

Gender Inequality Through *Gender-Blindness*? Family-Friendly Employers in Switzerland During the Covid-19 Pandemic

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Abstract: The study, based on a 2021 survey of 31 family-friendly Swiss employers, highlights how a *gender-blind equal-treatment* approach during the Covid-19 pandemic unintentionally deepened gender inequality within the organizations. While employers recognize gender-specific risks, they largely see no obligation to address them. We recommend adopting a *gender-conscious (equity)* approach in designing family-friendly measures within organizations for future crises and beyond.

Keywords: Gender inequality, gender-blindness, Covid-19 pandemic, family-friendliness, employer

Inégalités de genre par un *aveuglement au genre*? Employeurs favorables à la famille en Suisse pendant la pandémie de Covid-19

Résumé: L'étude, basée sur une enquête réalisée en 2021 auprès de 31 employeurs suisses favorables à la famille, montre qu'une approche de *traitement égalitaire aveugle au genre*, pendant la pandémie de Covid-19 a involontairement aggravé les inégalités de genre au sein des lieux de travail. Bien que les employeurs reconnaissent les risques spécifiques au genre, ils ne se sentent généralement pas responsables de les traiter. Il est recommandé d'adopter une *approche de conscience de genre* dans la conception de mesures favorables à la famille au sein des organisations pour les crises futures et au-delà.

Mots-clés: Inégalités de genre, aveuglement au genre, pandémie de Covid-19, mesures favorables aux familles, employeur

Geschlechterungleichheit durch *Geschlechterblindheit*? Familienfreundliche Arbeitgebende in der Schweiz während der Covid-19-Pandemie

Zusammenfassung: Die Studie, basierend auf einer Umfrage unter 31 familienfreundlichen Schweizer Arbeitgebenden im Jahr 2021, zeigt auf, wie ein *geschlechtsblinder* Ansatz der *Gleichbehandlung*, während der Covid-19-Pandemie ungewollt die Geschlechterungleichheit verstärkt hat. Obwohl die Arbeitgebenden geschlechtsspezifische Risiken erkennen, sehen sie sich meist nicht in der Verantwortung, diese anzugehen. Wir empfehlen einen geschlechterbewussten Ansatz bei der Gestaltung familienfreundlicher Maßnahmen für zukünftige Krisen und darüber hinaus zu verfolgen.

Schlüsselwörter: Geschlechterungleichheit, Geschlechterblindheit, Covid-19 Pandemie, Familienfreundlichkeit, Gleichstellung, Arbeitgebende

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1 Introduction¹

The Covid-19 pandemic rapidly changed working conditions globally. After the World Health Organization (WHO) declared Covid-19 a “Public Health Emergency of International Concern” on January 30, 2020 (WHO, 2020), many countries implemented drastic measures, such as closing borders, limiting travel, and implementing nationwide lockdowns. Social distancing, mask mandates, school closures, and remote work became common globally and changed the realities of work for everyone. In Switzerland, unemployment rates and job seeker numbers rose sharply, with a 36% increase in unemployed people in 2020 compared to 2019 (SECO, 2022, p. 5). By mid-March 2020, about 190 000 Swiss employers applied for short-time work compensation² for 1.94 million people, or 37% of employees (SECO, 2021), within which women were overrepresented (Dubois et al., 2022; Stutz et al., 2022).

The pandemic affected not only the economy but also numerous educational and care institutions (such as childcare, care for the elderly or disabled). On March 16, 2020, all schools and most childcare facilities in Switzerland were closed. They were gradually re-opened after May 11, 2020 (Oesch et al., 2020). Between March and at least May 2020, looking after children, elderly people, or people with disabilities often had to be carried out (again) within the families. In addition, school-age children had to be supervised and schooled at home. Whilst childcare institutions could apply for compensation for lost parental contributions, parents on the other hand were fully and solely responsible for arranging childcare during this period, without receiving extra (e.g. public) support in terms of time or money, placing pressure on both the parents and their employers.

Studies indicate that pandemic-related changes in work and caregiving *impacted people with and without care responsibility and by gender differently*. A representative Swiss study found that women with caregiving responsibilities were four times more likely to lose their jobs than women without caregiving responsibilities (the effect was much smaller for men, Fuchs et al., 2021). Balancing paid and unpaid work became harder for 55% of women and 50% of men with children and additional caring responsibility for elderly or disabled family members (Fuchs et al., 2021). During the first 2020 lockdown, mothers reduced work about twice as often as fathers due to caregiving, while experiencing more conflicts and less emotional support, such as institutional support, though fathers also faced restrictions (Lanfranconi et al., 2021). Steinmetz et al. (2022) concluded that overall changes in unpaid work time among Swiss dual-earner couples were driven more by work availability shifts than

1 Many thanks to all the companies that filled out the survey, to the two organizations that distributed the survey, as well as to Gena Da Rui who conducted the descriptive analyses.

2 Short-time work compensation means that the unemployment insurance temporarily covers part of the respective employees' wages during work stoppages. Employers can apply for short-time compensation if their business reduces or halts operations temporarily while employment contracts remain active, due to economic factors, government measures, or other uncontrollable developments (Die Schweizer Eidgenossenschaft, o.J.).

by gender. However, work availability, such as remote work, is also highly gendered, as higher earners (60%) had more home-office access than lower earners (28%) where women are overrepresented (Stutz et al., 2022). Home-office and mobile work increased flexibility and aid in emergencies (e.g., child illness) but led to unpaid overtime (Carstensen, 2020). Despite both men and women working more from home, women did two-thirds of unpaid care work, adding 1.7 hours weekly compared to men's 0.6 hours (Samtleben et al., 2020).

Other studies focus on the changes towards family-friendliness and potentially towards gender equity in *work organizations from the employer's perspective* since the pandemic. Several studies show how employers have increasingly adopted flexible models like home office and mobile work (Carstensen, 2020; Kös & Schäfer, 2020), and many plan to continue them, which could potentially support gender equity by helping e.g. mothers stay in well-paid jobs (Chung et al., 2021; Wong et al., 2021). However, countertrends suggest some employers still expect constant availability, which can undermine these benefits (Chung et al., 2021; Field, 2023). A Serbian study notes that whilst flexible work may support employees to balance work and life, it often overlooks family members' needs, such as reducing parental stress and limiting after-hours work, and thus question even the true family-friendly effects of more flexible work (Krstić & Sladojević Matić, 2020). Additionally, there is a gap in the literature of studies focusing on the gender perceptions of employers in the construction of family-friendly measures.

Finally, very few studies have explicitly focused on *organizations with explicitly pre-pandemic family-friendly structures*, but those that do suggest these employers benefited during the crisis by being more efficient in the crisis management. A study of eight certified family-friendly SMEs in Germany identified three success factors for flexible work: appropriate technical equipment, clear process regulations, and a culture of trust and teamwork (Kaczynska & Kümmerling, 2021). Another study found the job-sharing model in Germany to be highly resilient during the crisis, with job sharers benefiting in efficient crisis management, from shared flexibility, support, and strategic tandem coordination (Krzywdzinski & Christen, 2020).

No research has yet focused on how pre-pandemic family-friendly employers perceive gender differences in the changing work conditions during the pandemic, and who they hold responsible to ensuring gender equity. The current study contributes to better understanding family-friendly employers' perspective on gender equity in their organization by answering the following two research questions:

(1) What gender differences in the changing working conditions during the Covid-19 pandemic are perceived by family-friendly employers?

(2) Who do these family-friendly employers perceive as responsible for ensuring gender equity during and beyond the pandemic?

The study is based on an online survey of 31 employers from two German-speaking Swiss regions, known for conservative gender norms. The selected employers can be considered as particularly "family-friendly" as they are – at least at the mo-

ment of the study – members of regional associations focusing on family friendliness and social responsibility. Many of these organizations had already implemented family-friendly policies such as extended parental leave and flexible working hours before the pandemic. While this limited sample is far from being representative of Switzerland as a whole, we can argue that effects on gender of the changing working conditions observed among these committed employers may also be present in less committed employers.

Our research adds to the existing literature in the following ways: *Firstly*, with this contribution we expand the literature on the question of how pre-pandemic family friendliness in organizations can be a way to combat the negative consequences of a crisis regarding effects on gender and beyond. *Secondly*, this specific sample allows us to explore if and how gender inequalities in changes in the working conditions during and after the pandemic are perceived and addressed by pre-covid family friendly organizations.

Based on the concept of *gender-blind* organizations, meaning organizational policies and practices that assume that treating all gender the same is sufficient for fairness (Fuchs et al., 2019; Thun, 2019), our study will show that these family-friendly and engaged employers applied a *gender-blind* approach of equality during the pandemic, thereby unintentionally exacerbating gender inequality. For the future, these organizations recognize some gender-specific risks but do not see it as their responsibility to address them. Thus, we *thirdly* contribute to the concept of *gender-blindness* in organizations and its prevalence in Switzerland: If gender-blind practices and policies are applied by organizations who specifically identify as family-friendly, we can assume to find similar patterns in other organizations as well. Our contribution finally also expands the literature on the question of who is perceived *responsible for gender equity in organizations* by the employers. Despite the limited sample, we cautiously recommend that in future crises (and beyond), organizations and policymakers adopt a gender-aware (equity) approach.

2 Swiss Context and Regional Differences Within Switzerland

In an international comparison, Switzerland can be characterized as a liberal-conservative welfare state historically shaped by traditional gender roles (Lanfranconi, 2014). Although conservative values are declining, they are still prevalent: around a quarter of the Swiss working population believes that women should be willing to reduce their employment in favor of the family (Fuchs et al., 2021). There are major regional differences: While in the so called “Espace Mittelland”³ (central west

3 This is the official regional classification by “major regions” of the Swiss statistic office. Details can be found here: <https://www.bfs.admin.ch/bfs/de/home/statistiken/querschnittsthemen/raeumliche-analysen/raeumliche-gliederungen/analyseregionen.html>

of Switzerland), only 18% agree with the statement, in “Eastern Switzerland” 33% agree with it and 27.4% in “Central Switzerland” (Fuchs et al., 2021). The data analyzed in this paper originates from organizations located in the two regions Central (RI) and Eastern (RII) Switzerland, where more conservative gender norms prevail.

While more women in Switzerland are entering the paid labor market, unpaid work remains highly gendered. In a representative survey of all Switzerland (Fuchs et al., 2021), a majority of the women report being solely responsible for tasks such as laundry (67%) and caring for sick/elderly/disabled family members (56%). Conversely, men predominantly view their sole responsibilities as private administrative tasks (59%) and minor repairs and gardening (43%; Fuchs et al., 2021). The OECD has classified Switzerland as one of the countries with the worst working conditions for families (Chzhen et al., 2019). Examples include the short maternity leave of 14 weeks, the late introduction of two-week paternity leave since 2021, and the lack of parental leave. In an OECD comparison, parents in Switzerland bear the highest childcare costs. The design of family-friendly measures in the workplace—such as flexible working hours or the possibility of reducing working hours or working from home—primarily lies within the competence of employers (Bundeszentrale für politische Bildung, 2018; Chzhen et al., 2019; Lanfranconi et al., 2021).

3 Research Concepts: *Gendered Organization, Gender Blindness, Equity and Equality, Family Friendliness, and Responsibility for Gender Equity*

The perspective of *gendered organization* is based on the idea that gender inequalities become entrenched through norms, regulations, and principles in institutions, such as work organizations (cf. Acker, 1990; 1992; Lanfranconi, 2014). This concept highlights how seemingly neutral organizational processes, such as hiring, promotion, and work allocation are inherently gendered, often reinforcing traditional gender roles and maintaining male dominance. Gendered organizations may exhibit wage gaps, uneven career progression opportunities, and a lack of support for work-life balance, disproportionately affecting women and gender minorities (cf. Acker, 1990; 1992; 2006; Lanfranconi, 2014). *Gendered organizations* are always linked to the “inequalities surrounding society, its politics, history and culture” (Acker, 2006; Thun, 2019).

Gender blindness refers to the disregard of gender differences and inequalities within organizational policies and practices. This approach assumes that treating everyone the same, regardless of their gender, is sufficient for fairness. However, this can perpetuate existing inequalities because it ignores the distinct needs, experiences, and challenges faced by different genders. For instance, policies that do not account for caregiving responsibilities predominantly shouldered by women can disadvantage them. Gender blindness can lead to the maintenance of the status quo and hinder efforts toward achieving genuine gender equity (Fuchs et al., 2019; Thun, 2019).

Equity and equality, while often used interchangeably, have distinct meanings in the context of organizational practices and policies. *Equality* can be described as sameness of treatment and equity as fairness, where individual or group circumstances are taken into consideration (Espinoza, 2007; Lanfranconi & Basaran, 2023). Although achieving *equity*, resp. fairness can mean treating everyone the same in some cases, it can mean that different groups might get differential treatment based on their current or past inequities in other cases (Gooden, 2014; Lanfranconi & Basaran, 2023), such as e. g., being more burdened with caring responsibility.

Family friendliness in the workplace refers to policies, practices, and organizational cultures that support employees in balancing their work and family responsibilities. Family-friendly policies can include flexible working hours, remote work options, parental leave, childcare support, and initiatives promoting work-life balance (Lanfranconi et al., 2019).

Responsibility for gender equity: Swiss equality policy has also been described as a contested field of politics (Fuchs, 2018). Lanfranconi (2014) identified various interpretations of discourses of who should be responsible for implementing equality in Switzerland: the state with binding measures, companies with voluntary equality measures, and/or individuals.

4 Methodological Approach

4.1 Data, Data Limitation, and Sample Description

The *data* of this study is based on an online survey conducted by a team at the HSLU with Unipark in two regions of German-speaking Switzerland (Central (RI) and Easter Switzerland (RII)) on the pandemic related changes in working conditions and the perceived effects on family friendliness and gender equity. The survey was completed by 32 employers (16 each) between April 16 and May 23, 2021.⁴ The survey targeted executives, HR managers, or specialists and covers the period from the beginning of the Covid-19 pandemic (February 2020) to the time of the survey (April/May 2021) and the time afterward. Thus, the following results present the perspective of employers (represented through executives, HR managers, or specialists) and will be interpreted as such. The results do not necessarily reflect actual organizational practices. The survey was distributed through one association on family friendliness and social responsibility per region, of which the participating organizations were members. The response rate was 88% in RI and 60% in RII.

Data limitation: The analysis is based on a small sample of family-friendly employers and therefore is limited in scale; the findings are not representative for

⁴ Except for one employer, all employers agreed that their data could be used anonymously for further studies. Therefore, this contribution uses the statements of 31 out of the 32 employers.

Table 1 Employers by Industry and Company Size

Industry	Company Size		
	Small: 10–49 employees	Medium: 50–249 employees	Large: 250 and more employees
Manufacturing, Production of Goods		RI (1)	RI (1)
Trade, Maintenance, and Repair			RI (1)
Transportation and Logistics		RII (1)	
Hospitality/Accommodation and Food Service		RII (1)	
Provision of Financial and Insurance Services			RI (1)
Provision of Professional, Scientific, and Technical Services	RII (2)		
Public Administration, Defense, Social Security, Education	RII (1)	RI (2) RII (3)	RI (5)
Health Care and Social Services	RII (1)	RI (3) RII (4)	
Other Services	RII (1)	RI (1) RII (1)	RI (1)

Switzerland. However, the findings are theoretically significant as all surveyed employers are notably engaged and family friendly. According to the argument of theoretical case selection (Flyvberg, 2001), we may thus hypothesize, that the gendered effects observed in this sample may also apply to less engaged employers, thus that the effects we find, are probably a lower bound.

The employers in the *sample* tend to be engaged in family-friendliness and social responsibility across various industries and are of different sizes (see Table 1). While the sample from RI includes more medium-sized ($n=7$) and large employers ($n=9$), the sample from RII exclusively consists of small ($n=5$) and medium-sized employers ($n=10$; see Table 1). Both regions have representation from the public sector (e.g., “Public Administration, Defense, Social Security, Education,” “Healthcare and Social Work”), as well as many private sector companies (e.g., “Manufacturing,” “Trade, Maintenance, and Repair,” “Transport and Logistics,” “Hospitality/Accommodation and Food Services”; see Table 1).

Table 2 Offers, Work Forms, or Measures in the Company Regarding Family Friendliness and Gender Equality (n = 31)

Offers, Work Forms, or Measures Regarding Family Friendliness and Gender Equality	Already Present Before the Pandemic			Expanded Due to the Pandemic		Introduced Due to the Pandemic	
	RI (n = 16)	RII (n = 15)	Total (n = 31)	RI (n = 16)	RII (n = 15)	RI (n = 16)	RII (n = 15)
Compliance/Verification of Pay Equity	15	14	29	--	--	--	--
Flexible Working Hours	15	12	27	1	--	--	--
Family-Friendly Company Culture	11	13	24	1	--	--	--
Gender-Friendly Recruitment and Promotion	12	12	24	--	--	--	--
Job-sharing, Part-Time, and Workload Reduction during Parenthood	12	11	23	1	--	1	--
Home-Office	12	9	21	7	2	3	4
Corporate Health Management	10	7	17	1	--	1	--
Maternity Leave – Longer than 14 Weeks	7	4	11	--	--	--	--
More than Three Days Paid Leave for Care of a Dependent	6	4	10	--	--	1	--
Contribution to Childcare	4	2	6	--	--	--	--
Paternity Leave – Longer than Two Weeks	4	1	5	--	--	--	1

As shown in Table 2 the surveyed employers all categorized as “family-friendly employers,” as they mostly had had family-friendly measures in place before the pandemic. Notably, measures such as equal pay monitoring (n = 29), flexible working hours (n = 27), family-friendly corporate culture (n = 24), and gender-inclusive recruitment practices (n = 24) were prevalent. Some employers also offered job-sharing, part-time options, and reduced workload during parenthood (n = 23), home-office options (n = 21), corporate health management systems (n = 17), more than the compulsory 14 weeks of maternity leave (n = 11), and paid leave for family illness (n = 10). Fewer employers provided in-house childcare or financial support for childcare costs (n = 6), and only a few offered more than the compulsory two weeks of paternity

leave ($n = 5$). The pandemic did not lead to the elimination of any family-friendly or gender-related measures. Table 2 reveals that relatively few new measures were introduced or expanded due to the pandemic. Home-office options saw the most significant expansion, adapted by nine employers, and newly introduced by seven.

4.2 Questions of the Survey

In the first part of the survey, respondents were asked about the challenges and opportunities for employers concerning the effects of the pandemic on employees, specifically with respect to employees with caregiving responsibilities and by gender. These questions were designed as a scale (agreement/disagreement) with predefined answer categories. Additionally, an open-ended question was asked about the desired (e.g. government) support during the pandemic to in turn better support employees (with children).

In the next section, we asked a question assessing respondents' views on the positive influences of the pandemic on family friendliness / family policy in Switzerland (scale with predefined answer categories). The open, forward-looking final question asked for insights from the previous experiences for the post-pandemic period.

4.3 Methods

The results were analyzed using a mixed-method approach. *In the first step*, the closed survey questions were analyzed using descriptive statistics with Excel. The open-ended survey questions were analyzed using a qualitative content analysis (Mayring & Fenzl, 2014; results presented in section 5). *In the second step*, the descriptive results – both qualitative and quantitative – were contrasted with each other and analyzed through the lens of *gender-blind* organizations, *equity and equality*, as well as *responsibility for gender equity* (analysis presented in section 6).

5 Results of the Descriptive Statistical and Qualitative Content Analysis

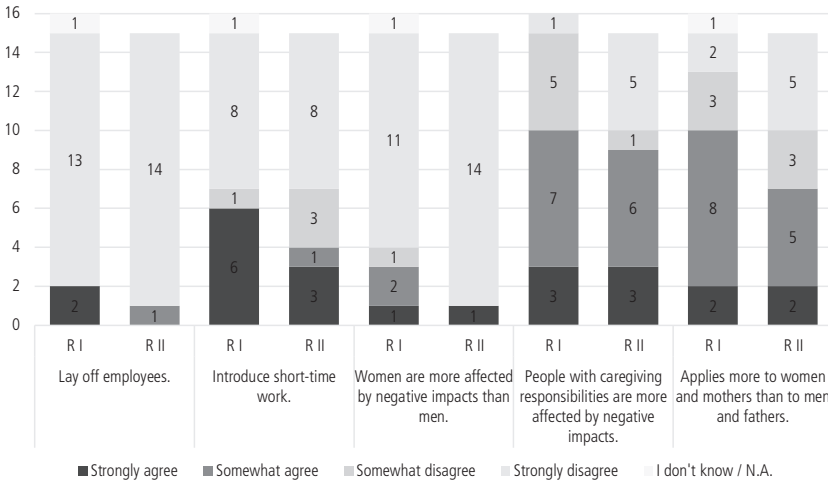
The results from the survey are presented in the following two paragraphs which relate to two research questions posed in the introduction.

5.1 Perceived Effects of the Pandemic on Organizational Family Friendliness and Gender

Challenges Due to the Pandemic – Gendered Perception

When employers were asked about challenges concerning their employees, only three out of the 31 surveyed employers indicated that they had to lay off employees (RI: 2, RII: 1). However, ten employers (RI: 6, RII: 4), thus around one-third of

Figure 1 Challenges in the Company Due to the Covid-19 Pandemic (n = 31)



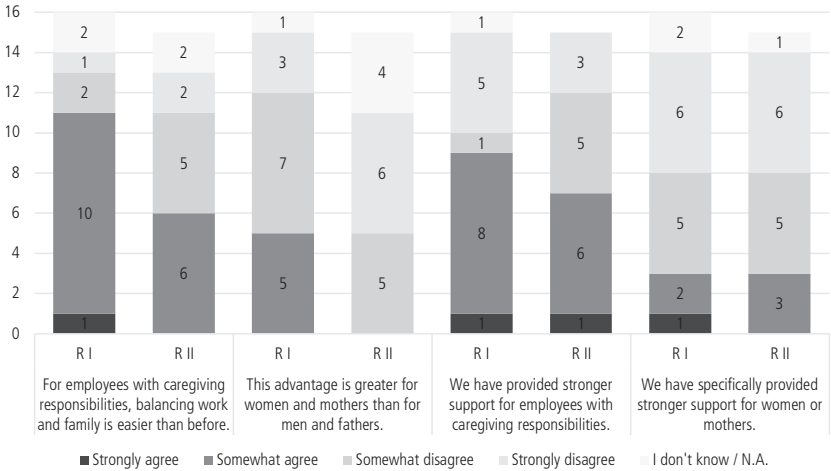
the sample, stated that they had introduced short-time work. Only four employers (RI: 3, RII: 1) agreed that women were more affected by these negative challenges than men. Thus, most of the respondents believe that either all genders were equally affected or that men were more affected (see Fig. 1).

However, when asked if individuals with caregiving responsibilities were more affected by the negative challenges of the pandemic, the picture changes. A total of 19 employers agreed with this statement (RI: 10, RII: 9), which is over 60% of the respondents. When asked further, whether women and mothers among employees with caregiving responsibilities were more affected by the pandemic-related challenges than men and fathers, seventeen employers, a majority of the total sample, agreed with this statement (RI: 10, RII: 7; see Fig. 1). Thus, employers do not see a gender effect, but rather a caregiving effect, which then appears to be gendered.

Opportunities for Employees With Caregiving Responsibilities Due to the Pandemic – Gendered Perception

We further asked if the employers see also opportunities for their employees with caregiving responsibilities (for children, dependent adults, seniors, or people with disabilities) due to the pandemic. Here a majority of 17 employers (RI: 11, RII: 6) agreed that the reconciliation of work and family responsibilities has become easier since the pandemic due to home-office or other changes in work conditions, such as time reduction or time flexibility. We again asked about any gender effect: A large majority of 26 employers (all from RII and a ten from RI) do not believe that this

Figure 2 Opportunities for Employees with Caregiving Responsibilities Due to the Covid-19 Pandemic (n = 31)



advantage is greater for women and mothers than for men and fathers. Contrary, 22 employers thus believe that this is to the disadvantage of women.

According to their own statements, 16 employers (RI: 9, RII: 7) have been providing more support to employees with caregiving responsibilities since the start of the Covid-19 pandemic compared to those without such duties. This corresponds to a slight majority of the total sample. Conversely, only three employers per region, thus a clear minority, stated that women or mothers were specifically more supported (see Fig. 2). This is particularly interesting, given that most employers see women, and mothers especially, as being more affected (see above).

Desire for (Government) Support During the Pandemic

The employers were further asked an open-ended question about what (government) support they would have wished for during the Covid-19 pandemic to better support employees (with children). Differences between the two regions emerged in the responses.

In RI, representatives from five companies explicitly opposed state measures. One organizational representative would have wished for more flexible working hours, such as extending or shifting work hours to evenings and weekends. Another emphasized the employees’ and especially mothers’ responsibility: “Employees had to organize themselves. Working mothers cannot afford to just stop working, stay with the children, and let others do their job. ... State support would not change much.”

The situation was different in RII. Here, eight of the 15 surveyed employers would have liked more state support. They requested, for example, assistance with homeschooling, simplified regulations for short-time work and quarantine for employees with caregiving duties. Explicitly mentioned was the need for childcare for healthcare staff. Challenges for children were also highlighted: “Basically, the question is whether schools and childcare facilities can simply be closed. Not all families can organize accordingly. The children usually suffer the most, with short- and long-term consequences.” Other comments included the desire for an earlier introduction of the shortened quarantine period, which was particularly challenging for working mothers, or the need for more flexible forms of childcare regardless of the pandemic. Finally, there was also a desire for increased financial state support, such as compensation for caregiving tasks due to school closures.

5.2 Future Scenarios by Family-Friendly Employers

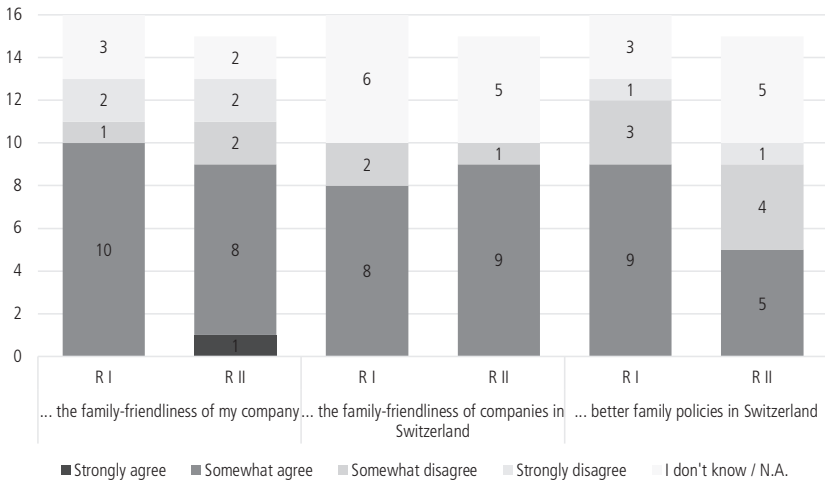
Possible Positive Impact of the Pandemic on Family-Friendliness

Regarding the question of possible positive impacts of the Covid-19 pandemic on the family-friendliness of employers or family policy overall, a clear majority of the surveyed employers (Region I: 10, Region II: 9) agreed (somewhat) that the pandemic positively impacted the family-friendliness of their company. Seven respondents were (somewhat) not of this opinion. Additionally, a slim majority of respondents (Region I: 8, Region II: 9) believe the pandemic had a rather positive impact on the family-friendliness of employers in Switzerland overall, with three companies not agreeing with this statement. The statement that the Covid-19 pandemic had a positive impact on better family policy in Switzerland was somewhat agreed upon by 14 companies (Region I: 9, Region II: 5). Nine respondents did not (somewhat) agree with this statement.

Opportunities

In an open-ended question, we asked the employers about their preliminary insights and conclusions from the pandemic-experiences, for the time after the pandemic. Employers from both regions plan to maintain location-independent and flexible working hours post-pandemic. Employers in RI noted increased trust in remote work and flexible hours, with one company representative supporting the trend towards flexible work forms like job-sharing in leadership positions. Similarly, RII employers highlighted the benefits of home-office and digital communication, emphasizing flexible schedules and family-friendly structures. They also stressed the importance of expanding open work models and job-sharing to retain employees, e.g.: “We have a lot of work ahead of us. And we should—where possible—work even more on open/flexible work models. Work-life reconsideration should become a central theme for every company.”

Figure 3 The Covid-19 Pandemic Has Had a Positive Impact On ... (n = 31)



Finally, many responses state that family-friendly measures in place before the pandemic benefited the organizations during the pandemic. For example, a respondent from RII mentioned that autonomous, self-organized teams have proven effective in many situations. Employer representatives from Region I explicitly point to the continuity in handling family-friendly measures, such as: “Our internal policy on family-friendliness has proven effective and should definitely be maintained.” Thus, the surveyed employers who were already committed before the pandemic seem to agree that these family-friendly measures proved their worth during the pandemic and should therefore be maintained or expanded.

Challenges – From a Gender Perspective

In addressing the question of insights and conclusions for the post-pandemic period, employers from both regions point to various challenges. Employers from RII warn of reproducing gender inequalities, especially in crisis situations: “When both parents are employed, I find that responsibility in a crisis is often delegated to the mother. Fathers and their employers need to be held more accountable here.” Additionally, they highlight potential new inequalities between employees who can work from home and those who cannot, which also can have gendered effects: “There is a risk that employees who cannot work from home will bear the negative consequences of decentralized working. This affects women more than men.”

In RI, the danger of working from home regarding employee’s health is discussed: “More flexible and family-friendly working hours through working from home promote less stressful working and employee’s motivation. Many employees

work more focused and exceed the agreed working hours. Therefore, it must be ensured that employees also take their breaks and have leisure time.” Additionally, the necessity of guaranteed childcare when working from home is emphasized: “Working from home leads to a strong flexibilization of working hours and location. This development is likely ‘family-friendly’. However, working from home should not be confused with childcare.”

In both regional contexts, it is mentioned that, alongside structural changes, cultural adaptation within the company is also necessary. Including employees and their needs in decision-making processes is often considered a central element.

6 Discussion of the Results Applying a *Gender Lens*

The presented study is based on a small-scale online survey of 31 family-friendly employers from two Swiss regions conducted in the spring of 2021, one year after the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic.

As expected from previous studies (cf. Kaczynska & Kümmerling, 2021; Köß & Schäfer, 2020), many of the surveyed family-friendly employers introduced new measures during the pandemic, notably expanding or initiating remote work in over half of the companies. Additional measures, such as job-sharing, part-time options, reduced hours during parenthood, flexible working hours, corporate health management, and extended childcare during a child’s illness were also implemented or expanded. As expected from previous studies (Bonin et al., 2020; Chung et al., 2021; Wong et al., 2021), results further show that employers plan to maintain flexible, location- and time-independent working arrangements, having gained trust in these practices and recognizing their benefits during the pandemic. Thus, these employers who had family-friendly measures before the pandemic benefited in crisis management and plan to maintain and expand these structures in the future.

A clear majority of the surveyed employers agreed that the pandemic positively impacted the family-friendliness of their company. This assessment is more positive than that of the Swiss general population, which was surveyed on the same topic around the same time (Fuchs et al., 2021). When analyzing the data deeper with a gender lens, our results reveal interesting, gendered patterns even in engaged family-friendly work organizations. In what follows, we address and discuss our two research questions.

6.1 (Not) Perceived Gender Differences

Our study shows an interesting contradiction in the perception of the surveyed employers: While women and mothers were not perceived to be more affected by the challenges of the pandemic, most respondents believed that people with caregiv-

ing responsibilities were disproportionately affected. Among caregivers, women and mothers were perceived as bearing the brunt of these challenges. Studies show *first* that women were more affected from pandemical consequences such as short-time work (Dubois et al., 2022; Stutz et al., 2022) and *second* that caregivers, especially women and mothers, were more affected by the negative impacts of the pandemic (Fuchs et al., 2021; Kohlrausch & Zucco, 2020; Lanfranconi et al., 2021; Samtleben et al., 2020; Stutz et al., 2022).

How can this contradictory effect, that the family-friendly employers do not see a gender effect but rather a caregiving effect, which appears to be gendered, possibly be explained? This contradiction can be explained by the hypothesis that within the work organizations (even those that are family-friendly and engaged), there exists a strong *gender-blind* norm of *equal treatment* of all gender (*equality*). This norm may hinder employers from recognizing gender inequalities (at least when firstly asked if there are any gendered effects on employees during the pandemic). The reality in Switzerland, however, remains strongly gendered, especially in the unequal distribution of paid and unpaid work between women and men. This situation has worsened during the pandemic (Fuchs et al., 2021). A *gender-blind* approach in work organizations may thus contribute to these organizations reproducing existing gender inequalities.

A similar effect was found by Fuchs et al. (2019), who showed that unemployment insurance (ALV) in Switzerland is regulated in a *gender-blind* manner, with the handling of individual situations, such as motherhood, delegated to advisors. In a gender-structured society, this implicitly reproduces gender stereotypes. Another similar effect was found in a study of American welfare-to-work offices, where frontline workers acknowledged that it is more difficult for Black clients to enter and succeed in the welfare-to-work program. However, due to a strong *race-blind* norm of equal treatment (*equality*), they did not treat Black clients differently than other clients, thus reproducing inequalities (Lanfranconi & Basaran, 2023).

The above hypothesis of a *gender-blind* norm in the analyzed work organizations is supported by another finding of our study: A slim majority of the employers we surveyed indicated that they had supported employees with caregiving responsibilities more during the pandemic than others. However, only very few indicated that women and mothers were specifically supported. This finding is surprising at first sight, given that most employers believe it is particularly women with caregiving responsibilities who are most affected by the pandemic.

However, this finding can be explained by the hypothesis of *gender-blind* perception among employers who aim to treat all genders *equally*. It explicitly shows that although employers perceive gender effects, they do not act upon them. A more nuanced approach to gender *equity*, acknowledging the challenges faced by women and mothers and actively addressing them, would be appropriate. Specifically, during the pandemic, employers (especially HR and supervisors) could have paid special attention to the challenges that for instance mothers may have faced in

home-offices, which could have involved providing systematical emotional or other forms of support to them. Lanfranconi et al. (2019) shows that mothers – more than fathers lacked emotional support.

While we are not advocating for differential treatment of women and men in work organizations in general, we argue that it is crucial to always consider the potentially gendered outcomes of seemingly gender-neutral organizational decisions – such as in the case of the pandemic the mandatory home office requirement – given the gendered realities – in this case the disparate unpaid workloads. This approach would involve applying an *equity* approach to organizations practices and decisions rather than mere *equality* approach.

Returning to the example of welfare-to-work offices in the USA, the same study revealed that in other, more race-conscious organizations, black clients were treated differently due to the discrimination they commonly face in the US labor and rental markets, and even by doctors. Consequently, frontline workers in these organizations treated black clients differently from others, based on an *equity* norm (Lanfranconi & Basaran, 2023).

A final interesting finding here is that the surveyed employers believe that employees with caregiving responsibilities have experienced better work-family balance due to pandemic-related changes than before the pandemic; however, they do not believe that this holds stronger for women or mothers. Other and representative surveys from Switzerland show that this is not true: People with caregiving responsibilities (and especially single parents and/or those with caregiving duties for children and other dependents) found balancing work and family more challenging during the pandemic than otherwise. Conversely, those without caregiving responsibilities found the balance easier during the pandemic than otherwise (Fuchs et al., 2021; Lanfranconi et al., 2021).

6.2 Perceived Responsibility for Ensuring Gender Equity

Analyzing the open-ended responses regarding governmental support and future challenges with a gender lens, we observe that many respondents acknowledge gendered challenges but do not feel responsible for addressing gender equity issues themselves.

Especially in RI many employers spoke out against any state measures, often referring to the self-responsibility of employees, especially working mothers: “Working mothers cannot afford to just stop working, stay with the children, and let others do their job. ... State support would not change much.” This citation shows how the respondent does not see the responsibility for gender equity with employers or the state but places it exclusively on mothers, who should—if we take the statement literally—prioritize their work over their children. Employers in RII would have liked more governmental support to better support employees (with children) during a crisis like the pandemic. Specifically mentioned was the desire for an earlier shortening of the quarantine period, which was particularly challenging

for working mothers, or the need for more flexible forms of childcare regardless of the pandemic. Finally, there was also a desire for increased financial state support, such as compensation for caregiving tasks due to school closures.

Interestingly, another respondent sees the responsibility more with employers, but specifically with the employers of fathers. They stated, “When both parents are employed, I find that responsibility in a crisis is often delegated to the mother. Fathers and their employers need to be held more accountable here.” This approach suggests holding employers of fathers accountable for ensuring that fathers take on their share of caregiving responsibilities. In practical terms, this could involve allowing fathers to reduce their working hours and take family leave. During a crisis such as the pandemic (and probably beyond), this approach would mean a special focus of HR or supervisors on fathers when designing family-friendly measures, ensuring they can adequately care for their children.

A final interesting statement is: “Basically, the question is whether schools and childcare facilities can simply be closed. Not all families can organize accordingly. The children usually suffer the most, with short- and long-term consequences.” This citation does not solve the question of responsibility; however, it shifts the focus from the gender perspective to the perspective of the children, who are often overlooked in the debate of family-friendly working structures. The analysis by Krstić and Sladojević Matić (2020) constitutes a good starting point, by raising the question, “Should children become key stakeholders in designing family-friendly workplaces?” in their analysis of organizational changes due to the pandemic and the way children perceived those changes.

6.3 Conclusion

The present study is based on an online survey of 31 family-friendly employers from two Swiss regions, conducted in spring 2021, one year after the Covid-19 pandemic outbreak. It reveals that, whilst pursuing a *gender-blind equal-treatment* approach during the pandemic, these employers unintentionally exacerbated gender inequality within the organizations. Although these organizations recognize some *gender-specific* inequalities and risks, they do not perceive it as their responsibility to address them. They instead largely place the burden on caregivers, predominantly on mothers.

The present study has *several limitations* and thus *suggests avenues for further research*: *Firstly*, the online survey is based on a small sample of engaged and family-friendly employers from two regions. Larger-scale studies should in the future trace whether the tendencies shown here also hold true for an extended sample. It would be interesting to expand the sample to employers of different branches, sizes, and regions. It would also be interesting to compare specifically committed and family-friendly employers with other employers. The regional differences shown above cannot be generalized from our very limited sample, however a larger sample would allow to support potential regional differences.

Secondly, the study exclusively reflects the perspective of employers (represented by management personnel, HR managers, or specialists in companies). It appears important, based on our findings (see, Krstić & Sladojević Matić, 2020), to include the perspective of employees and their families in a well-founded study.⁵

Thirdly, the results of this study primarily provide a snapshot of the situation during the pandemic and only sporadically include retrospective (before the pandemic) and future-oriented statements (after the pandemic). Therefore, there is a need for research on whether and to what extent family-friendly measures introduced or expanded during the pandemic will be retained post-pandemic and with which gendered effects.

While the survey sample is not representative of Switzerland and is limited in scale, it is theoretically significant as all surveyed employers are notably engaged and identify as family friendly. According to the argument of theoretical case selection (Flyvberg, 2001), we may thus hypothesize that the gendered effects observed in this sample may also apply to less engaged employers.

Based on our analysis, *we recommend a gender-conscious (equity) rather than gender-blind (equality) approach* when designing family-friendly policies within companies. Since mothers often handle most unpaid care work, companies should reflect this reality to avoid perpetuating gender inequality. This means companies should take some responsibility for addressing gender equity, not only in future crises but generally.

Lastly, the Swiss political system must also take responsibility. As previously discussed, Swiss family policy is one of the weakest in Europe, and childcare is more expensive than in any other European country. This increases e. g., the risk that remote work will lead to more parents, especially mothers, working from home while caring for their children. Therefore, it is crucial to invest in affordable childcare, parental leave, and robust family policies in Switzerland for future crises and beyond.

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5 The author currently works on a project that includes these different perspectives.

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