



# Towards More Equal and Family Friendly Working Life – Tackling Pregnancy and Family Leave Discrimination Through Social Design

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Towards More Equal and Family Friendly Working Life – Tackling  
Pregnancy and Family Leave Discrimination Through Social Design

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This thesis investigates pregnancy and family leave discrimination in Finnish working life through combining prior research and empirical data gathered from Finnish parents. Exploring the intersection of equality, labor, and family policies, relevant legislation, workplace practices, societal attitudes, and individuals' experiences, the thesis analyzes pregnancy and family leave discrimination as a gender equality issue.

The aim of the thesis is to gain understanding on the extent, manifestations, and causes of pregnancy and family leave discrimination and propose co-developed interventions for tackling the issue and for enhancing more equal and family friendly working life. The thesis was conducted in collaboration with Equally on Family Leave project (2023-2025) of a network and registered association of career-oriented mothers, Mothers in Business (MiB).

In this thesis service design is used to address a social issue of pregnancy and family leave discrimination, referred to as social design. The thesis uses a methodological framework which combines design thinking and systems thinking to the primary guiding principle of social design, that is, the 'common good'. In this thesis, instead of finding and delivering solutions, according to the traditional design process, the aim is to offer co-developed intervention proposals.

The thesis applies a 'triple diamond' process model, derived from the service design Double Diamond approach, which includes three phases: interpretation, exploration, and intervention. Main research methods consist of an open online survey (N=449) and collaborative workshops with 17 participants including MiB members, employees, and board members.

Findings reveal persistent discrimination across all sectors, fields, and positions, with 38% of survey respondents reporting experiences of discrimination or unequal treatment based on pregnancy or family situation. However, according to the survey results, a majority of cases (67%) were not pursued further which complicates the identification and acknowledgment of the problem.

In the analysis, seven categories with several sub-categories were identified as potential causes for the occurrence and persistence of pregnancy and family leave discrimination. Main issues identified in the analysis were related to 1) attitudes, assumptions, and societal structures, 2) financial issues from the employers' perspective, 3) underreporting of discrimination cases and 4) leadership culture and practices. In the thesis workshops, 39 intervention proposals were co-developed for the issues recognized, resulting as a prioritized list of 11 interventions for the work of Mothers in Business.

The thesis promotes a holistic approach to discrimination issues, encompassing legal and societal aspects, and recognizing the collective challenges experienced by pregnant individuals and those taking family leave. Additionally, the thesis advocates for further investigation of the topic from both quantitative and qualitative perspectives. According to the results, there is a clear need for greater awareness and systemic changes in both individual, organizational, and societal level to effectively address pregnancy and family leave discrimination.

Keywords: working life, equality, discrimination, family leave, pregnancy, social design

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Tässä opinnäytetyössä tarkastellaan raskaus- ja perhevapaasyrjintää suomalaisessa työelämässä yhdistämällä aiempaa tutkimustietoa opinnäytetyössä suomalaisilta vanhemmilta kerättyyn aineistoon. Työssä analysoidaan raskaus- ja perhevapaasyrjintää tasa-arvokysymyksenä nivomalla yhteen tasa-arvo-, työ- ja perhepolitiikan, keskeisen lainsäädännön, työelämän käytäntöjen, yhteiskunnallisten asenteiden ja yksilöiden kokemusten näkökulmia.

Opinnäytetyön tavoitteena on saada ymmärrystä raskaus- ja perhevapaasyrjinnän laajuudesta, ilmenemismuodoista ja syistä sekä esittää tutkimuksen osallistujien kanssa yhdessä ideoituja toimenpiteitä syrjinnän ehkäisemiseksi sekä tasa-arvoisemman ja perheystävällisemmän työelämän edistämiseksi. Opinnäytetyö tehtiin yhteistyössä urasuuntautuneiden äitien verkoston, Mothers in Business (MiB) ry:n Yhdenvertaisesti perhevapailla -projektin (2023-2025) kanssa.

Opinnäytetyössä hyödynnetään palvelumuotoilua, tai tarkemmin yhteiskunnallista muotoilua yhteiskunnallisen haasteen, raskaus- ja perhevapaasyrjinnän, käsittelemiseen. Opinnäytetyön metodologisessa viitekehysessä yhdistetään muotoiluajattelua ja systeemiajattelua yhteiskunnallisen muotoiluun, jonka keskeisenä tavoitteena on edistää "yhteistä hyvää". Työssä esitetään perinteisen palvelumuotoilun prosessin mukaisten ratkaisujen tarjoamisen sijaan tutkimuksen osallistujien kanssa yhdessä kehitettyjä interventioehdotuksia.

Kehittämistyössä sovelletaan palvelumuotoilun "tuplatimantti" -mallista johdettua "triplatimantti" -mallia, joka sisältää kolme vaihetta: tulkinta, tutkiminen ja interventio. Tärkeimmät tutkimusmenetelmät ovat avoin verkkokysely (N=449) ja työpajat, joihin osallistui 17 henkilöä koostuen MiB:in jäsenistä, työntekijöistä sekä hallituksen jäsenistä.

Tulokset paljastavat, että raskaus- ja perhevapaasyrjintää ilmenee kaikilla sektoreilla, aloilla ja positioissa. Kyselyyn vastanneista 38 % ilmoitti kokeneensa syrjintää tai epätasa-arvoista kohtelua raskauden tai perhetilanteen vuoksi. Tutkimustulosten mukaan suurinta osaa kyselyssä raportoiduista syrjintätapauksista (67 %) ei kuitenkaan oltu viety eteenpäin, mikä vaikeuttaa ongelman tunnistamista ja tunnistamista.

Tutkimuksessa tunnistettiin seitsemän kategorialla, ja useita alakategorioita, jotka voivat aiheuttaa ja ylläpitää raskaus- ja perhevapaasyrjintää. Keskeisimmät analyysissä tunnistetut kategoriat liittyivät 1) asenteisiin, oletuksiin ja yhteiskunnallisiin rakenteisiin, 2) taloudellisiin kysymyksiin työnantajien näkökulmasta, 3) syrjintätapausten aliraportointiin sekä 4) johtajuuskulttuuriin ja -käytänteisiin. Työpajoissa esitettiin yhdessä tunnistettuihin ongelmiin 39 interventioehdotusta, joista 11 valittiin tarkempaan arviointiin MiB:in tekemän työn näkökulmasta.

Opinnäytetyön tulosten pohjalta raskaus- ja perhevapaasyrjinnän ehkäisyyn ja vähentämiseen suositellaan kokonaisvaltaista lähestymistapaa, huomioiden sekä oikeudelliset ja rakenteelliset näkökohdat. Lisäksi opinnäytetyö puoltaa aiheen lisätutkimusta sekä määrällisestä että laadullisesta näkökulmasta. Jotta raskaus- ja perhevapaasyrjintää voidaan torjua tehokkaasti, tarvitaan aiheesta lisää tietoa ja systeemiä muutoksia niin yksilö-, organisaatio kuin koko yhteiskunnan tasolla.

Asiasanat: työelämä, tasa-arvo, syrjintä, perhevapaat, raskaus, yhteiskunnallinen muotoilu

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## 1. Introduction

### 1.1. The objective and approach of the thesis

In Finland, there is a strong belief in the narrative of being a role model for equality and that gender equality is a fundamental characteristic of the Finnish welfare state. Despite the strengthening and institutionalization of legislation related to equality and the practices of gender equality policies over the years, blind spots and unattained goals related to gender equality and workplace equality have emerged in the dynamic landscape of Finnish equality policy (Kantola, Koskinen Sandberg & Ylöstalo, 2020).

Drawing from prior research, Finland's equality policy has evolved in alignment with wider shifts towards administrativeization, legalization, and the economization of equality. Despite the robust welfare state services and stringent labor market regulations in Finland and the Nordic region, gender disparities persist. Criticism regarding the portrayal of Nordic countries as bastions of gender equality and women-friendly environments has been voiced (e.g., Kantola et al., 2020; Borschorst, 2009). These changes reflect neoliberal governance paradigms that emphasize efficiency and legal frameworks in addressing equality concerns. As a result, this shift has been labeled as "dismantling the equality policy" (Jacquot, 2017) or characterized as "the crisis of equality policy" (Kantola et al., 2020; Kantola & Lombardo, 2017; Jacquot, 2017).

Despite governmental pledges to advance gender equality and combat discrimination, tensions arise from proposed or implemented policy measures affecting women and female-dominated sectors (e.g., Helsingin Sanomat, 2024; Moore, 2023; Tuppurainen, 2023; Blomqvist-Valtonen, 2023). Despite a high employment rate, Finnish women face economic and social instability in the job market (Sutela et al., 2019). Extended absences from work disproportionately hinder women's career advancement and wage growth, thereby also impacting their future retirement income and pensions (Rotkirch et al., 2017; Salmi & Närvi, 2017; Alakärppä, 2022).

One key theme in relation to equality in working life is pregnancy and family leave discrimination. Building on previous research (see section 2.3.2.) and the findings of this thesis, it becomes clear that despite endeavors by equality policies to curb discrimination, cases of pregnancy and family leave discrimination endure within Finnish workplaces. However, the discussion concerning the issue reveals conflicting views on the prevalence, manifestations, causes and existence of such discrimination among different stakeholders. Due to the limited research data available on the topic and the mentioned discrepancies, a more profound and critical examination of pregnancy and family leave discrimination as a phenomenon is warranted.

Based on the previous research, and the data of this study reflecting the experiences of Finnish parents, **the aim of the thesis is to gain understanding of the extent, manifestations, and causes of pregnancy and family leave discrimination in Finnish working life, as well as to co-develop intervention proposals with thesis workshop participants for preventing and reducing the discrimination and enhancing more equal and family friendly working life.** Derived from the research objective, main research questions are as following:

1. What is the extent and prevalent manifestations of pregnancy and family leave discrimination?
2. What kind of causes contribute to the occurrence of pregnancy and family leave discrimination?
3. What kind of intervention proposals are suggested to prevent and reduce pregnancy and family leave discrimination?

The thesis is conducted in collaboration with the "Equally on Family Leave" project (see section 1.2.) of Mothers in Business (later referred as MiB), which is a non-profit organization that promotes gender equality and family friendliness in working life. The main target population of the study is Finnish parents, representing different professional groups from employees to managers. The data collection methods employed include an open online survey (N=449) and three (3) workshops aimed for MiB members, MiB employees and Mib board members. The analysis adopts a qualitative approach, although some statistical basic methods, such as average figures and cross tabulation (c.f. Moilanen et al. 2022) are used to describing the survey data. The development process implies a "triple diamond process model", adapted form double diamond process model of service design (Design Council, 2024).

Service design and innovation have evolved to address complex societal challenges and promote well-being (Patricio, Gustafsson & Fisk 2018); design can be employed not solely for problem-solving but as an approach directed at unveiling the intricate structures inherent in complex social issues. (Tromp & Vial 2023.) In this thesis the utilization of service design to address social issues or enhance human well-being is referred to as *social design* (in Finnish *yhteiskunnallinen muotoilu* or *sosiaalinen muotoilu*) according to Veiga's & Almendra's (2014) view. Bijl Brouwer & Malcolm (2020) propose that using a "systems thinking lens" alongside the design, offers opportunities to further strengthen (social) design practices. Thus, developing an approach that blends the strengths of both design thinking and systems thinking, while aiming to bridge their gaps, can enhance the likelihood of creating sustainable solutions to the complex challenges faced by organizations and society today (Pourdehnad et al. 2011). This thesis uses a framework which combines "systems thinking lens" (cf., Bijl Brouwer & Malcolm 2020) to the primary guiding principle of social design, that is, public welfare or in other words, the 'common good' (Dorst et al. 2016).



By exploring the intersection of equality policy, workplace practices, societal attitudes, and individuals' experiences, this thesis aims to deepen the understanding of pregnancy and family leave discrimination in the context of Finnish working life and Finnish culture. Based on the analysis, the goal is to present intervention proposals for taking action in preventing pregnancy and family leave discrimination primarily for Mothers in Business, but also to individual parents and employees, employers, policymakers, and to other societal actors to use.

## **1.2. Equally on family leave -project**

The thesis is conducted in collaboration with Equally on Family Leave project (2023-2025) of the network and registered association of career-oriented mothers, Mothers in Business. The project aims to support the achievement of gender equality goals of the family leave reform and enhance the well-being of families, parental involvement in both childcare and the workplace, as well as equal opportunities for more equal use of family leave (Mothers in Business 2023a). The family leave reform enables a more equal distribution of care within families but requires a change in attitudes and culture (e.g. Eerola et al. 2019). Thus, the project pursues to influence not only parents' choices but also employers' family-friendly policies. It facilitates a shift in attitudes that promotes the equal sharing of family leave among parents in families with two or more parents. In addition, the project aims to foster a family-friendly culture in Finland's largest companies and educate experts advising companies on personnel matters. (Mothers in Business 2023a.)

The thesis collaboration aimed to develop intervention proposals to pregnancy and family leave discrimination through co-creation with MiB members, employees, and board members. Promoting a family-friendly culture requires identifying the potential causes of pregnancy and family leave discrimination in the workplace. It also entails identifying solutions suggested by the target group to address this issue, which is still, according to this thesis, as well as to previous research (see section 2.3.), an obstacle to gender equality in the workplace. The proposed intervention proposals gather information for the project's training sessions, targeting HR professionals and supervisors in companies, as well as experts advising companies on employment matters. Additionally, the purpose of the intervention proposals is to guide and support the organization's future advocacy and membership services. (Mothers in Business 2023a.)

The thesis collaboration included several meetings, both online and face-to-face, between Equally on Family Leave -project's specialist and the thesis worker. Google Meets, Miro and Teams were utilized as tools for the practical work. Collaboration included planning an online survey and three workshops, as well as presenting the thesis work and its results in following occasions:

- Two online meetings with two (2) experts from the office of The Ombudsman for Equality (10/2023, 4/2024)
- A seminar regarding pregnancy and family leave discrimination (*Pregnancy and Family leave discrimination – true or false?*), organized by trade union confederations, MiB & Diverse Families network (5/2024)
- a MiB breakfast event about the thesis work (5/2024)
- a presentation about the thesis results for Statistics Finland related to an assignment from the Ministry of Social Affairs and Health concerning pregnancy and family leave discrimination (5/2024)

### 1.3. Structure of the thesis

Overview of the thesis structure is presented in figure 1. Chapter 2 forms the knowledge base of this thesis. In section 2.1., an overview of gender equality policy and its changes in the context of Finnish working life is provided. Section 2.2. focuses specifically on the theme of reconciliation of work and family life. In section 2.3., the focus is on pregnancy and family leave discrimination, intricately intertwined with both gender equality policy and, consequently, family policy and the issues related to balancing work and family life. The chapter concludes by defining a need for further research on the thesis topic, as well as for continued efforts to promote substantive equality, to tackle equality issues, such as pregnancy discrimination, and to promote more family-friendly working life.

Chapter 3 covers research approach and methodological choices. The section 3.1. outlines the approach of the study, exploring the application of service design as an interdisciplinary approach and specifically in the context of societal issues. The chapter introduces the framework of the thesis, which is a combination of social and systemic design, rooted in design thinking, as well as in systemic thinking. The section 3.2. delves into the development process and methodological choices, detailing the overall process of the thesis in relation to research data and key methods employed.

Chapter 4 presents the data collected and results concerning the topic of the thesis. The sections of the chapter follow the order of the development process of the study, “a triple diamond”, which is applied from service design “double diamond” (Design Council 2024). According to the process, the chapter covers: *discovering* the extent, manifestations, and causes; *defining* the main issues that need interventions; *developing* intervention proposals for the main issues; and finally, *delivering* a prioritized list of intervention proposals. The chapter concludes by answering the research questions concerning the extent, prevalent manifestation and causes of pregnancy and family leave discrimination in Finland, in light of the thesis data. Additionally, the chapter provides a list of prioritized and evaluated intervention proposals, co-developed with the thesis workshop participants, to tackle the issue.

In chapter 5, insights of the research are reflected and concluded based on the knowledge base of the framework of the thesis. Following the triple diamond development process, the final diamond of “intervention - taking action to make a change” is discussed. Leaning on the results of the study, the chapter provides recommendations for future actions and policies, and considers the possibilities of further research.

Chapter 1	INTRODUCTION	Provides an overview of the thesis with objective, approach, structure & key concepts
Chapter 2	KNOWLEDGE BASE	Introduces key literature and prior research
		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Equality policy</li> <li>• Reconciliation of work and family</li> <li>• Pregnancy and family leave discrimination in Finland</li> </ul>
		Concludes by defining a need for further research and continued efforts to tackle equality issues
Chapter 3	RESEARCH APPROACH & METHODOLOGICAL CHOICES	Outlines the approach of the study, research methodology & development process
Chapter 4	RESULTS	Presents the data collected and the results in light of the knowledge base & the framework of the study
		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>Discovering</i> the extent, manifestations, and root causes</li> <li>• <i>Defining</i> the main issues that need interventions;</li> <li>• <i>Developing</i> intervention proposals for the main issues</li> <li>• <i>Delivering</i> a prioritized list of intervention proposals</li> </ul>
		Concludes by answering the research questions in light of the thesis data
Chapter 5	CONCLUSIONS	Reflects the insights of the thesis and discusses the implication for further actions and future research

Figure 1: Overview of the thesis structure

#### 1.4. Key concepts

##### Equality

Equality can be understood as non-discrimination and a fundamental human right irrespective of gender, age, ethnic background, religion, or other personal factors. (Kantola, Nousiainen & Saari 2012.) In the Finnish language, there are two roughly synonymous terms available, *yhdenvertaisuus* and *tasa-arvo*. In recent years, they have been used legally in a way that the latter refers to the status of women and men, while the former is used in the context of other demographic factors. In principle, both the law related to gender equality (the Act on

Equality between Women and Men i.e., Equality Act, 609/1986) and the law related to equality concerning other individual factors (Non-Discrimination Act, 1325/2014) could be translated with the term "equality act." However, to avoid confusion, the English translation of the latter refers to "non-discrimination" to convey its focus more accurately on preventing discrimination. (Nousiainen 2012.) In this thesis equality is referred specifically from the gender perspective.

Equality as a concept, policy, and right is dynamic in its nature. Equality signifies both equality before the law, affirmative actions for the realization of equality, and the alteration of gendered structures and processes within society. Equality law and policies do not solely address *formal equality*, which concerns equal rights and equal treatment, but also *substantive equality*, which involves equal outcomes. Substantive equality requires the recognition of gendered power structures and consideration of the disadvantaged position of the other party. Hence, the goal is that individuals not only have equal opportunities and the right to equal treatment but also that the outcome of societal processes, such as salary, is equal, and that equal pay is received for equal work regardless of gender. (Kantola, Nousiainen & Saari 2012.)

The concept involves the categorization into equal rights (equality), equality based on differences (difference), and diverse equality (diversity) (Kantola et al. 2020). In this thesis, especially the first two are essential. Equality based on equal rights refers to the equal treatment of women and men, focusing on non-discrimination from the perspective of gender equality policy, thus linking to the concept of formal equality. From this standpoint, gender equality is often considered to have been relatively well achieved, as gender-based discrimination is prohibited by law. Difference-based equality, on the other hand, entails acknowledging differences, such as gender differences. Since responsibilities and obligations may be perceived differently for men and women, equality policies are needed to mitigate inequality stemming from these differences. Difference-based gender equality also considers structural inequality, such as the differential valuation and assessment of traditionally perceived women's and men's work. (Kantola et al. 2020). Thus, this concept is linked to the idea of substantive equality.

While there is little political contention over equal rights, difference-based equality tends to face more resistance, for example gender quotas (Kantola et al. 2020) or discussions about salary increases in female-dominated professions (Koskinen Sandberg & Saari 2019). Ylöstalo (2019) highlights that commitment to equal rights is often expressed as values, as such commitment does not yet necessitate actions or change in one's behavior. On the contrary, policy measures and other actions for promoting gender equality often evoke more conflicting emotions. Positive attitudes toward gender equality convey a sense of belonging, for instance, to the Nordic welfare state with its equality ideologies, while the irritation caused by equality measures possibly indicates the impact of power structures and their potential change on a personal level. Thus, the struggles over gender equality are not primarily battles

between those supporting and opposing equality. Instead, they often revolve around conflicts between prevailing notions of equality, the actual realization of equality, and the commitment to it. (Ylöstalo 2019.)

### **Pregnancy and family leave discrimination**

Discrimination is defined as placing people in an unequal position based on factors such as gender, age, religion, language, or opinion (e.g., Constitution 731/1999; Non-Discrimination Act 1325/2014). The law on equality and the prohibition of gender-based discrimination is regulated in the Equality Act (609/1986). According to the Act, both *direct* and *indirect discrimination* are prohibited. Direct gender discrimination involves placing a person in a different position based on their gender or due to pregnancy or childbirth. Indirect discrimination refers to placing someone in a different position based on gender, gender identity, gender expression, parenthood, or family responsibilities by virtue of a seemingly neutral practice. (Equality Act 609/1986.)

Pregnancy and family leave discrimination refers to treating a person differently solely because of pregnancy or family obligations, such as family leave. In practice, discrimination based on pregnancy and family leave can manifest, for example, as restrictions on the duration and continuation of fixed-term employment, challenges in returning to work after family leave, issues in recruitment, terminations during probationary periods, dismissals, as well as disparities in salary and other terms of employment. It has a negative effect in many aspects, especially on the position of women in working life, but men also face family leave discrimination. (Ombudsman for Equality 2023a.)

Discrimination related to pregnancy and maternity leave is always considered direct discrimination, because it only applies to women, and thus its determination does not require a comparison to individuals of another gender (Nieminen 2018). The central distinguishing feature between direct and indirect discrimination is that the employer cannot justify their discriminatory conduct immediately with reasons such as economic factors or other justifications. In cases of pregnancy discrimination, it is crucial to determine whether a presumption of discrimination arises, as overturning such a presumption is highly challenging. (Anttila 2012.)

On the other hand, rights related to parenthood are inherently gender neutral. Therefore, discrimination based on these rights is considered indirect discrimination (Equality Act 609/1986). In this context, placing someone in a different position can occur, for example, in hiring processes where the presence of small children in the family or the intention to have children influences the decision. Similarly, placing someone in a different position based on the use of family leave is considered indirect discrimination. When assessing family care obligations and parenthood, the comparison may not necessarily involve individuals of another gender but also individuals of the same gender who are not parents of small children or who do not intend to take family leave. (Nieminen 2018.)

## Family leave (in Finnish context)

Family leave is a legally guaranteed period of absence from work, or studies granted for the birth or care of a child. With the family leave reform, which entered into force on 1 August 2022, previously gender-specific terms like maternity leave and paternity leave was replaced with gender-neutral terms. This has been considered to emphasize gender equality, facilitate the consideration of different family forms, and contribute to dismantling gender stereotypes. (Hallituksen esitys 129/2021 vp.) Thus, the main forms of family leaves currently consist of pregnancy leave, special pregnancy leave, parental leave, and childcare leave. Other forms of family leaves are temporary childcare leave and temporary right of absence for compelling family reason (Hallituksen esitys 129/2021; Law amending the Employment Contracts Act 32/2022; Ministry of Economic Affairs and Employment of Finland 2022a).

As a result of the family leave reform, parents are given a shared parental allowance of 160 days, allowing parents to transfer up to 63 days to the other parent, custodian, spouse, or the spouse of the other parent. Additionally, there is a 40-day pregnancy allowance period during the final stage of pregnancy. In total, parents will have access to over 14 months of allowance days during family leaves. Single parents will have the flexibility to utilize both parental quotas. Notably, for parents of twins, triplets, and other multiple-birth children, the parental allowance days will increase by 84 days per additional child after the second child. Parents can utilize parental allowance days until the child turns two, and in employment relationships, parents are permitted to divide the leave up to four parts, except for pregnancy allowance period. (Ministry of Economic Affairs and Employment of Finland 2022a.) Childcare leave can be taken in one or two parts - or even more, as agreed with the employer - until the child turns three. The periods must be at least one month long. (Kela n.d.)

Parents are entitled to various benefits paid by Social Insurance Institution of Finland, later referred as Kela, after a child is born and as the child is growing. According to the Employment Contracts Act (55/2001), employers are not obligated to provide wages during family leaves. Nonetheless, numerous collective agreements have stipulated wage payments for certain family leave durations. Employers who compensate employees on leave with wages and holiday pay, or holiday compensation, are eligible to seek reimbursement from Kela. (Ministry of Economic Affairs and Employment of Finland n.d.) All employer costs covered by collective agreements (partial pay during pregnancy and parental leave, paid sick days during pregnancy, and paid sick childcare leave) are currently reimbursed to employers at a rate of approximately 70 percent according to calculations made. The costs of family leave are primarily funded through the sickness insurance's earnings-related insurance. The daily allowances paid by Kela for pregnancy and parental leave are covered by employer contributions (30 %), employee contributions (61 %) and state contributions (9 %). (Terveyden ja hyvinvoinninlaitos 2023a).

## 2. Knowledge base

### 2.1. Equality policy in Finland

Changes in society, especially in the way politics and law interact, have significantly influenced the concept and policies of gender equality. Changes in the direction of gender equality policy can signify, for instance, shifts in the status and content of gender equality, alterations in the conceptualization of gender equality, transformations in the role of the state in gender equality policy, changes in the relationships between various actors such as labor unions, government, or political and feminist movements, the emergence of new actors in the field of gender equality policy, as well as the expansion of arenas where the struggle for gender equality takes place. (Kantola et al. 2020.) In the following sections, the main practices and legislation related to Finnish equality policy, as well as the changes in direction of these policies, will be examined, culminating in an overview of the current government's vision.

#### 2.1.1. Main practices and legislation Finnish Gender Equality Policy

Gender equality developed in the Nordic countries as part of the welfare state project, which aimed for broader social equality. Promoting equality was a key political goal in Finland as well, and gender equality came to the fore in politics in the 70s. (Niemi 2020.) The movement for gender equality led to the establishment of the Council for Gender Equality in 1972. Its primary responsibilities include monitoring gender equality in society, generating initiatives and proposals, and providing input on the development of legislation. (Lammi-Taskula & Takala 2011.)

Equality and equal treatment are governed by Finnish national laws, European Community regulations, and international agreements to which Finland is a signatory. In Finland, the most important laws concerning equality are Equality Act (609/1986), and the Non-Discrimination Act (1325/2014). The purpose of the Equality Act is to improve gender equality, prevent gender-based discrimination and improve the status of women, especially in working life. The purpose of the Non-discrimination Act on the other hand is to secure equal treatment and prevent person-related discrimination on all kinds of grounds. (Ombudsman for Equality n.d.; Kantola et al. 2020.) Actions aimed at gender equality form the entirety of Finnish equality policy. The priorities of the equality policy are based, in addition to relevant legislation, on Report on Gender Equality Policy approved in 2022 and the government's policies. The work is done in all ministries, and it is coordinated by the Ministry of Social Affairs and Health. (Sosiaali- ja terveystieteiden ministeriö 2023a)

The Ombudsman for Equality is responsible for monitoring compliance with the Equality Act, particularly its prohibitions of discrimination, whereas the task of the Non-Discrimination Ombudsman is to promote equality and to prevent and tackle discrimination by monitoring compliance with the Non-discrimination Act. When related to working life, discrimination

based on the Non-discrimination Act is supervised by the occupational safety and health authorities of Regional State Administrative Agencies. (Ombudman for Equality n.d.); Kantola et al. 2020.)

For nearly two decades, the Equality Act was the only law in Finland that could be characterized as an actual anti-discrimination law. Enacted in 1986 and enforced the following year, the law included provisions related to gender equality planning, which have since been expanded and refined. (Nousiainen 2012.) There has also been a need to specify the prohibition of discrimination associated with the law, because it was initially very open to interpretation and, for example, pregnancy discrimination was not considered gender-based discrimination as late as the early 1990s. In terms of anti-discrimination legislation, the EU has been more progressive than Finland, and thus, joining the European Economic Area and the European Union led to a tightening of Finnish legislation in this respect. (Nousiainen 2012; Anttila 2012.)

More than two decades, the European Union's legislation on gender equality and anti-discrimination, along with various tools for advancing gender equality, have exerted a notable influence on Finnish gender equality policy. Whereas in Finland equality policy has historically focused especially on promoting equality in various working groups, for example in the tripartite of wage equality, in the EU the concept of discrimination and anti-discrimination regulation have been most central (Elomäki & Kantola 2020). Particularly prior to the Treaty of Amsterdam, the promotion of equality was viewed as somewhat of an exception or an auxiliary duty, rather than being recognized as a fundamental legal principle, and EU law placed significant emphasis on the concept of *formal equality* (suom. *muodollinen yhdenvertaisuus*). This concept revolved around ensuring equal treatment for all individuals under the law and served as the foundation for various regulations related to equality. In Finland, the enactment of the Non-Discrimination Act in 2004 also echoed this trend, and the EU directives that obligated Finland. (Nousiainen 2012.)

The equality act includes the authority's obligation to promote equality in all activities, reflecting the fact that in Finland, as well as in other Nordic countries, measures to promote equality, i.e., the promotion of equality of opportunities, have been common (Kantola et al. 2020). This obligation is frequently met through the practice of gender mainstreaming, which is a strategy for promoting gender equality by taking gender perspective into account in all decision-making and actions (e.g., Elomäki & Ylöstalo 2018; Saari 2012). A concrete example of this is, for instance, the assessment of gender effects in legislative proposals (Saari 2012.).

Throughout the 21st century, cornerstones of the political guidance in Finnish gender equality policy have consisted of Government Reports on Gender Equality Policy (from 2010 and 2022), as well as Government Action Plans for gender equality. The primary objective of the former is to assess Finland's gender equality policy and set out both national and international long-term objectives for it (Valtioneuvosto 2022). Even though there is no legal obligation to



prepare Government Action Plan for Gender Equality, especially in the 21st century, these programs have established themselves as central guidelines and guidance documents for equality policy, which define the priority areas and measures of equality policy. Every government since the Vanhanen I (2003-2007) government has approved its own equality plan. These plans have played an important role in translating and complementing the gender equality objectives and measures expressed in the government program. (Elomäki, Ylöstalo, Jurva & Lamberg 2023.) At this moment, the current government has not yet published its equality plan.

According to Elomäki & Ylöstalo (2017), in Finland, gender equality has been promoted through a so-called dual strategy: with specific gender equality initiatives and by mainstreaming a gender perspective into all decision-making. In line with the dual strategy, government action plans have included both thematic special measures and measures related to gender mainstreaming and its development (Elomäki et al. 2023). However, in the 2000s, the focus of measures in gender equality plans has shifted from specific actions (e.g., surveys and research, gender equality projects, services and benefits) towards integrating gender equality into existing or developing projects, programs, or processes. This can be referred to as the *administrativeization* (suom. *hallinnollistuminen*) of gender equality policy, which reflects a neoliberal governance approach and logic that emphasizes efficiency and competitiveness. (Elomäki & Ylöstalo 2017.) Overall, several researchers speak of a shift towards weaker gender equality policies both at the EU level and in Finland, especially after the economic crisis in 2008 and as a consequence of COVID-19 (e.g., Elomäki & Kantola 2020; Jacquot 2017). This shift is discussed in the next section.

### 2.1.2. Equality policy in flux

EU's gender equality policy, much like national gender equality policies, has often been marked by contradictions. On one hand, it has been viewed as a matter of human rights, focusing on gender equality and the eradication of discrimination. On the other hand, economic factors frequently have taken precedence, influencing the framework of gender equality policies. (Elomäki & Kantola 2020.) Based on several studies, these contradictions have intensified during crises, such as the 2008 financial crisis and the COVID-19 pandemic. It can be stated that austerity measures and competitiveness thinking have had an impact on gender equality policy, not only at the EU level but also in Finland. (e.g., Elomäki & Kantola 2020; Elomäki & Ylöstalo 2017; Jacquot 2017; Cavaghan 2017.)

Legislation has played a key role in the EU's efforts to promote gender equality. However, the specificity of this policy has earlier been in its multifaceted approach, incorporating various elements like laws, funding for proactive programs, and the integration of equality principles into all EU policies. After the 2008 economic crisis, the funding allocated for gender equality initiatives suffered significant reductions, and the tools for coordinating these efforts and incorporating gender perspectives into policymaking weakened considerably. (Jacquot 2017.)

In addition, the fact that equality policy was moved in 2011 from the Directorate-General for Employment, Social Affairs and Inclusion (DG Employment) to the Directorate-General for Justice and Consumer Affairs strengthened the shift of focus of equality policy away from issues of working life and social justice towards anti-discrimination legal definitions. (Elomäki & Kantola 2020.) As a result, legal measures have become the primary component of the EU's gender equality policy (Jacquot 2017).

This is referred to as the "legalization" (suom. *oikeudellistuminen*) of equality policy, meaning that issues related to equality (or other societal conflicts) are resolved primarily through legal means (e.g., Kantola, Nousiainen & Saari 2012). The changed relationship between law and politics has also been evident in Finnish gender equality policy. Whereas previously gender equality policy emphasized dismantling unequal societal structures and achieving actual equality, the focus has since shifted towards individuals and discrimination, in line with prevailing neoliberal thinking. (Kantola et al. 2012.)

Neoliberal thinking, and the administrative nature of gender equality policy are interconnected. Elomäki and Ylöstalo (2017) argue that this trend, known as the managerial approach to gender equality policy, might transform it into a neutral regulatory discourse, simultaneously reducing political character of the issues, diminish public participation and influence in the decision-making process. When gender equality policy is instrumentalized in this manner, it might lose its ability to effectively challenge the government's agenda focused on austerity measures and competitiveness. (Elomäki & Ylöstalo 2021.)

At the EU level, a shift in direction is evident both in gender equality-related legislation, financing, and EU gender equality programs (Elomäki & Kantola 2020; Jacquot 2017). The weakening of gender equality policy is indicated by the declining financial support for gender equality promotion since the second half of the 2000s (Karamessini & Rubery, 2014; Kantola & Lombardo 2017). In Finland as well, the resources have deteriorated. For instance, Ombudsman for Equality (2018) has noted that the operating conditions of traditional gender equality actors, such as gender equality authorities, have deteriorated throughout the 2010s. In the previous report for parliament by Ombudsman for Equality (2023a, 39), the resource situation is described as "seriously inadequate."

The subsequent effects of austerity policies have also been noted to have gendered impacts. Women's labor market position has deteriorated, and at the same time, cuts have been made to social benefits and services, which affect women either directly or indirectly. (e.g., Karamessini & Rubery 2014; European Institute for Gender Equality 2022.) For example, a study conducted by the European Institute for Gender Equality, EIGE, show that in June 2013, Finland was still the third most gender-equal country in the European Union (Sosiaali- ja terveystieteiden ministeriö 2013.) but in a study conducted ten years later, Finland's ranking had dropped to eighth place (European Institute for Gender Equality 2023).

Consequently, the change of direction has been referred to as “dismantling the equality policy” (e.g., Jacquot 2017) or “the crisis of equality policy” (e.g., Kantola et al. 2020; Kantola & Lombardo, 2017; Jacquot 2017). Whereas member state fiscal and economic policy surveillance have gained increasing prominence on the EU agenda, gender equality and social issues have been subordinated to the economy (Elomäki & Kantola 2020; Jaquout 2017). Elomäki & Ylöstalo (2021) argue that, in Finland as well, gender equality policy has been pushed to the sidelines and used as a tool to support other government priorities. This can be seen as part of a broader transformation of the state, *the economization of politics*. (e.g., Kantola et al. 2020; Elomäki & Ylöstalo 2020) A concrete example of this can be seen in the discussion that has taken place in Finland regarding family leave reform. The reform gained momentum when family leave was recognized as not just a social issue, but also as an employment and economic policy concern, garnering attention from economists, right-wing politicians, and the business sector. Although the important theme for women's organizations, the responsibility for caregiving, was raised, the more significant focus ultimately shifted to the improvement of women's employment. (Elomäki & Ylöstalo 2020.)

In recent developments, some positive aspects can also be observed. As discussions about gender equality have increased within the context of economic policy, attention has been drawn to the gendered aspects of economic discourse and the gender impacts of economic policy. (Elomäki & Ylöstalo, 2018; Kantola et al. 2020.) During the previous government's term, efforts were made to advance gender impact assessments, and in the programme of Sanna Marin's Government (2019-2023), it was stated that such assessments should be integrated into the operations of all ministries (Valtioneuvosto 2019). Overall, Kaarakainen et al. (2022) state that the goals of Marin's government were based more emphatically than previous governments on the realization of equality both at the level of society and in the lives of individuals.

However, due to limited resources, traditional gender equality actors have found it necessary to seek support from other stakeholders. Consequently, new actors from the business sector, associations, and civil society have entered the field of gender equality policy and feminism. Labor market organizations, which have traditionally played a significant role in gender equality policy in Finland, have also taken on a more proactive role in recent years. New and innovative methods of action, such as social media, citizen initiatives, and publicity, have come to the forefront. (Niemi 2020; Kantola, Koskinen Sandberg & Ylöstalo 2020; Elomäki & Ylöstalo 2017.)

Concerning equality policy, the current Petteri Orpo's government and its planned – as well as already initiated cuts to unemployment benefits and housing allowances – have faced criticism from, for example, trade unions, opposition politicians and individual citizens (e.g., Yle 2023a; Helsingin Sanomat 2023; JHL 2024). For instance, Amnesty International, in an open letter to Orpo's government, has stated that the government's program includes several goals and measures that contradict the promotion of equality, equity, and non-discrimination

(Amnesty International 2023). Since autumn 2023, labor unions have been opposing the government's austerity measures through strikes (JHL 2024). The government programme's gender equality objectives, especially in relation to working life, will be examined in more detail in the following section.

### **2.1.3. Equality in working life – the Government's vision**

The vision of the current government is “a strong and committed Finland”. In relation to government's aim for “a good working life”, government wants to promote gender equality in the workplace and eradicate all forms of discrimination from the labor market. It also promises to promote pay equality, as well as the reconciliation of work and family and continue to reform the family leave system. (Finnish Government 2023a.)

Addressing gender equality and the prevention of discrimination in the workplace, the government programme highlights that a more equal distribution of family leave and caregiving responsibilities would improve women's position in the labor market. The government commits to monitoring the results of the family leave reform, continuing efforts to promote a more even distribution of family leave and encouraging fathers in taking parental leave. The government also pledges to explore ways to distribute the costs of parenthood more evenly, following models in other Nordic countries. Furthermore, services that support the reconciliation of work and family life will be developed to better accommodate various family situations and shift work. (Finnish Government 2023a.)

The government aims to eradicate discriminatory practices and structures in the workplace by enhancing adherence to anti-discrimination legislation through improved information sharing, promotion of best practices, and robust monitoring, especially within sectors like the platform economy. The government programme states that priority will be given to implementing more effective measures to prevent discrimination related to pregnancy leave and family leave. (Finnish Government 2023a.) In December 2023, the Ministry of Social Affairs and Health established a tripartite working group specifically focused on addressing issues related to pregnancy and family leave discrimination. The goal is to formulate the government's position by the mid-term review on how the directives of the government programme can be best implemented. To support this objective, a legal analysis on reducing pregnancy and family leave discrimination will be prepared. (Sosiaali- ja terveystieteiden ministeriö 2023b.)

Nevertheless, several parties have criticized the government programme. For example, Chairman of Demarinaiset (the association of Social Democratic Women) and Member of Parliament, Tytti Tuppurainen (2023) argue that the most concerning provisions are specifically related to the working life: limiting the right to strike, introducing the unpaid first sick day, and facilitating termination and fixed-term employment contracts are all seen as setbacks for female-dominated sectors (Demarinaiset 2023). In addition, Elin Blomqvist-Valtonen (2023), the head of public relations of Akava special branches, a multidisciplinary

trade union and service organisation, state that if the government pledges to promote gender equality and non-discrimination in working life, it is contradictory to simultaneously demand reforms that primarily affect women, female-dominated fields, and low-wage sectors (Akavan erityisalrat 2023). Also, the executive director of Mothers in Business, Annica Moore (2023) from point out that although there is for example an intention to combat pregnancy discrimination, other clauses within the programme make it challenging (Mothers in Business 2023b).

In addition to criticism related to austerity measures and equality policy in general, during the summer 2023 the government was embroiled in a racism scandal, which led government to submitting of a statement to Parliament on September 2023 (e.g., Aamulehti 2023), which in its original form, concerns the promotion of equality, gender equality, and non-discrimination in Finnish society (Finnish Government 2023b). The government statement indicates that recent recommendations received by Finland from independent human rights treaty monitoring bodies have highlighted the obstacles and challenges to achieving *substantive* gender equality in working life as one of the development areas. The government statement sets goals for promoting non-discrimination, diversity, and equal opportunities in the workplace, in collaboration with labor market organizations. (Finnish Government 2023b.) Thus, in the statement, the emphasis is on equality of *opportunities*, or in other words, *formal* equality, rather than substantive equality, contrary to the recommendations addressed to Finland, which are referred in the statement (cf., Finnish Government 2023b).

The emphasis on equality of opportunities, i.e. formal equality, is often associated with neoliberalism and right-wing politics, which prioritize individualism (cf. Kantola et al. 2012; Kantola & Lombardo 2017). If opportunities are seen as equal for everyone, individuals are left responsible for realizing their own equality. In this view, gendered divisions of, for example, labor or education are seen as a result of individuals' choices. This perspective complicates the recognition and dismantling of power structures. (Isosomppi, Itkonen & Salmikangas 2019; Kantola et al. 2012). Kantola et al. (2012) highlight that an individual perspective alone is insufficient to solve the problems posed by an increasingly unequal society for gender equality policies. Investment in substantive equality, which includes the idea that individuals starting from different positions can achieve the same outcome in society, is therefore also needed.

Another interesting observation about the statement is that the legislation related to gender equality is deemed to be, as a whole, at a good level, with a few individual areas for improvement, though not explicitly specified. According to the statement, the deficiencies are more related to inadequate implementation and oversight of the legislation. (Finnish Government 2023b.) Instead, the Ombudsman for Equality has on several occasions, including during the government program negotiations on May 31st, 2023, and during the preparation of the mentioned statement in August 2023, highlighted the need for corrections to the Equality Act. The Ombudsman for Equality has stated that the government must commit to promoting

equality and gender equality in all its actions, particularly by implementing measures that the Parliament has required from the government for the development of the Equality Act. (Tasa-arvoaltuutettu 2023)

According to the Ombudsman for Equality, Finland should conduct a comprehensive review of the effectiveness of the Equality Act and prepare necessary amendments based on the findings. Both in the latest annual report (Ombudsman for Equality 2024) and in the previous report for government (Ombudsman for Equality 2023a), improving legal protection has been highlighted as one of the recommendations to the government. The Ombudsman has recommended, among other things, granting independent action rights to the Ombudsman and ensuring the Ombudsman's right to be heard in court when cases involving the application of the Equality Act. It is stated that there is a clear need for expert, low-threshold legal remedies. Enhancing the Equality and Non-Discrimination Board to serve as a low-threshold legal protection body would improve the legal protection of discrimination victims. (Ombudsman for Equality 2023a; Ombudsman for Equality 2024.)

Although both the government programme (Finnish Government 2023a) and the government statement (Finnish Government 2023b) have received a mixed reception, they both highlight essential themes related to gender equality in working life, such as work-life balance, family leave reform, pay equality, and combating pregnancy and family discrimination. The notion that both women and men should have the opportunity to balance work and family responsibilities is intertwined with the objective of achieving gender equality, underscoring the pivotal role of initiatives aimed at reconciling work and family life. (Lammi-Taskula, Salmi & Parrukoski, 2009).

## 2.2. Reconciliation of work and family

Reconciling work and family life, using this phrase, began to emerge as a topic of discussion in the early 1990s within the realms of politics, administration, and income policy negotiations<sup>1</sup>. Since the 2000s, it has been at the core of political activity. (Kuivalainen 2011.) It's about ensuring that both parents can harmonize the needs of their family and children with the demands of their jobs without facing problems or discrimination. This helps improve the opportunities for starting a family, managing daily life for families with children, and well-being, as well as sustaining productivity at work. In the theme of reconciling work and family life, elements of not only gender equality policy but also work policy, as well as family policy combine. (Lammi-Taskula et al. 2009.)

### 2.2.1. Finnish family policy guidelines in the 21st century

The objective of Finnish family policy is to establish a safe environment for children's upbringing and to furnish parents with the necessary material and psychological resources to have and nurture their children. Support for families encompasses three fundamental components: financial support, services and family leave. The Ministry of Social Affairs and Health in Finland bears the responsibility for crafting the nation's family policy, as well as for the continuous enhancement and preservation of the welfare of children, adolescents, and families, in collaboration with other ministries. (Ministry of Social Affairs and Health 2013.)

Family policy affects a large part of our population, and its importance as part of public policy is also great on economic scale. Services within the family policy in Finland have traditionally been comprehensive. (Kaarakainen et al. 2022.) Family policy and family political actions are ways to find solutions to the various problems and needs of families with children, and at the same time they contribute to matters important to whole society, such as maintenance of birth rate - which is a common goal of EU countries - and the working ability of the working-age population, as well as the possibility of being available to the labor market. Thus, family policy is part of a larger political field, which is closely linked to the solutions made in other policy fields, for example, economic policy, employment policy and equality policy. (Heinänen 2021.) In addition to the ministries, several interest groups, such as representatives of the labor market and non-governmental organizations, are involved in family policy decision-making (Kontula 2018).

A study by Iitla Children's Foundation (Kaarakainen et al. 2022) outlines the overall picture of the directions and effects of family policy after the turn of the millennium. The study states that the emphasis on family policy has varied during different reigns, but there have been certain consistent features in the development. Repeated family policy priorities have been

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<sup>1</sup> Reconciling work and family life was on the political agenda already before the 1990s, but it wasn't discussed using this specific term. For instance, improving women's employment opportunities and developing childcare for children were central gender equality issues already in the 1960s and 1970s. (Kuivalainen 2011.)

the prevention of marginalization and poverty, increasing multi-professionalism and the reconciliation of work and family. (Ibid.) Within the context of core values - freedom, justice, and equality - political discourse has revolved around five distinct subthemes: the women's 'double burden', children's welfare, cost-effectiveness, labour supply and fertility (Hiilamo & Kangas 2009).

The development of family policy, especially the distribution of family leave between spouses, and gender equality have been more prominent in government programmes in the 21st century than previously (e.g., Haataja et al. 2016; Salmi & Närvi 2017; Nyby 2020). In addition, employment goals have risen alongside more traditional family policy goals in connection with the development of the family leave system. Especially the employment rate of mothers has been a concern. (Kaarakainen et al. 2022.) This is related to the economization of politics, which was discussed in the section 2.1.2.

A study by Eurofound (2015) which describes the situation and experience of families during the economic crisis and analyzes the family policy changes of ten EU countries (including Finland) since 2010, supports the findings related to the pivotal role of family leave policies. Eurofound study states that austerity measures in Finland in the period under review mainly concerned cash benefits and tax benefits for families, while the area of leave policies seemed to remain largely unaffected. The Eurofound (2015) report considers this to mean that balancing work and family remained a policy focus even despite the crisis. During that period, actions supporting the reconciliation of work and family were also a goal at EU level; it was an essential part of the Europe 2020 Strategy which was the Growth and employment strategy of the European Union for the years 2010-2020 (European Commission 2010).

Reconciliation of work and family life has risen to the top of the political agenda in several industrialized countries during recent decades. In Finland, the topic came up for discussion in the 1990s, and in the 2000s it has been at the center of political activity. (Kuivalainen 2011.) The reconciliation of work and family life has also been a subject of national and international research interest for a long period. Questions related to the topic have arisen due to the evolving dynamics of work and family, transformations in the working life, the growing involvement of women in employment, and the rise in dual-earner households and single-person households. (Ojanen 2017.)

The focus of the policies has been particularly on family leaves. The objectives of the measures have been to promote a more equal utilization of family leaves between parents and to provide broader compensation to employers for the costs associated with the use of these leaves. In the Prime Minister Matti Vanhanen's first government, the goal to improve the reconciliation of work and family life was set for the first time at the government program level. The goal of Vanhanen's second government was to promote the reconciliation of work and family life in all decision-making. (Kuivalainen 2011.)



The Prime Minister Jyrki Katainen's Government (2011-2014) emphasized balancing work and family by developing support for part-time work and part-time childcare. It also focused on extending work careers by addressing career breaks, particularly concerning women's position in the labor market. In the so-called family package included in the program, a proposal was made to halve child home care allowance between parents and to limit the subjective right to early childhood education to part-time when parents are, for example, on family leave or unemployed. The family package generated intense public debate, ultimately leading the government to abandon the plans. (Kaarakainen et al. 2022.) However, a key milestone during Katainen Government was that from the beginning of 2013, the previous 18-day paternity leave, and the six-week father's month were transformed into a genuine father's quota compared with the earlier father's month, where the father needed the mother's consent to take the last two parental leave weeks. (Salmi & Närvi 2017.)

The Prime Minister Juha Sipilä's government (2015-2019) focused on strengthening public finances and increasing employment rates during the economic downturn. The government implemented several cuts affecting reconciliation of work and family life, with one significant measure being the restriction of the subjective right to early childhood education<sup>2</sup>. The government initially did not include specific goals related to family leaves in its program either. However, the public debate increased pressure to reform the family leave system, contributing to subsequent reform efforts. The most visible aspect of the criticized gender equality policy of Prime Minister Sipilä's government was the family leave reform initiated in August 2017 but abandoned in February 2018. (Kaarakainen et al. 2022.)

Kaarakainen et al. (2022) imply that Prime Minister Marin's government (2019-2023) program sets forth a continuum of previous government objectives, but the emphases differed significantly from those of previous administrations. Child and family friendliness, as well as gender equality, define both the government program and its implementation more explicitly than any previous government (ibid.). With national guidance, the government's aim was to promote equality and reconciliation of work and family for example through the family leave reform: by ensuring that family leaves and caregiving responsibilities are evenly distributed between both parents in families, workplace equality and gender pay gaps could be reduced (Finnish Government 2019).

The 21st century has been a time of many reforms in family policy (Haataja et al. 2016). To sum up, a mixture of contracting and expanding policy adjustments have been pursued (Nyby 2020). This is visible in table 1, which highlights the evolving approaches of Finnish governments regarding work-family balance, since it was set for the first time at the government programme level in 2003.

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<sup>2</sup> The decision sparked significant criticism from both the perspective of children's early education rights and mothers' opportunities for employment (Salmi & Närvi 2017) and from the beginning of August 2020 the subjective right for early childhood education was returned (see eg., Helsingin Sanomat 2019).

GOVERNMENT	THE MAIN APPROACHES
Prime Minister Matti Vanhanen's first government (2003-2007)	Sets the goal to improve the reconciliation of work and family life for the first time at the government program level.
Prime Minister Matti Vanhanen's second government (2007-2010)	Emphasized promoting the reconciliation of work and family life in all decision-making.
Prime Minister Jyrki Katainen's government (2011-2014)	So called family package, which was however abandoned, included measures for dividing child home care allowance between parents and limiting full-time early childhood education during family leave or unemployment.  A significant achievement during this period was the transformation of paternity leave into a genuine father's quota, allowing fathers extended leave without requiring the mother's consent.
Prime Minister Juha Sipilä's government (2015-2019)	Implemented several cuts affecting the reconciliation of work and family life, including restricting the subjective right to early childhood education.  The family leave reform was initiated in August 2017 but abandoned in February 2018.
Prime Minister Sanna Marin's government (2019-2023)	Set forth a continuum of previous government objectives, with a focus on child and family friendliness and gender equality.  Implemented more explicit measures for achieving the goals compared to previous administrations.

Table 1: Approaches of Finnish governments regarding reconciliation of work and family life during 2003-2023

The family policy of the 2010s has even been described as erratic (e.g. Hiilamo 2021, Kaarakainen et al. 2022) and citizens' opinions are in line (Kontula 2018). It can be assumed that political inconsistency reflects the fact that Finnish family policy is under great pressure for change. On one hand, family policy is one of our great achievements but on the other hand, Finland is facing challenges: economic growth is slow, the population is aging and there are problems securing the funding of the welfare state (Kontula 2018; Heinänen 2021). One of the big issues is the significant decrease in birth rate which has currently been discussed in Finland, likewise in dozens of other countries. The decrease in birth rates has affected Finland to such an extent that, when measured by the population replacement rate, Finland ranks among the twenty lowest performing countries. (Helsingin Sanomat 2024a.)

Finnish family policy has also been characterized as dualistic, as it has promoted gender equality on the one hand but, on the other hand, solidified the gendered division of childcare (Närvi, 2012; Repo, 2013). Despite relevant legislation and policies, the status of women and men in working life and family is still not equal in Finland. (Lammi-Taskula et al. 2009).

### **2.2.2. Equality issues related to reconciliation of work and family life**

Due to the fact that individual practices, societal structures, and processes interact with each other, they shape both barriers and opportunities in working life, as well as in everyday life, often linked to gendering practices. In this interaction, conceptions of what is "natural," "possible," or "appropriate" for different genders are formed. (Lammi-Taskula, Närvi & Salmi 2017 Eerola et al. 2019.) Past research endorses a consensus on gendered nature of parenting in Finland: the roles of fathers have still been culturally often understood as the primary provider, secondary caregivers and as "mothers' assistants". The gendered division has appeared as a "self-evident" way of acting. (Närvi & Salmi 2017.) Gendered ways of understanding parenthood both in everyday life and workplace can, however, constitute major obstacles in reconciliation of work and family life, as well as for preventing pregnancy and family leave discrimination and enhancing gender equality in society in general (cf., Eerola et al. 2019).

Alakärppä's (2022) doctoral dissertation state that gendered expectations regarding work and family influence the decision-making of young women concerning work and family matters. International studies (e.g., Fernández-Cornejo et al. 2016; Coyle et al. 2015) suggest that young women anticipate facing conflicts in reconciling future work and family responsibilities, irrespective of diverse institutional and socio-cultural contexts. Institutional factors pertain to practices in work and family policies, while socio-cultural factors refer to cultural expectations regarding parenthood and gender roles within the family (Alakärppä, 2022).

Researchers have observed that due to gendered expectations, especially young women who value education and career, experience difficulties in reconciling work and family responsibilities (Alakärppä, 2022). Similarly, in line with a recent survey conducted by Mothers in Business, the respondents - i.e. members of the association, highly educated mothers - identified challenges in balancing work and family life as the most significant source of stress in working life (Moore 2023). On the other hand, Alakärppä's (2022) research findings indicate that specifically unemployed women perceived their options as limited when considering the reconciliation of work and family life in the future.

Institutional factors are linked to perceived opportunities for young women in balancing work and family life (Alakärppä 2022). In Scandinavian welfare states, gender equality is a core element of the institutional framework (Koskinen et al. 2020). In Nordic countries the aim has been making policies 'women-friendly'; the state has played a pivotal role in shaping women's citizenship, influencing their access to the labor market, and redefining caregiving roles. (Mustosmäki et al. 2021). Along with day care, the most important social policy means is the

family leave system. The possibility of family leave, as well as the structure of the family leave system, are of great importance for the realization of gender equality, on the one hand in participation in the labor market and on the other in parenting. (Salmi & Järvi 2017.)

In terms of employment, gender equality seems to have largely been achieved in Finland, as the employment rate for women aged 15-64 (73,8 %) was nearly at the same level as men in the same age group (74,7 %) in 2022 (OECD 2022a). The unemployment rate for women was even slightly lower, at 6,4 %, compared to men's 7,1 % (OECD 2022b). In EU countries, the employment rates of parents exhibit gender-related variations in various ways. The gender gap, especially in the employment of parents of young children, is largest in countries where parental leave for mothers is long. An exception to this is Finland, where the difference between men and women in the employment rate of children under the age of 6 is only slightly higher than the average of the EU-28 countries, even though the length of parental leave is among the highest in Europe. (Heinänen 2021.)

Despite a high employment rate, Finnish women experience economic and social uncertainty in the labor market. This is due, for example, to the fact that part-time work is more common among women, and fixed-term employment is more prevalent among women than men (Sutela, Pärnänen & Keyriläinen 2019). In fact, concentration of fixed-term employment contracts among women is considered one of the central and persistent gender equality issues in contemporary Finland (Sutela 2013). In 2023 nearly 20 % of female wage earners worked on fixed-term contracts, compared to 14 % of male wage earners (Tilastokeskus 2023).

However, the uneven distribution of childcare and family leaves poses one of the most significant challenges to gender equality and reconciliation of work and family life, as prolonged absences from the workforce negatively impact women's career and wage development, subsequently affecting their future pensions (Rotkirch et al., 2017; Salmi & Närvi, 2017; Alakärppä, 2022). This inequality is further perpetuated by the gender pay gap, often leading women to stay at home when their children are young. According to the latest figures, the gender pay gap in Finland (15,3 %) is the highest among the Nordic countries and significantly higher than the OECD average (11,9 %) (OECD, 2021; Mustosmäki et al. 2021).

Registry-based studies reinforce the fact that women bear a significantly greater risk of the impact of parenthood on their career and standard of living: parenthood, especially early parenthood, appears disadvantageous for women's income development (Rotkirch et al., 2017). This is associated with the concept of the cost of opportunities, referring to the loss of earnings, pension income, and career opportunities experienced by a parent taking time off work or reducing working hours due to childcare responsibilities (Sutela, 2013).

The unequal distribution of family leaves can also be connected to pregnancy and family leave discrimination. For example, in the study of Nordberg et al. (2021), employers frequently cited women's prolonged family leave as main explanatory factor for discriminative practices. In the Work-Life Balance working group memorandum, it is stated that, since

legislation has already clearly prohibited pregnancy and family leave discrimination, the identified problems are interpreted to be related specifically to discriminatory practices in the workplace and the costs incurred by employers due to family leaves. (Työ- ja elinkeinoministeriö 2021.)

Financial factors from employers' perspective have indeed been tied to the evolution of family leave policies; the costs incurred by the employer from family leave have been seen as a relevant challenge, and various solutions have been proposed to equalize the costs (Salmi & Närvi 2017). According to employer federations, the compensation level itself is deemed sufficient (e.g., Terveyden ja hyvinvoinnin laitos 2023a; Rantahalvari & Åström 2013). Most of the available research data actually suggests that the direct costs of family leave do not appear to be a significant cost item when taking into account the compensation received by employers (Rantahalvari & Åström 2013; Terveyden ja hyvinvoinnin laitos 2023a). Instead, previous studies indicate that the most significant problem caused by family leave for organizations could be, in fact, indirect costs, such as training and onboarding costs for both staff and potential substitutes. These costs have been found to weaken the company's profitability, especially in female-dominated fields (e.g., Anttila 2012; Salmi & Närvi 2017; Lilja, Asplund & Kauppinen 2007; Maliranta & Napari 2007).

According to previous research, especially in smaller companies, the costs of family leave and the costs of employees' absences can be a significant factor in hindering women's employment (Salmi & Närvi 2017; Miettinen, Mustonen & Räsänen 2022). Additionally, as studies indicate a more pronounced financial effect on sectors predominantly occupied by women, this directly influences the wage-paying ability within these sectors, thereby exacerbating also the gender pay disparity. (Lilja et al. 2007).

Despite the comprehensive welfare state services and labor market regulation in Finland and the Nordic region, gender disparities have proven persistent. Criticism of the depiction of Nordic countries as women-friendly and high achievers in gender equality indexes has been raised (e.g., Kantola et al. 2020; Borschorst 2009). Scholars argue that positive portrayals are based on overly simplistic measures (Kirkebø, Langford & Byrkjeflot 2021). Prior research show that women still face greater challenges in reconciling work and family life, dealing with the gender pay gap, encountering male dominance in leadership roles, and managing the division of paid and unpaid work. The impact of stereotypes, gendered ideals, and social norms persists, indicating that political actions are still needed to support Finnish women in their efforts to engage in the working life, build a sustainable career, and achieve a balance between work and family. (e.g., Nordic Council of Ministers 2021; Mustosmäki et al. 2021.)

Sutela (2013) argues that the core of these issues is not the length of family leave or even labor market segregation based on gender. Instead, she sees the increasing involvement of fathers in family leave as one of the most crucial factors in unraveling the complexity. In this case the risk of taking family leave would not only affect the employment of (young) women.

It would additionally reduce, for example, the concentration of substitute positions resulting from family leave on female-dominated fields and decrease gender-based statistical discrimination. In other words, more equally shared family leave would mitigate the cost of opportunities that currently largely falls on women. (Lammi-Taskula & Salmi 2013; Sutela, 2013.)

### 2.2.3. Family leave reform

The effort to reform the family leave system has been on the agenda of Finnish equality policy and family policy for a long time (Elomäki, Mustomäki & Sandberg 2020). The first attempt to reform the family leave system was during Juha Sipilä's government (2015-2019). In the 2017 budget session, the government parties set strict boundary conditions for the reform. Nevertheless, the reform failed in February 2018, when Annika Saarikko, the minister responsible for the reform, announced that Center Party did not see the conditions for implementing the reform. (Elomäki, Mustomäki & Sandberg 2020.)

Before the reform, the use of family leave has been strongly gendered in Finland compared to other Nordic countries and therefore the economic risks related to family leave have mainly been directed towards women. (Valtiovarainministeriö 2023.) Earlier models and proposals for family leave reform both in Finland, as well as in other Nordic Countries, have indeed focused on the development and extension of the leave period specifically designated for fathers (Miettinen & Saarikallio-Torp 2020; Eydal 2012). The explanation is, that based on research, it has been defined as an efficient way of not just promoting gender-equal use, also to foster gender equality within households and the labor market (e.g., Saarikallio-Torp & Miettinen 2021; Duvander & Johansson 2019).

The family leave reform entered into force on 1 August 2022 during Sanna Marin's government (2019-2023). The reform aims to achieve the following objectives:

- Equitably distribute family leave and caregiving responsibilities among both parents within a family.
- Enhance non-discrimination and promote equality in the workplace.
- Mitigate gender-based wage disparities. (Ministry of Social Affairs and Health 2022.)

The reform was prepared based on the so-called Swedish model. Beyond gender impacts, the background of the family leave reform also includes a broader aim to improve the daily lives of families, reduce the risk for divorce, and contribute to the development of the relationship between the child and parents (Hallituksen esitys 129/2021 vp; Lammi-Taskula, Närvi & Eerola 2020.)

The reform includes financial incentives aimed at increasing the use of parental leave by non-birthing parents. Post-reform, there's an expectation that non-birthing parents' utilization will increase, contributing to about 2000 additional person-years of leave (Isolankila 2021). It has

also been estimated that the increase in the earnings portion of the first parental leave days (to the same level as the birthing parent's portion) could raise the percentage of non-birthing parents utilizing parental leave by a few percentage points (Carnicelli et al., 2020). In a microsimulation model calculation, it was observed that 85 percent of families would benefit financially if the non-birthing parent fully utilized the non-transferable portion of the parental leave period, instead of the birthing parent staying at home with home care support for the same duration (Koev 2022).

In the new system, in addition to both parent's own quotas, there are 63 working days of parental leave to be shared between parents. However, if the families behave as they have until now and the non-birthing parent transfers the days to the birthing parent, the number of per diem days used by the birthing parent will remain unchanged. As the daily allowance quota for non-birthing parent is extended and the compensation rate rises, the effects of the reform on the costs of daily allowances and employment largely depend on changes in non-birthing parents' behavior. (Isolankila 2021.)

The flexibility of the family leave system has been also enhanced. The flexibility of parental allowance is expected to facilitate a smoother return to working life and encourage parents to alternate the use of leave, which in turn affects a more equal distribution of caregiving responsibilities. (Hallituksen esitys 129/2021 vp; Isolankila 2021). A survey by Kela reveals that a quarter of childbearing and a third of non-childbearing parents would use the possibility of parental leave on a part-week basis, at least quite likely. (Heinonen, Miettinen and Saarikallio-Torp 2020)

Regarding childcare leave and child home care allowance, the family leave reform does not include changes. This might reflect the fact, that in contrast to other Nordic countries, Finland has placed a strong emphasis on family's own choice in caring for their children, alongside gender equality (e.g., Haataja 2016; Eydal 2012). Earlier the utilization of parental leave by fathers in Finland has been significantly influenced by the widespread use of childcare leave following parental leave. Nearly 90 percent of families in Finland, mostly mothers, have opted for the childcare leave, extending the period of home-based childcare before the use of public childcare services. (Duvander, Mussino & Tervola 2021.) The family leave reform aims to shift a larger portion of childcare responsibilities to be covered by well-supported and income-linked parental allowance. The increase in parental leave quota for non-birthing parents also contributes to this goal, hoping to encourage non-birthing parents to take a greater share of childcare responsibilities and reduce the use of childcare leave to some extent. (Hallituksen esitys 129/2021 vp.) Over the long term, with the reform and the more even distribution of family leaves between parents, the discrimination women face in the labor market is believed to decrease (Valtiovarainministeriö 2023).

### 2.3. Pregnancy and family leave discrimination in Finland

Based on the previous chapters, challenges related to equality in working life and reconciliation of work and family life persist, in spite of the equality legislation, presence of welfare state services and labor market regulations (e.g., Nordic Council of Ministers 2021; Mustosmäki et al. 2021). As one of the key issues in Finland has been considered the main topic of this thesis, that is, pregnancy and family leave discrimination, which disproportionately affects women (Työ- ja elinkeinoministeriö 2021).

#### 2.3.1. Related legislation

Gender discrimination is prohibited in many international human rights agreements (Alarotu 2005), in our constitution (1999/731), in the Criminal Code (1889/39) as well as in the Equality Act (1986/609). Additionally, the Employment Contracts Act (55/2001) includes a prohibition of employer discrimination and an obligation to treat employees equally. From EU legal perspective, key legal sources regulating pregnancy discrimination in the workplace are the Equality Directive (2002/73/EY), the Pregnant Workers Directive (NDir 92/85/ETY), and the case law of the Court of Justice of the European Union (Alarotu 2005). Legal practice complements legislation: The Court of Justice of the European Union has dealt with many legal cases based on pregnancy and parenthood, which have also guided the interpretation of the anti-discrimination provisions of the Equality Act in Finland. Protection against pregnancy discrimination is an essential human right, and Finland has committed to various international agreements that prohibit discrimination based on pregnancy. (Anttila 2012.)

The provision of Section 7 of the Equality Act (609/1986) is generally applicable and prohibits discrimination based on gender, pregnancy, parenthood, or family care obligations. Section 8 of the law is a specific provision related to the workplace, where gender-based discrimination is prohibited in recruitment, working conditions, salary, and other terms of employment. Additionally, an employee cannot be terminated or have their employment terms affected adversely based on these reasons. Discrimination also encompasses prohibition of countermeasures, referring to situations where a person is given notice or otherwise treated less favorably after invoking a right or obligation outlined in the Act or taken part in investigating a matter concerning gender discrimination (Equality Act 1986/609, § 8.)

In addition to other specific prohibitions on discrimination (Equality Act 1986/609 § 8a-8d), the law also provides the possibility of compensation for the violation of the prohibition (ibid., § 11). An employer who violates the prohibition of discrimination under the Equality Act is obligated to pay compensation to the aggrieved party. When determining the compensation, factors such as the nature and extent of the discrimination, its duration, as well as any other economic sanctions imposed or ordered against the person for an offense against another law, must be taken into account. Additionally, the aggrieved party may seek damages for financial loss under the Tort Liability Act (412/1974) or any other applicable law. (Equality Act 1986/609 § 11.)



In both the Equality Act (1986/609) and the Employment Contracts Act (55/2001), there are provisions prohibiting the termination of a pregnant employee. Pregnant individuals and those on family leave have enhanced job security, as, by the Employment Contracts Act (55/2001), they cannot be terminated even for financial or production-related reasons until they return from family leave. The only exception is if the employer's operations cease entirely. Additionally, the termination of an employment contract during the probationary period should not occur in violation of prohibition on discrimination. In practice, this means that if an employer terminates the contract of a pregnant individual, the termination is considered to be due to the employee's pregnancy or the use of parental leave unless the employer can demonstrate that it resulted from another legitimate reason. (Employment Contracts Act 55/2001, chapter 7, § 9; chapter 1, § 4:4.)

Discrimination against a pregnant woman is also prohibited in the hiring process, whether it is for a permanent or fixed-term employment relationship, and regardless of how much of the employment contract's duration the employee spends on family leave (Alarotu 2005). According to Equality Act (609/1986, § 8:1), employers must hire the most qualified candidate, unless they can justify their decision based on *a substantial and valid reason* related to the job's nature or another acceptable factor unrelated to gender. Pregnancy or family planning should not influence the employer's decision, and inquiries about them should not be made to job applicants. Also, according to the European Court of Justice, discrimination cannot be justified by potential financial losses that an employer may incur by hiring a pregnant woman. (Alarotu 2005.)

Identifying cases of pregnancy and family leave discrimination in recruitment situations can, however, in certain situations be challenging. In hiring decisions, an employer may bypass the most qualified candidate by demonstrating that their action was based on another valid reason unrelated to gender (Equality Act 609/1986, § 8:1). Such reasons may include legal restrictions; for example, employers are required to prioritize offering work to their part-time employees, as stated in the Employment Contracts Act (55/2001). Acceptable reasons may also include the applicant's personal qualities and suitability for the job, which particularly is posing challenges when suspicions of pregnancy (or family leave) discrimination arise. However, the employer must provide evidence that the chosen candidate's suitability for the position is genuinely better than the allegedly discriminated against individual and that the assessment criteria are fair, and not discriminatory based on gender. (Alarotu 2005.)

Section 9 of Chapter 4 of the Employment Contracts Act (55/2001) addresses the return to work after family leave. By the law, when family leaves end, employees have the right to return primarily to their previous position, and employers are responsible for ensuring compliance with the law. If returning to the previous tasks is not possible due to changes, the employer must offer work equivalent to the previous contractual job or as the last option, other work in accordance with their employment contract. Employers are obligated to demonstrate that they do not treat employees in a discriminatory manner due to pregnancy

or family leave. Failure to comply may lead to the employer being held liable for damages and, in some cases, facing criminal responsibility (Employment Contracts Act 55/2001; Brofeldt 2019.)

In accordance with the Section 1 of Chapter 6 of the Employment Contracts Act (55/2001), in fixed-term and part-time employment relationships, less favorable working conditions cannot be applied solely based on the duration of the employment contract or working hours unless justified by legitimate reasons. However, the Finnish courts have recognized the social challenge in the prevalence of fixed-term employment contracts, especially for women of childbearing age. They have been sought to be protected through an interpretation of the law that is well-suited to the Finnish situation: limiting the duration of the employment relationship or not continuing the employment relationship based on pregnancy is prohibited. (Alarotu 2005; Equality Act 1986/609.) In practice, individuals in fixed-term employment contracts still experience discrimination based on pregnancy or family leave (Brofeldt 2019; Ombudsman for Equality 2023a).

Pregnancy and family leave discrimination continues to exist, as evidenced in the supervisory practices of Ombudsman for Equality, legal cases, and the work of labor unions (e.g., Anttila 2012; Brofeldt 2019; Ombudsman for Equality 2023a). Next, the previous research findings related to pregnancy and family leave discrimination are reviewed.

### **2.3.2. Previous studies related to pregnancy and family leave discrimination**

In examining legislation and related legal precedents, the protection against discrimination based on pregnancy appears to be strong (Anttila 2012). However, regardless of legal provisions, pregnancy and family leave discrimination is common in the Finnish working life (Ombudsman for Equality 2024). Pregnancy and family leave discrimination occur across all industries and sectors. Women employed on fixed-term contracts, part-time positions, in temporary agency work, or under zero-hour contracts face a particularly high risk of experiencing discrimination due to pregnancy and family leaves (Ombudsman for Equality 2023a).

In Finland, data on pregnancy and family leave discrimination have largely been based on contacts received by the Ombudsman for Equality and trade unions (Keyriläinen 2019; Työ- ja elinkeinoministeriö 2021). Pregnancy and family leave discrimination constitute the most frequent category of work-related discrimination suspicions reported to the Ombudsman for Equality year after year (Ombudsman for Equality 2023c). In 2023, approximately 40 percent (117 cases) of workplace discrimination inquiries were related to discrimination based on pregnancy and family leave (Ombudsman for Equality 2024). Typical situations reported include inappropriate questions related to family situations or plans during job application processes, not renewing a fixed-term employment contract upon the revelation of pregnancy or family leave plans and complicating the return to work after family leave. For instance, a substitute may have replaced an employee returning from family leave, or their tasks may

have "disappeared" (Ombudsman for Equality 2023c). Nonetheless, there are no statistical or monitoring data regarding how many of the inquiries received by the Ombudsman for Equality have led to an assessment of discrimination or how many have progressed to, for example, court proceedings. (Työ- ja elinkeinoministeriö 2021). The previous research shows, on the other hand, that discriminated individuals often do pursue the matter further and discrimination seems to be an underreported phenomenon (e.g., Brofeldt 2019; Työ- ja elinkeinoministeriö 2021).

Trade unions also receive numerous inquiries related to pregnancy and family leave discrimination. According to a survey commissioned by the Ombudsman for Equality office for trade unions at the turn of 2016-2017, nearly half (47 %) of the responding unions reported receiving member inquiries on this topic at least weekly, with some receiving them even daily. For example, PAM ry, a union representing workers in the private service sector, receives approximately a thousand contacts annually. (Ombudsman for Equality 2019).

Based on the number of contacts received by both trade unions and the Ombudsman for Equality, the prevalence of discrimination has remained relatively stable (Keyriläinen 2019; Brofeldt 2019). However, actions that increase general awareness have been observed to lead to more contacts. For example, a campaign of the Ombudsman for Equality against pregnancy discrimination significantly increased client contacts in 2017 and 2018 (Kanninen et al., 2019).

On December 3, 2019, the Ministry of Economic Affairs and Employment established a tripartite Work-Life Balance working group. Its task was to investigate, among other things, the prevention of pregnancy discrimination, improving job security for those returning from parental leave, and refining related legislation as outlined in the Marin government program.

According to a memorandum of the working group, the number of contacts received by the Ombudsman for Equality can be contextualized by considering the annual number of childbirths (approximately 50,000) and the utilization of family leave. Kela's statistics indicate that family benefits were received by 140,000 individuals in 2020. The Work-Life Balance working group notes that, compared to these figures, the number of contacts received by the Ombudsman for Equality is not very high. (Työ- ja elinkeinoministeriö 2021.)

In addition to the figures on contacts received by trade unions and the Ombudsman for Equality, some statistics on the topic are available from the Finnish quality of work life survey<sup>3</sup>. Considering the statistics, the perception of discrimination based on family status or pregnancy at one's workplace has slightly decreased over the long term: in the late 1990s the

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<sup>3</sup> Quality of work life survey has been a comprehensive face-to-face interview study conducted since 1977, aiming to monitor working conditions and their changes from the perspective of wage earners. Additionally, the study provides information on topics such as the reconciliation of work and family life, employees' retirement plans, and work history. Data is collected through personal interviews using a standardized questionnaire. The sample (3,800-7,000) is drawn from the Labor Force Survey, including either employed individuals or wage earners.

average was 7 percent, compared with 4 percent in 2018. In previous study from 2018, women (6 %), similar to previous years, were more likely to perceive discrimination in their organization than men (2 %), and those under 45 years more frequently than older individuals. Based on the comparison between sectors, in the municipal sector, which is dominated by women, has an aging staff structure, and generally uses fixed-term employment relationships, discrimination related to family life and pregnancy was observed more often than in other sectors. (Sutela et al. 2019.)

The Work Research Centre (WRC) has examined personal experiences of workplace discrimination based on the quality of work life survey between 1990-2013. Based on these statistics, women had more personal experiences of discrimination in all sectors compared to men. (Sutela et al. 2019; Pietiläinen et al. 2018). In 2013 only 1,8 % of women reported personally experiencing discrimination related to family status or pregnancy. Between 1990 and 2008, the number was declining, but between 2008 and 2013 there was a slight increase once again. In 2013, the age group most frequently experiencing discrimination based on pregnancy or family status was women aged 35-44 (3,9 %). (Pietiläinen et al. 2018.)

When comparing the data compiled by Sutela et al. (2019) regarding observations of pregnancy and family leave discrimination with the figures presented in the WRC report on firsthand experiences of pregnancy and family leave discrimination (Pietiläinen et al. 2018), it can be noted that observations have been about three times more frequent than firsthand experiences every year. This reinforces the view represented in the report of the working group on work-life balance (Työ- ja elinkeinoministeriö 2021), that in accordance with national research and authorities' assessments, discrimination is an underreported phenomenon.

Based on the responses to a survey conducted by MiB ry (2021), experiences related to pregnancy and family leave discrimination are much more common compared with the statistics in WRC report (Pietiläinen et al. 2018). Of the respondents to the survey (N=475), as many as 36 percent reported encountering discrimination related to their family situation in the workplace. The cases highlighted in the survey were largely similar to situations raised by the Ombudsman for Equality (2023c): termination of fixed-term employment contracts due to pregnancy, stagnation in career development, or the inability to return to the same position after family leave - in some cases, the tasks had been given to a substitute. (Mothers in Business 2021.) However, it is important to note that the data sample only includes highly educated women. Prior research suggest that highly educated individuals may be more aware to detecting discrimination. For example, based on the statistical data obtained from the quality of work life surveys, especially among the highly educated, there have been relatively many experiences of being discriminated against in working life. (e.g., Pietiläinen et al. 2018; Behtoui & Neergaard 2009.)

In the supplementary study of Statistics Finland's Labor Force Survey, the extent of pregnancy and family leave discrimination in Finland was investigated for the first time at the population level in 2018. The data is based on interviews conducted in 2018. The results pertain to parents with children under 15 years old who returned to work from their most recent family leave by 2018 at the latest. Since the youngest child at the time of the interview was 0-14 years old, the return from family leave could have occurred between 2004 and 2018. (Työ- ja elinkeinoministeriö 2021.) The experience of the effects of family leave may therefore be based on a memory from years ago (Keyriläinen 2019). The interviews were conducted with individuals who were employed during family leave and at the time of the interview (Työ- ja elinkeinoministeriö 2021). However, previous studies suggest that this group often have a more positive image of the effects of family leave on their careers compared to individuals without a job to resume (Keyriläinen 2019).

Based on the study, overall, a quarter of employed mothers who had changed job tasks, employer, or had not returned to work after family leave stated that the change was not voluntary. At the population level, this applied to approximately 42,000 women. Non-continuation of fixed-term employment contracts related to pregnancy and family leave discrimination affected approximately 11,000 women at the population level. Additionally, about 17,000 women changed their job or job tasks because, upon returning to work, their tasks had changed or disappeared, or another person had been hired for the position. (Työ- ja elinkeinoministeriö 2021.)

The Ombudsman for Equality emphasizes that if respondents had multiple children, only experiences related to the youngest child's were considered. Consequently, mothers who had encountered discrimination due to pregnancy or family leave earlier in their careers or concerning older children were not reflected in the results. Similarly, respondents who were not employed were also excluded. Hence, the number of mothers who have experienced discrimination in working life may be higher than the figures provided by the study. Additionally, the study did not delve into discrimination related to job-seeking situations. (Equality Ombudsman 2023a.)

Alarotu (2005) notes that it is impossible to provide accurate statistical data on the prevalence of pregnancy (or family leave) discrimination precisely because the majority of discrimination cases remain hidden. This stems from various factors: for example, authorities may be poorly known, those suspecting discrimination may not believe in the progress of a complaint, or they may be hesitant to disclose discrimination with their real name, resulting in the matter going unresolved. (Ibid.)

In addition, Keyriläinen (2019) states that the absence of previous population-level figures on the extent of pregnancy and family leave discrimination adds challenge to contextualize the results of the study. The Work-Life Balance working group imply that conclusions about the actual prevalence of discrimination cannot be drawn from the responses. The working group

state that interpretation is complicated by the fact that this is a phenomenon whose determination ultimately requires the objective assessment of courts on a case-by-case basis, but at the same time legal precedent is sparse due to associated risks. (Työ- ja elinkeinoministeriö 2021.)

Accordingly, the Working Life Balance working group argue that investigating pregnancy and family leave discrimination through surveys is generally challenging. The difficulties particularly lie in the representativeness of the sample and the understanding of the concept of discrimination. (Työ- ja elinkeinoministeriö 2021.) Sutela et al. (2019) also assert that researching unequal treatment and discrimination, especially when experienced firsthand, is a challenging research topic. Interpretations of unequal treatment in different situations or what the perceived injustice is based on, can vary among respondents and at different times. The respondent is not always able to specify the reason for the discrimination they experienced, and sometimes the respondent can conclude that it is not discrimination, even if their reflection on the matter suggests the opposite; sometimes a person may only realize afterward that the situation they experienced was discrimination (ibid.).

A Norwegian study exploring pregnancy and family leave discrimination through interviews with employees and employers (Nordberg, Pedersen, and Egeland 2021) point out that not all cases involve intentional discrimination from employers and, not all can be classified as discrimination; a large amount of the negative impacts related to pregnancy and family leave in the workplace fell into “a gray area” between illegal discrimination and unequal treatment. Nordberg et al. (2021) notes that unfavorable treatment toward pregnant individuals or those on family leave is not necessarily rooted in prejudices or deliberate discrimination. Instead, it can stem from, for example, deficient systematics in human resources work, ad hoc decision-making, or inflexible attitudes among leaders and supervisors (ibid.). Eaton (2019) points out deficiency in awareness among supervisors and managers as one of the primary factors contributing to discrimination.

Due to the complexities and uncertainties involved in determining if discriminatory actions are directly linked to pregnancy or family leave, Nordberg et al. (2021) argue that it is crucial to differentiate between discrimination as *a social problem* and *a legal problem*. The legal framework recognizes and confronts discrimination as a communal concern through its laws and regulations. This was emphasized by the Work-Life Balance working group, which highlighted the necessity of determining discrimination cases in court. As a societal problem, pregnancy and family leave discrimination refers to discrimination as a broader societal problem resulting from structural factors - that is, the broader consequences that arise from systemic issues within society - primarily affecting women. (Ibid.). Nordberg et al. (2021) emphasize that relying solely on legal protection to combat gender inequality in the workplace neglects the 'gray area problem.' This challenge arises from the legal perspective, where discrimination may not be recognized unless proven in a court of law. Consequently, discriminatory experiences may go unnoticed if not legally recognized. Moreover, solely

viewing discrimination through a legal lens transforms it into a collective concern while simultaneously individualizing it, placing the responsibility on employees to safeguard their legal rights (Norberg et al. 2021).

In summary, based on earlier studies on the subject, it can be concluded that workplace discrimination related to pregnancy and family leave still exists in Finland, with a primary focus on women (Sutela et al. 2019; Pietiläinen et al. 2018; Työ- ja elinkeinoministeriö 2021). However, in addition to the inherent challenges of researching pregnancy and family leave discrimination, there are divergent views on its existence, prevalence, and the methods needed to address it.

### **2.3.3. Conflicting views about pregnancy and family leave discrimination**

The issue has raised divergent perspectives, with the most notable disparities between the viewpoints of employer representatives and employee advocates. This can be seen for example in the work of the Working Life Balance working group mentioned in the previous section. The working group conducted a comparison between the existing labor legislation and the Government's goals aimed at enhancing gender equality in both the workplace and family settings. The working group investigated, among other things, in accordance with the government program, protection for fixed-term employees against pregnancy discrimination and improvement of job security for employees returning from family leave. (Ministry of Economic Affairs and Employment 2021)

It is mentioned in the working groups memorandum, that the current Employment Contracts Act already offers stronger protection for pregnant employees and employees taking family leave. The working group also emphasizes that those who have returned from family leave are in a better position than other employees due to the anti-discrimination prohibitions outlined in the Equality Act. However, the working group held divergent opinions regarding the inclusion of provisions prohibiting discrimination based on pregnancy and family leave in the Employment Contracts Act. Ultimately, it did not propose any such amendments to the Act. (Työ- ja elinkeinoministeriö 2021; Ministry of Economic Affairs and Employment 2021.)

The appendices of the working group's memorandum strongly highlight divergent opinions about the findings between employer representatives and trade union confederations representing employees<sup>4</sup>. In Appendix 1 of the memorandum, the actors presenting employees present their dissenting opinion and in Appendix 2, the employer side presents its supplementary statement. The employer representatives assert that the working group's research and the accompanying memorandum align with the government program's

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<sup>4</sup> The employer representatives are: EK (The Confederation of Finnish Industries), KT (Local Government and County Employers), SY (The Federation of Finnish Enterprises), and KiT (Commission for Church Employers). The employee representatives are: SAK (The Central Organisation of Finnish Trade Unions), Akava (Confederation of Unions for Professional and Managerial Staff in Finland), and STTK (The Finnish Confederation of Professionals). (Työ- ja elinkeinoministeriö 2021.)

requirements. They argue against duplicative regulations on discrimination for fixed-term employees regarding pregnancy and family leave, finding legislative changes unnecessary. (Työ- ja elinkeinoministeriö 2021, appendix 2.)

The employer representatives state that the investigation done by the working group affirms that employees utilizing family leave do not face more terminations or changes in job tasks compared to other employees (Työ- ja elinkeinoministeriö 2021, appendix 2). However, in the memorandum itself, in contrary to employers' appendix, it is pointed out that "there is no available statistical data or study that would indicate that pregnant individuals or those taking family leave experience more terminations or changes in job tasks compared to other employees" (Työ- ja elinkeinoministeriö 2021, 42). Since there is no information available, it is not possible to draw a conclusion on whether terminations or other involuntary changes are directed more *or* less towards this particular group.

Additionally, employers' representatives emphasize that the statistical data mentioned in the study does not support the assumption or claim that pregnancy or family leave discrimination would be a significant issue in the Finnish job market. The group argue that the current discrimination presumption is comprehensive, addressing situations where discrimination is suspected. In their view, job security is already at a high level, and they also point out that concerning return protection, it is exceeding EU regulations. They note that tightening job security for those returning from family leave could be potentially detrimental to other employees and could negatively impact employment, particularly for women. (Työ- ja elinkeinoministeriö 2021, appendix 2.)

Thus, instead of changes in legislation, employers' representatives propose focusing on changing workplace attitudes and practices to combat pregnancy and family leave discrimination. They also suggest enhancing the enforcement of anti-discrimination laws through more effective communication, spreading best practices, rigorous supervision, and the real threat of consequences for non-compliance, such as compensation, criminal liability, damages, and reputational risk. (Työ- ja elinkeinoministeriö 2021, appendix 2.)

On the contrary, employee representatives argue that the working group failed to fulfill its task, disagreeing with its assessments and conclusions. The group claim that the working group, contrary to the government program, deemed legislative clarification unnecessary and rejected their proposals, arguing that discrimination statistics are lacking, and discrimination is minimal. The representatives criticize the working group for dismissing proposals and deeming job protection investigation unnecessary based on outdated inquiries. Employee representatives emphasize that lack of precise statistics on discrimination or its perceived rarity does not justify deviating from non-discrimination principles and other human rights. (Työ- ja elinkeinoministeriö 2021, appendix 1.)

Based on previously mentioned, employee representatives suggest legislative actions, including clarifying laws to prevent pregnancy and family leave from affecting the



continuation of fixed-term employment. This is in line with the latest recommendations from the Ombudsman for Equality (2024). The representatives also propose specifying responsibility distribution between temporary employment agencies and user companies, particularly in cases of discriminatory practices affecting employment continuity, with compensation responsibility extending to the user company. Additionally, they advocate for enhanced job security, commonly known as "elevated termination protection," for employees returning from family leave. (Työ- ja elinkeinoministeriö 2021, appendix 1.)

In addition to the differing views of the working group, the confrontation between employees' and employers' representatives can be seen in other sources. For example, an article published by Yle (2021), a national media company owned by the Finnish state, employee representatives argue that the legislation is not specific and stringent enough. In the article, Lotta Savinko, the Head of Workplace Affairs at Akava, points out that upon returning from family leave, an employee could theoretically be terminated on the first day back. According to her, there might be a need for a protective period for those returning from family leave. On the contrary, Albert Mäkelä, an expert from The Federation of Finnish Enterprises, representing employers, claims that discrimination due to pregnancy and family leave is already prohibited by the Equality Act, and reiterating the prohibition would not have any impact. (Yle 2021.)

Katariina Sahlberg (2023), a lawyer at STTK (The Finnish Confederation of Professionals), considers current legislation inefficient in atypical employment relationships, with reference to the contacts received by trade unions reported in the annual reports of the Ombudsman for Equality. She emphasizes that the duration of employment impacts protection against pregnancy and family leave discrimination, with indefinite contracts providing stronger safeguards. Sahlberg notes differences in burden of proof provisions and financial consequences between indefinite and fixed-term contracts. Thus, STTK demands that the level of protection must be the same as for those in permanent employment. This means that in practice, the Employment Contracts Act - as well as other employment laws - should be amended in this regard. (STTK 2023)

In another Yle (2023b) article, Vesa Rantahalvari, the leading expert at EK (The Confederation of Finnish Industries), responds to whether EK recognizes discrimination against women of childbearing age in the workplace or in recruitment, saying that "EK identifies a different issue". He argues that women's labor market position is influenced not by discrimination but rather by long family leaves, child home care support, and partial caregiving leave. (Yle 2023b.) The viewpoint corresponds with the perspective of the employer representatives in the Work-Life Balance working group, which posit the view that pregnancy and family leave discrimination may exist, but it is not a significant issue in the Finnish working life (Työ- ja elinkeinoministeriö 2021). The fact that pregnancy and family leave discrimination is not always recognized as a problem is also evident in many other articles and sources (e.g., Helsingin Sanomat 2017; Alarotu 2005).

Nousiainen (2012) speculates whether the rhetoric favoring gender equality in Finland has been used at the expense of recognizing discrimination. According to her, it seems that assumptions about the prevalence of discrimination and the readiness for gender equality promotion measures are interconnected. She argues that if discrimination is not identified, it understandably diminishes the motivation for advancing gender equality. When discrimination is not believed to occur, efforts to promote gender equality may be perceived as distributing undeserved privileges. Therefore, she considers recognizing discrimination as a prerequisite for the effective implementation of gender equality promotion measures. (Nousiainen 2012.) This also applies to pregnancy and family leave discrimination.

Although there are conflicting views on the subject, the Ombudsman for Equality has underscored the critical importance of addressing pregnancy and family leave discrimination in workplace gender equality for years. The previous recommendations presented to the Finnish Parliament by the Ombudsman for Equality imply that preventing pregnancy and family leave discrimination should be a focal point of gender equality policy, necessitating effective measures to halt such discrimination (Ombudsman for Equality 2023a). The latest annual report of the Ombudsman asserts that pregnancy discrimination should be tackled both by means of legislation and equality policy. The Ombudsman also suggests strengthening protection against pregnancy discrimination for fixed-term employees in employment laws. Although this recommendation made its way into Prime Minister Sanna Marin's government program, it did not materialize during the government term. Due to the severity of pregnancy discrimination specifically against fixed-term employees, this recommendation has been reiterated. (Ombudsman for Equality 2023a; Ombudsman for Equality 2024.)

Pregnancy and family leave discrimination is acknowledged in the present government program as a key challenge related to workplace equality (Finnish Government 2023a). For instance, Minister of Social Affairs and Health, Sanni Grahn-Laasonen, has affirmed that pregnancy and family leave discrimination constitute a genuine and often concealed problem. The working group established for the issue is expected to provide solutions for preventing pregnancy and family leave discrimination, balancing the costs imposed on employers due to parenthood, and facilitating post-family leave employment and smooth return to work. Additionally, the group is anticipated to assess the results of the family leave reform and evaluate potential adjustments to the model to ensure a more equitable distribution of family leave between parents. (Sosiaali- ja terveystieteiden ministeriö 2023b.)

After familiarized with the previous research, it can be observed that existing studies have primarily focused on examining the prevalence and on some level, on manifestations of the phenomenon. Additionally, discussions surrounding the topic have been closely linked to the debate on whether or not pregnancy and family leave discrimination is indeed a significant issue concerning gender equality and equality in the workplace. Those acknowledging the problem have proposed some solutions to reduce discrimination. However, there is limited research on the contemplation of why pregnancy and family leave discrimination occurs to

begin with, despite legislation prohibiting discrimination. The results of this study, presented in chapter 4, offer implications for the causes of pregnancy and family leave discrimination as well as intervention proposals to tackle the issue.

#### **2.4. Synthesis of the knowledge base**

Based on presented literature, the evolution of Finland's equality policy reflects broader trends towards administrativeization and legalization, as well as economization of equality, indicative of neoliberal governance paradigms prioritizing efficiency and legal mechanisms for tackling equality issues. Consequently, the change of direction has been referred to as “dismantling the equality policy” (e.g., Jacquot 2017) or “the crisis of equality policy” (e.g. Kantola et al. 2020; Kantola & Lombardo, 2017; Jacquot 2017).

Despite current government commitments to promote gender equality and non-discrimination, contradictions arise from planned or already or already implemented policy measures affecting women and female-dominated sectors (Helsingin Sanomat 2024b; Mothers in Business 2023; Demarinaiset 2023; Akavan erityisalat 2023). The emphasis on formal equality may overlook systemic inequalities, necessitating investment in substantive equality (e.g., Kantola 2012).

Family policy, central to societal well-being, intersects with broader policy objectives such as economic growth, and labor market participation. In the 21<sup>st</sup> century, employment goals have risen alongside more traditional family policy goals in connection with the development of the family leave system. (Karakainen et al. 2022.) Despite advancements in family policy, challenges persist in reconciling work and family life, exacerbated by persistent gender inequalities in the workforce and caregiving responsibilities. Regardless of high employment rate, Finnish women experience economic and social uncertainty in the labor market (Sutela et al. 2019).

Extended periods of absence from the workforce disproportionately impede women's career progression and wage growth, consequently impacting their future retirement income and pensions (Rotkirch et al., 2017; Salmi & Närvi, 2017; Alakärppä, 2022). Therefore, prior research highlights the potential of more equal family leave utilization to mitigate discrimination and promote gender equality in the labor market. The enduring influence of stereotypes, gender norms, and societal expectations underscores the ongoing necessity for political initiatives aimed at enhancing use of family leave by fathers, fostering long-term career sustainability for women, and facilitating the attainment of work-life balance. (Nordic Council of Ministers 2021; Mustosmäki et al. 2021.)

One of the pivotal concerns in Finland related to equality and to reconciliation of work and family life revolves around discrimination during pregnancy and family leave, disproportionately impacting women (Sutela et al. 2019; Pietiläinen et al. 2018; Työ- ja elinkeinoministeriö 2021). Recommendations from different stakeholders, presented in

section 2.3.3., emphasize the need for attitudinal shifts in workplaces, enhanced enforcement of anti-discrimination laws, and recognition of discrimination as a prerequisite for effective gender equality measures. The consistent advocacy of the Finnish Ombudsman for Equality underscores the urgency of addressing pregnancy and family leave discrimination, urging effective policy measures to safeguard workplace equality (Ombudsman for Equality 2019; Ombudsman for Equality 2023a).

In conclusion, some progress has been made in advancing gender equality and work-life balance, for example through family leave reform (section 2.2.3.). However, despite legal prohibitions, instances of pregnancy and family leave discrimination persist, as indicated by the oversight activities of the Ombudsman for Equality, legal proceedings, and the advocacy efforts of labor unions (e.g., Anttila 2012; Brofeldt 2019; Ombudsman for Equality 2023a; Tasa-arvoaltuutettu 2024). This underscores the need for continued efforts to promote substantive equality, to tackle equality issues, such as pregnancy discrimination, and to promote more family-friendly working life. Additionally, due to the limited amount of research on the topic, particularly concerning the potential causes of the phenomenon, further research is needed.

### **3. Research approach and methodological choices**

The chapter outlines the approach of the study, exploring the application of service design as an interdisciplinary approach and in the context of societal issues. The chapter introduces the framework of the thesis, which is a combination of social and systemic design, rooted in design thinking, as well as in systemic thinking. Additionally, the chapter delves into the development process and methodological choices. The overall process of the thesis is detailed in relation to research data and key methods employed. It underscores the thesis's overarching aim: to gain understanding of the extent, manifestations, and causes of pregnancy and parental leave discrimination in Finnish working life, as well as to co-develop intervention proposals for preventing and reducing it.

#### **3.1. Approach of the study**

In this section, the evolution and interdisciplinary nature of service design is outlined, highlighting its dynamic definitions. The section presents the application of service design in societal issues, that is social design, in addressing pregnancy and family leave discrimination, emphasizing its role in understanding causes for the issue and collaboratively developing interventions. Additionally, the integration of systems thinking with design principles, manifesting as systemic design, is discussed. Finally, the section presents the thesis framework combining systems thinking and design thinking, thus bringing together both social design and systemic design methodology. The framework is grounded in recognizing pregnancy and family leave discrimination as complex or even wicked problems, requiring a systemic lens in conjunction with design thinking and practices.

##### **3.1.1. Service design as an interdisciplinary approach**

Service design is an interdisciplinary approach, integrating diverse methods and tools from various fields. Rather than constituting a distinct academic discipline, it signifies a novel way of thinking that transcends traditional disciplinary boundaries. (Stickdorn & Schneider 2010.) The integration of analytical and creative capabilities in service design enables individuals with various skill sets to collaborate, bringing their unique approaches to contribute to service design projects. (Penin 2018.) Service design is an evolving approach, and its dynamic nature is evident in the multiplicity of its definitions (Stickdorn & Schneider 2010).

Stickdorn et al. (2018) point out five different ways to explain service design, depending on the situation: either as a mindset, a process, a toolset, a cross-disciplinary language, or as a management approach. Based on the views of a panel of 150 service designer, service design can be defined as a human-centric approach, seeking to create seamless and high-quality service experiences by balancing customer and business needs (ibid.). Penin (2018) describe service design being about having ideas, defining new relationships, visualizing, and communicating ideas to others; fundamentally, delivering well-being to people.

Within this thesis, service design is utilized, notably in the iterative development process and the methodologies and tools employed during workshops. Moreover, the thesis is grounded in the fundamental principles of design thinking, presented below, serving as the foundation for the research. Before engaging in practical implementation of service design, it is indeed essential to internalize the right mindset to achieve successful outcomes. The concept of the 'Three Lenses of Human-Centered Design', frequently referenced in Design Thinking, provides a conceptual framework for understanding Design Thinking's fundamental principles. In a design challenge, success hinges on discovering a solution that meets human needs, is technically feasible, and financially sustainable. The ultimate design solution emerges at the intersection of these three lenses - desirability, feasibility, viability - serving as the guiding questions throughout the Design Thinking process. (Shapira, Ketchie, Nehe 2014; Chasanidou, Gasparini & Lee 2015).

In addition to considering these three spaces, to anchor the concrete design work, one must be aware of some basic principles (Penin 2018). However, just like with defining service design, numerous different listings of these principles can be found in the research literature (e.g., Kimbell 2014; Chasanidou, Gasparini & Lee 2015). In most lists, at least the following are mentioned: human-centeredness, iteration/experimentation, collaboration/cocreation, visualization, holism and multidisciplinary (cf., Stickdorn et al. 2018; Penin 2018). In the figure 2 the relationship between service design and design thinking is illustrated using the metaphor of an iceberg: design thinking serves as the invisible foundation upon which tangible service design actions are constructed.



Figure 2: The relationship between design thinking & service design (adapted from Oinonen 2018)

Today, service design has evolved into a credible design practice globally and an established discipline (Penin 2018). It is a popular approach in development work of companies, in the public sector (Moilanen et al. 2022) and in third sector organizations as well (e.g., Ryttilahti & Miettinen 2016). Due to a clear process and easily applicable methods and tools, service design enables to define and test even vague service concepts (Moilanen et al. 2022) and help solving critical issues faced by organizations (Stickdorn et al. 2018). It can be applied to service development at all levels, including company's strategy, business models, processes, service environment (both physical and virtual), customer experience work, as well as to

service innovation (Moilanen et al. 2022). In fact, Stickdorn et al. (2018) imply that service design has the potential to influence a broad spectrum of human activities.

During the past decade, scholars in service design have increasingly recognized the complexities of the operational environment. Several researchers argue that traditional user-centered design methodologies are no longer sufficient to address the paradigm shift and systemic complexity caused by contemporary global challenges (Sangiorgi & Prendiville 2017; Santos & Sustar, 2023; Manzini 2011). Suoheimo et al. (2021) assert that numerous connections can be found between the complexity of current challenges and the evolving role of service design in addressing them. Service design has transitioned from merely creating bespoke services to serving as a catalyst for broader societal transformations and driving change (Kimbell, 2014; Santos & Sustar 2023). In this context, service design, specifically *social design* as delineated in the subsequent section, is employed to address a societal challenge concerning pregnancy and family leave. Its application aims to facilitate the identification of causes of this issue and collaboratively develop interventions to address it.

### **3.1.2. Service design in the context of societal issues**

Service design and innovation have evolved to address complex societal challenges and promote well-being (Patricio, Fisk & Gustafsson 2018). This shift is driven by various factors, including the limitations of traditional problem-solving methods in the public sector (Chen et al. 2016; Dorst 2018). Design's ability to integrate diverse perspectives from the outset offers a more efficient approach to tackling complex issues (Dorst, 2018). Additionally, the reduction of welfare state services in Europe and the aftermath of the 2008 financial crisis have spurred designers to explore opportunities in the public sector and non-governmental organizations, aided by innovative research tools (Chen et al. 2016).

Veiga & Almendra (2014) have recognized numerous alternative terms and expressions for describing design in societal issues, such as: Humanitarian Design, Design for Social Good, Design for Social Change, Design for Social Innovation, Useful Design, Transformation Design, Design for Public Good et cetera. Despite nuanced differences, based on the analysis of Veiga & Almendra (ibid.) the authors imply that all these terms belong to and are integral parts of the broader category that they suggest identifying as Social Design.

Veiga's & Almendra's (2014) view is that social design could be used as an umbrella term to encompass all the scattered "social" practices and practitioners, providing structure to the current state of diversity. Although there are several different terms for describing this particular area of design, there is a general consensus that its primary guiding principle is public welfare or the 'common good' (Dorst et al. 2016) - occasionally expressed as the 'social good' or the 'good society'. (Tromp & Vial 2023.) In this thesis the utilization of service design to address social issues or enhance human well-being is referred to as *social design* (in Finnish

“*yhteiskunnallinen muotoilu*” or “*sosiaalinen muotoilu*”<sup>5</sup>) according to Veiga’s & Almendra’s (2014) view.

Methodologies such as participatory design, co-design, co-creation and social innovation have significantly expanded the scope of “design thinking,” contributing momentum and substance to the social design movement (Andrews 2010; Chen et al. 2016). Tromp & Vial (2023) strive to construct a comprehensive framework for comprehending the diverse array of social design manifestations. They observe an initial wave of social designers who ventured beyond commercial contexts, concentrating on marginalized and underprivileged societal groups, and creating products and services to enhance their quality of life (e.g., *transformation design* by Burns et al. 2006, cited by Tromp & Vial 2023). Subsequently, the authors recognize the emphasis shifting towards viewing the design process as a tool for empowerment and organizational transformation (e.g., *design activism* by Markussen 2011, cited by Tromp & Vial 2023). More recently, designers have been exploring novel approaches to address systemic complexities (e.g., *transition design* by Irwin 2015, cited by Tromp & Vial 2023). Thus, design can be employed not solely for problem-solving but as an approach directed at unveiling the intricate structures inherent in social issues. (Tromp & Vial 2023.)

Escalating complexity and increasing strain on societal systems has increased interest in integrating *systems thinking* and design practices, built on the analytical strengths of systems thinking and the action-oriented strengths of design (Bijl-Brouwer & Malcolm 2020; Buchanan 2019) Arnold & Wade (2015, 675) define systems thinking as “a set of synergistic analytic skills used to improve the capability of identifying and understanding systems, predicting their behaviors, and devising modifications to them in order to produce desired effects”. This approach, developed as a response to perceived shortcomings in deterministic and reductionist methods, relies on synthesis, considering elements in relation to a larger, indivisible whole or system (Bijl-Brouwer & Malcolm 2020). The core of systems thinking lies in understanding systemic wholeness, achieved by examining the entire system rather than its individual parts (Pourdehnad, Wexler & Wilson 2011). This thesis acknowledges the imperative of comprehensively grasping the systemic nature of pregnancy and family leave discrimination. Therefore, it advocates for adopting a systemic perspective to effectively uncover the causes and devise strategies for addressing this issue.

Both systems thinking and design thinking share a common goal of achieving impactful, well-reasoned changes in complex problems (Jones 2014). Richard Buchanan (1992) coined this new form of design - the practice blending elements of systems thinking with design

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<sup>5</sup> In some Finnish publications, such as the article by Miettinen, Huhtamaa, and Kontio (2016), the presentation by Tiensivu and Vainio (2014), as well as Amel's (2022) thesis, the translation “*sosiaalinen muotoilu*” has been used. However, “*yhteiskunnallinen muotoilu*” has also occurred in some publications, such as the theses by Homi (2015) and Liiri (2020), and in quite recent blogtexts by service design professionals, e.g. Tornberg (2023) and Kettunen (2023). Since both mentioned translations are used in Finnish, establishing the term requires further discussion.



principles - as “fourth-order design” already in the 90s. Over the past decade, it has gained traction among design scholars and practitioners, and like social design, it has been labeled in various ways, for example, DesignX, and Design 4.0, currently known as *systemic design*. (Bijl-Brouwer & Malcolm 2020.) Jones (2014) defines systemic design as a design-led approach which incorporates dialogue for co-creation, sensemaking, and decision-making to understand system perspectives across stakeholder worldviews. However, he distinguishes systemic design from (traditional) service design due to its focus on larger scale, more complex issues involving various interconnected parts and subsystems.

Based on the literature, it can be concluded that both social design and systemic design draw from design thinking, as well as from systemic thinking. They also share similarities in their orientation toward addressing complex issues, often at a broader systemic level. Based on literature (e.g., Jones 2014; Chick 2012; Blomkamp 2022; Tromp & Vial 2023), at least following principles can be combined with either one. Consequently, these principles has guided the implementation of this thesis:

- Interdisciplinarity
- Human-centeredness
- Purpose-driven
- Holistic view, recognizing complexity
- Collaboration, co-creation & empowering
- Comprehensive exploration and iterative engagement

Bijl Brouwer & Malcolm (2020) have observed that the methodologies employed by expert practitioners leading social innovation in five global case studies embed systemic design principles in design approaches. Based on this observation, Bijl Brouwer & Malcolm (ibid.) propose that using a “systems thinking lens” alongside the design, offers opportunities to further strengthen (social) design practices. Thus, developing an approach that blends the strengths of both design thinking and systems thinking, while aiming to bridge their gaps, can enhance the likelihood of creating sustainable solutions to the complex challenges faced by organizations and society today (Pourdehnad et al. 2011). Therefore, this thesis uses a framework which combines “systems thinking lens” (cf., Bijl Brouwer & Malcolm 2020) to the primary guiding principle of social design, that is, public welfare or the 'common good' (Dorst et al. 2016).

### **3.1.3. The framework of the thesis**

Pregnancy and family leave discrimination is at least complex, if not even a wicked problem. At least following characteristics related to wicked problems also apply to pregnancy and family leave discrimination: 1) it involves multiple stakeholders with conflicting agendas 2) it straddles disciplinary boundaries; 3) problem exist across various levels of scale and are intricately interlinked and interdependent; 4) assessing interventions requires a significant

duration, as does resolving the issues and 5) it is impossible to solve with conventional, linear problem-solving methods. (cf., Irwin 2018.)

Also, based in the typology of problems on a scale of tame–complex–wicked by Suoheimo et al. (2021), pregnancy and family leave discrimination can be placed on somewhere in between complex and wicked problem; problem is known but there is no unequivocal solution, or the solutions are – at least in some parts – unknown and in addition, there are multiple parties with conflicting values/interests. Therefore, a systemic lens is needed in combination with design thinking and design practices. Thus, this thesis and its analysis is positioned in a framework where systems thinking is combined with design thinking, manifesting through the integrative practices of social design and systemic design, as visualized in figure 3.

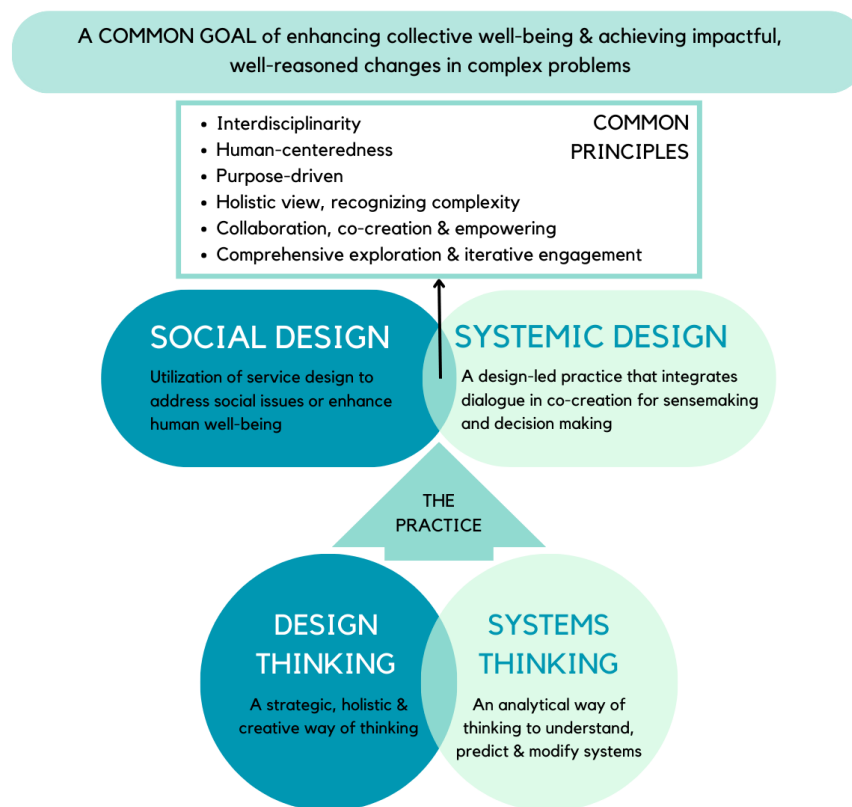


Figure 3: Framework of the thesis

Several researchers view that combining systemic thinking with design practices might need a new design paradigm (cf., Dorst 2018; Pourdehnad et al. 2011). Coops et al. (2022) state that when addressing complex societal challenges, the notion of problems must be relinquished, and the pursuit of definitive, single fix solutions discarded. Instead, systemic design approaches such as transition design, dealing with 'wicked problems', should focus on progress, and creating *interventions* that move the whole system to a better state (ibid.). Thus, in this thesis, instead of finding and delivering solutions, according to the traditional design process, the aim is to co-develop intervention proposals.

### 3.2. Development process and methodological choices

Based on the perspectives outlined by Coops et al. (2022) and Dorst (2018), the objective of this study shifts from providing fixed solutions to proposing interventions. This thesis is applying Design Council's (2024) Double Diamond but with some modifications, recognizing the ongoing process of tackling the complex issue of pregnancy and family leave discrimination; the thesis can offer some intervention proposals, but it is only a small step towards a bigger change in socially more sustainable system (cf., Tromp & Vial 2023). The process of the thesis, as well as methods and tools applied in this study are described in a more comprehensive manner in the next sections.

#### 3.2.1. Development process of the thesis

Over the past few decades, practitioners and literature have presented a myriad of service design processes (Stickdorn et al. 2018). One of the well-known visualizations of service design process is Design Council's Double Diamond (figure 4.). Double diamond model, launched 2004, serves as a clear guide for both designers and non-designers, illustrating a comprehensive design process. The two diamonds symbolize the interplay between in-depth exploration of an issue (divergent thinking) and the subsequent focused action (convergent thinking). (Design Council 2024.) Divergent thinking is often used for seeking or creating opportunities, and convergence thinking for making decisions (Stickdorn et al. 2018). One of the most essential things in design process, is making sure to challenge initial assumptions and understand the problem through research before moving on to solutions; in other words, solving the right problem before solving the problem right (Stickdorn et al. 2018).

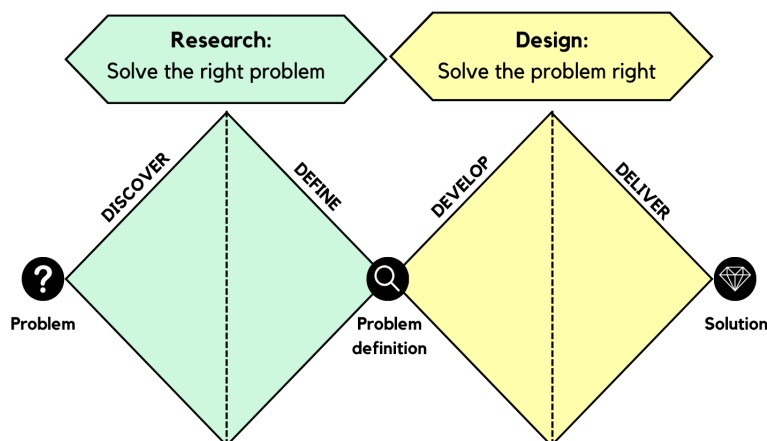


Figure 4: Double diamond model (adapted from Design Council 2024)

*Discovering*, in the first diamond, emphasizes gaining a nuanced understanding of the problem, rather than making assumptions. This stage often entails engaging in conversations and dedicating time to interact with individuals directly impacted by the concerns. The second phase, *defining*, refers to reframing and defining the challenge based on insights obtained during the discovery phase. The first half of the second diamond, phase for

*developing*, promotes the cultivation of diverse solutions for a well-defined issue, drawing inspiration from multiple sources, and fostering co-design with a diverse group of individuals. The final phase, *delivery*, involves testing different solutions on a small scale, eliminating ineffective ones, and enhancing those with potential for success. (Design Council 2024.)

Instead of stage-based process, one option is to think of overlapping “spaces”. Blomkamp (2022) presents a policy design project where these three spaces have been describes as 1) understanding current state, 2) imagining alternatives and actions and 3) making change happen. Blomkamp (ibid.) sates that, regardless of which model or scheme is used, a design-led process emphasizes iteration, redefining the problem before potential solutions and acknowledging that the process cannot be perfectly predicted in advance.

As stated in previous section, several researchers argue that increasing societal complexity renders traditional service design processes inadequate (e.g., Dorst 2018; Bijl-Brouwer & Malcolm 2020; Patricio et al. 2018; Santos & Sutar 2023) and the need for new paradigm is underscored (e.g., Pourdehnad et al. 2011). Dorst (2018) advocates for designers to abandon traditional problem-solving approaches and embrace the complexity inherent in design situations, focusing on crafting interventions to guide systems towards desirable states. To address this complexity, Dorst (2018) proposes a specific approach for both understanding the problem (interpretation) and taking action (intervention). While understanding that the problem may involve some generalizing based on observations (inductive reasoning), taking action requires a more open-minded form of reasoning known as design abduction. Design abduction is employed to maintain flexibility in defining the problem space and exploring potential strategies. In line with Dorst's (2018) views, this thesis applies design abduction to preserve flexibility in interpreting the topic of pregnancy and family leave discrimination and thoroughly investigating potential interventions, thereby avoiding premature conclusions or assumptions.

In the development process of this thesis, insights from Dorst (2018) and Blomkamp's (2022) case study are combined into three phases – interpretation, exploration, and intervention –. Thus, the traditional double diamond is modified into a “triple diamond” as presented in figure 5. In prior research, various interpretations of a triple diamond exist, each offering slightly different perspectives (e.g., Schleith & Tsar 2022; Marin-Garcia et al. 2020). Although Blomkamp (2022) notes the possibility of using overlapping spaces instead of a stage-based process, the diamond visualization is effective in depicting the alternation between divergent and convergent thinking, and it also provides a clear structure for presenting results of this thesis regarding each phase. The thesis work covers only the first two diamonds, but the third is included in the visualization for offering an overview about the whole process. Chapter 5 concludes by exploring the phases of the third diamond and offering recommendations derived from the intervention proposals collaboratively developed in earlier stages. These suggestions pertain to the final phases: taking action and effecting change.

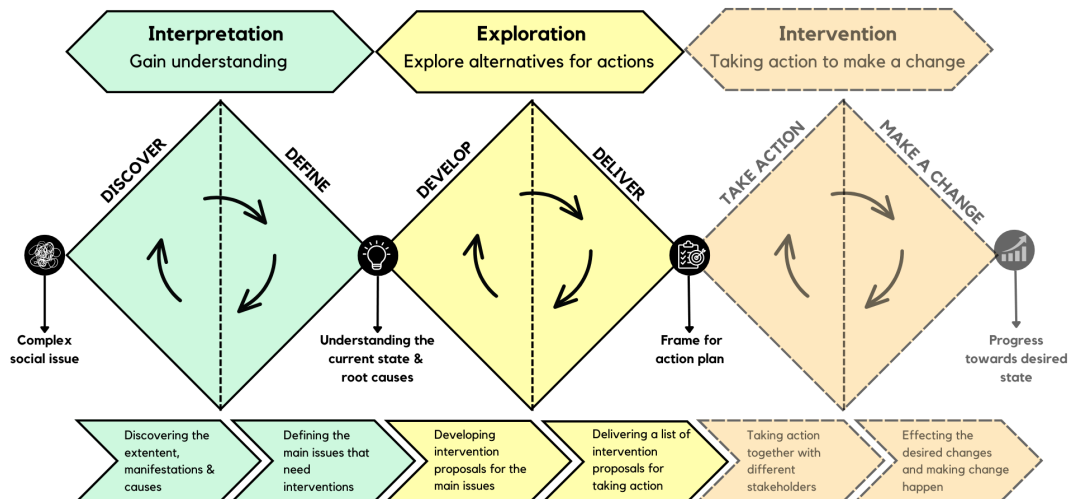


Figure 5: Triple diamond process of the thesis (adapted from Design Council (2024), Blomkamp (2022) and Dorst (2018))

### 3.2.2. Research methodology

Both data and method triangulation are recommended for service design projects. Data triangulation enhances the research by incorporating diverse foundations, enriching the dataset, and enhancing its comprehensibility. Simultaneously, method triangulation offers varied perspectives on the same subject matter, contributing to a more comprehensive understanding. (Stickdorn et al. 2018.) In a mixed-methods study, the quantitative approach often serves to quantify and measure a research problem, providing numerical data for generalizing findings to a larger population. It allows for the identification of statistical trends, patterns, averages, frequencies, or correlations. Conversely, qualitative data and methodologies offer a means to delve deeper into phenomena, elucidate behaviors and beliefs, identify processes, and grasp the contextual intricacies of people's experiences. (Hennink, Hutter & Bailey 2020.) According to Alasuutari (2011), quantitative and qualitative approach can be understood as a continuum, not as opposites or mutually exclusive analytical models.

Based on previous statements, in this thesis, both data and method triangulation is applied. The research data consists of both quantitative and qualitative data, which are gathered through an online survey (N=449) and three workshops with altogether 17 participants. Originally, Equally on Family leave project aimed to target labor market organizations' employment advisors as the primary target group for this thesis collaboration. The objective was to gather perspectives through an online survey and workshops from individuals who handle cases of pregnancy and family leave discrimination in their respective roles. Simultaneously, the aim was to represent the viewpoints of both employer and employee representatives. However, the target group had to be changed because employment advisors were not reached to a sufficient extent. Consequently, an open online survey for Finnish

parents was conducted. Additionally, workshops were organized for Mothers in Business members (2 sessions) and for selected board members and employees (1 session).

Through the survey and workshops, both employees and employers had the opportunity to present their views. However, there is a bias in the data towards the perspective of employees rather than employers. This can be explained by the fact that the topic concerns discrimination in the workplace, which employees in different positions encounter from employers or supervisors. Although employers had the opportunity to participate in the study, the topic did not generate as much interest in this group.

### Participatory approach to qualitative research

Except for some statistical basic methods, such as average figures and cross tabulation (Moilanen et al. 2022) to describing the survey data, the study follows a participatory approach to qualitative research. Overview of the development process in relation to methods and tools applied in the study is presented in figure 6.

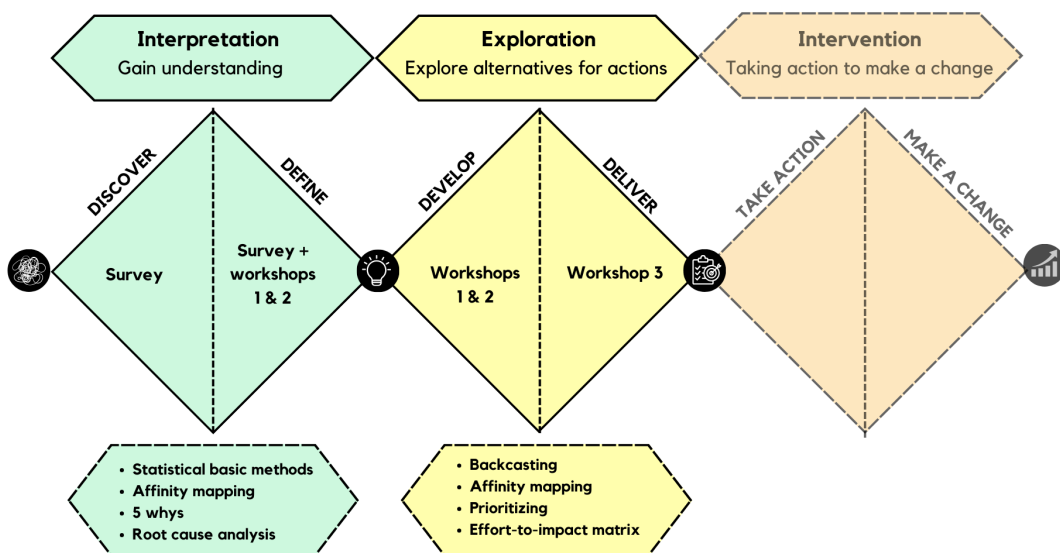


Figure 6: Overview of the process in relation to key methods and tools

Qualitative research seeks to generate relevant, insightful, and valuable information about the phenomenon, including its structures, mechanisms, and the dynamics between actors and phenomena. It endeavors to accurately reflect the perspectives and lived experiences of participants. Additionally, researchers draw conclusions based on their interpretations in relation to previous research (Aaltio & Puusa, 2020). Unlike quantitative research, the significance of the data quantity is not straightforward (Hänninen, 2016). In line with qualitative research principles, while statistical generalizations are not made, this thesis aims to draw inferences or insights about a phenomenon – specifically, pregnancy and family leave discrimination – reflecting the experiences of the study population.

*The participatory approach to qualitative research* as presented by Hennink et al. (2020) is applied in this study. It is a suitable approach for service design and to social design projects, such as this thesis, not only because of its participatory nature, but particularly because of its practice-orientedness. As a social design project, the aim of this thesis is to move beyond mere comprehension towards what is known as 'Verstehen'<sup>6</sup> of a social phenomenon. This entails understanding the issue from the viewpoint of the study population rather than solely through the researcher's interpretive framework. (cf. Hennink et al., 2020.)

Hennink et al. (2020) point out that the approach differs from other participatory research approaches, because in addition to rigorous data *analysis*, this approach includes a specific phase for rigorous *application* of (qualitative) research methods. In other words, the approach has a twofold purpose: to generate academic theory and to initiate social change. To contribute to social change effectively, a participatory approach is required. In line with the approach presented by Hennink et al. (2020), in this study participants and other stakeholders are involved from the beginning; their invaluable input not only shapes the initial stages but also serves as the cornerstone for crafting and refining social change interventions moving forward.

According to Hennink et al. (2020), following evaluation criteria for participatory qualitative research have been considered. In line with these criteria, the thesis is:

- *Interpretive*; e.g., the research reflects the meaning and perceptions of the study population applying the idea of 'Verstehen'.
- *Reflexive*; e.g., the participatory process and the positionality of the researcher was reflected. For example, the researcher communicated with different stakeholders, acted as a change agent and facilitated stakeholders' ability to express themselves.
- *Appropriate*: e.g., the research questions are supported by literature and theory and embedded in socio-cultural context.
- *Participatory*: The study includes a societal change objective, in addition to academic objective.
- *Embedded*: The study is embedded in the study society. The research problem and target states were co-defined with participants and stakeholders.
- *Coherent*: The tasks in the participatory design process were coherently interlinked.
- *Transparent*: All tasks were described in a transparent way and participants had the possibility reflect on each other's views. (cf. Hennink et al. 2020)

The reliability of qualitative research needs to be understood beyond the concepts of *validity* and *reliability* commonly used in quantitative research traditions, as these concepts do not directly apply to assessing qualitative research. Instead, the perspective on evaluating the reliability of qualitative research can be summarized into three concepts: *credibility*,

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<sup>6</sup> The concept of Verstehen is essential in qualitative research. It has its roots especially in the work of Weber (1864-1920) who derived the concept from Wilhelm Dilthey (1833-1911). (Hennink et al. 2020.)

*trustworthiness*, and *ethics*. Credibility refers to the extent to which colleagues, research participants, and the general public accept the research findings as true and trust that the data has been collected appropriately and analyzed carefully. Trustworthiness, on the other hand, means that the researcher can convincingly demonstrate their competence in selecting and using appropriate and justified approaches and methods to address the research problem and conduct the study. Ethics, meanwhile, entails that the researcher has adhered to ethical principles throughout the research process. The research must also strive to bring about good outcomes for the people being studied. (Aaltio & Puusa 2020.)

The substantial number of survey responses, complemented by workshop data, allows for a credible and trustworthy representation of the experiences of women living in Finland regarding pregnancy and family leave discrimination. Given the sensitivity of the thesis topic, ethical considerations, such as informing the participants, ensuring anonymity, confidentiality, as well as beneficence for the target group, were considered both regarding the survey and the workshops (cf., Hennink et al. 2020; Aaltio & Puusa 2020).

Although Aaltio & Puusa (2020) state that concept of validity cannot be directly applied to qualitative research as in quantitative research, according to Hennink et al. (2020) it is however essential to validate the research findings with research participants and other relevant societal stakeholders when evaluating participatory qualitative research. Thus, the preliminary finding of this study have been validated throughout the research process with different stakeholders, such as specialist from the office of Ombudsman for Equality, MiB employees and workshop participants, representing the target group.

Next, the main data collection methods, survey and workshops are presented in more detail.

## **Survey**

One of the most often used data collection methods is the survey (Moilanen et al. 2020). As part of the research process of this thesis, the survey and its analysis cover the first phase of “triple diamond”, *discovering*. For this phase an online survey served the purpose best due to certain advantages, such as: enabling to ask a large population several questions and collect extensive data; possibility of fast conducting; opportunities for statistical processing of the data; usefulness for collecting information on a sensitive matter; and minimal expenses (cf., Moilanen et al. 2020.).

However, previous studies have recognized some disadvantages concerning the method. The data collected through surveys may be perceived as superficial and response rates low. Additionally, it might be challenging to gauge the respondent's seriousness about the research, assess the appropriateness of options from their perspective, and determine their familiarity with the research topic. Survey research may also elicit socially desirable responses. (Moilanen et al. 2020; Patten 2018.) These challenges are considered regarding the thesis survey. Nonetheless, there were no challenges with the response rate, and respondents



appeared to take the survey seriously and gave in-depth information on their views and experiences. Positive feedback was received from respondents regarding both the topic of the survey and the structure, as well as the formulation of the questions. Recognizing that pregnancy and family leave discrimination might be unfamiliar to many, a brief introduction to the topic was provided at the beginning of the survey.

Originally, the survey was targeted towards the initial target group, labor union employment advisors. However, since only a couple of responses were received from employees' organizations and none from employers' representatives, a decision was made to not use this data. Instead, the target audience was expanded, the survey was modified, and it was directed it to all parents living in Finland regardless of age, gender, and employment status. By expanding the distribution, we obtained respondents from different fields and education levels. The invitation for answering the survey (figure 7) was shared through various online channels mainly by the thesis worker (personal Facebook, Instagram and LinkedIn account, a few Finnish Facebook groups aimed for parents and MiB nationwide Facebook group). It was possible to share the post and for example, in LinkedIn it was reposted by 11 individuals. MiB shared the post through their newsletter and LinkedIn account.

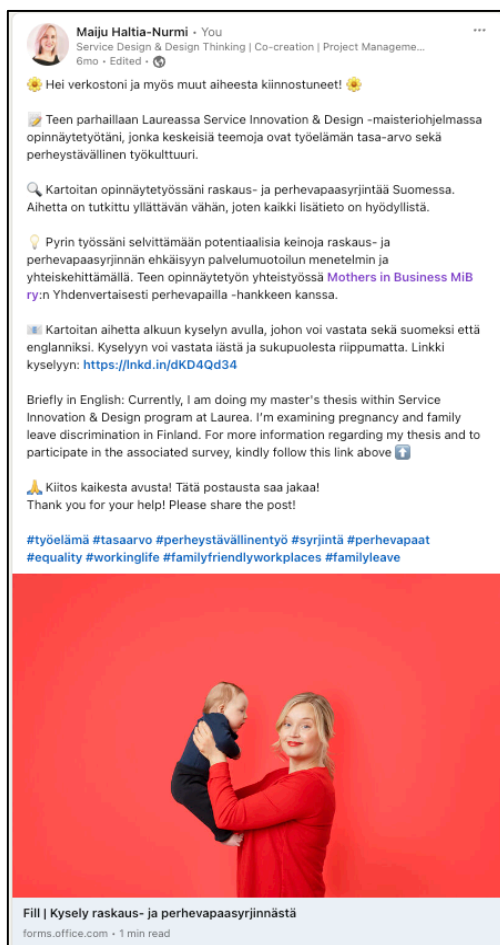


Figure 7: Social media invitation for answering the survey

The survey (appendix 1.), conducted with Microsoft Forms through Laurea's license, was used for providing insights, for example, into the extent of the phenomenon, namely pregnancy and family leave discrimination, its manifestations, prevalence, as well as the perceived causes and respondents' beliefs regarding the most effective ways to address the issue. The survey served both for measuring and quantifying certain issues, and for providing qualitative data through open-ended responses, capturing the experiences of discrimination reported by respondents and their perspectives on addressing the issue (cf., Hennink et al. 2020).

The questions of the survey were formulated based on previous studies related to the topic and in a way that would allow the data collected from them to be as versatile as possible, offering valuable insights into the research challenge. Thus, the survey included both closed, i.e. forced choice questions with predefined options, as well as open-ended questions (cf., Leung 2001). In addition, some questions were a mixture of the two formats; they included a list of options, with the final option of "other" followed by a space for respondents to fill in other alternatives. Open questions offer the advantage of delving into a broad spectrum of potential themes stemming from an issue, particularly when it's not feasible to compile an comprehensive list of alternative choices. (Leung 2001.) It allows respondents to express their experiences and views in their own words and thus giving more nuanced and in-depth information, even with sensitive topics (Braun et al. 2021). On the other hand, the advantages of closed questions are that they are easy and quick to fill in. Additionally, closed questions are easy to code and analyze quantitatively, making it straightforward to report results. There are many possible ways to structure responses to close-ended questions. (Leung 2001.) In this survey, choice of categories, Likert scales and ranking were used for question structuring.

The tools used for the analysis regarding the survey were Microsoft Forms' reporting feature and Excel, as well as Miro for clustering the survey data in affinity diagrams, as seen in figure 8. Affinity diagramming or mapping, also known as KJ method, after Jiro Kawakita, a Japanese anthropologist often credited as the creator of the method, is a method employed to externalize, comprehend, and structure extensive quantities of unstructured and diverse qualitative data, capturing insights and pain points (Lucero 2017; Harboe, G. & Huang, E. 2015). With the survey data, the method was applied in following cases:

- in cases where the respondent had chosen the option "other" when asked about the situations where the respondent had experienced pregnancy and family leave discrimination (question 10)
- regarding cases in which the respondent reported experiencing "other inappropriate treatment related to pregnancy, family leave, or family circumstances" (question 12)
- regarding the open-ended question of evaluating obstacles to reducing maternity and family leave (question 18).
- in cases where the respondent had chosen the option "other" when asked how the discrimination situation(s) was resolved (question 13)



be both analytical and creative. (cf., Stickdorn et al. 2018). The small group sizes helped in ensuring individual attention and providing opportunities for each participant to express their views (cf., Ørngreen & Tweddell 2017).

Moilanen et al. (2020) mention that collaborative methods - such as workshops - are often used at the ideation stage. However, Hennink et al. (2020) state that active involvement of and collaboration with participants and stakeholders is possible in all stages of the process. For instance, collaboration can manifest in various stages, such as jointly identifying research issues, mutually shaping the objectives for social change, and advocating for the perspectives of participants. Additionally, it extends to validating research discoveries, collectively defining precise social change goals, and collaboratively designing and implementing interventions. (Ibid.) The thesis work followed these implications and principles.

Initially, along with the first version of the survey aimed at employment advisors, an invitation was sent regarding four workshops (2 + 2) for the original target group, providing both employees' and employers' representatives the flexibility to opt for either live or online workshop sessions. There was only 1 registration from the employers' side and a total of four (4) from the employees' side. Finally, one online workshop was organized for the wage earner organizations, for which four (4) employment advisors signed up, but only two (2) were present. Due to the small number of participants, only a presentation about the Equally on family leave -project and the thesis was held, and the topics were discussed freely. This particular data is not used in the thesis work.

The planned schedule was somewhat delayed because the original target group had to be changed, leading to modifications in workshop contents. Thus, to make the participation effortless for the participants, and to be able to document and gather data easily, all workshops were finally arranged online. In the workshops, the digital services selected were those used by MiB in their online events; Google Meets was utilized as an online video call and Miro as a virtual whiteboard. The thesis worker co-developed the plan for facilitation, timetable and contents of the workshops together with the specialist of Equally on family leave project. The thesis worker was responsible for ideating and designing the workshop activities, which were then further developed and discussed with the MiB project specialist.

The first workshop was aimed at all MiB members, and the latter especially at employers, HR professionals and lawyers. Invitation for the workshops (figure 9) was sent through MiB newsletter and social media accounts (LinkedIn, Instagram, Facebook). Eleven (11) participants signed up for the first workshop, of which six (6) attended. For the second workshop, seven (7) out of nineteen (19) attended. Thus, no-show percent was quite high.



Figure 9: Social Media invitation for the workshops 1 & 2

The first two workshops, with similar contents, were organized in October 2023. The length of each workshop was 1,5 hours. The workshops aimed to delve into the thoughts that emerged from the survey; that is, gaining understanding and interpreting the findings and results of the data (cf., Hennink et al 2020). Additionally, the goal was to collaboratively generate potential solutions based on those insights. Thus, following the development process (see section 3.2.1), the main goals for the first two workshops were to *define* the most central issues regarding pregnancy and family leave discrimination that need intervention, and to *develop* ideas for those interventions.

The final workshop was an in-house session for specifically targeted participants, a group of two (2) employees and two (2) board members of MiB. The participants were selected based on their expertise on the topic, as well as on their possibilities to have an influence on how MiB as an organization could proceed concretely with the intervention proposals. The length of the final workshop was two (2) hours. The goal for the last workshop was to *deliver* a prioritized and evaluated list of intervention proposals, based on previous assignments in workshops 1 and 2.

The overview of held workshops is presented in table 2. The workshops, along with their activities, and the insights from each will be presented in more detail in the following chapter.

Workshop timing	10/2023	10/2023	3/2024
Participants	MiB members (6)	MiB members: Employers/HR/Law yers (7)	MiB employees (2), MiB board members (2)
Design process phase	Define + develop		Deliver
Purpose	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Validate the results of the survey</li> <li>• Gain understanding on the causes of the issue</li> <li>• Ideate intervention proposals based on current state and target state</li> </ul>		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Selecting key intervention proposals identified within each cluster derived from the affinity mapping of previously provided proposals</li> <li>• Assessing the selected proposals according to their potential impact, effort and resource requirements</li> </ul>
Key activities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 5x whys</li> <li>• Adaptation of backcasting method</li> </ul>		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Prioritizing</li> <li>• Effort-to-impact matrix + resource requirements</li> </ul>

Table 2: Overview of the thesis workshops (adapted form Bekš 2022)

Virtual workshops require thorough preparation and planning to prevent misinterpretation or miscommunication (Bekš 2022). Removing barriers to participation is crucial to ensure that all participants can actively engage in workshop activities. Specific barriers encountered in virtual workshops can include *technical barriers*, such as limited internet access, as well as *physical* and *social barriers*, such as restrictions in interaction and creating trust. *Cultural barriers* can also occur related to cultural differences in standards and traditions of communication. In addition, online workshops require new skills compared with traditional face-to-face workshops. (Andersen 2021.) Regarding the thesis workshops, the aim was to remove technical barriers by testing the video call and Miro board beforehand. The participants were also given a pre-task for to write their self-introduction on post-it notes so that all participants had the opportunity to test Miro whiteboard before the workshop. In addition, on the workshop board, a simple visual instruction for using Miro was given, in case among the participants was someone unfamiliar with the digital tool.

Any cultural barriers were not encountered in the workshops. Regarding physical and social barriers, everyone was encouraged to keep their cameras on during co-developing activities (cf., Sipilä et al. 2021; Andersen 2021). As facilitators, the thesis worker and the MiB project specialist put effort in creating an informal and psychologically safe environment. At the beginning of each workshop, the timetable and main goals for the workshop were introduced. During the activities, attention was paid to engaging all participants by making sure that they knew what to do and checked regularly if the work was proceeding in the small groups.

It is recommended to gather feedback from the participants afterward (Andersen 2021). MiB utilizes Lyyti event management system for event registrations and for collecting feedback on each event. Participants automatically receive an Experience Value Score (EVS) survey after each event. The maximum EVS on the scale is 100. We received four (4) replies out of six (6) participants from the first workshop and three (3) out of seven (7) from the second workshop. EVS scores were high in both cases: 87 of the first workshop and 83 of the second one. There was also a possibility for open feedback and altogether it included three (3) excellent and two (2) neutral feedback. The excellent feedback emphasized the relevance of the topic, the importance of working together and the feeling of being heard and being able to influence an important issue. The other feedback classified as neutral also contained partly critical feedback, which was given on the first workshop, related to sense of rush, due to the fact that the facilitators were not able to stick to the original scheduler.

In the in-house workshop, Lyyti tool was not used. Instead, the participants were given the possibility to give open feedback on the Miro board. Only two feedback were given, both positive. The workshop was described as well-prepared, smoothly conducted, important and in-depth. It was noted as valuable that concrete ideas were received regarding, for example, applying for funding or communicating about the topic.

Overall, both on the group level and at the individual level facilitation was successful, as the groups' motivation and productivity remained high through each workshop. After the first workshop, participant continued writing their views several hours after the workshop. However, an important lesson learned on the significance of facilitation, was related to the process level, in order to guide the progression of work towards achieving a definitive outcome. (cf., Stickdorn et al. 2018.) In the second workshop, participants were divided into small groups in separate break-out rooms, compared with the first workshop, where the assignment was collaboratively completed with the entire group. Upon reflection, it was observed that although less time was allocated to the task in the first workshop, more was accomplished because the discussion was facilitated. In the second workshop, discussions in small groups were extensive, but more informal, and the documentation was not as efficient. Also, regarding the second workshop, despite the rich discussion and the thesis worker visiting in small groups, the first approach to addressing the issue was more effective both in regard of the process and in terms of ensuring that the thesis worker heard the entire discussion.

## 4. Results

This chapter presents the results and insights obtained from both the survey (N=449) and the three thesis workshops with 17 participants. The aim is to deepen understanding and to address the research topic outlined in chapter 1.1, aligning with the objectives of this thesis, that is, to gain understanding of the extent, manifestations, and causes of pregnancy and family leave discrimination in Finnish working life, as well as to co-develop intervention proposals for preventing and reducing the discrimination.

The chapter follows the triple diamond process model of the thesis, covering the first two diamonds, “Interpretation” and “Exploration”. The first section, the phase of *discovering*, gives an overview on the extent, manifestations and the most commonly perceived causes for discrimination of pregnancy and family leave discrimination. The goal for the second section is to *define* the main issues related to pregnancy and family leave discrimination through root cause analysis. In the third section, the co-developed intervention proposals are presented. Finally, in the fourth section, the focus is on *delivering* a list of evaluated and prioritized intervention proposals, based on the third workshop.

### 4.1. *Discovering* the extent, manifestations, and causes

This section focuses on the “discovery” phase of the development process as outlined in the triple diamond model (figure 10). Initially, the key background information of the survey respondents is presented, followed by an examination of the extent and manifestations of pregnancy and family leave discrimination on the basis of the thesis survey.

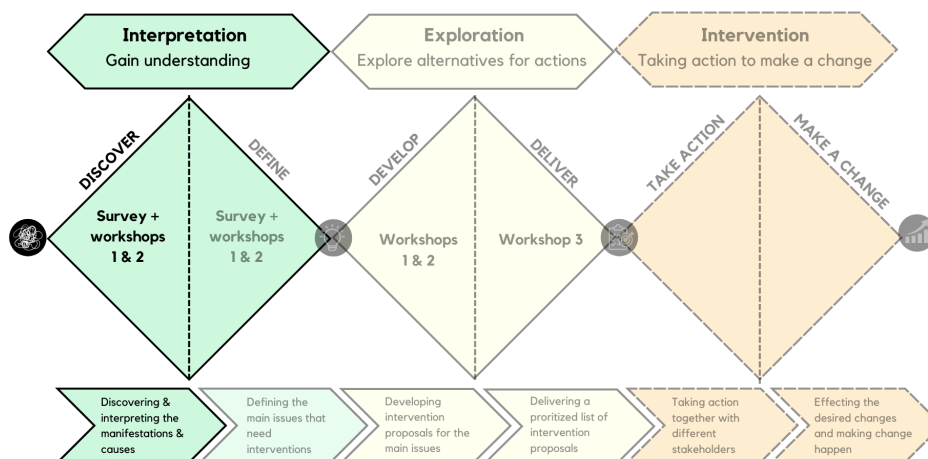


Figure 10: Discovery-phase

Subsequently, the most commonly perceived causes for discrimination are discovered by presenting the survey respondents' views. This is supplemented by means of affinity mapping, compiling open-ended responses from the survey regarding perceptions of barriers to reducing/preventing discrimination and the data from the "5 whys" exercise implemented in the first two workshops. A more detailed analysis about the causes is outlined in the following



section, corresponding to the *define* stage of the triple diamond model, although the boundary between these two stages is somewhat fluid.

### **Background information on the respondents of the survey**

The classifications of the background information questions in the survey were based on the same categories used in the MiB family leave survey, conducted in spring 2022. Regarding industries, the classification was identical with the classification used by TE Office (The Employment and Economic Development Office).

The absolute majority, 97,5 % of respondents, were women. Although respondents were encouraged to answer to the survey regardless of gender, only 10 out of the 449 respondents were men and 1 respondent declared a gender other than male or female. Hence, due to this substantial discrepancy in the number of respondents between genders, it is not reliable to draw comparisons between genders based on the data. The most common age groups among the respondents were 31–35 years old (41 %) and 36–40 years old (28 %), as the topic particularly concerns those on the threshold of starting a family or parents with young children. However, respondents were represented across all age groups, with the fewest respondents being in the 45+ and 18–25 age groups, both having fewer than 10 respondents each.

The majority of respondents were highly educated, with the educational background being either a Master's degree (44 %) or a Bachelor's degree (39 %). Most of the respondents (66 %) were currently employed. The second most common category was those taking care of children at home (22 %). Almost a third of the respondents were from predominantly female-oriented field of social and healthcare (29 %). However, male dominated field of technology and industry had the second-highest number of respondents, accounting for 12 %. Otherwise, the responses were quite evenly distributed across different fields. In terms of sectors, the distribution was as follows: private sector 52 %, public sector 39 %, and third sector 6 % of the respondents. Since the responses from the third sector were limited, a reliable comparison between all three sectors cannot be made based on the results.

The distribution of different professional groups among the survey participants is presented in figure 11. In most cases respondents represented either employees (37 %) or experts (33%). The representation of professional groups was the smallest among other middle management (8 %), managers (4 %) and entrepreneurs (2 %). Therefore, the data strongly represents the employees' perspective and experiences. Nevertheless, reliable inferences regarding the research questions can be drawn from the survey data due to the large number of respondents, the richness of the data, and the qualitative, in-depth analysis (Hänninen, 2016).

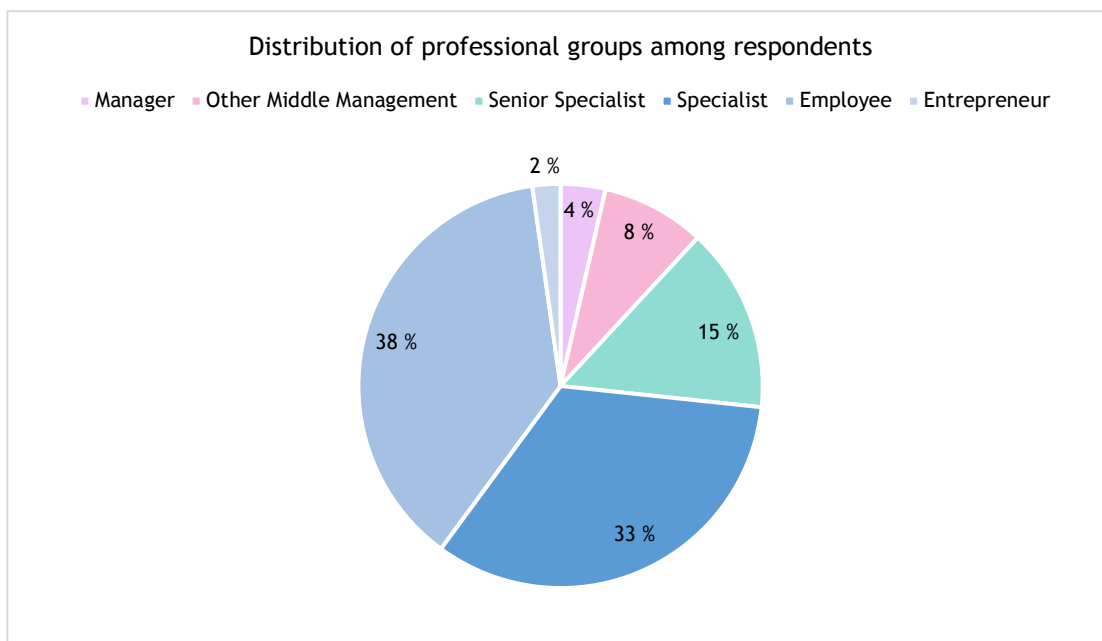


Figure 11: Distribution of professional groups among survey respondents

### The extent and manifestations of pregnancy and family leave discrimination

According to the survey, 29 % of the respondents had experienced inappropriate treatment related to pregnancy, family leave or family circumstances. Almost identical amount, 28 % of the respondents reported to have experienced discrimination due to pregnancy or family leave. In addition, 10 % of the respondents chose the option “not sure” concerning this question. The thesis worker deemed it crucial to include the option “not sure” among the response choices due to the fact that in the light of previous information women do not always recognize that they have been discriminated against (e.g., Sutela et al. 2019; Akavan erityisalat 2017). Over half (52 %) of the discrimination instances occurred during this decade, with 42 % taking place between 2010 and 2020. The quotes from the survey respondents used in this section show that cases concerning both discrimination and inappropriate treatment in working life emerge in all sectors, fields and positions.

The respondents were asked to categorize their experiences of discrimination if they had chosen the option “yes” or “I’m not sure” in the previous question. To reduce the margin of error concerning whether the experience truly constituted unlawful discrimination rather than other forms of inappropriate treatment, the question included predefined options based on legislation <sup>7</sup>. This type of question formulation was also used to facilitating data analysis

<sup>7</sup> Later in the process, thesis worker came to the realization that a more precise terminology, in accordance with the provisions of the Employment Contracts Act (55/2001), regarding option “The job description has undergone significant changes through the unilateral decision of the employer” would have been “The job description has undergone significant changes so that they are *not in line with the terms of the employment contract*” for according to Employment Contracts Act 55/2001 chapter 4, section 9 “employees are in the first place entitled to return to their former duties. If this is not possible, employees shall be offered equivalent work in accordance with their employment contract, and if this is not possible either, other work in accordance with their employment contract.”

and in highlighting the most prominent perspectives perceived by respondents. Respondents could choose several options. About one in four of had chosen more than one of the given options. All options and distribution of discrimination situations based on the options is presented in figure 12.



Figure 12: Distribution of discrimination situations based on the given options (Survey question 10)

According to the survey responses, the most frequent scenario, occurring in approximately one-fourth of the cases, involved the non-renewal or non-extension of fixed-term employment contracts due to pregnancy or family leave. In the additional clarification the respondents often mentioned that either the position was not offered again, or it had been assigned to the substitute during family leave. Although these kinds of cases were evident in all fields, they were predominantly observed within the realms of health and social care services. Below, there are examples of such situations cited by the respondents:

*Others in a similar career situation were offered permanent employment after their fixed-term contracts ended, except for me. The reason was stated directly. (Specialist; Private finance and Insurance; 2020-2023)*

*The supervisor stated that the employment contract would not be extended. I had been working on a fixed-term basis at the hospital, with assignments continuing for years, one after another, without interruption. Then, while on parental leave, the employment contract ended with the expiration of the assignment, and I wasn't even contacted. (Employee; public health and social services; 2010-2020)*

In addition to the predefined options, respondents also had the opportunity to choose "other." Regarding table 3, at first glance the second most frequent situation seems to be these "other" cases. However, there was a notable dispersion in the answers, and additionally, some instances fell into a predefined category, such as termination of employment. Therefore, the predefined option of discrimination in the job application process was in fact the second most

common situation overall. Similar cases formed the second largest category also when asked about other inappropriate treatment related to pregnancy, family leave or family circumstances in question 14 of the survey. In open responses, most common instances concerned job interviewers asking about family planning or, for example, how one plans to handle a demanding work as a parent of young children, or how childcare would be managed when a child is ill. In certain instances, such as in the following case, respondents mentioned that during job interviews, they were explicitly informed that they were rejected in the application process due to pregnancy, childbearing age, or gender:

*Once I was told that, since I have children and the other applicant is a man, I am a bigger risk and expense for the company. (Employee; Private sector, Arts, Entertainment, and Recreation; 2010-2020)*

Thus, despite challenges related to interpretation of assumed discrimination in recruiting situations (see section 2.3.1.), the survey data reveals obvious cases of discriminative treatment in recruitment processes. In some instances, the respondents were uncertain about whether discrimination had occurred, even in cases where the incidents were apparent, as the forementioned examples illustrate. This was evident both in the fact that many chose the option "not sure" when describing the potential discrimination related to recruitment situations, as well as in the prevalence of these cases reported as instances of inappropriate treatment, rather than discrimination.

In "other" cases, negative attitudes or unpleasant behavior from the employer were most commonly mentioned, although this kind of cases cannot be considered discrimination from legal perspective. These cases fall more under the category of "inappropriate treatment," which was inquired in survey question 14. Other recurring themes included issues related to salary, such as non-payment of salary during maternity leave or reducing rate of pay due to pregnancy, reductions in working hours and denial of benefits due to pregnancy or family leave, as seen in following citations:

*The employer withdrew the promotion and salary increase and offered either dismissal or a salary reduction instead. -- It was written into the new employment contract that if the pregnancy is terminated, my salary will be increased back to the previous level. (Senior specialist; Private sector, technology and industry; 2010-2020)*

*When I announced my pregnancy, the promised salary increase was not implemented. My job responsibilities were practically reduced to the lowest level possible within the company. (Other Middle Management; Private animal sector; 2020-2023)*

*The amount of work and responsibilities were not given so that the salary for the time off would be lower. The hours were below official duty. (Specialist; Public sector, teaching and education; 2010-2020)*

*I didn't get the agreed bonuses and salary increases when I told about my pregnancy.  
(Senior specialist; Private sector, sales and marketing; 2020-2023)*

According to the results, respondents had several experiences related to either reduction of the level of work demands or to a significant change in work tasks due to pregnancy or family leave. Quite often job tasks were delegated to a substitute or colleagues during family leave, as in the following cases:

*-- In reality, this new person was recruited to stay and was given my responsibilities. My boss even told me that how was I expecting to get my previous job back and that the new person had two university degrees and I only had one, so it would be normal that the new recruit would get my more challenging work and I 'would be making coffee'. (Manager; Private hotel and restauration industry; 2010-2020)*

*My temporary substitute during family leave was made permanent while I was at home, and now that I have returned to work, there are not enough tasks for me.  
(Senior Specialist; non-profit teaching and education; 2020-2023)*

In two-thirds of the cases where work tasks were reported to have undergone significant changes, these alterations were also associated with either a reduction in task demands and/or with other predefined discriminatory categories. This is demonstrated in the citation below:

*Unfortunately, the pregnancy in question ended in a termination due to fetal abnormality. Upon returning to work after sick leave, my duties were further reduced because I was no longer deemed "reliable" in case of another pregnancy. Additionally, my supervisor (a female) withheld a portion of my salary during my sick leave, which was part of my compensation for managerial responsibilities, claiming that someone else had to cover my duties. (Other Middle Management; private health and social services; 2020-2023)*

Upon reviewing the responses, it became evident that not every respondent possessed a comprehensive understanding of the legal implications associated with pregnancy and family leave discrimination. However, in most of these cases, individuals were not aware of being discriminated against, rather than reporting cases that did not appear to be discrimination according to the equality law (609/1986). This was also evident in the responses to question 14 regarding inappropriate behavior. Although the majority of these responses were related to inappropriate comments or attitudes regarding pregnancy or family circumstances, there were several cases that were in violation of legislation, such as discrimination in recruitment situations, termination of employment contract, or denial of benefits due to pregnancy or family leave.

Given that the research data is based on the respondents' experiences, the goal is not to make a definitive interpretation of which cases constitute illegal discrimination and which ones might be instances of inappropriate or unequal conduct towards the employee. Notwithstanding, it is essential to note that the responses "yes" and "not sure" are combined, a total of 38% of the respondents have experienced either discrimination according to legal definitions or, at the very least, unequal and inappropriate behavior, such as coercion, belittlement, exclusion, misogyny, and blame based on their pregnancy or family situation in Finnish working life. One of the survey respondents frame the issue as following:

*There is a huge but silent group of discriminated employees. The discriminated employees should be listened and not "paid silent" and the curtain of shame and blame they bear on their shoulders should be lifted. It is not the employees' fault if the employer is discriminating, and by doing so creating a huge emotional, physical and economical stress on the employee who perhaps eventually has to change workplace and be the one who takes the risk of unemployment or sick leave.*

#### **The most commonly perceived causes for pregnancy and family leave discrimination**

From a design thinking standpoint, it is essential to understand the reasons for the phenomenon before proposing solutions (Stickdorn 2018). In this section the aim is to gain knowledge of the perceived most common reasons for discrimination according to the target group of the study. This is implemented through both the survey data, as well as the data from the first workshop assignment in workshops 1 and 2.

In the survey, respondents were asked with predefined options on their views of what they believe are the top 3 reasons for pregnancy and family leave discrimination to occur. The given options were based in issues emerging in the prior research and discussions related to the topic, presented in section 2.3. Additionally, the options again included an open-ended option, "other". As in mapping the manifestations of discrimination (p.67), the utilization of predefined options aimed to elucidate the salient facets discernible within the dataset. Three issues clearly emerged from the survey data, which is visible in figure 13: "Employers want to avoid financial risks related to, for example, long family leaves"; "The lack of family-friendly culture / prevailing attitudes in working life"; "Employees fear repercussions if they bring up their discrimination case".

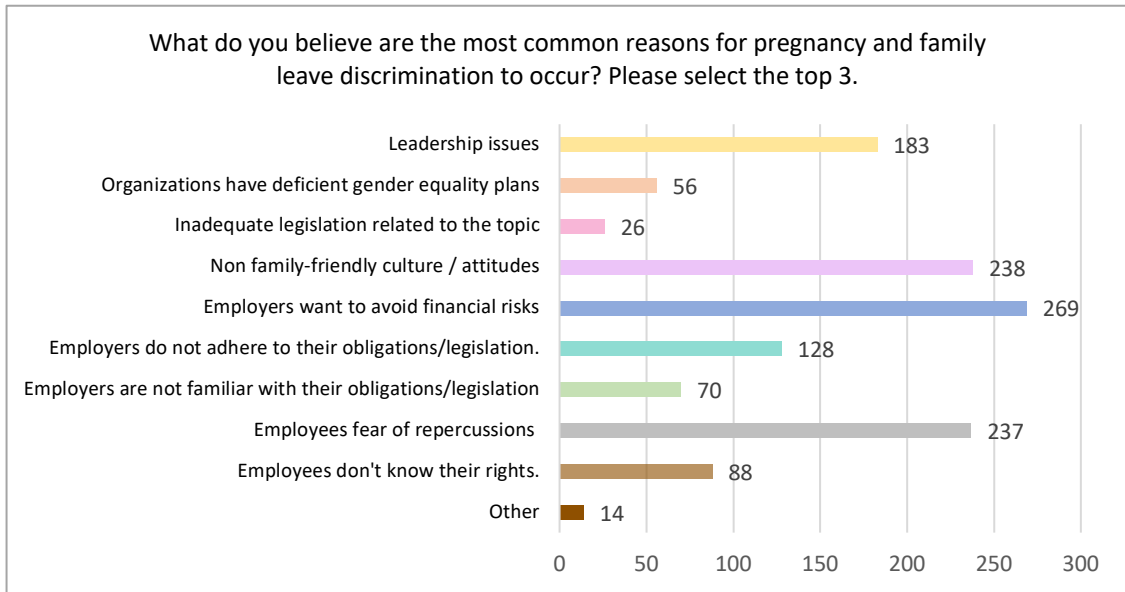


Figure 13: Survey respondents' views on the most common reasons for pregnancy and family leave discrimination (question 20)

The nine (9) potential reasons for discrimination, as presented in the survey (figure 12) were further analyzed in workshops 1 and 2 by applying the "5 whys" method (figure 14), a frequently used tool for root cause analysis. The main idea of the method is to use "why-because" question chain repeatedly, until asking "why" yields no further useful information. By iteratively questioning the causes behind a problem, one can uncover deeper layers and address the cause-and-effect relationships rather than just the symptoms. (Serrat 2017.)

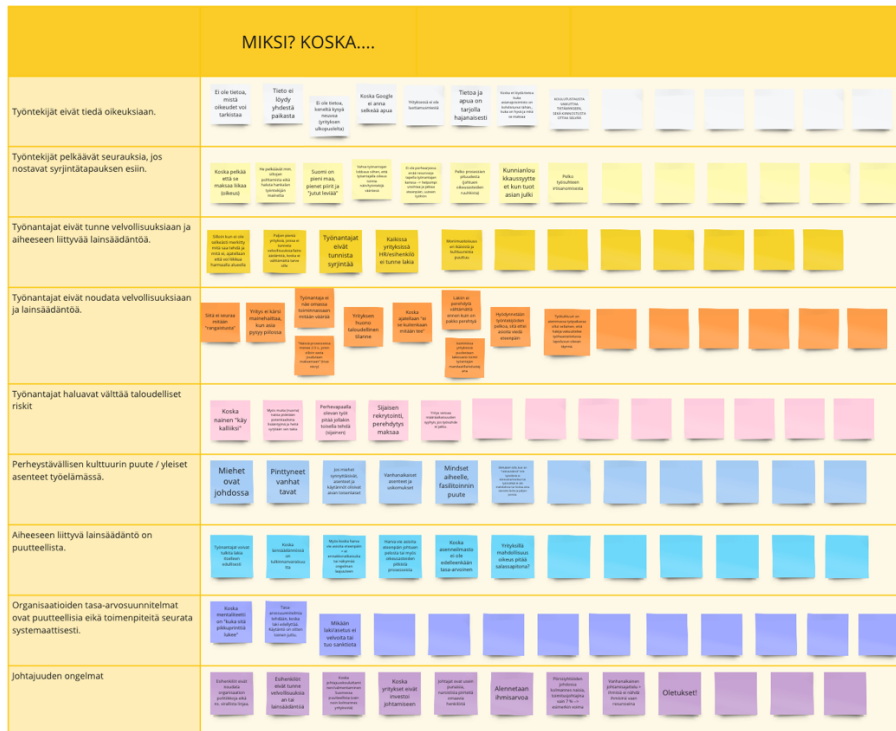


Figure 14: Assignment 1 in workshops 1 & 2: "5 whys" of pregnancy & family leave discrimination





In table 3 all causes for pregnancy and family leave discrimination as identified through affinity mapping based on survey responses and “5 whys” workshop assignment are organized by category size.

Main category	Sub-categories
<b>Attitudes</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Misogyny</li> <li>• Conservative, cross generational attitudes</li> <li>• Gender-related role assumptions</li> <li>• Child/family hostility</li> </ul>
<b>Financial matters</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Low subsidies for companies</li> <li>• Greed/profit maximization</li> <li>• Lack of resources, especially in SMEs (+ certain sectors, e.g., health and social)</li> <li>• Women as "risk recruits"</li> <li>• Unequal distribution of employer costs depending on gender</li> <li>• Beliefs vs. actual costs</li> </ul>
<b>Prevailing culture and structural factors</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Uneven distribution of family leave</li> <li>• Lack of practices for reconciling work and family life</li> <li>• General social structures &amp; culture</li> <li>• Labor market structures &amp; work cultures</li> <li>• The current politics &amp; government</li> </ul>
<b>Underreporting of discrimination cases</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Fear of consequences (being labeled as difficult person, termination, accusations of defamation, obstacles in career advancement/future employment)</li> <li>• The heaviness of the process</li> <li>• Financial costs</li> <li>• "Word for word" dynamics; employee at a disadvantage</li> </ul>
<b>Lack of knowledge</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Lack of knowledge due to the fragmentation and difficulty of finding information</li> <li>• Educational background of an employee can influence the ability and willingness to investigate own rights</li> <li>• Employers' lack of knowledge and understanding on DEI-issues and legislation</li> <li>• No need for the legislative competence in SMEs?</li> </ul>
<b>Leadership issues</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Power dynamics</li> <li>• Ingrained habits</li> <li>• Conservative management culture</li> <li>• Masculine leadership norms</li> <li>• Indifference</li> <li>• Lack of empathy</li> <li>• Insufficient management training</li> </ul>
<b>Legislation</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Ambiguity/loopholes</li> <li>• Insufficiency</li> <li>• Lack of sanctions</li> <li>• Gender-biased legislation</li> <li>• Companies' confidentiality/mediation practices</li> <li>• Insufficiency of labor protection authorities</li> </ul>

Table 3: Causes for pregnancy and family leave discrimination

#### 4.2. Defining the main issues that need interventions

In this section the aim is to construct a deeper understanding of the factors contributing to the occurrence of pregnancy and family leave discrimination which were identified based on the affinity mapping (table 3). According to the triple diamond development process, the goal is to *define* the main issues needing intervention proposals based on the analysis (figure 16). The analysis draws from both the comments organized through affinity mapping and additional citations extracted from the survey data. All cases presented in quotations are from either this or the last decade.

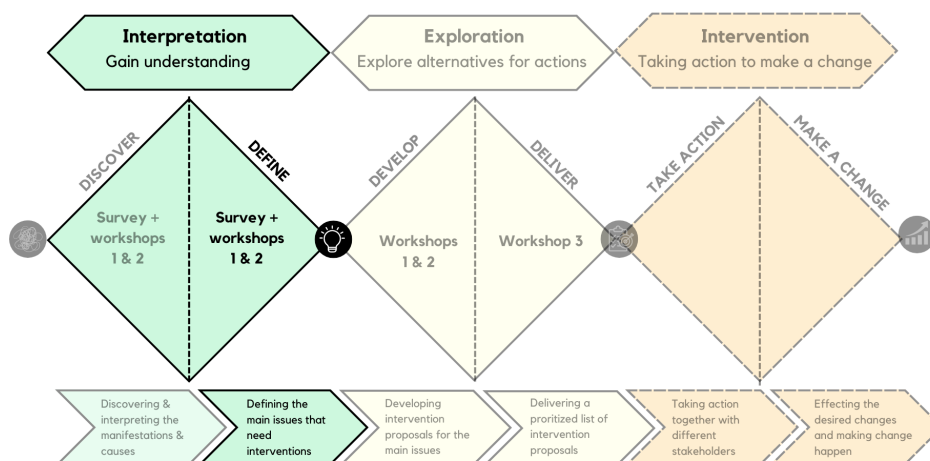


Figure 16: Define-phase

**Issue 1: Discrimination is rooted deeply in the prevailing attitudes and societal structures in workplace as well as in everyday life.**

Here, the focus is on the largest category formed based on affinity mapping (figure 15), that is, attitudes, including the emerging subcategories that were related to misogyny, conservatism, cross-generationality, gender-related assumptions/expectations and child and family hostility (table 3). Comments gathered in affinity mapping from the survey respondents and workshop participants pertained to both individual level and organizational level, as well as the broader societal level. It was noted in the comments that attitudes change slowly, and outdated assumptions persist, particularly concerning gender roles:

*General awareness and attitudes perceive pregnancy and family leave as individual risks and personal choices, rather than understanding their effects on equality (such as career progression, pensions, and distribution of caregiving responsibilities).*

*The attitude is on the minds of both families and employers - that is, awareness of the importance of the family should rise to a whole new level.*

*The conservative ideas of the current generation of decision-makers and their own experiences. These are usually related to the fact that the supposed older male decision-maker has been allowed to pursue a career while the wife has taken care of the children, so he does not even have proper experience in the subject.*

*Also, the uneven distribution of family leave and old-fashioned family roles cause deeply discriminatory structures that are difficult to dismantle without a clear commitment from the organization's management.*

The thesis data uncovers numerous "taken-for-granted" assumptions and gendered expectations concerning women in the workplace. The following comments from the survey respondents illustrate how assumptions related to pregnancy, family leave, or family situation erect various barriers for women in their careers:

*I was told that I couldn't be offered the same managerial position upon returning from parental leave because the possibility of my child falling ill might disrupt my work. To clarify, my child is completely healthy and normal.*

*I was not given the chance to advance or take on challenging tasks offered to others. My supervisor made these decisions without consulting me, assuming that as a mother of a young child, I wouldn't be interested.*

*Because I have children, my supervisor believes that certain job tasks and opportunities "don't fit my life situation." Thus, they have decided on my behalf not to even offer me these opportunities.*

*I wasn't given the opportunity to apply for an open job abroad, the reason being that I wouldn't want it because I'm pregnant.*

The data reveals that women were expected to take care of their children and staying at home longer than the father, but at the same time, employers or supervisors could expect women to return to work from family leaves as soon as possible. The differing attitudes of employers regarding gender also emerged in the comments. As the following citations from the survey responses show, the assumptions and expectations from the employer side evidenced contradictions, especially related to family leaves.

*At the workplace, there were doubts about whether I should be returning to work "when the child is still so young." Few would likely question a father's personal choices in a similar situation.*

*The employer also did not want me to share parental leave with my spouse but hoped that I would be away continuously for as long as possible.*

*The pressure from the supervisor to return to work, but at the same time she tells how she can't understand that a child under 3 years old is put in early childhood education.*

*I had to go back to work as an entrepreneur when my child was 3 months old I had to go back to work as an entrepreneur when my child was 3 months old, leaving my husband to take all of our shared parental leave. He was praised an exemplary father, but as a mother who voluntarily returned to work, I heard that I was selfish.*

The prevailing culture and practices both in working life and everyday life of families are tied to gendered attitudes and expectations presented in this section. In the survey, attitudes and structures were actually combined into a single response option (“non-family friendly culture/attitudes in working life”) when asked about the most common reasons for pregnancy and family leave discrimination to occur. However, in the root cause analysis based on affinity mapping, a separate category was formed based on respondents' perspectives on societal structures and the prevailing culture. In addition to the general social structures and culture, the emerging subcategories covered practices related to family leave, particularly concerning the uneven distribution of parental leave, gendered aspects of the working culture, the lack of practices related to balancing work and family life, and the impact of current government and political decisions (table 3). One of the survey respondents frames the point clearly:

*There's discrimination that happens on two levels. On individual level there's a lot of lack of empathy: women (and men) get rude comments when announcing they're pregnant / going on family leave. This may result in illegal practices or just leave a bad taste in mouth. The second level is the societal level that doesn't encourage couples to share family leaves equally -which makes women be seen as more 'risky' recruits, men get more shit for taking family leaves as it is still not so commonplace in certain industries, women lag behind in career progress, pay and pensions. etc.*

Some comments pointed out that current legislation and policies may pressure or incentivize women to take on a greater share of family leave responsibilities, which leads to women facing greater challenges in the job market and receiving smaller pensions or other benefits compared to their male counterparts. While equality legislation aims to promote gender equality, various societal and economic factors may still perpetuate inequality in working life as well as traditional gender roles, as these citations from the thesis survey demonstrate:

*The positive impacts of men's active parenthood are not discussed enough. If combining family and work, for example, through part-time work, were better supported, women's career trajectories would not stall or significantly slow down.*

*Women conceal their pregnancies for an extended period to ensure the extension of their fixed-term substitutes. Men do not face the same issue, as the birth of a child does not impact a man's work future as significantly. Men's fixed-term contracts are not left unrenewed simply because a woman is pregnant at home, while women's contracts are left unrenewed in such cases.*

*The culture should change, and the other parent (often male) should participate more in family life, staying at home for a longer period of time.*

The thesis data shows that while existing practices, structures, and attitudes within both professional environments and society at large are identified as barriers to achieving gender equality, simultaneously, employers, and colleagues may still inadvertently reinforce gendered norms and expectations through their actions. While the prevailing attitudes and structures are expected to change, individuals themselves can also contribute to the maintaining and creation of gendered expectations related to, for example concerning family leaves. This is evident in the following quote from the survey:

*I was considering applying for a new, better-paid job in the work community, despite the upcoming family leave. My colleagues wondered why I would apply when I am about to take family leave. I didn't apply for it, afterwards it felt like I had missed a good job opportunity.*

The thesis data highlights the need and desire to change gendered structures in the workplace, such as the pay disparities prevalent in female-dominated sectors. However, seen as the most significant structural challenge based on the responses, was the uneven distribution of parental leave. This challenge clearly demonstrates the interplay between structures and attitudes: even if structural changes are made to promote gender equality, as in the case of family leave reform, the success of such changes remains contingent upon individual attitudes and way of acting. The point is well articulated in the following quote:

*The position of men in the workforce is stronger than that of women as long as the majority of men do not exercise their right to take parental leave.*

**Issue 2: Financial issues from the employers' perspective, especially regarding smaller companies and indirect costs, may cause discriminative practices.**

The survey respondents perceived the most common cause for the occurrence of pregnancy and family leave discrimination to be employers seeking to mitigate financial risks. In the affinity mapping, financial factors from the employer's perspective emerged as the second-largest cluster. Sub-categories emerged from the data through affinity mapping included: limited subsidies for employers; greed/profit maximization; scarce resources - especially in SMEs or in certain fields (e.g., social and health care); viewing women as a "risk

recruitments"; unequal distribution of costs depending on gender; and finally, disparities between beliefs and actual costs (table 5).

The responses indicated a general belief that employers tend to consider women as risky recruits. This challenge was perceived to be sustained by the fact that particularly women have traditionally taken long family leaves, in which case the financial burden of family leaves is not evenly distributed between both parents' employers but falls primarily on the woman's employer. The following comment demonstrates how even childless women in certain age can face discrimination in recruitment, as they can be assumed to potentially start a family and take long family leaves:

*In the job interview, it was stated that I would not be chosen for the position because I am at an age where I might have children. I had my first child 15 years later.*

Despite legislation (see section 2.3.1.), based on the views of the study participants, financial factors still seem to cause discriminatory practices, such as above-mentioned discrimination in recruiting processes. In the data, some views emerged, according to which employers are perceived to receive insufficient compensation for their employees who are on family leave. The survey responses, such as the two following citations, point out that especially the indirect costs, such as finding and training potential substitutes may be a burden for employers.

*The employer's reaction to the pregnancy news was to lament how difficult everything would become, having to find a substitute midway through the semester.*

*The company's management pressured me to disclose my pregnancy so that substitute arrangements could be made.*

Some responses specifically expressed understanding towards SMEs, acknowledging that the absence of an employee can pose more challenges to small companies compared with larger organizations:

*In small companies, on the other hand, it is understandable that an employee taking family leave is a risk for the entrepreneur (usually a young woman). It is humane for a small entrepreneur to must think about finances.*

However, economic reasons alone are not sufficient to explain why, according to the thesis data, pregnancy and family leave discrimination occur in companies of various sizes and in different fields and sectors, despite existing legislation. One relevant aspect emerged from the survey and workshops of this study, are the difference between actual and assumed costs: "Attitudes are driven by the image of the costs incurred by the employer. We should talk about real expenses."

The perspective focusing on the financial impact on employers can be viewed as an implication of economization of equality policy (see section 2.1.2.). If employers view providing equal rights and opportunities for pregnant individuals or those employees on family leave as financially burdensome, it can lead to decisions that prioritize cost savings over creating an inclusive and non-discriminatory work environment. All employers, despite their size, are subject to the same legislation, and the cost of pregnancy or family leave does not justify discrimination.

**Issue 3: A vast majority of the discrimination cases are not brought forward.**

The survey data reveals that 67 % of individuals who reported experiencing discrimination did not pursue further action. This statistic is illustrated in figure 17, which delineates the proportions of how instances of discrimination were addressed. At the same time, based on the affinity mapping, this was seen as one of the main issues regarding the persistence of the problem. The affinity mapping data indicates that there can be several reasons for an employee not to take the discrimination case further: behind this decision may be not only the fear of consequences, such as career implications or accusations of defamation, but also the burdensome nature of the legal process and the associated costs, as well as the subordinate position in relation to the employer. One of the survey respondents describes the issue as following:

*Often, when pregnant, there might not be energy for anything extra, and stress certainly doesn't help with coping. That's why I didn't have the strength to start a fight myself but quickly sought out new jobs, luckily easy to find in my field, even though the attitude in the restaurant industry is generally poor.*

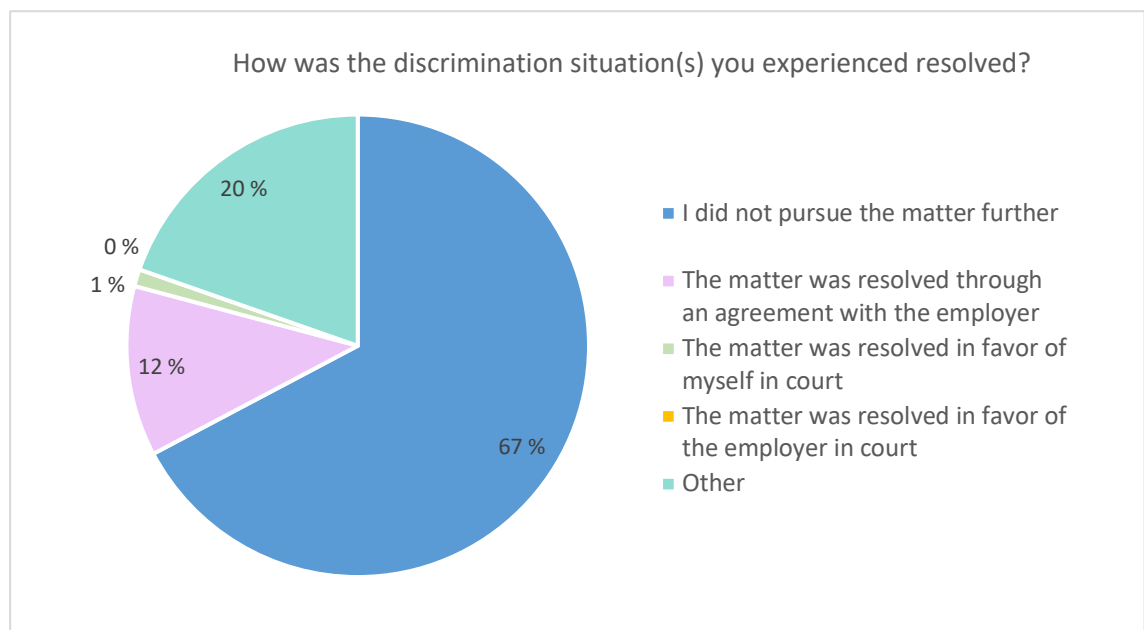


Figure 17: Proportions of survey responses on how the discrimination cases were resolved (question 13)

The hesitation to bring forth cases is also associated with a category identified in the affinity mapping regarding lack of information. As previously noted, the data revealed that discrimination cases are not always recognized as such; individuals may, for example, perceive them as merely “inappropriate behavior” from the employer. Some survey respondents mentioned realizing only later that they had been discriminated against. Based on the data, information was perceived to be sporadically available, leading to individuals not being aware of where to seek information or assistance. Moreover, workshop participants suggested that educational background may influence the ability and willingness to seek information.

Among those 20 % who chose the option “other” for how the discrimination case had been resolved, the majority reported receiving help from either trade union or in some cases from workplace’s shop steward or HR representative. In these cases, other common responses included changing job/workplace or the incompleteness of the process. Some respondents mentioned attempting to bring the case forward but without success:

*I had several discussions with a lawyer about the situation, and according to them, holding a large, reputable company accountable for discrimination would have been extremely difficult. They would have launched a huge smear campaign against me, making my job search even more challenging. Financially, I wouldn’t have gained anything, and it would have been difficult to find a lawyer willing to challenge such a powerful corporation. This apparently happens a lot. I resigned myself to my fate.*

Only 1 % of the respondents reported that the matter had been resolved in favor of the employee in court, whereas none of the cases were resolved in favor of the employer in court. Additionally, 12 % told that the matter had been resolved by reaching an agreement with the employer. However, in the workshop discussions, it was brought out that workplace mediation practices might be part of the problem; when cases remain unpublic, there is limited impetus for employers to revise their policies.

Because based on the research data such a significant portion of cases remains undisclosed, and cases brought in court are rare, it makes the discrimination appear more insignificant issue than it in reality is. This, in turn, may affect the perception that legislative changes are not necessarily needed, if only the number of legal cases is considered. Thus, relying solely on cases proven in court may not provide a comprehensive understanding of the full extent of the problem of discrimination.



#### **Issue 4: Leadership culture and practices may involve several problem areas.**

Based on the data, leadership issues pointed out are closely tied with many other causes emerging from the research data. The seven (7) subcategories of leadership issues (table 5) show that leadership may reflect broader societal and working life attitudes, manifesting, for instance, as deeply ingrained conservative or masculine leadership norms. Furthermore, the data implies that leadership issues might not only entail inadequate leadership training overall, or more specifically a lack of knowledge regarding gender equality matters, but also indifference or lack of empathy. The survey data reveals experiences of bullying, coercion, lying, and scapegoating by supervisors:

*When I reminded my boss and director about laws and asked my actual job back, they started to bully: cancel my holidays, not invite to meetings that concerned my job and responsibilities, I had to log my working hours despite my written job description considered my job so independent that I didn't have defined working hours and traveling for work was forbidden, even if it would have been necessary.*

*I informed my employer about my pregnancy about 3 months before the start of my maternity leave, well in advance. However, the employer got angry about the 'late' notification, claiming that I should have told them much earlier. A substitute was arranged for me on my last day of work, and I was given only an hour to train my replacement.*

*I received a call informing me that I was being promoted to a managerial position. The catch was that I had to start immediately. I accepted the opportunity. However, the truth was that I never actually received that position; I was never given any managerial responsibilities or promotions. I felt deceived into returning to work from parental leave.*

The experiences of the survey respondents indicate that even if the top management would be acting according to the laws, some front-line supervisors may not be following the organization's official policies:

*Even within the workplace, there can be completely opposite experiences. My predecessor always had a neutral or even positive attitude towards family leave both during the time off and upon returning to work. On the other hand, the experience of a colleague under another supervisor in the same company is the opposite.*

*The company where I worked had received the Family-Friendly Workplace declaration from the Family Federation of Finland, yet the frontline supervisors were allowed to act based on their own biased perceptions of women.*

In some cases, the supervisor acted against the law – whether knowingly or unknowingly – as illustrated in the first citation from the survey. In other cases, such as the second example, adherence to the law was emphasized as being necessitated by circumstances.

*My employer ended up laying me off from the team without any specific reason when it was time to return from parental leave. I heard from my colleague that the employer couldn't afford to pay my salary, as another person had been hired for my position.*

*The supervisor said about my maternity leave pay: 'Sure we have to pay it to you, but we haven't budgeted for this.'*

Several comments reiterated the discourse of employees “struggling for one’s own rights,” often linked to supervisors’ lack of awareness or indifference:

*Initially, my supervisor did not believe that pregnancy-related appointments could be attended during working hours, despite it being stated in the collective agreement. The issue was resolved after contacting HR, but it required the employee's own initiative and clarification of their rights.*

It was also brought out that supervisors may not be familiar with family leave legislation, and that unintentional assumptions can easily create expectations about how employees should behave. For example, this citation from the survey suggests the unawareness of new family leave is among the most relevant challenges concerning equality in workplaces:

*I think one of the biggest issues is that the new parental leave that supports fathers to take more leave is not supported and educated in the companies and in our society.*

Additionally, based on the data, even management’s familiarity with legislation did not always seem to be sufficient means for preventing pregnancy and family leave discrimination in the workplace. In fact, based on the affinity mapping, respondents associated various contradictions with gender equality legislation, and it was perceived as inadequate. In the survey comments, policies planned by current government were interpreted as taking the situation in an even worse direction:

*The legislation is not sufficient; the protection against dismissal needs to be improved, especially for those working in fixed-term employment contracts. The plans of Orpo's government to weaken job security for employees and facilitate the signing of fixed-term contracts are unlikely to alleviate the situation; on the contrary, they are likely to exacerbate discrimination.*

Notably, in the data, both survey respondents and workshop participants saw employers exploiting ambiguity and loopholes of the legislation. Local agreements were perceived to be part of the problem. It was also suggested that the lack of sanctions for employers could

exacerbate this exploitation. Furthermore, the data exposed an incident within a major corporation, where an employer had faced legal conviction for discrimination under the Equality Act, mandating compensation for the employee. However, the employer seemingly disregarded the severity of the situation. According to the survey respondent, the employer had stated the following: *“In these (legal) processes, it takes 2-3 years, so only then do we have to pay (the compensation).”*

To conclude, based on the thesis data, it seems evident that leadership – notably proximate leadership – can significantly influence on the practical implementation of legislation related to equality in workplaces. While the data indicates that personnel in managerial positions may not in all cases intentionally engage in discriminatory practices, and instead the actions may reflect unawareness, such findings do not legitimize the presence of discrimination within work environments.

#### **4.2.1. Synthesis on the causes of pregnancy and family leave discrimination**

Based on the data of this thesis, it can be concluded that the reasons for pregnancy and family leave discrimination appear to be multifaceted. Drawing upon the thesis data, there are various categories contributing to discrimination, ranging from entrenched attitudes to structural barriers, legislation, and leadership issues, among others. The root cause analysis reveals that social norms, structures, and culture, both in workplaces and more broadly in society, are intertwined, with individuals simultaneously reinforcing behavior and practices considered “self-evident” and “natural.” The data reveals pervasive assumptions concerning women, manifesting in various ways. These assumptions wield significant influence on women’s career trajectories, particularly when employers and supervisors align their actions with such presumptions. Thus, the data emphasizes the pivotal role of leadership in perpetuating or mitigating discrimination.

Furthermore, the analysis shows underlying complexities of legislation and policies, revealing contradictions and loopholes that may undermine efforts to combat discrimination effectively. Based on the data, although labor and equality legislation provide a framework for promoting gender equality, its effectiveness rely also on leadership culture and practices within organizations. By fostering a culture of compliance, awareness, and advocacy for gender equality, organizational leaders can enhance the implementation of legislation and create workplaces where discrimination is actively challenged and eradicated.

However, the reluctance to pursue discrimination cases, often due to fear of consequences and the burdensome legal process, contributes to underreporting of incidents, with 67% of the survey respondents affected by discrimination not taking further action. Lack of awareness and access to information also play a significant role, with educational background potentially influencing individuals’ ability to seek help. With only 1% of cases reported in the survey resolved in favor of the employee in court, there is a clear need for greater awareness and systemic changes to effectively address pregnancy and family leave discrimination.

In conclusion, addressing the current situation requires an understanding of its complexity. Thus, this thesis advocates for a comprehensive understanding of discrimination issues, considering both legal and societal dimensions and acknowledging the collective nature of challenges faced by pregnant individuals and those on family leave. In the following two sections, intervention proposals gathered from the study’s target group are presented, covering a wide range of perspectives related to the issue at hand.

### 4.3. *Developing* intervention proposals for the main issues

In this section, entering into the realm of the second diamond, “Exploration”, presented in figure 18, along with its initial phase, *developing*, the focus is on the co-developed intervention proposals. Because the writing process and the data analysis didn’t progress at the same pace as the triple diamond design process, only the *top three* issues identified from the survey were focused on in the first two workshops, compared with *four* main issues presented in the root cause analysis in section 4.2. In other words, a more detailed root cause analysis, presented in previous chapter, was conducted after the workshops. However, it later becomes evident that while solution proposals were developed for only “top 3” challenges, based on the survey results, they comprehensively address various perspectives, including leadership-related problem areas highlighted in the preceding section.

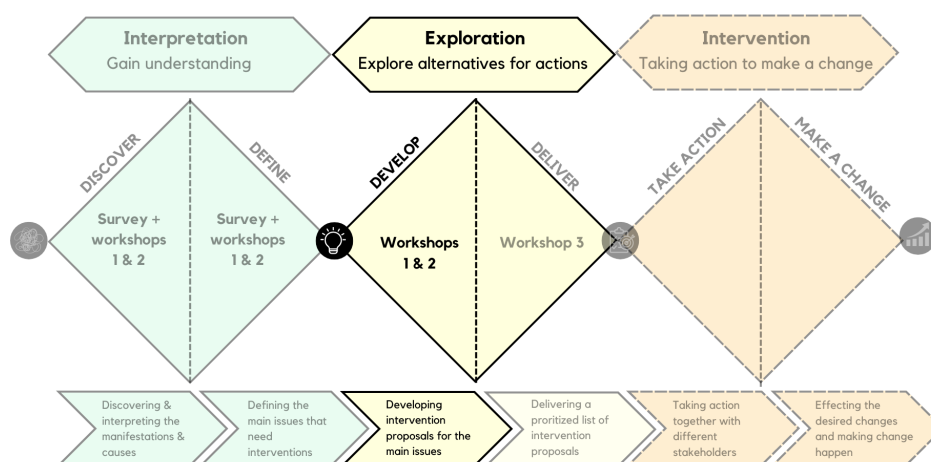


Figure 18: Develop-phase

Intervention proposals were developed in the first two workshops using an application of backcasting method which produces information about routes to a desired future. The working template for the assignment is visible in figure 19. Backcasting can be used to make a concrete work plan to achieve a certain vision or goal. The work begins by defining the desired future state. The subsequent phase aims to identify actions and measures that can facilitate the transition from the current state to the envisioned future state. (e.g., Jyväskylä University 2023; Talvela & Stenman 2012).

In this application of backcasting, time limitations necessitated a focus on the three most salient reasons for pregnancy and family leave discrimination to occur, as identified through

the survey: “the lack of a family-friendly culture/prevaling attitudes”; “employers want to avoid financial risks”; and “employees fear of repercussions if they bring up their discrimination case”. Based on these top three survey options voted by survey respondents, the thesis worker and the MiB project specialist formed in advance a statement for the assignment, each reflecting the current state:

1. 70 % of those who have experienced discrimination do not pursue their cases further.
2. Financial issues or concern about expenses can lead to employers discriminating against pregnant individuals or those on family leave.
3. Society and the workplace lack family-friendly culture, with attitudes sometimes even displaying hostility.



Figure 19: Example of backcasting assignment (workshop 1 & 2)

The first task for the participants was to decide and formulate desired future state(s) for each issue. Following this, participants were encouraged to brainstorm with a goal to produce as many intervention proposals as possible, for achieving the target states. An additional task, if there was time left, was to write down all stakeholders considered relevant for the implementation of the proposed interventions. The complete dataset from from both workshop sessions for this assignment, including all 39 intervention proposals, is provided in attachment 2.

### Intervention proposals for challenge #1: Measures for enhancing the possibilities for reporting and resolving the discrimination cases

Regarding the first statement related to employees not pursuing discrimination cases forward, the target states were framed in the workshops as follows, underscoring the need for accessible and effective mechanisms for resolving discrimination issues, as well as emphasizing proactive measures to prevent discrimination:

- Everyone would have the opportunity to try to resolve the situation.
- 100 % takes the matter forward.
- Aiming to handle cases internally in the organization → Employees would not need to resort to taking the case to court.
- Prevention of cases of discrimination.

As potential stakeholders that should be involved in solving this issue, following parties were mentioned:

- MiB
- Occupational safety lawyers
- The cooperation between the Ombudsman for Equality and the occupational safety and health authorities
- Employer Unions
- Employers
- Trade Unions
- Mothers

Altogether, there were 15 intervention proposals regarding this issue (attachment 2). One of the focus areas of the intervention proposals regarding this specific challenge was more effective information sharing. The intervention proposals covered individual level through *enhancing employees' knowledge about legislation and their rights*, organization level, e.g., *establishing clear organizational protocols*, as well as societal level, e.g., *placing the matter of defining discrimination on the national agenda*. Furthermore, intervention proposals encompassed peer support and low-threshold services, aspects that have been infrequently addressed in prior research concerning pregnancy or family leave discrimination. For example, *fostering a community/group for sharing experiences and providing peer support* and a *legal support hotline manned by a pool of legal experts for members of the Mothers in Business* were suggested.

An essential intervention proposal from the legislative perspective was related to the prohibition of countermeasures (see section 2.3.1.); *emphasizing that countermeasures are prohibited* and raising both employers' and employees' awareness on this prohibition was deemed essential. This is supported by the thesis data, as experiences indicate that despite the prohibition of countermeasures, employees may face, for example, threats and coercion. Moreover, the discourse emerging from the data regarding "fighting for one's rights" indicates that the prohibition against retaliatory actions may not be known to all employers.

Among intervention proposals, an important aspect was also raised concerning legal expenses. *Implementing deterrents for employers in the form of legal costs if they engage in discrimination (as seen in France)* was suggested, for the current financial sanctions were not seen as sufficient. In certain organizations, based on the experiences of survey respondents, as the legal processes are often lengthy, there may be a long delay before sanctions are

imposed (see p.83). On the contrary, from the employee's perspective, *ensuring that the risk or fear of legal expenses associated with litigation is reasonable and manageable* was deemed necessary. However, it was noted that financing mechanisms regarding this proposal need further evaluation and research.

### **Intervention proposals for challenge #2: Establishing a hiring environment where financial considerations do not influence decisions & equalizing the gender-based financial burden on employers**

The statement in relation to financial issues leading to discriminatory behavior of the employer was formed into following target states:

- **Financial reasons are not an obstacle for hiring.**
- **Parental leave would be treated in the same way in collective agreements as in legislation (= it doesn't matter who takes the leave).**

The stakeholders considered relevant for tackling this issue were:

- HR specialists
- Financial management of companies
- Law offices familiar with the Equality Act and employment contracts
- MiB
- Maternity and child health clinics, health care

Twelve intervention proposals were presented concerning the matter (attachment 2). Regarding the first target state, "financial reasons are not an obstacle to hiring", it was noted that a change toward more family friendly work culture is needed; for example, *strengthening a compassionate work culture; enhancing employer branding through family-friendly policies; and shifting the perspective from solely focusing on financial costs to recognizing mothers as valuable assets in the workforce* were mentioned among the proposals. The intervention proposals emphasized a need to equalize employer costs for both parents' employers, thereby mitigating the perception of women as higher-risk candidates among employers. This was highlighted for example in a proposal for *providing equal Kela reimbursements to employers for both parents, thus treating both mothers and fathers as equally expensive for employers.*

One central theme concerning the non-influence of economic factors on recruitment was the compensation that companies receive for family leaves. For example, *providing support to businesses to mitigate financial burdens incurred due to family leave policies* was suggested. Regarding the mitigation of the costs incurred by employers, increasing state subsidies was deemed well-founded. One of the intervention proposals entailed the establishment of *an independent entity, a "family fund", akin to a pension fund, to finance family-related expenses.* Additionally, *tailored government support based on company size (e.g., turnover,*

*personnel*) was suggested, based on the view that the size of the company can affect how burdensome the costs arising from family leave become.

Furthermore, pivotal category in the intervention proposals regarding the first target state was related to *emphasizing fact-based analyses of the actual costs of family leaves*, as well as *providing and enhancing the utilization of accessible tools like family leave calculators* for accurately estimating the costs of family leaves for businesses. These proposals stem from the recognition that employers may lack accurate information on the actual costs of family leaves, which was evident in the survey data as well.

The second target state, **“Parental leave would be treated in the same way in Collective Agreements as in legislation (= it doesn’t matter who takes the leave)”** is related to the statement of Ombudsman for Equality (2023a): the family leave reform sets a requirement to adjust paid maternity and paternity leaves in collective agreements. Historically, the unequal distribution of paid leave between mothers and fathers has not been considered discriminatory due to differing leave purposes and prerequisites. However, due to equal right of both parents to take parental leave after the family leave reform has entered into force, equal wages should be provided to both parents for equivalent periods during parental leave to prevent discrimination, while mothers could still receive wages during pregnancy leave. (Ibid.) The workshop participants viewed that these factors should be considered to avoid potential discrimination, as confirmed by the Constitutional Law Committee (HE 112/2006 vp).

### **Intervention proposals for challenge #3: Promoting attitudes and actions for fostering a family-friendly culture and promoting equal sharing of family leaves**

The target state for tackling the third issue, the lack of family friendly culture, was defined through considering two perspectives:

- **There should be a transformation in the entirety of Finnish culture.**
- **Parental leave should be distributed more evenly or equally between women and men (or between birthing and non-birthing individuals).**

The pertinent stakeholders identified for addressing the matter were:

- Parents
- Media
- Employers (from a perspective of corporate responsibility!)
- MiB

Considering this issue, twelve intervention proposals were presented (attachment 2). Firstly, taking tangible steps in relation to the first target state of transforming the Finnish culture to be more equal and family-friendly was suggested through *concrete actions* in workplace, *such as setting meeting times*. In addition, it was proposed that *women should be offered more*



*flexibility and greater preference should be given to part-time work. The workshop participants also recommended enforcing a family-friendly employer image through platforms like Trip Advisor or Glassdoor, by encouraging positive reviews from employees regarding family-friendly policies, benefits, and work-life balance initiatives. Overall, it was proposed to enhance leadership skills across the organization to promote equality and to support for family-friendly policies.*

Although the proposals focused on the organization (meso) level or on the wider societal (macro) level, both target states require a change in attitudes and courses of action in individual (micro) level as well. The intervention proposals such as *affirm the roles of women and mothers and empower men and fathers by recognizing and strengthening their roles beyond being assistants to mothers* refer to challenging the gendered norms and expectations (see section 2.2.2.) This is evident also in the target state regarding more equal distribution of parental leaves between parents; the structural change alone is not sufficient if individuals don't question the "self-evidencies". Some of the survey respondents saw equal sharing of parental leave as the "only option" for tackling issue for achieving equal working life:

*In male-dominated sectors and small companies, laws against discrimination, training sessions, or campaigns do not seem to be effective. I believe that in these contexts, equal parental leave is the only solution - making men as risky recruits as women.*

#### 4.4. Delivering a prioritized list of intervention proposals

This section focuses on the second half for "exploration" diamond (figure 20). In this phase, the goal for the third, in-house workshop with MiB board members and employees, was to deliver a prioritized list based on previously presented intervention proposals that MiB could use in its work in preventing and reducing pregnancy and family leave discrimination. The workshop consisted of two assignments: initially, selecting the most significant proposals and secondly, evaluating them based on impact, effort, and resource requirements.

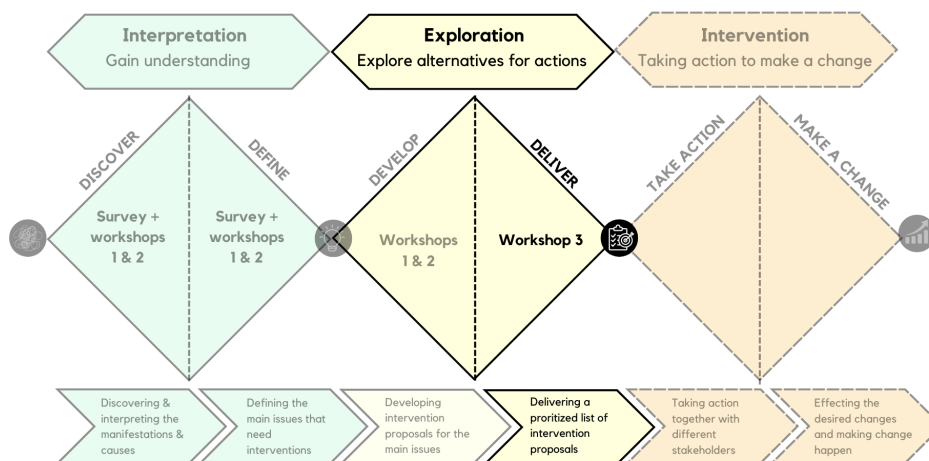


Figure 20: Deliver-phase

## Selecting the most significant intervention proposals

Although the focus of the backcasting exercise in workshops 1 and 2 was on the top 3 reasons for pregnancy and family leave discrimination identified from the survey data, the intervention proposals were related to several themes, which indicates the systemic nature of the issue. Before the last workshop, the thesis worker and MiB project specialist clustered the intervention proposals gained from previous workshops using affinity mapping (figure 21). Eleven (11) clusters were identified, largely echoing themes observed during earlier stages:

- Attitudes/workplace equality + gender roles
- Communication
- Leadership skills
- Support for businesses
- Low-threshold support
- Legal aspects
- Employer brand
- Costs of family leaves for employers
- Concrete actions of the employer
- Resources for supporting parental well-being
- Peer support

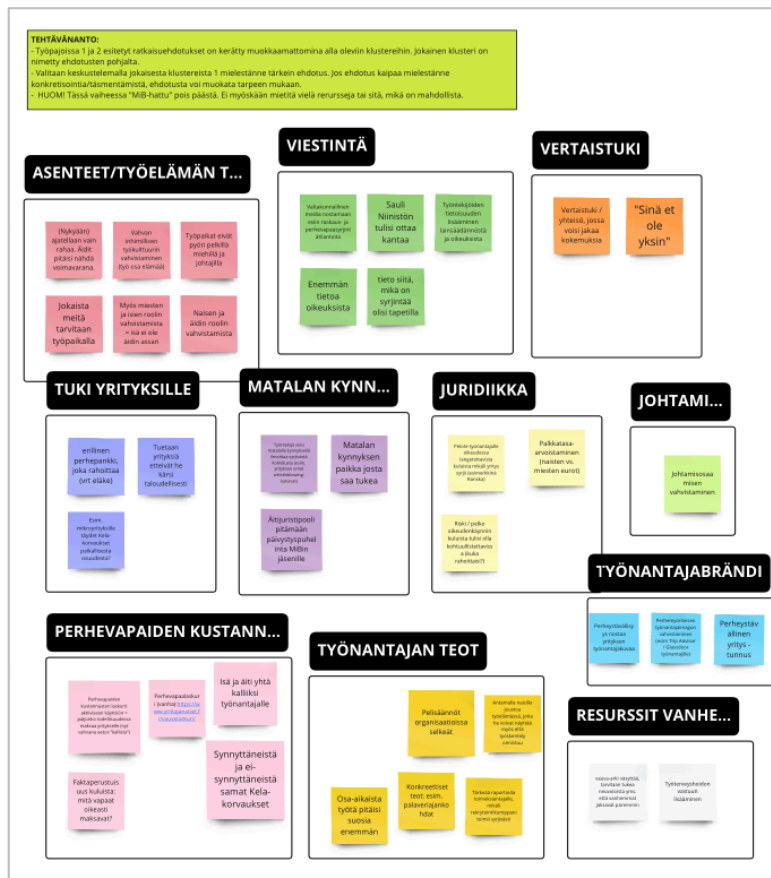


Figure 21: Affinity mapping of the intervention proposals presented in workshops 1 & 2

The objective of the initial assignment in the final workshop was to identify, from each cluster, the intervention proposal deemed most significant. The participants were given the possibility to elaborate on the given intervention proposals if found needed. At this point, the attendees were advised to defer considerations regarding resources and to assess the significance not only through the lens of MiB but from a wider societal standpoint so that the prioritized list would be beneficial also for other stakeholders. Due to small number of participants, the assignment was accomplished through mutual discussion. Following intervention proposals were selected for further examination in the second assignment:

- Equal cost to the employer for both (birthing and non-birthing) parents
- Strengthening a strong human-centric work culture (work-life balance) by, for example, training key personnel in companies, communicating, highlighting benefits, sharing information, and breaking down the segregation of “women’s and men’s work”
- Family-friendly leader online course
- “Patient advocate-type” solution: informing about rights, guiding forward
- Specifically targeting young people on pregnancy and family leave discrimination (social media)
- Peer support group
- Government support based on business size (e.g., turnover, personnel): micro-enterprises, SMEs, listed companies
- Peer support groups in family centers + reforming maternity and child health services in relation to better consideration of parents
- Promoting more positive attitude towards part-time work
- Incorporating family-friendliness into the “Great Place to Work” certification
- Enhancing and clarifying the information sharing on prohibition of countermeasures.

### **Evaluating the selected intervention proposals**

In contrast to the first assignment, here the participants were recommended to consider proposals specifically from their organization’s perspective, for at this point the goal was to identify those proposals that would be feasible for MiB to pursue, while at the same time having high impact on preventing and reducing pregnancy and family leave discrimination.

The task was structured around the application of the three fundamental lenses of design thinking commonly utilized in service design, that is: viability, feasibility, desirability (see p. 46). However, these criteria were somewhat modified in this context. While the traditional lenses of viability, feasibility, and desirability primarily focus on organizational or user-centric perspectives, here an additional element is fostering societal impact and common good, according to the primary principle of social design (cf., Dorst 2016). Thus, after the *significance* had been evaluated in the first task, in the second phase, *feasibility* and *impact* were assessed within a matrix. The human perspective, *desirability*, can be considered

inherent in all proposals, as they stem directly from input provided by representatives of the study's target group.

The effort-to-impact matrix, visualized in figure 22, is divided into four quadrants. It serves as a valuable tool for change agents, enabling them to prioritize their efforts and make strategic decisions about the sequence of actions. It facilitates the mapping of potential strategies and the assessment of the balance between the effort required for implementation and the anticipated impact of each strategy - or in this case, intervention proposal. (cf., Helmke 2022.) This kind of comparative matrix is a versatile tool that can be adapted to various evaluation criteria and contexts. It is possible to substitute each axis with different criteria or utilize multiple matrices to evaluate more than two factors simultaneously. (Gibbons 2021.) For example, in this instance, the final step of the assignment involved assessing a third factor, *resource requirements* on a scale of €-€€€. This assessment was conducted post-workshop by MiB employees due to time constraints during the workshop.

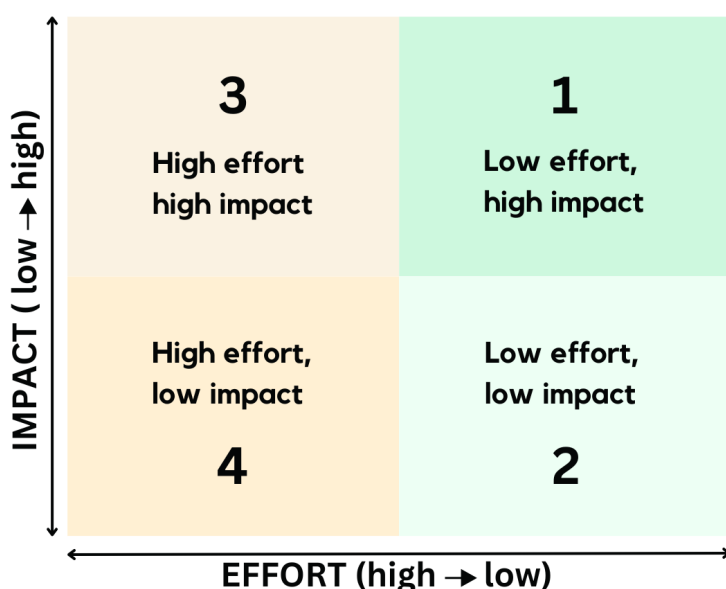


Figure 22: Effort-to-impact matrix (adapted from Helmke 2022)

In figure 23, all intervention proposals are situated in the matrix used for the workshop assignment. Even though some of the proposals are in the middle of two of the quadrants, based on the discussions held in the workshop, each proposal was leaning somewhat more on certain quadrant. Thus, each proposal is situated into the quadrants based on which quadrant it primarily addressed.

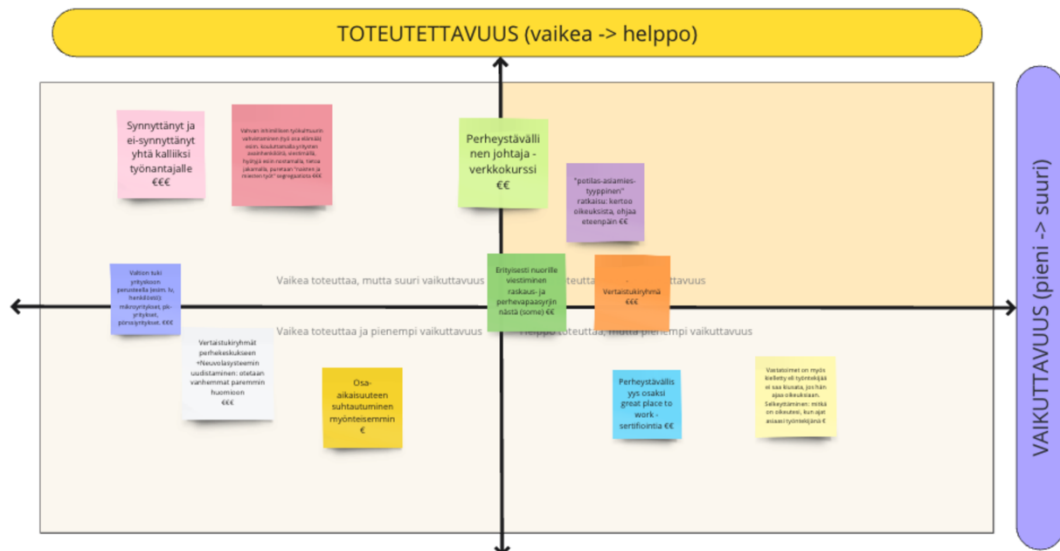


Figure 23: Intervention proposals evaluated based on impact, feasibility & resource requirements

**Quadrant 1** comprises intervention proposals that were considered low-effort, high-impact, offering quick and effective wins (cf., Helmke 2022). These are the proposals that should be accomplished in the first place (Tartell 2023). In the resource assessment, however, three proposals were considered to require moderate and one proposal significant allocation of resources.

Altogether, there were four (4) proposals situated in this quadrant:

- A Family-friendly leader online course (€€)
- "Patient ombudsperson-type" solution: informing about rights, guiding forward (€€)
- Peer support group (€€€)
- Specifically targeting young people on pregnancy and family leave discrimination (€€)  
(social media) (€€)

All these proposals, except peer support group, were further developed in the third workshop, building upon previously presented ideas. The initial proposal for *strengthening leadership skills*, was evolved into a *family-friendly leader online course* with the intention of adding specificity. Additionally, an online course concept was considered easily accessible. The proposal related to low-threshold support, "*patient ombudsperson-type*" solution, was elaborated on the idea of establishing a pool of legal experts operating a hotline for MiB members. The initial proposal was further developed due to the potential challenge of recruiting a sufficient number of highly paid, busy lawyers to volunteer for the initiative. Finally, regarding enhanced communication on the issue, it was deemed essential to *specifically targeting young people through social media* to prevent pregnancy and family leave discrimination.

**Quadrant 2** encompasses intervention proposals that were seen as easy to carry out but with less significant impact. It is advisable to address these proposals following those in quadrant 1 (Tartell 2023). The other proposal was evaluated to necessitate minor resources, while the other was considered to require moderate resources. Two (2) proposals were categorized within this quadrant:

- Incorporating family-friendliness into the “Great Place to Work” certification (€€)
- Enhancing and clarifying the information sharing on prohibition of countermeasures (€)

Concerning the theme of “employer brand” featured in the initial intervention proposals, the workshop participants came up with a new idea: *Incorporating family-friendliness into the “Great Place to Work” certification*. Due to the certificate’s recognized reputation, it was believed that this measure, in a simple manner, could promote a family-friendly image for businesses.

Among all previously presented proposals related to legal aspects, *enhancing and clarifying the information sharing on prohibition of countermeasures* was chosen among the proposals. Although other proposals - *Implementing deterrents for employers; implementing measures to achieve gender pay equality; and ensuring that the risk or fear of legal expenses associated with litigation is reasonable and manageable* - were considered essential, participants perceived these proposals beyond the capacity of their organization. Increasing employees’ awareness of the prohibition of countermeasures was seen to expand the understanding of their own rights, which could help prevent discrimination. Communication about the countermeasures was seen as suitable to be integrated into the previous proposal regarding “a patient ombudsperson-type solution”. At the same time, mothers could be encouraged and supported to contact authorities that assist in cases of discrimination. Additionally, information could be disseminated through initiatives such as training sessions organized by the Equally on Family Leave project.

**Quadrant 3** consists of high-effort, high-impact intervention proposals. This kind of “big bets” also merit attention, however, requiring careful planning and potentially consuming significant time and/or financial resources for realization, as well as collaboration with multiple stakeholders. (Tertell 2023; Helmke 2022; Gibbons 2021). Indeed, all three (3) proposals in this quadrant were considered to require significant number of resources. All the following proposals were presented in previous workshops, although some specifications were made on the first two.

- Equal costs to the employer for both (birthing and non-birthing) parents (€€€)
- Strengthening a strong human-centric work culture (work-life balance) by, for example, training key personnel in companies, communicating, highlighting benefits, sharing information, and breaking down the segregation of "women's and men's work" (€€€)
- Offering government support tailored to business size (e.g., turnover, personnel), with different levels of aid for micro-enterprises, small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs), and listed companies. (€€€)

Given that all these issues are deeply entrenched in existing culture and societal structures, workshop participants regarded them as resistant to change. Despite challenges, for example, *strengthening a strong human-centric work culture* can be advanced through several actions, as outlined in the proposal: *training key personnel in companies, communicating, highlighting benefits, sharing information, and breaking down the segregation of "women's and men's work"* are all relevant actions for making the change happen.

*Equal cost to the employer for both parents, as well as government support based on business size* are, on the other hand, proposals that still need further examination. This was also acknowledged by the workshop participants; despite long-standing policy goals to compensate employers for family leave costs, especially in predominantly female sectors (Terveyden ja hyvinvoinnin laitos 2023a), and additionally current government promoting cost sharing among parents' employers (Finnish Government 2023a), uncertainty surrounding calculations, particularly regarding indirect costs, necessitates further research to inform decision-making (Johansson et al. 2007; VM 2015).

Finally, **quadrant 4** includes intervention proposals that were perceived as requiring substantial effort but not resulting in such a significant impact. Typically, this quadrant is deemed low priority and not worth investment (Tertell 2023; Gibbons 2021). However, in this scenario, these intervention proposals should not be disregarded as they were included within the 11 most significant proposals chosen in the earlier phase of the third workshop. In the end, two (2) proposals were found as challenging to implement and having a minor impact on preventing/reducing discrimination related to pregnancy and family leave. The first proposal was deemed to necessitate significant resources, while the other was seen as requiring only minor resources.

- Peer support groups in family centers + reforming maternity and child health services in relation to better consideration of parents (€€€)
- Promoting more positive attitude towards part-time work (€)

The first proposal – *Peer support groups in family centers + reforming maternity and child health services in relation to better consideration of parents* – in fact, cover two perspectives, combining previous proposals of *parental support from healthcare centers and other resources to alleviate the fatigue of early parenthood and ensure better parental well-being* and *fostering a community/group for sharing experiences and providing peer support*. Family centers, which encompass the services provided by maternity and child health clinics, were seen as a natural location for peer support groups, as the duties of the family center include support in parenting and relationships, as well as enabling peer support and strengthening communities. (Terveyden ja hyvinvoinnin laitos 2023b)

However, from the viewpoint of MiB, as a network for career-oriented mothers, and as an organization focusing on enhancing primarily equal and family friendly working life, maternity and child health services was not considered the most essential stakeholder for MiB. Regarding the prevention and reduction of pregnancy and family leave discrimination, influencing other stakeholders such as employers and policymakers was deemed more characteristic of MiB. Overall, it was also perceived that MiB's ability to influence reforming maternity and child health services in relation to better consideration of parents was limited, which was the explanation for placing the proposal in quadrant 4. However, creating peer support groups in family centers was seen as a good method for preventing discrimination and supporting those who have experienced discrimination.

Moreover, maternity and child health clinics can play a role in *promoting a more positive attitude towards part-time work*, the second intervention proposal in this quadrant, by reminding parents of the option for part-time parental leave to balance work and family commitments. However, workshop participants saw the question of increasing part-time work for parents of young children as multifaceted. Thus, the original proposal was slightly modified; instead of advocating for part-time *preference* (*Greater preference should be given to part-time work*), the reformulated proposal emphasizes promoting *more positive attitude* towards part-time work. Since the participants considered the current family leave system already enabling a highly flexible combination of parental leave and part-time work, there was no perceived need for, for example, advocacy efforts towards legislation. Instead, there was a consensus that promoting a more positive attitude, particularly among employers, should be prioritized.



## 5. Conclusions

The final chapter brings together the findings of the thesis work and reflects on them in relation to the knowledge base and framework of the thesis. The chapter concludes on the research questions presented in section 1.1. Additionally, the third diamond of the development process, “Intervention”, is discussed, based on the prioritized and evaluated intervention proposals presented in section 4.4. Finally, suggestions for making a change towards a more family friendly and equal working life are presented.

### 5.1. Prevalent manifestations and causes contributing to discrimination

The first research question of the study was “What is the extent and prevalent manifestations of pregnancy and family leave discrimination?”. The findings show that pregnancy and family leave, as well as inappropriate behavior related to pregnancy, family leave or family circumstances was common among the survey respondents with 29 % of the respondents reporting experiences of inappropriate treatment, and 28 % indicated experiencing pregnancy and family leave discrimination. Additional 10 % of the respondents were unsure if discrimination had occurred. However, a majority of these cases, based on open-ended responses, exhibited signs of discrimination from legal perspective. If the number of these respondents is combined the result aligns closely with the Mothers in Business member survey (N=475), where 36 % of respondents reported experiencing discrimination related to family situations (Mothers in Business 2021).

The survey responses revealed several cases of all presented options of different kind of manifestations of pregnancy and family leave discrimination. Altogether there were 228 individual cases, meaning that quite often one individual had experienced more than one incidence of discrimination. The most frequent scenario according to the thesis data, observed in approximately one-fourth of the cases, involved the non-renewal of fixed-term employment contracts due to pregnancy or family leave. This is in line with previous research, implying that women, employed on fixed-term contracts – as well as in other atypical employment relationships – face a particularly high risk of experiencing discrimination due to pregnancy and family leaves (Equality Ombudsman 2022; PAM 2019a).

The survey data shows that cases concerning both discrimination and inappropriate treatment in working life emerge in all sectors, fields and positions. Majority, with over half (52 %) of the discrimination instances, occurred during this decade, and 42 % took place between 2010 and 2020. Therefore, according to the data, the issue persists in Finnish working life. The data is in line with previous studies (e.g., Sutela et al. 2019; Pietiläinen et al. 2018; Työ- ja elinkeinoministeriö 2021; Equality Ombudsman 2023); it appears evident that pregnancy and family leave discrimination remain pertinent equality issue in Finnish working life.

The second research was “What kind of causes contribute to the occurrence of pregnancy and family leave discrimination?”. The root cause analysis was conducted by utilizing both the survey and workshop data. In the analysis, seven categories with several subcategories were identified (section 4.1., table 3). In section 4.2, four main issues requiring intervention proposals were identified based on affinity mapping, which was conducted using both the survey and workshop data. The issues were:

**Issue 1: Discrimination is rooted deeply in the prevailing attitudes, assumptions, and societal structures in workplace as well as in everyday life.**

**Issue 2: Financial issues from the employers’ perspective, especially regarding smaller companies and indirect costs, may cause discriminative practices.**

**Issue 3: A vast majority of the discrimination cases are not pursued forward.**

**Issue 4: Leadership culture and practices may involve several problem areas.**

Drawing from the data presented in this thesis, it becomes apparent that the factors contributing to pregnancy and family leave discrimination are complex, making it difficult to establish clear cause-and-effect relationships (cf., Nordberg et al. 2021). Referring to the research findings by Nordberg et al. (2021), although some of the experiences of the survey respondents may fall into a “gray area” between illegal discrimination and unequal treatment, the thesis data illustrates a spectrum of factors contributing to discrimination, spanning from deep-seated attitudes to structural impediments, legal frameworks, underreporting of the discrimination cases and leadership challenges. It underscores the interconnection between legislation, societal norms, structures, and workplace culture, wherein individuals themselves also may inadvertently reinforce certain behaviors and norms (Närvi & Salmi 2017). The thesis data reveals the first issue being that **discrimination is rooted deeply in the prevailing attitudes, assumptions, and societal structures in workplace as well as in everyday life**, shaping women’s career paths and ways of parenting.

Lack of resources, especially in smaller companies, unequal distribution of family leaves and lack of knowledge regarding the actual costs of family leaves were considered main contributors for the second challenge, **financial issues from the perspective of employers** causing discriminative practices. The responses of this study indicated a general belief that employers tend to consider women as risky recruits due to long family leave. This is related to the view that the financial burden of family leaves is not evenly distributed between both parents’ employers but falls primarily on the the woman’s employee. This perception receives support from previous research (e.g., Sutela 2013; Kupiainen, Evans & Kauppinen 2007). Even childless women aged 20-40 also face discrimination in recruitment, as they can be assumed to potentially start a family and take long family leaves (Närvi & Salmi 2017). There were similar experiences among the survey respondents, too. It is, however, problematic that, at the same time, women’s long family leaves are seen as a central cause for discriminative

practices, but both individuals and employers perpetuate attitudes and structures that contribute to this issue.

The third challenge, being that **vast majority of the discrimination cases are not pursued forward**, encompasses various factors. Firstly, the repercussions of advancing these cases were feared for several reasons. Overall, employees were also seen to be at a disadvantage compared to employers, with employer testimony believed to hold more weight in "word against word" situations. Additionally, the legal process was perceived as burdensome, with associated costs feared. Indeed, among intervention proposals, advocating for the moderation of litigation costs was pointed out. At the Institute of Legal Policy, the development of litigation costs has been monitored in several studies since the judicial reform of 1993. According to the research, litigation costs have been continuously increasing. A full-scale trial is considered a very expensive method of dispute resolution for the parties involved, relative to the benefits obtained. Costs may indeed prevent individuals from pursuing legal action. (Antila & Nousiainen 2013.) The challenge also lies in the fact that, even if an employer is convicted of discrimination and thus ordered to pay compensation, the individual who filed the lawsuit may have to wait several years to receive the compensation, including reimbursement for legal expenses (Brofeldt 2019), unless they are covered by legal expenses insurance that covers legal costs (Ombudsman for Equality n.d.).

As part of the problem, it was pointed out that cases are often handled behind closed doors because companies have the right to confidentiality. Yle (2019) confirms that non-disclosure agreements are common in pregnancy discrimination cases. Brofeldt (2019) states that when discrimination is only known to a small circle and does not become public, there is no compulsion for employers to change their policy. As a key challenge related to the issue is that the cases are both underreported or solved unpublic, and additionally, only a few – one percent of the cases reported in the thesis survey – is resolved in court. Thus, as the thesis findings show, the number of legal cases does not reveal the actual extent and severity of pregnancy and family leave discrimination in Finnish working life.

Previous research on challenges and barriers related to legal protection has revealed similar themes to those identified in the thesis data: the mental burden caused by the process, the duration of the process, lack of knowledge about different avenues of appeal, costs or fear of costs and deficiencies in the power of authorized persons (Antila & Nousiainen 2013). Based on data from Quality of work life surveys, current practices are not considered sufficiently effective in all respects. The pathways for reporting discrimination have been perceived as somewhat inadequate, and the authorities' responses as inefficient. (Pietiläinen et al. 2018.) According to the Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW Committee), which monitors the implementation of the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW), the complexity of legal remedies is often a barrier to the accessibility of legal protection for women. (HE 98/2016 vp.) Additionally, the actions of authorities, such as being passed from one authority to another, and lack of

expertise from lawyers or the judiciary has been recognized as a barrier. (Antila & Nousiainen 2013). There were some cases in the thesis data, as well, where the respondent had sought for help without success. Thus, according to both previous research and the findings of this thesis, conducting a comprehensive investigation into improving legal protection, as recommended by the Ombudsman for Equality (2024a) latest guidelines, is justified.

Anti-discrimination practices, as well as practices for balancing work and family life, rely heavily on legislation and collective agreements in Finland. However, organizational culture, leadership, and workplace atmosphere can significantly influence their practical implementation. In relation to this observation, the third issue according to the thesis data is that **leadership culture and practices may involve several problem areas**. The insight of the thesis supports the view of previous research: the contradictions between legislation, collective agreements, and real-life situations are often resolved in the field of frontline leadership. (Mäkäräinen, 2020; Takala, Heikkinen & Lämsä 2020.) For instance, Takala et al. (2020) describe that in their study, interviewees depicted frontline managers' decision-making as varying depending on the subordinate's position and individual factors, even though the organization officially aimed to promote equality and fairness. Thus, leadership can play a crucial role in promoting adherence to legislation and fostering a culture supporting equality and work-life balance (Takala, Heikkinen & Lämsä 2020).

Prior studies (e.g., Nordberg et al. 2021; Takala, Heikkinen & Lämsä 2020) indicate that employers' actions may be shaped by dilemmas and conflicting priorities the pursuit of economic efficiency has been perceived to conflict with social responsibility towards the workforce. While employers have managerial prerogatives, they also bear responsibilities towards pregnant employees and those on family leave. The emphasis on operational efficiency, client satisfaction, and the needs of other employees may, however, overshadow efforts to prevent discrimination associated with pregnancy and family leave (Norberg et al. 2021). In the research by Takala et al. (2020) both employees and those acting as immediate supervisors pointed out that balancing work and family should be possible, but economic constraints often hinder its implementation. The thesis data also indicated that supervisors' practices could vary within the company depending on the individual and that the supervisors were not always acting according to the official procedures of the company. Similarly, the conflicting pressures between financial considerations and obligations set by the law became apparent, as illustrated by the experiences from survey respondents (see section 4.2.).

Both survey respondents and workshop participants felt that the gender equality legislation is inadequate and contains loopholes and ambiguities that many employers and supervisors exploit. One suggestion to tackle the issue was to add deterrents towards employers in cases of discrimination. Indeed, previous research has highlighted the need to develop sanctions for discrimination and measures for addressing discrimination (e.g., Pietiläinen et al. 2018; Työ- ja elinkeinoministeriö 2021). In connection to this, the data revealed a discourse suggesting that employees had to "fight for their rights" to ensure they were not discriminated against. In

light of the thesis data, it is disconcerting to note the prevalence of instances where employees encountered harassment, coercion, and intimidation attributed to their pregnancy, family leave, or family circumstances. These occurrences, whether stemming from intentional actions or a lack of awareness (cf., Nordberg et al. 2021; Eaton 2019), underscore significant concerns regarding workplace culture and practices surrounding issues of pregnancy and family leave.

## 5.2. Intervention – taking action to make a change

In this section, the last research question, “What kind of intervention proposals are suggested to prevent and reduce pregnancy and family leave discrimination?” is discussed. Altogether, 39 intervention proposals were presented in the workshops of this thesis (attachment 2). In this section the focus is on the ones that were prioritized and evaluated with effort-to-impact matrix by MiB board members and employees in the last workshop. This is because the main goal of the thesis collaboration with MiB was to identify intervention proposals particularly valuable for Equally on Family leave project training sessions aimed at HR professionals, supervisors, and employment advisors, while also providing guidance and support for the whole organization's future advocacy and membership services. Although the third diamond of the design process, “Intervention” (figure 24), remains beyond the scope of this study, the intervention proposals discussed give direction for possible next steps – *taking action* and *making a change* – particularly for Mothers in Business, but also to individuals, employers, policymakers, and to other societal actors.

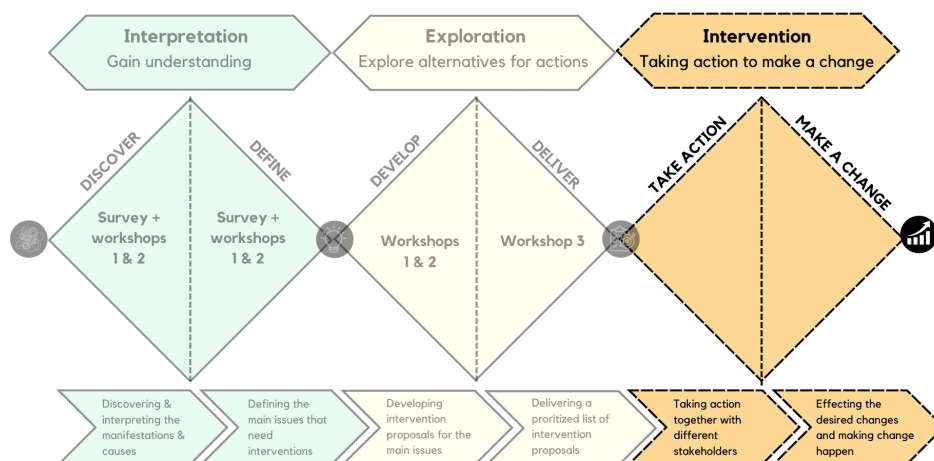


Figure 23: The final diamond, “Intervention”

### Quadrant 1 intervention proposals

The focus of the four “low-effort, high-impact” intervention proposals was on more effective information sharing, which is also one of the measures mentioned in the current Government Programme (Finnish Government 2023a) in eliminating discriminatory practices and structures in working life. The proposal for *a family-friendly leader online course* points out the

importance of raising employers' awareness. Training leaders and supervisors in organizations on work-life balance issues as well as on equality and family leave legislation is crucial, as their attitudes and the example they set for others are key to the effectiveness of work-family practices, thereby contributing to the more equal share of family leaves and prevention of pregnancy and family leave discrimination. (cf., Alakärppä 2022; Eaton 2019). According to Närvi (2017), the way an immediate supervisor discusses topics such as family leave may influence employees' perceptions of the workplace's family-friendliness. Through such discussions that occur in the everyday life of the organization, employees form their understanding of the types of solutions they can make regarding work and family life (ibid.). As an example, according to MiB Survey (N=371, 84 mentions in open-ended responses) the employer's positive attitude and encouragement towards family leave have a significant impact on both parents utilizing their full 160-day quotas (Mothers in Business 2022).

On the other hand, "*patient ombudsperson type*" solution and *specifically targeting young people on pregnancy and family leave discrimination through social media* point out the importance of sharing information for employees. As highlighted in previous research (Antila & Nousiainen; Anttila, 2012; Pietiläinen et al., 2018), it is imperative to increase women's awareness of both legal remedies and contact points. Considering the information regarding the handling of discrimination cases overall, it is evident that not all individuals experiencing discrimination know where to turn for help, which is seen in the thesis findings as well. Especially vulnerable groups, such as those working in non-standard employment relationships, seem to have insufficient knowledge about legal remedies, legal aid, and the services provided by equality bodies. Considering the challenges related to accessibility to legal remedies, addressing discrimination requires the development of what are commonly referred to as *low-threshold legal remedies*, such as mediation and the operation of equality bodies resembling courts, and *collective legal remedies*, such as expanding the right of initiation in courts or equality bodies. (Antila & Nousiainen 2013.)

The other key area among the first quadrant was low-threshold support. The proposal regarding *peer support group*, could at the same time enhance the awareness of one's rights but also provide practical advice and mental support from other people in similar situation. Research by Masters et al. (2024), examining the correlation between discrimination and perinatal depression, suggests that social support acts as a protective factor in mitigating the adverse effects of discrimination during pregnancy. Social support can come from a variety of sources, including peers (ibid). Additionally, in different contexts, such as related to mental health work, 'low threshold' services, often through a mix of professional and peer support, have proven to provide opportunities for receiving social support and practical advice in daily life as well as help with more personal issues (Elstad 2014). Therefore, it can be assumed that offering peer support and low-threshold services in a pro-active manner or for the victims of pregnancy and family leave discrimination more widely would be beneficial.

## Quadrant 2 proposals

The first proposal in this quadrant, *incorporating family-friendliness into the “Great Place to Work” certification*, is related to enhancing family-friendly branding in companies.

Organizations which develop and promote family-friendly cultures have indeed been found to attract job seekers, particularly women (Alakärppä 2022). According to prior studies family-friendliness of the workplace is a competitive advantage for employers (Lilja et al. 2007). For example, Kupiainen, Evans & Kauppinen (2007) assert that mothers on family leave were motivated to return to work earlier if the workplace was perceived as family friendly. Conversely, if it was anticipated that the workplace did not support work-life balance, returning to work was postponed and even changing jobs was considered. With this proposal, it would be relatively straightforward to support the reinforcement of a family-friendly employer image, while also incorporating family-friendliness as a key criterion for a good workplace.

The second proposal in this quadrant was *enhancing and clarifying the information sharing on prohibition of countermeasures*. Recommendations from the latest report of the United Nations’ Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) indeed emphasized strict adherence to the prohibitory provisions of the Equality Act regarding discrimination due to pregnancy or maternity (CEDAW 2022). Similarly, the suggestions from the Work-Life Balance working group, advocating for genuine consequences for non-compliance, such as compensation, criminal liability, damages, and reputational risk, echo this sentiment (Työ- ja elinkeinoministeriö 2021, appendix 2). The thesis data further underscored the need for adherence to the prohibition of retaliatory actions, as many respondents reported experiences of employers or supervisors not adhering to this prohibition.

## Quadrant 3 proposals

All the “high-effort, high-impact” intervention proposals in quadrant 3 were deemed important, although requiring significant time and financial resources, as well as co-operation of several stakeholders. In terms of the first proposal advocating for equal costs to the employer for both birthing and non-birthing parents, previous studies suggest that employers, perceive particularly indirect costs as a challenge (Anttila 2012; Salmi & Närvi 2017; Lilja et al. 2007). Furthermore, the size of the company can influence the extent to which the costs associated with family leave are burdensome (Salmi & Närvi 2017; Miettinen et al. 2022), which ties into the second proposal for tailored government support based on business size.

Both proposals find support in the findings of this thesis. Lilja et al. (2007) suggest that both general policy measures to equalize indirect costs and workplace-level measures to reduce them are needed. General policies can help mitigate differences in indirect costs resulting from the unequal use of family leaves by women and men by increasing the fathers’ uptake of

paternal leave, which is a desirable goal from both family and gender equality policy perspectives. As evidenced by the thesis data and corroborated by various studies (e.g., Sutela, 2013; Alakärppä, 2022; Miettinen & Saarikallio-Torp, 2020), the widespread uptake of family leave by fathers has the potential to foster not only a more balanced allocation of childcare responsibilities but also fairer treatment of women and men in the labor market. Furthermore, achieving a more equitable distribution of family leave between genders could potentially mitigate gender disparities in experiences of discrimination thus highlighting the imperative for promoting greater parity in family leave uptake among parents (Nordberg et al., 2021). Thus, projects such as "Equally on Family Leave" remain necessary to disseminate knowledge about the benefits and impacts of more equitable family leave for individual parents but also to employers.

At the workplace level, various measures and best practices related to job organization and substitute arrangements aimed for reducing the indirect costs are essential. (Ibid.) However, measuring indirect costs is not straightforward (Johannsson et al., 2007). Similarly, the background memorandum prepared by the Ministry of Finance (2015) for the government states that calculations of indirect costs are uncertain and can vary depending on the case and industry. Thus, the significance of indirect costs incurred by family leave should be further examined.

Based on the thesis results, as well as on prior research, as part of the issue is that some employers lack sufficient knowledge about the costs associated with family leave (Lilja et al. 2007). This discrepancy in understanding may stem from incomplete awareness of the compensation framework, particularly its existing level. (Rantahalvari & Åström 2013.) Consequently, there is a need for more comprehensive company-level information on the costs overall if the discriminative practices occur based on beliefs instead of actual knowledge.

In the coming years, the assessment of economic impacts for employers regarding family leaves is contingent upon how parents are expected to utilize family leave benefits following the implementation of the family leave reform (Government Proposal 129/2021). The need for cost equalization will need to be reassessed if gender equality in family leave usage increases and fathers continue to use parental leave more frequently, as the first statistics of the impact of family leave reform imply. The effects of the reform can be reliably assessed only when the first children born after its implementation reach the age of two. (Miettinen 2023.) Comprehensive data on the employment status and conditions of women starting pregnancy leave would offer better insights for detailed examinations of the distribution of family leave compensation and other related benefits across various demographics and employer groups. (Miettinen et al., 2022).

Concerning the third proposal of strengthening a strong human-centric work culture and work-life balance, the thesis data, as well as previous research supports the view that the labor



market is a significant determinant of young women's aspirations and ability to plan for their later working lives and hence for family formation and work-family reconciliation. Thus, fostering a human-centric and family-friendly work culture should be a central goal in organizational development; it should be ensured that employees have the opportunity to prioritize family life without negative consequences for career advancement. (Alakärppä 2022.)

Hartikainen (2010) has investigated the theory of job demands and resources in relation to the positive interaction between work and family in eight countries. Similar to Alakärppä's (2022) findings, the empirical analysis highlights the importance of a supportive organizational culture, characterized by openness, flexibility, and skill utilization, in enhancing work-family synergy. Contrary to traditional views, focusing on factors that reduce conflicts, Hartikainen (2010) notes that understanding conditions for positive interaction between work and family life is essential for fostering a conducive work environment. Developing practices that facilitate such interaction could lead to a more family-friendly organizational culture (ibid).

In companies that participated in the study by Kupiainen et al. (2007), the development of an equality plan in cooperation with the personnel was seen as a valuable tool to document practices that support the reconciliation of work and family life in the workplace. Although equality planning in workplaces were not mentioned in the intervention proposals as such, it can aid in both strengthening a humane work culture, as well as prioritizing work-life balance. At its best, collective gender equality planning could evolve into a new forum for dialogue in the workplace, where different employee groups and individuals at different life stages bring up issues related to gender equality and well-being at work, thus also preventing pregnancy and family leave discrimination. Additionally, indirect costs previously highlighted could be anticipated by identifying situations and documenting best practices in gender equality plans, for example incorporating measures that encourage fathers to share family leave more equally with their partners and prepare for recruiting substitutes as well as guiding and orienting new employees. (Kupiainen et al. 2007.)

#### **Quadrant 4 proposals**

The last quadrant, with "low effort, less-significant impact" included two proposals. In addition to a proposal for peer support groups in general in quadrant 1, these groups were proposed to be established in family centers, leveraging their role in providing parenting support and fostering community. However, MiB, deemed maternity and child health services as a less central stakeholder to their mission, explaining the positioning of the proposal in this specific quadrant. On the other hand, the importance of maternity and child health services has been highlighted in the statements received on the draft of the government's proposal on family leave reform, emphasizing their role not only in information dissemination but also in fostering a culture of shared parenting (Hallituksen esitys 129/2021 vp). Supporting

parenthood and relationships is indeed a statutory duty of maternity and child health clinics, and due to their universal nature, they have an excellent opportunity to identify and provide support to families' needs. Comprehensive health check-ups offer a good option not only to check on parents' well-being, but also for supporting more equal sharing of caregiving responsibilities when planning for family leave. (Lammi-Taskula & Hakulinen 2019.) Furthermore, these health check-ups provide an opportunity for sharing information in general, including details about pregnancy and family leave discrimination, which could be conveyed, for instance, through a brochure – a suggestion emerging in thesis survey.

The complexity surrounding the other proposal, part-time work was acknowledged by workshop participants; thus, the original proposal was modified from advocating for part-time preference to promoting *a more positive attitude* towards part-time work. Collectively agreed flexible practices such as remote or part-time work, can indeed facilitate work-family balance (Alakärppä 2022). Nonetheless, research indicates that in gender comparison, women engage in part-time work significantly more than men across countries (Työ- ja elinkeinoministeriö 2020; Tilastokeskus 2023; Salmi et al. 2017). Even in Sweden, where part-time work is widespread, men are still in the minority in utilizing part-time work (Työ- ja elinkeinoministeriö 2020). In Finland, during 2022, nearly a quarter of female wage earners were engaged in part-time employment, while only one-eighth of male wage earners were working part-time. Among female respondents, 25 % cited caregiving responsibilities as the rationale for engaging in part-time employment, whereas only 3 % of male respondents attributed their part-time work to similar obligations. (Tilastokeskus 2023.) Especially highly educated, socioeconomically advantaged women with partners are more likely to plan and utilize part-time work (Työ- ja elinkeinoministeriö 2020).

In Finland, the work culture is based on full-time employment, and part-time work is prevalent only in a few sectors. Encouraging broader part-time work might pose a long-term contradiction both for mothers and the sustainability gap in public finances. The risk associated with part-time solutions related to family leave and increasing part-time work is that they may create separate part-time job markets for women, making it difficult to transition to full-time employment. (Salmi et al. 2017.) Part-time work may have a positive impact on a parent's experience of balancing work and family life, but on the other hand, it may have negative effects on women's financial status, career development, and pension. If facilitating the reconciliation of work and family life through part-time work is desired, it should be done in a way that does not reinforce traditional gender roles or undermine women's financial status and career opportunities. (Työ- ja elinkeinoministeriö 2020.)

## **Feedback of the thesis collaboration and the benefits for Mothers in Business**

From the perspective of the thesis collaboration, the thesis partner, Mothers in Business, view that the survey, workshops, and resultant findings and ideas implemented as part of the thesis have proven beneficial to the organization since the inception of the collaboration with the thesis worker. The information collected from the survey will be utilized in conjunction with employee unions and the Diverse Families network in a discussion event titled "Pregnancy and Family Leave Discrimination - Fact or Fiction?" scheduled for May 20, 2024. The aim of the event is to support the work of the working group established by the Ministry of Social Affairs and Health, which addresses the topic from a legislative standpoint. The proposed solutions generated in the collaborative workshops of the thesis have been utilized in grant applications, with responses expected by the end of 2024. The implementation of these measures will necessitate external funding in the future, and exploration of other funding opportunities is currently underway. (Söderman 2024)

The Equally on Family leave project specialist Jenny Söderman (2024) states that societal significance of the thesis cannot be overstated; it has already garnered interest among stakeholders and policymakers. Furthermore, the topic of the thesis is one that has not been extensively researched in Finland previously. The proposed solutions will be communicated in the future and incorporated into the training materials of the Equally on Family Leave project. (ibid.)

### **5.3. Final words**

The aim of the thesis was to gain understanding of the extent, the manifestations, and the causes of pregnancy and family leave discrimination in Finnish working life, as well as to co-develop intervention proposals with thesis workshop participants for preventing and reducing pregnancy and family leave discrimination and enhancing more equal and family friendly working life. The findings of the thesis reveal that despite legal prohibitions, instances of pregnancy and family leave discrimination persist in Finnish working life, manifesting in various ways. Based on the results of this study, the thesis promotes a holistic approach to the issue of pregnancy and family leave discrimination, encompassing legal and societal aspects, and recognizing the collective challenges experienced by pregnant individuals and those taking family leave (cf., Nordberg et al. 2021).

In the study, three limitations were identified. Firstly, both employer and supervisor representation were limited among both survey respondents and workshop participants. Although the original goal was to equally reach representatives from both the employer and employee sides, there was a significantly higher proportion of employees among the study participants. Therefore, further research, especially to elucidate the perspectives of employers, is recommended. For instance, the causes of pregnancy and family leave discrimination identified in the study could be evaluated in collaboration with supervisors and

employers. Mothers in Business will engage with employers in upcoming events and training sessions, thereby disseminating the research findings to this group.

Another limitation in the research data is the limited representation of men's perspectives. It would be useful to investigate men's experiences of family leave discrimination, particularly after there is more understanding and research available in family leave reform effects. If men start taking longer parental leaves, it would be essential to see if this is reflected in the actions of employers and supervisors, as observed in this study from the perspective of women.

A third limitation is that the study addresses the topic solely from the perspective of Finland. However, comparative research in other Nordic countries, where societal structures are similar, and there are similarities in family leave policies, is suggested. The survey used in the study could largely be utilized in other Nordic countries as well.

To conclude this thesis work, changes at one level – micro, meso, or macro – alone are insufficient; instead, a systemic shift towards a more family-friendly and equitable work environment in Finland requires changes at all three levels. A groundbreaking new report from the World Bank (2024) reveals that the gender gap for women in the workplace is much wider on a global scale than previously understood. When considering legal disparities related to issues such as violence and childcare, women have access to less than two-thirds of the rights afforded to men. Remarkably, no country, not even the most prosperous economies offer equal opportunities for women. (World Bank 2024.) Thus, the intervention proposals presented in this thesis for tackling one of the essential equality issues, pregnancy and family leave discrimination, are valuable for different stakeholders, such as MiB, individual parents and employees, employers, policymakers, and to other societal actors.

The thesis advocates for further investigation of the topic from both quantitative and qualitative perspectives. Particularly, there is a need for doctoral level research. As the results indicate, the majority of cases remain undisclosed, which complicates the identification and acknowledgment of the problem. Thus, there is a clear need for greater awareness and systemic changes to effectively address pregnancy and family leave discrimination.

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## Appendix 1: Thesis Survey on Pregnancy and Family Leave Discrimination

English (United Kingdo...  


### Survey on Pregnancy and Family Leave Discrimination

Dear Recipient,

I am currently pursuing a Master's Degree in Service Innovation and Design at Laurea University of Applied Sciences, and this survey is related to my thesis. In my thesis, I am investigating pregnancy and family leave discrimination in Finland. My aim is to explore potential strategies for preventing pregnancy and family leave discrimination and promoting a more equal working life using service design methods and co-creation. I am conducting this thesis in collaboration with Mothers in Business ry's Equally on Family Leave (Yhdenvertaisesti perhevapailla) project. Please note that no personal information is being collected in this survey, and all responses will be treated confidentially. Thank you for your assistance!

Sincerely, Majju Haltia-Nurmi

\* Required


1. Consent to participate in the study \* 

I understand that by answering this survey, I give my consent to use the results of the survey in Majju Haltia-Nurme's thesis. The material is treated confidentially and does not process personal data.

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\* Required


#### Background information

2. Sukupuoli \* 

Female

Male

Other

3. To which age group do you belong \* 

18-25


26-30

31-35

36-40

41-45

45+

4. What is your educational background? \* 

Comprehensive School

Vocational School

High School or High School Graduate

Bachelor's Degree

Master's Degree

Other

5. What best describes your current employment situation?

[?]

- Employed
- Unemployed
- Student
- Providing childcare at home
- Retired
- Other

6. In which field do you work

[?]

- Technology and Industry
- Transportation, Warehousing, and Construction
- Agriculture and Forestry
- Information and Communication
- Administrative and Support Services
- Public Administration and National Defense
- Teaching and Education
- Health and Social Services
- Finance and Insurance
- Sales and Marketing
- Legal Practice and Services
- Research
- Arts, Entertainment, and Recreation
- Other Service Activities
- Other

7. In which sector do you work

[?]

- Private
- Public
- Third / non-profit

8. Professional group to which you consider yourself to belong

[?]

- Manager
- Other Middle Management
- Senior Specialist
- Specialist
- Employee
- Entrepreneur

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## Pregnancy and Family Leave Discrimination



Discrimination on the basis of pregnancy and family leave is prohibited under the Equality Act. The reported cases cover all stages of employment and public service relationships. Typical situations involve hiring, extension of fixed-term contracts and returning to work from family leave.

Gender-based discrimination includes treating someone differently for reasons of pregnancy or childbirth or treating someone differently on the basis of parenthood or family responsibilities.

When employing a person or selecting someone for a particular training, the employer may not bypass an individual for reasons of pregnancy, childbirth or family leave. Nor is it permitted on the basis of the above reasons to dismiss the employee or limit the length or continuation of their employment relationship. It is also prohibited to treat someone unfavourably with regards to decisions on wages and other employment conditions for reasons of pregnancy or family leave.

Source: <https://tasa-arvo.fi/en/pregnancy-and-family-leaves>

9. Have you experienced pregnancy or family leave discrimination? \*

Yes

No

I'm not sure

10. In what situations or circumstances have you experienced pregnancy and family leave discrimination? \*

The level of job responsibilities has been lowered through the unilateral decision of the employer

The job description has undergone significant changes through the unilateral decision of the employer

Discrimination in the job application process related to pregnancy or family circumstances

A promotion or promised bonus has been withheld due to pregnancy or family leave

A fixed-term employment contract has not been extended/renewed due to pregnancy or family leave

Termination of an employment contract due to pregnancy or family leave

Other

11. When did the discrimination situation(s) occur? Please respond based on the **most recent** situation. \*

2020-2023

2010-2020

Earlier

12. If you prefer, you can describe the situation(s) here in more detail.

Enter your answer

13. How was the discrimination situation(s) you experienced resolved? \*

I resolved the matter through an agreement with the employer

The matter was resolved in favor of the employer in court

The matter was resolved in favor of myself in court

I did not pursue the matter further

Other

14. Have you ever experienced any other inappropriate treatment related to pregnancy, family leave, or family circumstances? \*

Yes

No

15. When did the situation(s) occur? Please respond based on the **most recent** situation.

\*

- 2020-2023
- 2010-2020
- Earlier

16. Please provide more details about the situation(s) here.

\*

Enter your answer

17. Do employees, in your opinion, recognize/are aware of their rights related to this topic? **Rate on a scale of 1-5.** When using mobileapp, please scroll sideways for options. (You can familiarize yourself with employee rights here: <https://tasa-arvo.fi/en/employee-s-rights>)

\*

	1	2	3	4	5
1=very poorly, 5=very well	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

18. Do employers, in your opinion, recognize/are aware of their obligations and the consequences related to pregnancy and family leave discrimination? **Rate on a scale of 1-5.** When using mobileapp, please scroll sideways for options. (You can familiarize yourself with employer obligations here: <https://tasa-arvo.fi/en/the-employer-s-obligations>)

\*

	1	2	3	4	5
1=very poorly, 5=very well	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

19. In your opinion, how significant of a problem related to equality in working life is pregnancy and family leave discrimination in societal level? **Rate on a scale of 1-5.** When using mobileapp, please scroll sideways to see the options. \*

	1	2	3	4	5
1=not significant at all, 5=extremely significant	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

20. What do you believe are the most common reasons for pregnancy and family leave discrimination to occur? Please select the top 3.

\*

Please select at most 3 options.

- Employees don't know their rights.
- Employees fear repercussions if they bring up their discrimination case
- Employers are not familiar with their obligations and relevant legislation regarding this issue.
- Employers do not adhere to their obligations and legislation.
- Employers want to avoid financial risks related to, for example, long family leaves.
- The lack of a family-friendly culture / prevailing attitudes in working life
- Inadequate legislation related to the topic
- Organizations have deficient gender equality plans, and measures are not systematically monitored.
- Leadership issues (e.g., lack of empathy, traditional masculine work culture, work-related pressures)
- Other

21. What do you believe are the most important methods for preventing pregnancy and family leave discrimination? Please select the top 3.

\*

Please select at most 3 options.

- Educating employers on the subject
- Educating employees on the subject
- Strengthening legislation
- Enhancing the role of gender equality authorities
- General awareness-raising campaigns
- Strengthening the role of occupational safety and health authorities
- Workplace commitment to non-discrimination through initiatives like workplace-level campaigns
- Promoting a family-friendly work culture at the societal level
- Other

22. Do you believe there are obstacles to reducing pregnancy and family leave discrimination? If so, what are they?

Enter your answer

23. Do you feel that you need more information or education regarding pregnancy and family leave discrimination? If so, what kind of information or education would be helpful?

Enter your answer

24. Do you have any additional comments or thoughts on the topic?

Enter your answer

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Submit

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## Appendix 2: Intervention proposals from workshops 1 & 2

CURRENT STATE VS.TARGET STATE	INTERVENTION PROPOSALS	WHO SHOULD BE INVOLVED?
<p><b>70% of discrimination cases related to pregnancy and family leave are not pursued further.</b></p> <p>→</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Everyone should have the opportunity to try to resolve the situation</li> <li>• 100% takes the matter forward</li> <li>• Aiming to handle cases internally in the organization → there is no need for employees to pursue the case to court</li> <li>• Prevention of cases of discrimination</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Parental support from healthcare centers and other resources to alleviate the fatigue of early parenthood and ensure better parental well-being.</li> <li>• Increasing awareness among employees about legislation and their rights.</li> <li>• Enhancing the responsibility of occupational health services.</li> <li>• Implementing deterrents for employers in the form of legal costs if they engage in discrimination (as seen in France).</li> <li>• Increasing public awareness regarding what constitutes discrimination.</li> <li>• Establishing a place for low-threshold services for affected individuals.</li> <li>• Emphasizing that countermeasures are prohibited, meaning employees should not face retaliation if they assert their rights.</li> <li>• Ensuring that the risk or fear of legal expenses associated with litigation is reasonable and manageable (financing mechanisms?).</li> <li>• National media attention to highlight instances of pregnancy and family leave discrimination.</li> <li>• Establishing a legal support hotline manned by a pool of legal experts for members of the Mothers in Business.</li> <li>• Promoting a sense of solidarity with the slogan "You are not alone."</li> <li>• Providing employees with easy avenues to report discriminatory treatment (e.g., through company whistleblowing channels).</li> <li>• Fostering a community/group for sharing experiences and providing peer support.</li> <li>• Enforcing clear organizational protocols.</li> <li>• Encouraging employers in reporting to the contracting authority if a recruitment partner engages in discriminatory practices.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• MiB</li> <li>• Occupational safety lawyers</li> <li>• The cooperation between the Ombudsman for Equality and the occupational safety and health authorities</li> <li>• Employers' organizations</li> <li>• Employers</li> <li>• Trade Unions</li> <li>• Mothers</li> </ul>
<p><b>Financial issues or concern about expenses lead to employers discriminating against pregnant individuals or those on family leave</b></p> <p>→</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Financial reasons are not an obstacle to hiring</li> </ul> <p>Parental leave would be treated in the same way in Collective Agreements as in legislation (= it doesn't matter who takes the leave)</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Utilizing tools such as calculators</li> <li>• Shifting the perspective from solely focusing on financial costs to recognizing mothers as valuable assets in the workforce.</li> <li>• Providing support to businesses to mitigate financial burdens incurred due to family leave policies.</li> <li>• Implementing measures to achieve gender pay equality, ensuring equal pay for equal work between men and women.</li> <li>• Strengthening a compassionate work culture that recognizes work as part of life.</li> <li>• Establishing a separate family fund, akin to a pension fund, to finance family-related expenses.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• HR specialists</li> <li>• Financial management of companies</li> <li>• Law offices familiar with the Equality Act and employment contracts</li> <li>• MiB</li> <li>• Maternity and child health clinics, health care</li> </ul>

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Enhancing employer branding through family-friendly policies, improving the company's reputation as an employer.</li> <li>• Providing equal Kela reimbursements to employers for both parents, thus treating both mothers and fathers as equally expensive for employers.</li> <li>• Emphasizing fact-based analyses of the actual costs of family leaves.</li> <li>• Providing and enhancing the utilization of accessible tools like family leave calculators, such as the one available at <a href="https://www.yrittajanaiset.fi/vauvalaskuri/">https://www.yrittajanaiset.fi/vauvalaskuri/</a> → accurately estimating the costs of family leaves for businesses, moving away from the prevalent notion that they are inherently expensive.</li> <li>• Offering government support tailored to business size (e.g., turnover, personnel), with different levels of aid for micro-enterprises, small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs), and listed companies.</li> </ul> <p>Considering granting full Kela reimbursements for micro-enterprises regarding their paid leave contributions.</p>	
<p><b>Society and the workplace lack a culture conducive to family friendliness, with attitudes sometimes even displaying hostility</b></p> <p>→</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• There should be a transformation in the entirety of Finnish culture.</li> <li>• Parental leave should be distributed more evenly or equally between women and men (or between birthing and non-birthing individuals).</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Concrete actions, such as setting meeting times</li> <li>• Strengthening of the human-centered work culture, prioritizing work-life balance.</li> <li>• Recognizing the importance of each individual in the workplace.</li> <li>• Providing comprehensive information about rights</li> <li>• Acknowledging that workplaces thrive with diverse contributions beyond just men and managers</li> <li>• Greater preference should be given to part-time work</li> <li>• Women should be offered more flexibility; they can concurrently demonstrate that they are capable of succeeding in their work commitments</li> <li>• Enforcing a family-friendly employer image through platforms like Trip Advisor or Glassdoor.</li> <li>• Enhance leadership skills across the organization.</li> <li>• Affirm the roles of women and mothers.</li> <li>• Empower men and fathers by recognizing and strengthening their roles beyond being assistants to mothers.</li> <li>• Encourage the president to take a stand the issue.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Parents</li> <li>• Media</li> <li>• Employers (from a perspective of corporate responsibility!)</li> <li>• MiB</li> </ul>