

Article

Early Childhood Education and Care Services, and Parents' Work–Life Balance

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Abstract: Parents' work–life balance represents a major challenge, especially for those who have young children. The present article aims to identify the perceptions of parents relating to the purpose of early childhood education and care (ECEC) services, care responsibilities, and factors that affect the balance between caring responsibilities for children and the professional career of parents. Using a database with 825 parents, who have children aged between 0 and 6 years enrolled in the ECEC system (nurseries, kindergartens), we performed a descriptive statistical analysis and a logistic regression to identify factors that affect the balance between caring responsibilities and career. The results indicate an appreciation of the usefulness of ECEC services (nurseries/kindergartens) by parents and underline the importance of parents' involvement in the activities of ECEC services. Results also show that three factors affect the balance between caring responsibilities for children and professional career as follows: the residence area, the educational level, and the proximity to ECEC services. The need to develop ECEC services in Romania is correlated with the work–family balance field. Policymakers should focus more on structural changes and the development of early childhood education and care services, as well as the expansion of such services in both rural and urban areas.

Keywords: early childhood education and care services; work–life balance; quality of family life



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1. Introduction

The policies considering childcare and education services in Romania are still in the process of legislative transformation, and the effects are felt by families with children in care, who manage with quite some difficulty to achieve a balance between professional life and family life given the lack of these types of services. The European Commission has recommended that member states effectively implement the Barcelona targets by 2030 and adopt the 2014 framework on the quality of early childhood education and care. Investments in ECEC, including infrastructure, have considerable effects on employment, leading to significant additional revenues for the public sector in terms of wage taxes and social security contributions. In many countries, early childhood education and care (ECEC) services have become a priority for social policies due to the many benefits that these types of services generate, recognized by a growing number of scientific research studies. According to the scientific literature [1–6], among benefits are included: the increased well-being of children and favorable learning outcomes, increased fertility rates, and the greater participation of women in the labor market, reduce poverty.

In recent years, maternal employment rates have grown in the European Union; thus, the probability of having a job is higher in the case of women who have at least one child aged 0–14 years than for women without at least one child aged 0–14. In 2021, in Romania, the employment rate of women (15–64 years) with at least one child aged 0–14 years was 60.7%, while that of women without any children in this age group was only 48.7% [7]. However, Romania is below the EU average (74.9%) in this respect. The countries with the highest maternal employment rates are Slovenia (87%), Portugal (85.5%), and Sweden

(82.9%), and those with the lowest maternal employment rates are Greece (61.2%), Romania (60.7%), and Italy (57.2%). Most Romanian working mothers are in full-time arrangements (59.4%), while only 1.3% are in part-time work. Part-time work is more common than full-time work in the Netherlands (48.3%, compared with 33.5%) and Austria (40.4% and 35.2%, respectively), and is also particularly common in Germany (36.1%), Ireland (24.5%), and Belgium (19.7%). Among EU countries, part-time work is the least common in Romania (1.3%) and Bulgaria (0.6%).

Usually, maternal employment rates increase with the age of the mother's youngest child across EU countries. In Romania, the employment rate for women (15–64 year-olds) with their youngest child aged 0–2 years is 44.3%, for women with their youngest child aged 3–5 years is 58.0%, and for women with their youngest child aged 6–14 is 66.2%. All these figures are well below the EU average (64.9%, 73.7%, and 79.6%, respectively) [7].

Maternal employment rates also generally vary with the number of children living in the household. In most countries and on average across the EU, employment rates for mothers decrease as the number of children increases [7]. In Romania, the employment rate decreases dramatically from 67.4%, in the case of mothers with one child aged 0–14 years, to 56.0% in the case of mothers with two children aged 0–14 years, and 30.4% for mothers with three or more children aged 0–14 years. The impact of the number of children on the employment rate of the mother is not as pronounced at the level of the EU average (76.6%, 74.7%, and 60.0%, respectively). The insufficient development or lack of childcare services in Romania could be one of the explanations.

A strong correlation exists between maternal employment rates and educational attainment within the EU, with mothers possessing higher education levels demonstrating a greater likelihood of participation in the workforce. On average, highly educated mothers have an employment rate of 85.1% across the EU. On the other hand, 71.4% of mothers with medium and 45.5% of those with low levels of educational attainment were in paid work in 2021. In Romania, the disparity in maternal employment rates based on education is stark. The employment rate for highly educated mothers is substantially higher (89.4%) than for those with medium (62.9%) or low (24.5%) educational attainment [7].

In 2019, Romania spent 0.4% of its GDP on early childhood education and care, a percentage well below the EU average of 0.7% of GDP [7]. The European countries that spend the most are Sweden (1.6%), France (1.3%), and Denmark (1.2%), and the countries that spend least are Cyprus (0.30%), Ireland (0.33%), and Portugal (0.34%). Public expenditure on early childhood education and care covers all public spending (in cash or in-kind) towards formal day-care services (e.g., crèches, day-care centers, and family day-care, generally aimed at children aged 0 to 2 years, inclusive) and pre-primary education services (including kindergartens and day-care centers, which usually provide an educational service as well as traditional care for children aged from 3 to 5 years, inclusive).

Enrolment rates in early childhood education and care for 0 to 2-year-olds (the percentage of children aged 0–2 years old enrolled in or using early childhood education and care services) differ widely across the EU [7]. In 2022, the highest rates are found in the Netherlands (72.8%), France (57.9%), and Luxembourg (56.4%) and the lowest in the Slovak Republic (2.6%), Czechia (7.7%), and Romania (13.8%). Enrolment rate in our country is well below the EU average (34.2%). Enrolment rates for 3- to 5-year-olds are generally higher than those for younger children. However, Romania remains below the EU average for this indicator as well (75.6% compared with the EU average of 88.5%). In countries like France (100.0%), Belgium (98.3%), and Denmark (97.0%), almost all children aged 3–5 years are enrolled in early childhood education and care or primary school. The countries with the lowest enrollment rates are Greece (68.8%), Croatia (70.8%), and Romania (75.6%).

According to the Gender Equality Index [8] in 2021, 61% of Romanian women and 16% of Romanian men reported taking care of and supervising children aged 0–11 years completely or mostly by themselves. The gender care gap in Romania was among the widest in the EU (45 pp). In 2021, women were overall less likely than men to rely on either formal or informal external support with childcare responsibilities. In Romania, the

interest in ECEC services has increased significantly in the last decade. But for the age group 0–3 years, we cannot speak about a functional system of ECEC services, a major deficit being the number of existing units, as well as the human resources within these units. Previous research [5–9] has shown that formal childcare services for young children are a way for parents to enter and/or remain in the labor market only if they are financially accessible. In order to balance care and work responsibilities when ECEC services are unaffordable, of low-quality, or difficult to access, parents may decide for atypical work schedules, and possible negative consequences on the well-being of children may occur. The European Care Strategy [10] indicates that Member States should encourage equal sharing of care for children between parents by combating gender stereotypes and encouraging a balanced involvement of both parents in care responsibilities, including through communication campaigns. Promoting and supporting family-friendly working-time arrangements and the uptake of family leave by both parents (especially men) throughout the course of their life is also a significant element that leads to the decrease in gender care gap. The European Care Strategy is accompanied by the Recommendation for Member States on the revision of the Barcelona targets on early childhood education and care [11]. It is essential that all children have access to high-quality ECEC services, studies in the field [9,12–17] highlighting the fact that this contributes to combating inequalities and promoting equal opportunities, especially in the case of children from disadvantaged backgrounds.

The research questions (RQ) around which the analysis of this article is built concern (RQ 1) the perception of parents related to the purpose of ECEC services and care responsibilities and (RQ 2) factors that affect the balance between caring responsibilities for children and parents' professional career.

In recent decades there has been a growing interest in research on parental preferences regarding the type and intensity of ECEC, the purpose of ECEC, and care responsibilities [18]. The relevant literature that focused on studying perceptions regarding the accessibility of ECEC services is not very well developed, especially on perceptions of users regarding the accessibility of childcare services being under-researched. ECEC services are perceived to be more accessible in countries that do not allow the existence of profit-making ECEC services for children between 3 and 6 years and adopt a unitary ECEC system [19]. The perception of low-income parents on the quality of ECEC has also been the subject of research [20,21], more studies focusing on aspects related to the accessibility of such services for various types of families [22,23]. Children who come from vulnerable families and benefit from targeted interventions in early childhood have greater chances of overcoming social isolation throughout their lives. When childcare is the responsibility of employed parents, achieving a balance between work and family becomes problematic, as demonstrated by multiple studies in the field. In families with children, work life balance represents a good functioning of the scheme of parental roles and those associated with the external domain, i.e., paid work [24].

The development of ECEC services must respond to the number of beneficiaries, but also to the parents' options regarding the use of these services, especially for the young age group of children (0–3 years). The use of various forms of childcare outside the family (paid and unpaid) is influenced by a series of factors, among which we find the needs of the parents and their socioeconomic status, the age of the children, and the system of family policies [25–27]. An important number of studies [28–31] have examined the relationship between the availability of ECEC services and mothers' satisfaction in achieving the balance between their professional career and childcare. According to the few studies that have addressed the issue of access to childcare services, according to the residence environment, the development of ECEC services in rural areas is characterized by low public financing and a reduced potential to attract private investments in such services [17]. There have been studies [28] that found that the experience of family–career conflict was related to childcare responsibilities. Parents with three or more young children experience more frequent conflicts between professional and family life [32].

2. Materials and Methods

2.1. Data Collection

The authors used empirical data from the project “Mechanism for developing access to early education services in Romania” (PN 19130203 financed by the Romanian Ministry of Research, Innovation and Digitalization under the Nucleu Program Inov Soc implemented by The National Scientific Research Institute for Labour and Social Protection–INCSMPs).

A questionnaire survey methodology was developed by the authors for data collection. Within the questionnaire, a number of 9 statements were tested using a 5 Likert scale regarding the perception of parents related to the purpose of ECEC services (*nurseries/kindergartens*) and the perceptions regarding care responsibilities. The analysis carried out in this article covers only the information collected for the assessment of those 9 statements (Table 1).

Table 1. Statements tested.

Domains	Statements Tested Based on 5 Likert Scale
Perception of parents related to the purpose of ECEC services	<i>Nurseries/kindergartens must offer parents the opportunity to participate in open activities with the child's group at least once a month</i> <i>Nurseries/kindergartens must meet the needs of reconciling the professional life with the family life of the parents</i> <i>Nurseries/kindergartens must also offer services during the holidays</i> <i>Nurseries/kindergartens must collaborate intensively with the child's family during the child's education process</i>
Perception of parents related to care responsibilities	<i>It is better to use daycare services for your child than to take care of him at home, during the childcare leave</i> <i>The services offered by nurseries are a necessity these days</i> <i>The nursery is a much better alternative for parents compared to the services offered by a nanny</i> <i>The nursery is not beneficial for the harmonious development of children</i> <i>It is better to enroll the child in kindergarten, than to use the services of a nanny</i>

Source: INCSMPs database.

2.2. Target Group, Sampling, and Recruitment of the Participants

The target group was made up of parents with children aged between 0 and 6 years enrolled in the education and childcare system (*nurseries, kindergartens*). According to the Romanian National Institute of Statistics [33], in 2016, there were 541,295 children enrolled in *nurseries* and *kindergartens*, of which 4% represented children enrolled in *nurseries* and the rest in *kindergarten*. The distribution by residential environment is 58% in urban vs. 42% in rural areas.

The sample was probabilistic, nationally representative, and stratified according to residence environment and Romanian development regions. The sample size achieved was 825 respondents with a maximum margin of error of 3.5% at a 95% confidence level.

The data collection method was a mixed one, using both Computer Assisted Personal Interview (CAPI) and Computer Assisted Telephone Interview (CATI). A total of 538 interviews were conducted face-to-face, and 287 interviews were conducted by telephone using the Random Digit Dialing (RDD) method. The total sample was made starting from the urban/rural distribution and taking into account the two types of pre-school education institutions, *nurseries* and *kindergartens*.

All the parents participating in this survey expressed their consent regarding the recording of their answers on a tablet or audio support, according to the research protocol developed by the researchers of the National Institute of Scientific Research in the field of Labor and Social Protection. Data collection took place in September–October 2017. After data collection, all statistical analyses were performed using IBM SPSS Statistics version 20.

2.3. Method

The research methodology combines classical statistical techniques with methods of inferential statistics and includes two steps. In the first stage, starting from the data collected, in order to identify perception of parents related to the purpose of ECEC services and care responsibilities, a descriptive statistical analysis was performed. During the second step, to identify factors that influence the achievement of the work–life balance of parents with children aged 0–6 years, we employed logistic regression to measure the relationship between our dependent variable and the selected independent variables. That decision was based on the literature that proposes the choice of a logistic regression when the outcome variable (dependent variable) is binary and can take only two values, usually encoded with 1, success, and 0, failure [34]. The method of logistic regression allows us to estimate the probability of the event encoded with value 1, according to the values of independent variables [34,35].

3. Results

3.1. Perception of Parents Related to the Purpose of ECEC Services and Care Responsibilities

Parents feel the need for more active involvement on their part in the educational process offered by ECEC services. In total, 68.2% of them expressed complete agreement regarding the need for nurseries/kindergartens to offer them the opportunity to participate in open activities in their child's group at least once a week, and a very large percentage, 85.5%, are completely agreed with the statement according to which, "Nurseries/kindergartens must collaborate intensively with the child's family during the child's education process". ECEC services must meet the need for the reconciliation between parents' professional life and childcare responsibilities, as more than half of the parents who participated in the survey totally agreed with this. Approximately 50% of parents consider that the holiday period is problematic in the provision of childcare services; therefore, they fully agree with the need for ECEC services to be available during the holidays as well (Table 2).

Table 2. Perception of parents related to the purpose of ECEC services.

	Totally Agree (%)	Totally Disagree (%)
Nurseries/kindergartens must offer parents the opportunity to participate in open activities with the child's group at least once a month	68.2	0.4
Nurseries/kindergartens must meet the needs of reconciling the professional life with the family life of the parents	54.7	2.1
Nurseries/kindergartens must also offer services during the holidays	48.5	10.9
Nurseries/kindergartens must collaborate intensively with the child's family during the child's education process	85.5	0.4

Source: Authors' calculations using IBM SPSS Statistics 20 based on INCSMPS database.

When the child is of a young age (0–2 years), the majority of childcare responsibilities should be carried out in the family, only 12.8% of parents expressing complete agreement with the statement, "It is better to use daycare services for your child than to take care of him at home, during the childcare leave". This can also be explained by the fact that only 32.5% of parents consider that for children aged 0–2 years, nurseries are not beneficial for the harmonious development of children. When childcare falls under the responsibility of a nanny, parents express more favorable opinions in comparison to services offered by nurseries, 41.7% considering that they are a much better alternative to the services offered by nannies. Moreover, almost half of the parents consider that nurseries are a necessity at present.

With the increase in the child's age and their access to the kindergarten, the parents' appreciation for the services offered by the kindergartens also increases, 67.5% expressing total agreement with the statement, "It is better to enroll the child in kindergarten, than to use the services of a nanny." (Table 3).

Table 3. Perception of parents related to care responsibilities.

	Totally Agree (%)	Totally Disagree (%)
<i>It is better to use daycare services for your child than to take care of him at home during childcare leave.</i>	12.8	45.1
<i>The services offered by nurseries are a necessity these days</i>	49.3	4.1
<i>The nursery is a much better alternative for parents compared to the services offered by a nanny</i>	41.7	6.2
<i>The nursery is not beneficial for the harmonious development of children</i>	7.6	32.5
<i>It is better to enroll the child in kindergarten, than to use the services of a nanny.</i>	67.5	1.7

Source: Authors' calculations using IBM SPSS Statistics 20 based on INCSMPS database.

3.2. Factors That Affect the Balance Between Caring Responsibilities for Children and Professional Career

The percentage of parents who declared that their duties as parents affect their professional career to a small and very small extent is lower than that of those who declare that they are affected to a large and very large extent (34.8% compared to 27.6%). An explanation for these answers is to be found in the data that show that the employment rates, especially for mothers, are quite high, despite the difficulty in accessing early education services. The recorded percentages of respondents from urban areas indicate greater difficulties for parents in managing the balance between professional life responsibilities and those related to raising children, the difference being approximately 12 percentage points compared to parents from rural areas. The gender dimension indicates percentage differences similar to the residence environment between women and men (Table 4).

Table 4. The answers to the question, "To what extent the tasks that fall to you as a parent (mother, father) in raising and parenting your children have affected/are affecting your professional career?".

	Total	Urban	Rural	Women	Men
Not at all	35.6	21.6	53.3	38.1	29.0
In a small and very small extent	34.8	43.6	23.8	30.9	45.1
To a large extent and to a very large extent	27.6	33.1	20.8	40.1	33.5

Source: Authors' calculations using IBM SPSS Statistics 20 based on INCSMPS database.

To identify the factors that influence the work-life balance of parents with children aged 0–6 years old, we defined the dependent variable in the multiple logistic regression, as the perception of parents regarding the impact of caring for their children on the professional career. The constructed binary variable takes the value 1 if the respondent considers that "Caring responsibilities for my children affected/affects my professional career". The variant "Caring responsibilities for my children did not affect/do not affect my professional career" has been coded with the value 0. The respondents that were not able to appreciate the influence of caring responsibilities on their professional career were not included in the logistic regression. Thus, the final sample used for the analysis in this article contains the answers of 809 of parents (Table 5).

Table 5. Distribution of respondents based on their perceived ability to balance work and caring responsibilities.

Characteristic	Total (<i>n</i> = 809) <i>n</i> %	Caring Responsibilities for My Children Did Not Affect/Do Not Affect My Professional Career (<i>n</i> = 294)	Caring Responsibilities for My Children Affected/Affects My Professional Career (<i>n</i> = 515)
Sex			
Male	222 (27.4%)	65 (22.1%)	157 (30.5%)
Female	587 (72.6%)	229 (77.9%)	358 (69.5%)
Civil status			
Married/Consensual Union	738 (91.2%)	266 (90.5%)	472 (91.7%)
Single	71 (8.8%)	28 (9.5%)	43 (8.3%)
Residential area			
Urban	358 (44.3%)	99 (33.7%)	352 (68.3%)
Rural	451 (55.7%)	195 (66.3%)	163 (31.7%)
Last education level			
ISCED 0–2	101 (12.5%)	68 (23.1%)	33 (6.4%)
ISCED 3–4	282 (34.9%)	121 (41.2%)	161 (31.3%)
ISCED 5–8	426 (52.7%)	105 (35.7%)	321 (62.3%)
Age			
Under 20 years	4 (0.5%)	1 (0.3%)	3 (0.6%)
21–35 years	526 (65.0%)	193 (65.6%)	333 (64.7%)
36 years and over	279 (34.5%)	100 (34.0%)	179 (34.8%)
Monthly income (in EUR, EUR 1 = RON 5.0) *			
Less than EUR 200	46 (6.7%)	23 (9.6%)	23 (5.1%)
EUR 201–1200	567 (82.7%)	202 (84.5%)	365 (81.7%)
More than EUR 1200	73 (10.6%)	14 (5.9%)	59 (13.2%)

* Note: A total of 123 respondents refused to declare their monthly income. Source: Authors' development based on survey database.

As explanatory (independent) variables, we considered both some socio-demographic characteristics, but also variables considered important in influencing the work–life balance of parents with children. These latter variables were obtained from specific questions included in the questionnaire.

The socio-demographic characteristics included in the model are gender, educational level, residence area, age of the respondent, level of income, and civil status. Gender is a binary variable that takes the value 1 in the case of a female respondent. Educational level (categorical variable) of the respondents was coded 1 for those that attained an education level corresponding to ISCED 0–2, 2 for those that obtained ISCED 3–4 level, and 3 for those with ISCED 5–6 level. The residence area is a binary variable coded 1 for parents that live in urban areas and 0 for those that live in rural areas. To quantify the age of the respondents, we used a categorical variable with the values, as follows: 1 for the parents of age less than 20 years old, 2 for parents of age between 21 and 35 years old, and 3 for parents aged 36 years old and above. Income was coded as a categorical variable with three variants (Romanian currency, EURO 1 = RON 5.00), as follows: 1 for those with a monthly income less than EUR 200, 2 for those with an income between EUR 201 and EUR 1200, 3 for those with an income above EUR 1200. Civil status is an alternate variable that takes the value 0 if the respondent has a partner and value 1 if the respondent is single.

Other variables considered to have an influence on the work–life balance were taken into account, such as the proximity to ECEC services and the share of caring responsibilities with other persons. The first variable quantifies the role of ECEC services in achieving the

work–life balance. In the case of the second variable, we considered that the availability of ECEC services near the home help parents to achieve a balance between professional and parental responsibilities. The proximity to early childhood education services was measured using an alternative variable that takes value 0 in case ECEC services are located near the home or 1 if ECEC services are not available near the home. The share of caring responsibilities is a categorical variable that takes value 1 if the share of responsibilities in caring the children is taken by the father, value 2 if the share of responsibilities in caring the children is taken by the mother, 3 if the share of responsibilities in caring the children is equally shared between mother and father, and value 4 if the caring of the children is shared with other per-sons (grandparents etc.).

Among the multitude of factors that may influence the wok-life balance of parents with children aged 0–6 years, we identified those that exert a significant influenced based on the respondents’ responses. The results of the logistic regression (estimated parameters and corresponding Wald test) are presented in Table 6.

Table 6. Logistic regression model with all possible independent variables.

“Caring Responsibilities for My Children Affected/Affects My Professional Career”		B	SE	Wald	Sig.	Exp(B)	95% C.I. for EXP(B)	
							Lower	Upper
Intercept		0.227	0.723	0.099	0.753	1.255	0.227	0.723
Gender		0.265	0.222	1.414	0.234	1.303	0.842	2.015
Residence		1.127	0.199	32.067 **	0.000	3.087	2.090	4.560
Civil status		0.132	0.324	0.166	0.684	1.141	0.605	2.152
Income		−0.016	0.239	0.005	0.945	0.984	0.616	1.571
Education	ISCED 0–2	0 ^a						
	ISCED 3–4	−1.242	0.326	14.514 **	0.000	0.289	0.153	0.547
	ISCED 5–8	−0.687	0.200	11.830 **	0.001	0.503	0.340	0.744
Age	Less than 20 years old	0 ^a						
	21–35 years old	0.878	1.314	0.447	0.504	2.407	0.183	31.625
	36+ years old	0.164	0.196	0.700	0.403	1.179	0.802	1.732
Proximity to ECEC services		−0.378	0.208	3.303 *	0.069	0.685	0.456	1.030
Caring responsibilities	Father	0 ^a						
	Mother	0.503	1.052	0.228	0.633	1.653	0.210	12.998
	Father and mother	0.038	0.484	0.006	0.937	1.039	0.402	2.682
	Other persons	0.136	0.479	0.081	0.776	1.146	0.448	2.930

The significance level is marked in the table as follows: * for = 0.1 and ** for = 0.05. Reference category is “Caring responsibilities for my children did not affected/do not affects my professional career”. ^a This parameter is zero because it is the reference. Source: Authors’ calculations using IBM SPSS Statistics 20 based on INCSMPS database.

Only three factors affected/affect the balance between caring responsibilities for children and professional career: the residence area, the educational level, and the proximity to ECEC services. The *residence* area is a factor that exerts influence on the ability of parents to balance the caring responsibilities with those related to work. As such, parents living in urban areas are more likely to experience difficulties in achieving work–life balance, compared to those living in rural areas. In this case, the registered odds are three times higher for parents living in urban areas. The higher the *education* achieved, the less difficulties in balancing work and personal life are experienced by parents with children aged 0–6 years. The *proximity to ECEC services* of the home of the parent who cares for a child increases the probability to be less influenced in achieving work–life balance.

4. Discussion

4.1. The Role of ECEC Services in Helping Parents to Achieve Work–Life Balance

Childcare services represent an important system within the socio-educational ecosystem that greatly contributes to helping parents achieve a balance between their professional and family life. Although Romania is deficient in terms of services intended for pre-school children (0–2 years), the demand for such services is increasing, especially in urban settings.

In the last decade, efforts have been made to develop the nursery infrastructure, but the demand remains mostly uncovered, especially in large cities. Our results indicate an appreciation of the usefulness of ECEC services (nurseries/kindergartens) among respondents and underline the importance of parents' involvement in the activities provided by these services, the partnerships between ECEC services and parents being perceived as necessary and useful for the harmonious development of children. The results are also supported by previous studies regarding the partnership between parents and childcare services [6].

The results of this study indicate an appreciation of ECEC services (nurseries/kindergartens) for achieving the balance between professional life and the care of children, preventing the possible negative effects related to the time spent by children outside the family space, especially in the case of young children. Most studies that have investigated mothers' childcare responsibilities have focused on periods when children are in non-maternal care, as is the case with ECEC services. There are researchers who believe that time away from the baby can undermine the mother's ability to know her baby well and thus provide sensitive, responsive, and growth-facilitating care [36,37]. However, a consistent body of studies has not identified differences in parent-child interactions associated with the time spent caring for the child [38,39]. As the testing of the assertions regarding the responsibilities of caring for children in the conducted study show, there is a predominant pattern of caring for children in the family in the first 2 years of life (45.1% of parents express total disagreement with the statement, "It is better to use daycare services for your child than to take care of him at home, during the childcare leave"). The results are in agreement with other studies that evaluated the same topic [40–45]. Some authors [46] note that due to the changes in the family structure, the role of family members becomes more complex. The availability of ECEC services has an influence on the ability of parents to manage work responsibilities and those related to parenting. These could partially explain the results in our study, as the proximity to ECEC services was a factor that proved to have an influence in the achievement of work-life balance. As other national studies concluded [6], formal childcare services are important to achieve work-life balance, if availability, quality, and affordability are insured. Also, some families assess positively the quality of ECEC services available in urban areas [17]. Other studies [47–52] documented the importance of the location of childcare services as a factor that influences the work-life balance for parents with children.

4.2. Socio-Demographic Characteristics Related to Work-Life Balance

Achieving work-life balance may become a challenge for parents regardless of the age of the children, but especially in the case of parents with children aged 0–6 years. Our study highlights that in-depth attention should be focused on socio-demographic characteristics and other factors (contextual and cultural) to research the impact of caring responsibilities on career. These factors could also serve as guidance in defining family policy measures.

In terms of *gender*, although the percentage of women that participated in our survey is higher than men, there is no significant difference between them with regard to the impact of caring responsibilities on their professional career. Similar results were reported in other quantitative studies conducted among parents [53].

Civil status is a factor that did not emphasize any differences between respondents in our study; no differences were recorded between single parents and those that had a partner. However, other studies [46,53] underlined differences between parents who were in a marital or cohabiting relationship and those that were not in a relationship. We appreciate that in-depth analysis on larger samples of parents should be performed in this regard, to understand if this socio-demographic feature remains less important in achieving work-life balance.

The *available income* and the *age of the parent* are other personal features that proved not to have any influence in differences between respondents of the present study. The more educated the parents are, the less difficulties they experienced in achieving work-life

balance. As [54] explained, well-educated parents have more available resources, which translates into the greater affordability of a broader range of ECEC services.

Another noteworthy aspect is that parents from urban area experience a larger extent of difficulties in achieving a balance between professional and personal life. Urbanization (polarization of localities due to industrial development and rural migration) leads to higher job accessibility and the uneven development of educational services regardless of the age of children, and the severe aging of rural communities may explain the results in our research.

Several studies [49–52] that investigated how the work–life balance is influenced by social support, pointed that community support is an important indicator that favors the achievement of a balance between work and parental duties. In our study, support from families, grandparents or other persons proved to have no effect in achieving work–life balance.

4.3. Strengths and Limitations of the Research

For this study we used a representative sample for Romanian parents with children aged between 0 and 6 years enrolled in the education and childcare system (nurseries, kindergartens). The sample is representative for the area of residence (urban/rural), but not of other variables included in the logistic regression, hence the possible limitations of the obtained results. However, the results of the logistic regression contribute to a better understanding of the factors that impact the work–life balance of parents, providing valuable insights from the perspective of the parents.

4.4. Implication for Family Policies

Policymakers should focus more on structural changes and the development of early childhood education services, as well as on the even spreading of such services between rural and urban areas, in order to allow for parents with children to gain greater control in balancing work and personal responsibilities. An important feature of this process is the parents' perception of the role of ECEC services, as shown by the analyzed data. The article offers support to decision-makers in the field of ECEC services and family policies aimed to provide support of the parents.

5. Conclusions

The need to develop the early education system in Romania must be correlated with the field of reconciliation of professional activity and family life. Due to the distribution pattern of parental roles in the Romanian family, the collected data highlight a fairly high percentage of female persons who perceive the process of achieving balance between professional duties and family responsibilities not problematic, when the direct reference is the growth and education of children. The process is more pronounced in rural areas, and this occurrence can also be explained by the parental roles within the family, which are much more distinct in rural settings compared to those in urban areas. As the educational level of the parents increases, the conflicting aspects between the two spheres, family and professional life, amplify. The availability of ECEC services improves the perceived feeling of the achievement of work–life balance.

Fiscal policies are still necessary in Romania, to increase the access to the ECEC system, and at the same time strengthen the balance between professional and family life, as well as to promote employment through the introduction of tax credits for childcare.

Future research should consider the development of indicators to measure the quality of life of families with children in order to better support ECEC services and family policies.

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