



Article

The Caregiving Penalty: Gender and Caregiving Effects on Career Opportunities Perceived by Italian Employees

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Abstract

Despite significant improvements in gender equality in recent years, persistent gender disparities remain prevalent in the workplace. In particular, women with caring responsibilities could encounter more barriers in obtaining career opportunities. This study examines the interplay between gender, caregiving responsibilities, and the perception of workplace disparities. We hypothesized that perceived gender-based inequalities would vary depending on the type of caregiving responsibilities, specifically childcare and eldercare. An online survey of 213 employees was conducted to explore this relationship. These preliminary findings suggest that gender biases regarding prospects for career development, leadership responsibility, and opportunities offered by workplaces could persist, and these biases are exacerbated when employees hold caregiving responsibilities, particularly those associated with the care of elderly people. This research establishes a foundational investigation into how gender and caregiving responsibility still influence employees' conception of workplace disparities.

Keywords: stereotypes; gender equality; work psychology; work-life balance; caregiving penalty



Academic Editors: Morten Blekesaune, Isabella Crespi and Elena Macchioni

Received: 23 May 2025

Revised: 30 August 2025

Accepted: 9 September 2025

Published: 12 September 2025

Citation: Lantano, Irene, Giuseppina Dell'Aversana, Gertraud Bacher, and Massimo Miglioretti. 2025. The Caregiving Penalty: Gender and Caregiving Effects on Career Opportunities Perceived by Italian Employees. *Social Sciences* 14: 547. <https://doi.org/10.3390/socsci14090547>

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1. Introduction

Despite the increased participation of women in the workforce and the resulting changes in gender role conceptions, significant disparities between men and women persist in professional settings (Santonnicolo et al. 2023). This enduring inequality not only constrains women's potential but also hinders broader social and economic progress. A key driver of these disparities is the persistent cultural assignment of primary caregiving responsibilities to women (Padavic et al. 2020), generating a complex work-family conflict that disproportionately affects them (Emslie and Hunt 2009). In particular, women are subject to the caregiving penalty, experiencing cumulative disadvantages in career progression, work opportunities, and professional visibility, often as a direct consequence of managing the competing demands of paid work and family care (Shi and Jiang 2024; Cutillo and Centra 2017).

A growing body of literature highlights the increasing prevalence of informal caregiving, defined as the unpaid assistance and support provided by family, friends, and neighbors to individuals in need due to age, illness, or disability. In Europe, approximately 41% of women engage in informal caregiving, compared to just 16% of men (European Commission 2025). This gender disparity is particularly pronounced in Italy, where the figure for

women rises to 60% ([Conciliazione tra Lavoro e Famiglia—ISTAT 2018](#)). This trend reflects a heavy reliance on unpaid, family-based care for children, older, or disabled relatives.

Italy's dependence on informal care is further underscored by its ranking as fourth in Europe for the proportion of individuals exclusively engaged in this type of care, largely managed within families due to a scarcity of public and structural support ([Bettio and Plantenga 2004](#)). The disproportionate burden on women has significant consequences for their employment. Among the different caregiving responsibilities, motherhood is one of the most studied and recognized. In 2023, the European employment rate for mothers with children was 74.9%, significantly lower than the 91.9% rate for fathers ([European Commission 2025](#)). This disparity is even more pronounced when considering individuals who manage a dual caregiving burden. Among the working-age population, nearly 3 million people provide care for ill, disabled, or elderly family members. Approximately one-third (33%) of these caregivers also manage the simultaneous responsibility of caring for minor children ([Consiglio Nazionale dell'Economia e del Lavoro \(CNEL\) 2024](#)).

Women with caregiving responsibilities also face disadvantages in access to promotions, training, and leadership roles ([Padavic et al. 2020](#); [Bobbitt-Zeher 2011](#)). Gender-based stereotypes play a central role in sustaining this imbalance, as they continue to assign women a greater share of care work and reinforce perceptions that women are less committed to their careers due to family obligations ([Volpato 2022](#)). While this phenomenon has been extensively documented in relation to childcare, it is increasingly important to examine inequalities in the perception of workers who care for older adults, particularly in light of population ageing. In Italy, where the median age is 48.3, among the highest in Europe, which is 44.7 ([Infografiche—Rapporto Annuale 2023—Istat 2023](#)), the impact of elder care on gender inequalities is a pressing issue. Yet, little research has explored how different forms of caregiving may perpetuate or mitigate workplace gender disparities.

This study contributes to the literature by examining the perception of gender disparities in the workplace associated with caregiving responsibilities. Specifically, we examine how perceptions of workplace inequality are influenced by gender and various types of caregiving responsibilities, to provide a more comprehensive understanding of this complex and timely issue.

2. Theoretical Framework

2.1. Gender Inequalities in Caregiving Roles

Gender is one of the earliest and most enduring forms of social differentiation, shaping societal expectations and individual identities in ways that influence both in-terpersonal interactions and institutional structures ([Santoniccolo et al. 2023](#)). This process is reinforced by stereotypes, which, as socially constructed cognitive schemas, reduce the complexity of social reality into simplified and often distorted categories ([Rudman and Glick 2008](#)). While research shows that stereotypes can evolve ([Eagly et al. 2020](#)), such changes are not always mirrored in everyday experiences. Deeply embedded gendered assumptions continue to influence behaviors, limit opportunities, and shape the allocation of caregiving responsibilities.

Women frequently face the challenge of reconciling professional and caregiving roles, often resulting in career interruptions or decisions that prioritize family over career advancement ([Ehrlich et al. 2020](#); [Sullivan and Carraher 2022](#)). They are still largely perceived as nurturing, patient, and family-oriented, while men are viewed as strong, ambitious, and career-focused ([Robin and Rajeev 2021](#)). These perceptions stem from persistent gender stereotypes that dictate men's and women's roles both at home and in the workplace. Whereas women's unpaid caregiving responsibilities limit their time and energy for paid

work, men often benefit from a “fatherhood bonus,” using parental status to reinforce professional engagement and increase earnings (Cutillo and Centra 2017).

Family caregiving, especially during the transition to parenthood, reduces women’s free time and makes it less restorative compared to men’s (Gracia et al. 2022; Yerkes et al. 2020). Mothers tend to integrate childcare into their daily routines more than fathers do, meaning that time away from paid work is often more demanding than relaxing. When additional caregiving responsibilities, such as elder care, are present, these demands can significantly heighten psychological distress, particularly among working mothers (Yucel and Latshaw 2024). Care for older or disabled relatives has documented negative effects on caregivers’ emotional, physical, and psychological well-being (Converso et al. 2020). Beyond individual outcomes, elder care can strain family relationships, as care-givers may begin to feel more like service providers than family members, thereby altering the quality of interpersonal connections within the household (Steiner and Fletcher 2017). Overall, the burden of elder care undermines household well-being regardless of the caregiver’s gender, contributing to burnout and chronic stress (Mussida and Patimo 2023; Steiner and Fletcher 2017).

National policies can exacerbate these inequalities. While gender-neutral family policies are increasingly common across Europe, Italian parental leave provisions still reflect institutionalized gender roles by placing primary responsibility for childcare on mothers. Maternity leave lasts five months at 80% of pay, whereas paternity leave is limited to ten days at full pay (Portale Inps—Congedo Parentale: Nel 2024 due Mesi all’80% dello Stipendio 2024). This framework not only reinforces women’s role as primary caregivers but also discourages men from active participation in family life, due to both cultural norms and structural barriers (Cannito 2015).

2.2. *The Impact of Caregiving Responsibilities on Women’s Careers*

This dynamic contributes to occupational segregation and entrenches multiple forms of workplace inequality (Cutillo and Centra 2017). The conflict between work and care responsibilities drives many caregivers, especially women, to seek jobs offering greater flexibility, often at the cost of career advancement and financial stability (Shi and Jiang 2024; Görlich and de Grip 2009) or to leave the workforce entirely. Women’s career trajectories are frequently stalled due to caregiving interruptions (Vagni and Breen 2021; Budig and England 2001). Caregiving responsibilities reduce work resources, such as time dedicated to work, attention put on the job, and respect for workplace rules, requiring caregivers to search for more flexible jobs, which can also lead to missing important career opportunities and financial stability (Shi and Jiang 2024). Many workplaces fail to offer employees meaningful opportunities to meet both professional and family obligations (Zhu and Chen 2022), which fosters perceptions of insufficient organizational support, particularly among women (Liu et al. 2022).

For women who remain employed, stereotypical conceptions about reduced commitment due to caregiving responsibilities can hinder career advancement (Rebelo et al. 2024).

Despite advancements in female employment, significant gender gaps persist, particularly in leadership roles. In Italy, women hold only 2.9% of CEO and 15.6% of managerial positions (Freguja et al. 2025), positioning the country among the lowest-ranking in Europe. This contrasts sharply with nations like Sweden, where women occupy over 42% of similar leadership roles (Rapporto SDGs 2020).

The underrepresentation of women in leadership is a result of multiple barriers that hinder their professional advancement and discourage them from pursuing such roles. These barriers are both social and familial, stemming from the persistent societal expectation that women serve as primary household caregivers. Additionally, these obstacles are often

a consequence of pervasive stereotypical conceptions that portray women as less capable of holding leadership positions. (Brammah et al. 2025). Another significant barrier is the failure of organizations to provide equal opportunities for both genders. For example, women are often offered fewer opportunities for higher education and post-academic training provided by their companies. This lack of access limits their ability to develop the knowledge and skills necessary for professional growth. (Hora 2014)

This stereotypical framing can lead to women being overrepresented in roles that emphasize interpersonal skills or diversity management, which are often perceived as extensions of feminine traits like empathy and emotional intelligence (Yu et al. 2022; Rudman and Glick 2008). Conversely, they remain underrepresented in positions with substantial decision-making authority (De Paola et al. 2022). This dynamic reflects the phenomenon of second-generation bias (Ibarra et al. 2013), where women in the workplace are often implicitly associated with the “care” of the organization rather than its strategic direction (Ely et al. 2012).

Consequently, they are frequently assigned responsibilities in mentoring, team well-being, and diversity initiatives, valuable roles that rarely lead to positions of significant power (Ibarra et al. 2013). While women are often celebrated as agents of organizational transformation (Cavaletto et al. 2019), such narratives do not consistently translate into meaningful structural change. Discrimination rooted in socially constructed notions of gender continues to shape organizational structures and the distribution of opportunities.

Building on this literature, the present study seeks to investigate how gender and caregiving responsibilities influence employees’ perceptions of workplace inequalities, with a particular focus on career advancement, access to leadership roles, professional training opportunities, and the assignment of roles traditionally associated with women, such as mentorship and diversity management.

2.3. Hypothesis

We developed six hypotheses to investigate the perception of gender disparities in the workplace by Italian employees.

The first hypothesis examines gender differences in the allocation of daily time between work and family responsibilities. In line with Yerkes et al. (2020), we predict that women will dedicate significantly more time to family-related activities, while men will devote considerably more time to work-related tasks. We adopt the term “Daily Time Management” (Aeon et al. 2021) to describe how individuals structure and prioritize their daily routines.

H1: *Women will report significantly more time spent on family-related activities than men, whereas men will report considerably more time spent on work-related activities than women.*

The following hypothesis addresses perceived inequalities in access to career development opportunities. Using vignette-based methodology, we will test whether female characters with children are perceived to have the same career opportunities as male characters, and whether differences emerge when caregiving responsibilities involve elderly dependents. This study investigates career development opportunities, access to post-academic training, and the gender-based preferences for roles with increased workplace responsibilities.

The second hypothesis explores perceived gender-based inequalities in access to career development opportunities. Consistent with existing literature (Volpato 2022; Converso et al. 2020), which suggests that being a woman and having caregiving responsibilities, particularly for elderly people, negatively impacts career progression, we posit the following:

H2: Respondents will attribute more career development opportunities to men than to women. Furthermore, they will perceive greater career development opportunities when the individual described in the vignette had caregiving responsibilities for children, but fewer when they take care of an elderly person.

This perception could lead to a perceived decrease in opportunities associated with post-academic training, such as company-sponsored courses or company-funded master's degrees. These are crucial for professional growth but may not be offered to employees perceived as less committed to the company (Shi and Jiang 2024; Hora 2014). In light of this, we hypothesize the following:

H3: Respondents will attribute significantly fewer post-academic training opportunities to women than to men. Furthermore, they will perceive greater opportunities for post-academic training when the individual described in the vignette had caregiving responsibilities for children, but fewer when they take care of an elderly person.

In the following hypothesis, we explore the extent to which gender is associated with preferences for different professional roles among the study's respondents.

Stereotypical beliefs regarding gender and caregiving responsibilities may also compromise the perception of an individual's skills and readiness for increased responsibilities within the company. Specifically, if people predict that having caregiving responsibilities, especially for women, entails reduced job involvement and a lower inclination to acquire new skills and knowledge, it will negatively impact their perceived suitability for leadership roles (De Paola et al. 2022; Ibarra et al. 2013; Ely et al. 2012). This leads to our fourth hypothesis:

H4: Respondents will indicate a preference for a male leader over a female leader. Furthermore, they will prefer an individual who has caregiving responsibilities for children instead of one who takes care of an elderly person.

The fifth hypothesis regards how "second-generation bias" influences perceptions of an individual's suitability for specific organizational roles. Ibarra et al. (2013) define this phenomenon as a subtle, often unconscious bias where women are stereotypically perceived as more nurturing and communal, leading to their assignment to roles that leverage these traits, such as managing diverse groups or mentoring others. While these roles are crucial for organizational functioning, they may not always lead to top leadership positions, potentially perpetuating gender segregation within the workplace. In line with this, we hypothesize the following:

H5: Respondents will indicate a preference for a female leader over a male leader to manage a highly heterogeneous team. Furthermore, they will prefer an individual who has caregiving responsibilities for children instead of one who takes care of an elderly person.

The "second-generation bias" also provides a theoretical foundation for our final hypothesis, which is related to the mentoring role. A mentor, who transmits organizational culture and facilitates the integration of new employees, is often seen as possessing a nurturing nature. This trait is stereotypically associated with women and can be further linked to an individual's experience in caregiving roles.

H6: Respondents will indicate a preference for a female mentor over a male mentor. Furthermore, they will prefer an individual who has caregiving responsibilities for children instead of one who takes care of an elderly person.

3. Methodology

3.1. Sample and Procedure

The study was conducted in collaboration with two companies operating in Northern Italy. The first company provides certification services, while the second specializes in the production of food with a specific proposition for infant nutrition. Both are mid-to-large-sized companies, and both are headquartered in other European countries and maintain a branch office in Northern Italy. Moreover, they both have initiated a process to fulfill the requirements for gender certification, which was introduced in Italy in 2021. This certification was facilitated by Law No. 162/2021, which was enacted to operationalize the initiatives outlined in the NRRP, to promote equality and mitigate the gender disparity in the workplace, following broader efforts to enhance the well-being of workers from both genders. The commitment to acquiring the requirements for this certification highlights a strong interest in these topics and the presence of a culture that is attentive to gender equality, which can lead to the successful completion of this process.

We administered an online survey using Qualtrics. 338 responders participated in the survey. 62 participants did not consent to data treatment and were therefore excluded. 36 participants started the survey but did not submit any answers, so they were also excluded. Finally, we decided to exclude 28 respondents who presented identical values in all the responses (for example, 5555). These values could often be associated with biased answers given due to distraction or a tendency to give extreme answers, which could damage the reliability of the data (Paulhus 1991). So ultimately, we obtained a sample of 212 participants (see Tables 1 and 2).

Table 1. Respondents' Gender.

Variable	Condition	n (%)
Gender	Female	59.2
	Male	39.9
	Other	0.9

Table 2. Demographic Characteristics of the Sample.

Variable	Condition	n Female (%)	n Male (%)
Age	20–35	22.4	21.2
	36–45	28.8	34.1
	46–60	46.4	37.6
	Over 60	2.4	7.1
Degree	High-school Diploma	37.6	25.9
	Bachelor's Degree	9.6	17.6
	Master's Degree	40.8	43.5
	Post-Academic Training	12	12.9
Seniority	2–5 years	14.4	23.5
	6–10 years	15.2	23.5
	11–20 years	32.8	24.7
	Over 20 years	21.6	4.7

Most of our sample were women (59.2%), and the majority (42.7%) were aged between 46 and 60 years old. In our sample, 41.3% got a Master's degree, and 12.2% had post-academic training. 29.7% of participants had been employed by the same organization for 11 to 20 years, and 14.6% of the respondents had more than 20 years of service. In Table 3 we reported information about the caregiving responsibilities of the respondent. In the examined sample, 55.2% of the subjects had at least one child. In Table 4, we report how many children respondents in this category have. The average age of the children ranges between 5 and 10 years. 12.7% of the respondents were responsible for the care of an elderly relative. Of this smaller group, the majority were female (76.9%). Overall, we can conclude that our sample was quite balanced, except for gender.

Table 3. Distribution of respondents' caregiving responsibility.

Variable	Female (%)	Male (%)
Only Childcare	28.1	20.2
Childcare and elderly care	5.4	2
Only elderly care	4.4	1.0
No caregiving responsibility	20.7	18.2

Table 4. Respondent Parental Status.

Variable	Female (%)	Male (%)
No children	45.6	47.1
One child	23.2	15.3
Two children	27.2	31.8
More than two children	4	5.9

3.2. Measures

For this study, we developed a questionnaire incorporating the main areas of interest identified in the literature. The questionnaire consisted of three sections: the first section collected socio-demographic data, the second section included two brief questions to assess the respondents' daily time management between work and family, and the third section focused on questions related to the primary domains of inequality that we aimed to explore in our research. Before accessing the questionnaire, participants were provided with informed consent. Daily time management was measured with two items. Participants were asked to report the average time they usually spend working and the time they usually spend with their family. They could point at a number between 0 and 20 h per day. These questions were formulated following findings from the Italian National Institute of Statistics ([Conciliazione tra Lavoro e Famiglia—ISTAT 2018](#)) and in line with what is suggested in the literature on this theme ([Gracia et al. 2022](#); [Yerkes et al. 2020](#)).

This study investigated the stereotypical associations between gender and caregiving responsibilities in the workplace using four experimental vignettes. The vignettes were developed in accordance with [Gould's \(1996\)](#) guidelines for creating effective stimuli in scientific research. The vignettes were manipulated along two independent variables: gender (male/female, e.g., Paolo/Anna) and caregiving responsibility (caring for two children/caring for a non-self-sufficient relative). Participants were randomly assigned to one of the four vignettes and subsequently responded to a series of questions regarding salient domains of gender disparity, including career development, post-academic training, and leadership opportunities. The conditions are reported below:

Condition 1—Female with childcare role: Anna is a 42-year-old worker. She has a degree in chemistry and has been managing a team of 15 people in a multinational pharmaceutical company for the past 2 years. She has two children, Sara, who is 5 years old, and Matteo, who is 10 years old.

Condition 2—Female with elderly care role: Anna is a 42-year-old worker. She has a degree in chemistry and has been managing a team of 15 people in a multinational pharmaceutical company for the past 2 years. She has been caring for her 74-year-old father, who is unable to live independently and cannot leave the house.

Condition 3—Male with childcare role: Paolo is a 42-year-old worker. He has a degree in chemistry and has been managing a team of 15 people in a multinational pharmaceutical company for the past 2 years. He has two children, Sara, who is 5 years old, and Matteo, who is 10 years old.

Condition 4—Male with elderly care role: Paolo is a 42-year-old worker. He has a degree in chemistry and has been managing a team of 15 people in a multinational pharmaceutical company for the past 2 years. He has been caring for his 74-year-old father, who is unable to live independently and cannot leave the house.

To minimize potential influence on participant responses, the vignettes were constructed with a minimalist design, offering only essential information. The scenarios were developed to be credible and realistic, adhering to some of the main principles outlined by [Atzmüller and Steiner \(2010\)](#). Subsequently, participants provided their perceptions on several domains of workplace disparities:

Career development. The respondent had to choose between three options: Paolo/Anna will maintain the same work position; Paolo/Anna will become head of his/her team; Paolo/Anna will become head of his/her department.

A three-point scale was used to measure this variable, which represented three possible outcomes in an individual's career progression. This variable is the only one used to investigate how respondents attribute a potential career outcome to the character described in the vignettes. The other variables are more closely associated with perceptions of workplace disparities in various work situations and the gender-based preference respondents associate with different roles, as described subsequently.

Post-Academic Training: This variable was employed to explore potential biases in the provision of post-graduate training opportunities by companies. The question was: "Consider Anna/Paolo as one of your employees. If you were Anna's/Paolo's manager, how beneficial would it be for the company to sponsor her postgraduate studies?" Responses were collected on a 5-point Likert scale, where 1 represented "not at all" and 5 represented "very much".

Leadership responsibility—This variable was operationalized to assess participants' evaluation of having one of the described characters in a direct supervisory role. Participants were asked: "Would you be pleased to report directly to Anna/Paolo?" Responses were recorded on a 5-point Likert scale, ranging from 1 ('not at all') to 5 ('very much')."

Managing Diversity—to investigate if women tend to be more associated with "caring role" like managing the diversity of a team in the workplace ([Ibarra et al. 2013](#)), we asked "To what extent, in your estimation, would Anna/Paolo be capable of effectively managing a team characterized by significant heterogeneity among its members? (e.g., a team with a diverse mix of sexual orientations, ages, and genders)." And collected the answer on a 5-point Likert scale, where 1 represented "not at all" and 5 represented "very much".

Mentorship role—This last variable was employed to assess different perceptions of the respondent related to the figure of the mentor, which is someone who takes care of a new employee. We asked: "If you were a new employee, would you want Anna/Paolo as your mentor?" Responses were collected on a 5-point Likert scale, where 1 represented "not at all" and 5 represented "very much".

4. Analysis

We analyzed the results using the software IBM SPSS V. 29.0.1.0.

To test the first hypothesis, an independent samples *t*-test was conducted to compare the reported time spent at work and time spent with family based on the respondent’s gender.

A two-way between-subjects ANOVA was conducted to test the other hypotheses. The first independent variables we considered were the four experimental conditions (female with childcare responsibility, female with elderly care responsibility, male with childcare responsibility, male with elderly care responsibility). We also consider the gender of the respondent as an independent variable to investigate different perceptions between male and female respondents. Following [Armstrong et al. \(2002\)](#), this randomized design was employed to estimate the effects of the distinct subject groups.

The homogeneity of the variable was checked using [Levene’s \(1960\)](#) test. The level of significance was set at 0.05 for all tests.

5. Results

5.1. Gender Differences in Daily Time Management

We started testing Hypothesis 1. A *t*-test was performed to test gender differences in the distribution of Daily Time Management between genders. Analysis revealed significant gender differences in both work and family time: work time ($t(181) = -3.68$ with $p < 0.001$) and family time ($t(181) = 4.16$ with $p < 0.001$). Women spent more time with their families, compared to men (5.64 daily h vs. 3.95 daily h). In contrast, men reported an average time spent at work that was greater than women (9.75 daily h vs. 8.64 daily h). [Table 5](#) reports the effect size estimated using Hedges’ *g*, which, although less common, is better suited for small sample sizes ([Lakens 2013](#)). The values for this effect highlight a substantial difference between both dimensions investigated. The negative sign for “time spent at work” indicates that women spend less time at work compared to men. Conversely, the positive value for the time spent with family highlights that the first group, women, spends more time on family activities compared to men.

Table 5. *T*-test on Gender Differences in Daily Time Management.

Variable	Condition	M	DS	<i>t</i>	<i>p</i>	Hedges’ <i>g</i>
Time spent working	Female	8.64	1.691	−3.683	<0.001	−0.75
	Male	9.75	1.201			
Time spent with family	Female	5.64	2.931	4.168	<0.001	0.59
	Male	3.95	2.112			

5.2. Respondent’s Perception of Gender Disparities in Career Prospects

We investigate Hypothesis 2, which refers to the attribution of career development opportunities. As shown in [Tables 6 and 7](#), the ANOVA revealed a significant main effect of condition ($p < 0.01$), indicating that participants’ evaluations of career development opportunities differed across the four conditions. Respondents perceived significantly fewer career development opportunities for the female character when she had elderly care responsibilities. Post hoc comparisons with Bonferroni corrections showed a significant difference between Condition 2 (Anna with elderly care responsibilities) and Condition 3 (Paolo with childcare responsibilities), $p < 0.01$.

Table 6. Two-Way Anova Between Subjects on respondent evaluation of gender disparities in the workplace.

Variable	Sources	Df1	Df2	F	p	η ² p
Career Development	Condition	1	188	4.685	<0.01	0.070
	Respondent Gender	3	188	4.092	0.044	0.021
	Interaction	3	188	1.096	0.352, ns	0.017
Post-Academic training opportunities	Condition	1	187	1.385	0.249, ns	0.022
	Respondent gender	3	187	1.597	0.208, ns	0.008
	Interaction	3	187	1.108	0.347, ns	0.017
Leadership Responsibilities	Condition	1	188	4.547	<0.01	0.068
	Respondent gender	3	188	3.190	0.076, ns	0.017
	Interaction	3	188	0.601	0.615, ns	0.010
Managing Diversity	Condition	1	188	4.821	<0.01	0.071
	Respondent Gender	3	188	2.339	0.128, ns	0.012
	Interaction	3	188	0.341	0.796, ns	0.005
Mentoring role	Condition	1	188	1.849	0.140, ns	0.029
	Respondent gender	3	188	0.480	0.489, ns	0.003
	Interaction	3	188	1.036	0.378, ns	0.016

Table 7. Mean values obtained in the Two-Way Anova Between-Subjects on respondent evaluation of gender disparities in the workplace.

Variable	Condition	Female		Male	
		M	SD	M	SD
Career Development	Anna—childcare	2.13	0.846	2.00	0.791
	Anna—elderly care	1.74	0.729	1.70	0.657
	Paolo—childcare	2.37	0.688	2.21	0.833
	Paolo—elderly care	2.11	0.791	1.90	0.795
Post-Academic Training Opportunities	Anna—childcare	4.32	0.832	4.53	0.514
	Anna—elderly care	4.07	0.980	4.35	0.671
	Paolo—childcare	4.33	0.734	4.13	0.612
	Paolo—elderly care	3.92	1.038	4.24	0.831
Leadership Responsibilities	Anna—childcare	4.06	0.727	4.24	0.752
	Anna—elderly care	3.94	0.727	4.00	0.649
	Paolo—childcare	3.70	0.775	3.79	0.721
	Paolo—elderly care	3.44	0.651	3.86	0.655
Managing diversity	Anna—childcare	4.03	0.657	4.06	0.748
	Anna—elderly care	3.94	0.772	4.05	0.605
	Paolo—childcare	3.52	0.753	3.83	0.761
	Paolo—elderly care	3.48	0.823	3.67	0.577
Mentoring Role	Anna—childcare	4.16	0.820	4.12	0.781
	Anna—elderly care	4.06	0.727	4.05	0.759
	Paolo—childcare	3.85	0.949	3.79	0.721
	Paolo—elderly care	3.60	0.913	4.05	0.805

Further analysis of response percentages provided deeper insights. Condition 3 (Paolo with childcare responsibilities) was associated with the highest likelihood of significant career advancement (level 3, 36.9%). In contrast, conditions 2 and 4, which involved eldercare responsibilities, were more strongly linked to maintaining job stability (level 1) and limited career growth (35% and 26%, respectively). This confirms our Hypothesis 2.

We also found a statistically significant effect of the respondent's gender ($p = 0.04$). This difference shows that the mean values reported by female respondents were consistently slightly higher than those reported by male respondents. This result can suggest that women have a less negative perception of certain forms of disparity compared to their male counterparts.

Hypothesis 3 examines the attribution of post-academic training opportunities to the character of the four stories told to the respondent. We got a non-statistically significant result, so we could not conclude that there was a gender difference in the attribution of training opportunities.

Hypothesis 4 investigates the perception of the respondent associated with having one of the four characters described as their manager. The ANOVA to test the fourth hypothesis revealed a significant main effect of the four different conditions ($p < 0.01$), but in a different direction than expected. Contrary to our hypothesis of a preference for males as leaders, the mean values, presented in Table 7, indicated that participants showed a preference for females as leaders.

Post hoc comparisons using the Bonferroni correction revealed a statistically significant difference between Condition 1 (Anna with childcare responsibilities) and Condition 3 (Paolo with childcare responsibilities), $p = 0.05$, and also between Condition 1 (Anna with childcare responsibilities) and Condition 4 (Paolo with elderly care responsibilities), $p < 0.01$.

Respondents exhibit a preference for females in leadership roles, particularly when they are associated with childcare responsibilities. This result did not confirm our hypothesis for hypothesis 4. The gender of the respondents did not have any statistical significance in this result.

A similar pattern was observed for Hypothesis 5, which examined preferences based on gender and caregiving for the leadership of heterogeneous groups. ANOVA revealed a significant main effect of condition ($p < 0.01$). As we observed for the previous hypotheses, there is no statistically significant effect of the respondent's gender.

Post hoc comparisons using the Bonferroni correction indicated significant differences between Condition 1 (Anna with childcare responsibilities) and Condition 4 (Paolo with elderly care responsibilities), $p < 0.01$, but also between Condition 4 (Paolo with elderly care responsibilities) and Condition 2 (Anna with elderly care responsibilities), $p < 0.05$. This result confirms what we had hypothesized.

These findings suggest a preference for female leaders in heterogeneous groups, regardless of the specific caregiving role, particularly when compared to male leaders with elderly care responsibilities, but this preference is not related to the gender of the respondents.

At last, we conducted the same analysis for Hypothesis 6, but in this case, we did not obtain a statistically significant result; therefore, we could not conclude that there is a difference in the preference of a male or female mentor for the respondent. There is also no statistically significant evidence of a difference related to the respondent's gender.

6. Discussion

This study investigates employee perception of workplace disparities concerning gender and caregiving responsibilities. The findings of this study provide evidence supporting the persistence of gender-based workplace disparities and their effects across different caregiving roles, particularly in the less traditionally studied context of caring for the elderly.

A key initial finding concerns gendered patterns in daily time allocation. In our study, female participants reported spending more time on family responsibilities compared to male participants, who allocated more time to work-related activities. Although the data

do not allow us to disentangle specific caregiving tasks, these findings align with prior literature documenting the gendered division of labor, in which women carry a larger share of family care responsibilities and men assume breadwinner roles (Volpato 2022; Cannito 2015). Notably, the magnitude of these differences was relatively small, suggesting a potential shift in how men and women conceptualize work and family roles, while also potentially reflecting men's tendency to over-report household contributions (Geist 2010; Kan 2008).

Perceptions of disparities in career development represent a second key domain. Specifically, the results show that eldercare responsibilities, particularly when held by female employees, were perceived as detrimental to career advancement. Gender differences traditionally studied appear even more pronounced when considering female employees who care for elderly relatives. Importantly, these results reflect participants' expectations regarding typical career processes in organizational contexts, rather than their personal preferences. In other words, participants evaluated what they believed to be normative patterns of career progression in workplaces, rather than expressing value judgments.

According to the literature, while childcare is often viewed as a socially recognized and temporary life stage, eldercare is perceived as unpredictable, less socially sanctioned, and unevenly distributed across the life course (Ehrlich et al. 2020; Henz 2004). This expectation may be reinforced by the limited organizational support provided for eldercare, which can contribute to emotional strain, isolation, and other burdens (Converso et al. 2020). Interestingly, this pattern does not emerge for expectations regarding access to post-training activities, suggesting that perceptions of career advancement may be more sensitive to caregiving responsibilities than perceptions of access to development opportunities.

A third domain of findings concerns stereotypical perceptions of female leadership. When asked about personal preferences and evaluation of leadership competencies, the gender disadvantage appears reduced. On the one hand, respondents preferred women for managing diverse teams. Women were generally perceived as better suited to manage highly diverse teams, consistent with research on relational leadership and gender stereotypes (Ibarra et al. 2013; Ely et al. 2012; Rudman and Glick 2008). On the other hand, women are still generally preferred in leadership roles. This is particularly noteworthy given national data (Freguja et al. 2025) documenting the persistent underrepresentation of women in leadership positions in Italy. These measures capture personal attitudes and value-based judgments, distinct from career development expectations, and may reflect symbolic support for female leadership without necessarily translating into real-world promotion or representation (Cavaletto et al. 2019). Alternatively, given the sensitive nature of the topic, these findings may partly reflect social desirability bias (Wetzel et al. 2016), particularly in organizations attentive to gender equality certification.

It should be noted that this bias did not extend to mentorship roles, where no gender differences were observed. This could reflect a limited knowledge about the mentorship practices in Italian organizations, which may have reduced the reliability of the measure, especially since the task required respondents to imagine themselves as new employees.

The study also examined whether these patterns differed by respondents' gender. However, the effects appeared largely transversal. Only when participants were asked to indicate expectations regarding career development did we observe an effect of respondent gender. On average, women reported a slightly more favorable perception of career development opportunities than men, despite the conditions presented in the vignettes. This suggests subtle but meaningful differences in how men and women evaluate career prospects, which merit further investigation.

Taken together, these results reveal a nuanced and sometimes ambivalent pattern of perceptions. While female employees with eldercare responsibilities are perceived as

disadvantaged in expected career outcomes, participants simultaneously report positive attitudes toward female leadership in general. This ambivalence may partly reflect the distinction between expectations about organizational norms and personal preferences: the former pertains to beliefs about typical processes; the latter reflects individual judgments or attitudinal endorsement. Methodological factors, such as the use of vignettes and the limited sample size, may also have influenced responses, suggesting caution in generalizing these patterns.

These findings extend social role theory and provide supporting evidence that eldercare responsibilities carry specific and often more pronounced consequences than childcare for women's expected career trajectories. Childcare may be accommodated as a socially recognized and time-limited role, whereas eldercare is perceived as more burdensome, less predictable, and less socially legitimized. Furthermore, distinguishing between expectations about career processes and personal attitudes toward leadership provides a finer-grained understanding of gendered perceptions, suggesting that theoretical models of work-family dynamics should incorporate later-life caregiving as a critical variable.

From a practical standpoint, these findings underscore the need for organizational policies that explicitly address eldercare. While many companies provide childcare support, eldercare remains largely neglected. Employers can implement flexible work arrangements, caregiver support networks, and training programs to reduce bias and increase awareness among managers. The presence of symbolic support for female leadership also offers an opportunity: organizations may leverage positive attitudes toward women leaders to promote equitable practices, including role-modeling, mentorship programs, and gender certification initiatives. Addressing structural barriers while simultaneously fostering cultural change may help mitigate the disadvantages faced by caregivers, particularly women, and promote inclusive workplaces.

Several limitations must be acknowledged. First, the vignettes used in this study were not validated, highlighting the need for future research employing validated instruments and manipulation checks, following [Atzmüller and Steiner's \(2010\)](#) suggestion. Second, the restricted sample size may constrain the robustness and generalizability of the findings. These methodological constraints may partly explain the observed ambivalence between career development expectations and leadership preferences. We acknowledge the potential for social desirability bias in the responses concerning this topic. However, the study was designed to ensure respondent anonymity, thereby mitigating the presence of this bias. Nevertheless, the data provide valuable preliminary evidence, indicating directions for future investigation. Subsequent studies should include larger and more diverse samples, examine dual-caregiving scenarios, and explore additional contextual factors such as child age, ethnicity, socioeconomic status, and organizational culture to capture the full complexity of gendered perceptions in the workplace.

In conclusion, this study underscores three key, interrelated findings. First, it confirms that significant gender disparities persist at the intersection of caregiving and career development, particularly in relation to eldercare. Second, by distinguishing between expectations of typical organizational processes and personal preferences, our research offers a nuanced understanding of gendered workplace perceptions. Finally, we highlight the critical role of organizations in shaping these dynamics, emphasizing their potential not only to reduce structural disadvantages but also to foster a cultural shift that supports female leadership. Addressing these issues is paramount given the trends of demographic aging and the ongoing need for equitable, inclusive workplaces.

7. Conclusions

This study is a preliminary investigation, and its findings provide a valuable foundation for future research. Our results highlight the differential effects of caregiving roles, demonstrating that long-term caregiving responsibilities, particularly for women, are perceived as a significant hindrance to career advancement.

Addressing gender disparities requires a shift beyond a sole focus on women. Companies must promote equitable work–life balance, encourage shared caregiving responsibilities, and implement training programs to challenge gendered assumptions.

In the Italian context, company policies often limit women’s ability to balance professional and family duties. It is therefore crucial to raise awareness about the need for a more equitable distribution of caregiving responsibilities between genders. Furthermore, a greater emphasis on formal care services for the elderly and a broader societal acknowledgment of the challenges faced by caregivers are essential to combat the stigma associated with these roles.

Author Contributions: Conceptualization, I.L., G.B. and M.M.; Methodology, I.L., G.D. and M.M.; Formal analysis, I.L. and G.D.; Writing—original draft, I.L.; Writing—review and editing, I.L., G.D. and M.M.; Visualization, G.B.; Supervision, M.M. All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

Funding: This research received no external funding.

Institutional Review Board Statement: The study was conducted in accordance with the Declaration of Helsinki, and approved by the Institutional Review Board of Department of Psychology, University of Milano- Bicocca (protocol code RM-2022-562, 27 July 2022).

Informed Consent Statement: Informed consent was obtained from all subjects involved in the study.

Data Availability Statement: The data presented in this study are available on request from the first author.

Acknowledgments: The authors want to thank the enterprises involved in the study.

Conflicts of Interest: Author Gertraud Bacher was employed by the company ASAP Italy. The remaining authors declare that the research was conducted in the absence of any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.

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