisms appear particularly valuable when complemented by systematic post-implementation monitoring: positive examples include Lamborghini – where monitoring is conducted by a joint working group (*Gruppo di lavoro paritetico)* – as well as Luxottica[93], which provides for quarterly monitoring activities. The active involvement of workers and trade union representatives increases the likelihood that new working-time arrangements reflect employees' actual needs while remaining compatible with organisational requirements.

5. *Concluding remarks: towards a gender-responsive four-day working week*

The article moved from the premise that female occupational segregation remains a persistent structural challenge within European labour markets. In this context, the traditional organisation of working time has historically acted as a key determinant in shaping the employment gender gap, often producing discriminatory effects against women due to the difficulty of reconciling paid work with family and caregiving responsibilities. However, recent legal and organisational evolutions have contributed to a revision of working time's role: organised through the lens of flexibility, it has transitioned from a mechanism of marginalisation into a strategic tool for women's inclusion and the promotion of substantive equality. Building on this theoretical framework, the research has connected the analysis of working-time flexibility to its most recent and innovative manifestation, namely the four-day working week. Indeed, the same factors influencing the successful implementation of corporate flexibility and gender-equality measures – such as sector, company size, union representation and organisational culture – have proved to be particularly significant also in the adop-

[93] At Luxottica, different Committees are involved in the proposition and evaluation of new working models, such as the *Commissione Pari Opportunità* and the *Commissione Organizzazione e orario di lavoro*.

tion of the four-day working week. The focus on the Italian case study has contextualised the spread of this innovative instrument within an employment landscape that still faces structural gender gaps: key indicators include lower female employment, high inactivity rates, the long-term impact on parenthood on women's career and their heavy reliance on part-time.

In this context, shorter working weeks could potentially address many of these critical issues. However, for the potential benefits to become concrete, the present analysis identifies the conditions under which the four-day week can effectively foster gender equality. Such conditions emerge from a cross-analysis of the legislative proposals advanced on the topic and the first experiences of company-level collective bargaining, considered alongside the factors previously examined with regard to the introduction of flexibility measures aimed at gender equality.

Before focusing on these conditions, it seems necessary to clarify which model of the four-day week is considered potentially valuable for promoting gender equality. In the light of the research carried out, the "compressed" week appears to be an unsuitable model for these purposes, particularly when considered within the context of the Italian labour market. More specifically, there is a significant risk of perpetuating and exacerbating existing inequalities in the distribution of family and care responsibilities: restructuring the standard working week into four days risks extending – rather than combat – the culture of long working hours, which is one of the primary causes of women's occupational segregation. Furthermore, from this point of view, the adoption of a compressed working week would require – even more so than a "reduced" four-day week – an institutional framework and services to support families and care which still appear inadequate at national level.

Having clarified this point, let us now turn to identifying the conditions under which "reduced" four-day weeks can become effective tools for gender equality.

First, the organisational design of the measure is crucial. The identification of a clear rationale behind the measure aimed at promoting work-life balance and gender equality is essential to counter the risk that it might be implemented solely for branding purposes, inducing somehow companies to provide effective responses also in these terms. The scope of application of the measure is likewise quite relevant: a universal approach prevents both the *a priori* exclusion of potential beneficiaries and the targeting of specif-

ic categories of workers (such as parents or caregivers). By avoiding measures restricted to these groups – which could otherwise cause new forms of marginalisation – universal application promotes the widespread diffusion of the scheme and helps prevent the gender stereotyping often associated with flexible arrangements. Similarly, the voluntary basis of the scheme may prove to be a double-edged sword: on the one hand, it risks increasing the gender gap if the measure is primarily adopted by women, leaving intact the effort of men in care and family responsibilities; on the other hand, it would allow workers to choose the instrument best suited to their needs, particularly where other forms of organisational flexibility are available, at the same time avoiding the risk of discriminating someone through its general imposition. These implementation modalities also lead to two broader recommendations. Regular monitoring should be carried out not only after the adoption of the measure – to evaluate its efficacy and prevent potential gendered use of the four-day week – but also during the initial design phase. This earlier stage allows for a reasoned and tailored planning that accounts for the specific needs of different departments and workers. Furthermore, a universal scope of application of the 4DW should be favoured, although targeted measures may occasionally be necessary to guarantee a minimum standard of success in specific sectors or departments, in line with the logic of positive actions and based on their starting points in terms of gender equality.

Second, embedding the four-day week within a broader set of measures aimed at gender equality and work-life balance is fundamental to ensuring a redistribution of care responsibilities between men and women. This trend is already observable in ongoing four-day week initiatives that seek to provide tools capable of filling the gaps left by statutory provisions, for instance by improving leave schemes and paid time off, as well as introducing various welfare benefits. In these terms, the four-day working week serves as a valuable tool for labour market inclusion not only for women but also for workers disadvantaged by other factors of discrimination, such as disability or age. Accordingly, the design and implementation of four-day working week schemes should be supported by highly trained Diversity, Equity and Inclusion (DE&I) professionals.

Similarly, the four-day week should not be introduced in isolation from other flexibility measures available in the workplace. This approach enhances its capacity to promote gender equality, as it enables individual family units to select the most suitable arrangements for their specific needs.

Finally, the involvement of workers and trade union representatives in designing and adopting a four-day working week, as observed in ongoing corporate experiences, appears essential to the success of the initiative also from a gender equality perspective. Actively shaping work arrangements around the diverse needs of employees transforms flexibility from a structural risk that may discriminate against certain categories into a tool for inclusion and well-being. Ultimately, this drives the deeper transformation of organisational culture required both to reduce working time and to promote gender equality.

Having identified the conditions under which the four-day week can effectively promote gender equality, the final issue addressed is the determination of which regulatory approach is best suited to achieve this objective. The answer cannot be reduced to a single regulatory instrument, given the multifaceted nature of the intervention required to ensure gender equality in the Italian – as well as European – employment context.

The role of collective bargaining appears to be fundamental on two fronts[94]. At national level, collective bargaining can establish minimum standards concerning the organisation of working time and gender equality measures, taking into account the specific characteristics of the relevant productive sector. At company level, collective agreements can promote highly innovative models (both in terms of working-time arrangements and gender equality policies) through investment in tailor-made initiatives based on the characteristics and needs of specific workforces. However, an approach relying solely on collective bargaining risks producing fragmented outcomes and reinforcing a multi-speed labour market. Legislative intervention is therefore equally essential, particularly in light of the need for structural reforms aimed at ensuring that gender equality becomes a reality in the labour market. These should include measures concerning, for instance, leave schemes and childcare and care infrastructures, alongside the broader need to restructure organisational models that remain grounded in a culture of long and highly bureaucratised working hours. Addressing these issues requires a comprehensive reconsideration of matters such as technological investment, wage levels and training.

From this perspective, the most appropriate regulatory strategy would be to rely on collective bargaining for the introduction and adaptation of

[94] As emphasised also by ETUC, *cit.*, p. 76.

four-day working week schemes, while legislative intervention should subsequently provide the structural reforms necessary to transform the organisation of working time more broadly. Such reforms are crucial given that the current organisation of working time continues to constitute a structural and cultural source of discrimination, with a substantial impact on the achievement of gender equality.

Abstract

The essay investigates the evolution of EU working-time regulation from a work-life balance tool into a strategic governance mechanism for substantive gender equality. Using Directive 2019/1158/EU, especially art. 9 on flexible working arrangements, as a starting point, the study explores the gendered implications of working-time flexibility and reduction, with particular attention to the innovative model of the four-day working week. Drawing on the Italian case, it examines recent legislative proposals and company-level collective agreements to identify the optimal conditions for inclusive organisational change and to avoid new forms of marginalisation.

Keywords

Working-time reduction, Four-day working week, Gender equality, Work-life balance, Italian labour law.