DEVCOBA

Developing Collective Bargaining in the Care Sector

WP4 Country Report

ITALY

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Contents

1. Introduction

This report analyses the findings of an **exploratory study of caregivers' individual positions and perceptions regarding job quality, working conditions, and collective representation** in childcare services (ECEC 0-6) and long-term care services (LTC) in Italy.

The research was carried out within the third *research* package (WP4) of the **DEVCOBA Project**, a six-country study that examines the dynamics, mechanisms, and impacts of the development of collective bargaining in the two sub-sectors. Specifically, the project analyses the mechanisms and practices available across the six countries to address the three main employment-related challenges of the care sector: ensuring the extension of collective bargaining; strengthening collective representation; and designing initiatives and policies to tackle the issues of skills and labour shortage.

The current study **integrates workers' perspectives** into the analysis of the issues and dynamics outlined in the Italian national and case studies' reports (Bolelli & Mori 2025a; 2025b) and it is a **first verification point for the evaluation of the strategies implemented by Italian policy makers and social partners in promoting adequate working conditions and tackling labour shortage in the care sector**. The first section of the report analyses workers' opinions and attitudes towards job quality, highlighting their perspectives and priorities regarding the organisation of the services and working conditions. The second part of the report investigates workers' perspectives on voice and engagement in the workplace, and their relationship with their workplace representatives and with the unions.

The research was conducted through semi-structured interviews with 17 workers, of whom 6 working in the LTC sector and 11 in the ECEC sector. The sample covers the most relevant types of services and service providers in the two sectors. For the LTC sector, the sample includes workers employed in domiciliary services and care homes and working for private non-profit and accredited service providers. For the ECEC sector, it includes workers employed in nursery schools and kindergartens in the public and private non-profit sector. The sample is also balanced in terms of the experiences of the workers with workplace workers' representation: at the time of the interviews, 10 of the workers were employed in places that have workplace representatives, while 7 were not. Moreover, 4 of the interviewees are, or have served as, workplace representatives. Geographically, the sample is limited to Northern Italy and covers 3 regions (Veneto, Lombardia and Emilia Romagna). Although it was not possible within the time constraints to expand the sample to other areas of the country, the sample provides variety along the centre-periphery dimension: at the time of the interview, 2 of the workers were working in a large metropolitan area, 9 in a medium size metropolitan area and 6 in a small and peripheral area. Finally, the sample covers a wide range of age cohorts, providing multiple perspectives in terms of priorities and preferences according to seniority, career and life stages: 5 interviewees were between 20 and 35 years old; 7 between 35 and 45 years old; and 5 between 45 and 55.

The Interviews were conducted online in order to cover a wider geographical area and to facilitate participation. This was a particularly effective strategy to reach a constituency that often works long

hours, has short breaks and whose shifts can change short notice. The first interviewees were contacted through a union while the rest were identified through snowball sampling. Although this proved to be an effective strategy, the sample is limited in terms of gender and migration background (1 male and 1 migrant worker). While the first limitation can be considered a symptom of the predominance of the female workforce in the two sectors, the migrant workforce is a growing constituency in the LTC sector. The difficulty in reaching migrant workers through our snowballing channels might reflect the segmentation between native and migrant workers in the workplace and suggests the need to explore different channels for reaching this constituency.

To guarantee anonymity, the data is presented in an aggregated form and the quotes in text have been cited using only female pseudonyms and the generic reference to the sector.

Table 1. Summary Table

Code	Age	Sector	Public/Private
Elisa	45-55	LTC	Private
Annamaria	45-55	LTC	Private
Arianna	35-45	LTC	Private
Valeria	35-45	LTC	Private
Sara	35-45	LTC	Private
Lucia	45-55	LTC	Private
Noemi	45-55	ECEC	Public
Silvia	45-55	ECEC	Public
Petra	35-45	ECEC	Public
Federica	35-45	ECEC	Public
Giada	35-45	ECEC	Private
Ada	20-35	ECEC	Private
Sabrina	20-35	ECEC	Private
Cristina	20-35	ECEC	Private
Francesca	35-45	ECEC	Private
Paola	20-35	ECEC	Private
Laura	20-35	ECEC	Private

2. Working Conditions and Job Quality

The analysis largely confirms the general picture emerging from the national report (see Bolelli and Mori 2025a for details). The worsening of wages and working conditions and the gradual intensification of workloads across the two sectors have affected LTC and ECEC workers negatively and reduced their well-being at work. The unloading of costs and risks on workers, paired with the scarce social consideration of LTC and ECEC professions, has not only reduced the ability of the two sectors to attract new workers but also that to retain the ones who are already inside.

The interviews with caregivers confirm a strong link between job quality and workers' propensity to remain in or leave both their job and the sector. Most respondents report that they still enjoy their work and entered LTC or ECEC out of a sense of vocation. They continue to derive significant personal satisfaction from interactions with children or service users. However, the deterioration of working conditions has led many to consider leaving their current workplace or to be open to doing so if better opportunities arise. Younger workers in the private care sector (in both LTC and ECEC) seem to remain committed to the profession but express a willingness to move to the public sector. Some mid-career workers in the private sector report considering a move to another area of the care sector or leaving the profession altogether. Several interviewees—including younger workers—have already changed workplaces during their careers. These transitions involved either moving to another workplace within the same sector offering more stable and sustainable conditions (eight interviewees) or shifting to a different area of the care sector (two interviewees).

Within the sample, workers currently employed in the public ECEC sector, while critical of the deterioration of working conditions, appear the least likely to consider changing jobs or exiting the profession.

Several elements contribute to this propensity to leave or switch workplaces. While wages and other elements of working conditions, like working time and length and type of contract, are a fundamental element of the idea of "job quality" that emerges from the interviews, the analysis supports the recommendation of the Care Strategy to understand "quality" in a broader sense. "Workplace well-being" emerges as a fundamental element of job satisfaction that revolves around the recognition and promotion of workers' skills and that, together with working conditions, influences workers' decision to stay. The following sections unbox each of these elements and highlight their relevance in relation to the sector, the type of contract, and the age and career stage of the workers.

2.1 Organisation of the Service: Workload and Working Time

The reorganisation of the services along "efficiency" principles related to cost-containment needs is one of the main elements of dissatisfaction for the workers interviewed. In general, this kind of re-organisation entails an intensification of workloads and a decline of service standards that challenge workers' own definition of quality of services. This is particularly relevant in the private sector, where service providers are pushed to compete on lower service costs. But the pressure derived from the lack of resources and investment is also affecting workers in the public segment of these services.

The negative effects of outsourcing and cost-containment management practices are particularly felt by workers in the LTC sector, both in home care and in domiciliary services, where the share of outsourced services is higher**.** In home care, cost-containment has often meant the decrease of the workers-to-users ratio and a related drastic increase of workloads. In domiciliary services, the shift to "minute count" as the principal method of service-financing has led to sacrificing several aspects of service quality to speed.

"The situation worsened above all with the shift from public management to outsourcing; that was the dividing line marking the steep decline of the OSS profession [Socio-Sanitary Operator]. That's when the OSS became underpaid, worked many hours, and had to cover all shifts without any protection. And then, on a qualitative level, we no longer work toward a project — we work on isolated interventions. We are all interchangeable, so if I'm not there, another colleague is, but there is no project." Noemi, LTC

"I started doing this job in '92, and in '92 we were still under public management — there was funding, everything was in place, there was staff. To give you a comparison: I worked in a ward with twenty-five residents when I started this job, and there were ten assistants on the morning shift. Now there are about forty residents, with six people in the morning — that's the ratio we have now. And we do what we can." Annamaria, LTC

Workers feel that they do not have the time to perform their tasks properly and that the relational aspect of their job has been completely sacrificed, worsening not just their but also users' well-being. This is particularly evident and frustrating for workers with longer experience in the sector.

"I remember at the beginning of my career, in the mornings we would sit with the residents … It was fun for us too, and especially for them, because they felt like they were in a family. Now it's a rather sad situation. I see it every day: we go into the main hall, and we find these people there — one sleeping, another with her head on the table… This is the situation, because we don't have the possibility to do otherwise. On one hand, they tell us: you have to do this, this, and this… For example, in the morning you have to guarantee five baths per resident when there is a certain number of you, so you have to make sure that gets done; they have to be ready by nine because breakfast can't be given any later; at eleven you have to prepare them for the meal service. These are the schedules — the day is organized like this, so the resident is there, waiting to be washed, waiting to eat, and waiting to go to bed. Very sad, in my view." Annamaria, LTC

"They've added more tasks to our work… they don't see the workload, they don't realize how heavy it is. If before we managed in the morning to have that extra little chat with a resident, now that's almost nonexistent — the personal relation is gone. Before, they used to say that if we were chatting with the residents, it was because we had time, so since we had time they would add something else for us to do. They don't realize that that time was actually dedicated to talking with the residents, giving them a bit more human connection — something they see as spare time, time that must be filled with some other task, just to cover everything. Because for them, seeing us sitting and talking with one resident or another is time wasted…" Elisa, LTC

Workers report that often, in order to provide the required service level, private providers sacrifice workers' well-being by imposing tighter and variable working schedules. Lack of predictability and longer shifts negatively affect work-life balance and contribute to work exhaustion.

"The work is divided among too few people, the working hours are exhausting, and the double shift with on-call duty subjects you to ten hours of work with fragile users, inside their own homes. It becomes unrewarding and doesn't allow you to balance private, family, and work life. Ten-hour shifts should not exist in a sector that deals with people care." Noemi, LTC

"People are really getting fed up, because… little staff, lots of extra shifts… and of course they even take away the few rest days you do have. We get by with just a short break between one shift and the next, which to me is absolutely insufficient. There have already been cases of burnout in my facility, with girls who burst into tears or other things I won't even mention…" Annamaria, LTC

Workers with a longer experience in the sector notice that outsourcing and the marketisation of management has often been associated with the worsening of working conditions for incoming workers, who are consequently less attached to the workplace. Lack of personnel and time constraints have reduced the time devoted to the training of incoming workers and have led to the hiring of less qualified personnel. This has further increased turnover and reduced the quality of workplace relationships between workers.

The lack of resources is also affecting workers in the ECEC sector. One of the main factors affecting the sustainability of workloads is the child-to-educator ratio. In both public and private settings, these ratios are set without taking into account daily unpredictability or the differing levels of children's needs. Staff shortages often require educators to cover for absent colleagues, resulting into longer shifts and increased exhaustion. Meanwhile child-to-educators ratios do not adequately reflect the presence of children with special needs, which are not always properly diagnosed or formally recognized.

"My colleague was absent, and I was left alone because there were no resources, with three certified children and twenty children with major vulnerabilities. … I mean, you feel frustrated because you know there are things you're supposed to do. If you're used to working in a certain way and you believe in certain principles but you can't manage, you feel professionally frustrated, because you know that what you're doing isn't right. And when you stop a child — this is just one example, but I could give others — without giving an explanation of what you did, a child doesn't understand. And that is not educational work." Lucia, ECEC

"Today, when I sat all the children around that table and told them, 'No, now we're playing with salt dough, period,' even though we know how important choice is, how important personal inclination is… I said to myself, 'They and I have to survive,' but you're at the mercy of events… But why should I feel inadequate when I would never have worked this way in the first place?" Sara, ECEC

Special needs support is a service guaranteed only from kindergarten onwards, leaving nursery schools uncovered. When it comes to kindergarten, the service is often externalised and suffers from

the same problems of understaffing and turnover, meaning that the educators entering the school might not be fully qualified.

"The staff who come in aren't properly qualified, so they're not able to handle the critical situations that come up in the service, and as a result I can't really do my job the way I would in other conditions. I mean, when the support teacher arrives—poor thing—she's basically thrown into the situation alongside a professional, into an environment she doesn't know. She barely knows the setting because she's only been there a few days, she doesn't know the world of disability because she doesn't have the necessary training or experience… and yet I'm expected to entrust her with three certified children. She's supposed to help me manage the class, but if she can't, and my colleague isn't there with me, then there's no way I can handle all the needs that come up on my own." Lucia, ECEC

2.2 Wages

Although it is generally assumed that, in care jobs, intrinsic motivation can compensate for low remuneration levels, **wages emerge as an important element of workers' dissatisfaction.** Wages in the sector are struggling to keep up with inflation and increased living costs, which can turn the choice to leave a lower-paying job into a necessity rather than a preference. **This pressure is felt especially by workers in the private sector, both in LTC and ECEC.**

"I find myself doing two or three jobs, so many times I leave in the morning at seven, seven-thirty, and I get home in the evening at six, six-thirty. […] I live alone with my partner, and the expenses, the bills, those things have to be paid; so at the end of the month… even now I often get to the end of the month really stretched, and I'm not even someone who goes out a lot, because by the weekend I'm obviously very tired. But it's really complicated. I think that's the truly negative part of my job." Petra, ECEC

"The only reason I would consider moving away from home care services — and I'm saying it — is for financial reasons, because the hospital is the only sector where the hourly pay is higher. I would stay if they paid more. Silvia, LTC

"Last year, when I didn't have a full-time position, I earned nine hundred euros a month. But with the responsibility I have? These are small children… So, I didn't want to tell you this as one of the first things, because, in my opinion, it's always unpleasant … It's always unpleasant to focus on money in a job, because I chose it out of passion, and so it pains me to talk about money — but it's a problem." Federica, ECEC

In the private sector**, contractual fragmentation due to the intensive outsourcing of these services** has contributed to keeping wages particularly low. In the LTC sector, some of the private sector collective agreements have not been renewed for years, a delay that has often been insufficiently compensated through non-wage elements like bonuses.

"This thing, however, makes me angry, because these bonuses don't lead to anything. In the end, if I ever retire, they won't be counted, so what will I retire on, if I even get there? Usually, with a work

contract, you think about where you'll end up, but like this, we really don't get anywhere, in my opinion." Arianna, LTC

Workers **at an early stage of their career have fewer opportunities to enter the public sector and are often further penalised for their lack of experience**. Moreover, they often undergo stretches of early career precarity.

"I was very happy at the kindergarten I worked at, to be honest, but I was underpaid, in the sense that it was my first experience; instead of placing me at the fifth level, as the rules say, they placed me at the third level. I also accepted it to get started, because you think, 'I have to do my apprenticeship,' so you accept it. In hindsight, I say, 'It was useful,' but on the other hand I also think, 'Wow, we study so much, it's true that we're young, but why do young people always have to earn less at the start to do their apprenticeship?" Federica, ECEC

"Fortunately, now there are some protections in the permanent contract, because until a few years ago they kept extending these fixed-term contracts endlessly. Even there, I mean, if I want to start a family, if I want to take out a loan to buy a car… that's also an issue, in my opinion. I was lucky because I got a permanent contract almost immediately, but I see other situations where they keep pushing these fixed-term contracts forward, which is particularly difficult for us women…" Federica, ECEC

Despite the general awareness of the inadequacy of wages, emphasis on this issue varies depending on the stage of the worker's career. Both in the public and private sectors, **workers at a later stage of their careers tend to put less emphasis on wages and more on the conditions that have led to a deterioration of service organisation and workplace well-being, such as increasing workloads and the taylorization of care activities.** This might also depend on the fact that these workers have experienced comparatively better employment conditions at crucial stages of their lives and feel less economic pressure compared to the younger ones. It also speaks, however, to the importance of valorising working experience. This observation confirms the multidimensional nature of "quality" in care jobs.

"You just have to accept it. I also know some educators, for example, who work in Switzerland, and when I hear about their salaries, I just think, 'Don't even tell me.' By the time we're thirty-two, we're only making fifteen hundred… I don't even want to think about it." Sara, ECEC

"Yes, because if I were after a higher salary, I wouldn't be an OSS, and I wouldn't have stayed in this field for twelve years. There's a lot I could say about my pay check, but that's not really my issue. My issue is being able to work in a team that actually works—one that comes up with ideas, projects—not with people who respond rudely when you speak, tell you you're wasting your time, or act like they already have all the answers." Noemi, LTC

"I don't care at all about what I'm being paid now at fifty-two. Of course, when my daughter said, 'I want to study education,' I told her, 'No, honey, think about it for a moment.' She could have chosen it—I might have been a little disappointed, but it would have been fine. But honestly, how much I get

paid isn't even part of the equation when I think about the conditions, meaning the way you're working. […] Still, when I think about educators in social cooperatives earning only eleven hundred, I think, 'I've been lucky,' and the choices I made were also made with the financial side in mind." Lucia, ECEC

2.3 Management style and skills recognition

What emerges from the interviews as a fundamental element of workplace well-being is the **management style** and the **level of involvement of workers in organisational decisions**. A good relationship with middle and top management is a fundamental aspect of workplace well-being.

Top-down and authoritative management styles are one of the main sources of frustration and dissatisfaction for workers. Authoritative decision-making is interpreted as a form of disrespect and devaluation of the workers and of their skills. Even in workplaces where the relationship with the top management is less tense, the lack of workers' involvement in work organisation and communication is one of the most felt issues.

"There's no real connection between management and the employees anymore. They've completely checked out—it's like there's this boss who just says, 'Tomorrow it'll be like this, next month like that, shifts change in May,' without even asking us. People are getting really fed up." Elisa, LTC

"Let's be honest, that's the heart of the problem: too much attention is paid to other people, other professionals, but the workers themselves aren't really listened to. That's the big issue, in my view. We've always asked for the same thing: to build a team within our structure but starting from the ground up—with everyone involved: kitchen staff, tradespeople, support staff, OSS, nurses—everyone, no one left out. But unfortunately, there's still a wall there." Annamaria, LTC

"But like I said, it's not just about them making decisions out of the blue. They also need to consider whether we—the ones actually doing the work—are capable of getting it done, whether we can meet the goal, like finishing the work plan for that shift or completing all the tasks. It's not just, 'Do this, and that's it.' …Which, unfortunately, management just doesn't get. […] Even when we speak up, even when we try to work out solutions with the current management, it's really hard—actually, it's impossible. Trying to achieve any goal meant to improve things? It's like talking to a brick wall." Elisa, LTC

"We've got solutions—me and some of my colleagues—that could make the whole place work a lot better, but nobody listens. It's like they say, 'You're just the workers, why should I care?" Annamaria, LTC

"Every year we have to fill out a kind of questionnaire in the company, where we write about the positive things or things we feel we need. A lot of times, we might ask for a bit more time with management or the office staff, and sometimes you get it… but I think there are real communication issues. It's not that there are bad relationships—far from it—but communication problems often get overlooked. Personally, I've often felt a lack of empathy toward me in certain situations when I really needed support." Petra, ECEC

A fundamental figure is that of the *coordinator* (or, in some organisations, *supervisor*), who is usually responsible for organising shifts and schedules and mediating the relationship between the workers and the management. Coordinators can be fellow colleagues with the same or different qualifications, or, in bigger organisations, they can be moved on the unit or service after having been coordinators of a different one. A bad relationship with a coordinator can have several negative effects on workplace wellbeing, especially if coordinators reproduce the top-down management style enforced by management.

> *"There's no point in being loud or intimidating—it may have initially worked with some users, they were hesitant to engage with her. Users have reported that they no longer communicate with her because they feel she doesn't listen. By "doesn't listen," we mean that her tone is rigid and her approach is firm and somewhat authoritarian, which can be intimidating. If it affects us, it's easy to imagine how much more challenging it is for elderly users. This behavior has generated discontent within the organization … the overall environment has become disorganized, which ultimately led to four colleagues leaving the team." Silvia, LTC*

> *"If I'm met with harsh words or criticized for being just five minutes late, that's not acceptable. I am there to provide care and support for the patient, and also to address the needs of the whole family, not to be insulted or reprimanded. My work and professionalism are being questioned, and I cannot accept that. This kind of atmosphere also impacts our work. We are not recognized and supported as professionals by our employer and supervisors yet are expected to assist people with health or psychological needs. How can we effectively provide support if we ourselves are not supported? We are expected to have soft skills, empathy, and problem-solving while working, but at the same time, we are left to navigate situations on our own. There is a clear disconnect there." Noemi, LTC*

On the other hand, a good relationship with a coordinator can drastically improve the day-to-day work experience and mitigate the discontent of feeling that management is distant. This seems to be easier to achieve when the coordinator is a fellow colleague who has experience with the service and similar qualifications.

> *"She's my go-to person, and since it's a – let's say – small school, she's also one of our colleagues, so I get along really well with her; she is part of the team. The trickier part is dealing with the admin side—the school's legal contact or the secretary. If you need time off or have any bureaucratic issues, you have to go through them, and that's where it can get a bit more complicated." Petra, ECEC*

Where there are problems, these are often attributed to a lack of proper training and skills of the person appointed for the task or to a lack of experience with the service that prevents the coordinator from understanding the workers' needs.

> *"And then there's the lack of professionalism among the staff here—I'd even include the head nurses. These days, with those so-called "master" programs, you can go from being a nurse to a coordinator in no time, without really being prepared. So what do they do? They just hide out in their little offices and barely show their faces. Sure, they probably have work to do—bureaucracy in healthcare is insane right*

now, and there's always the fear that relatives with their lawyers—or, as I like to call them, "tiny lawyers"—could start legal trouble in a heartbeat. But still, I wish people would act more professionally. You can't just hide away in a facility; you've got to maintain relationships with your colleagues. It just can't work like this." Annamaria, LTC

"The person in charge—or whoever is the first point of contact with the family—should also represent the caregiver, acting as a link between the service, the caregiver who goes to the home, and the user. But if they're not hands-on with the actual care—and probably don't even really understand what your job involves—nothing really gets done. You go there, and they ask for stuff that just doesn't make any sense." Noemi, LTC

Finally, in some cases, workers feel that the management has forgone its coordinating role altogether.

"There's no real coordination—no one there to go over the work plan, explain how things should be done, or how you're supposed to behave. That used to be in place, even if organized a bit differently. Back then, any issues or problems were discussed as a group. You'd have meetings with the coordinator to figure out what could be improved or changed, the whole process was reviewed—none of that happens now. This system has basically been broken for years." Elisa, LTC

2.4 Physical and mental health

Workers in both sectors report **physical health problems and heightened levels of stress**. These health issues are largely linked to the **physically demanding nature of the work** and are reported most frequently by staff in nursery schools and domiciliary services, regardless of their age.

"Considering that this is a physically demanding job, I'm thirty-seven and have been working as a care assistant for five years, but I've already started having back problems. I've had X-rays, and now I'm scheduled for an MRI because the X-rays showed that it's necessary. Keep in mind that almost all of my colleagues have issues related to the effort required to lift weights, so a lot of the strain falls on our arms and backs." Silvia, LTC

"Well, the classic back pain—that's actually why I started doing yoga. Seriously, that was the real reason. I spent two consecutive years around Christmas taking cortisone and anti-inflammatories." Paola, ECEC

"The negative part, which honestly is weighing on me, is the physical side—the effort we put in every day. Even though I'm young. But when you find yourself doing it seven hours a day, every day… it really adds up. In fact, my colleagues and I often ask, "How will we manage when we're fifty, fifty-five?" Because we're constantly on the floor. We interact with the children at their level, so we're on our knees—knees take the strain. We're always sitting on the floor, so our backs take a hit. We're constantly leaning forward, and every day we wonder how we're going to cope with all this over time." Petra, ECEC

In the **ECEC sector**, workers point out that their job is not formally recognised as physically demanding, which means there are no mandated or structured support measures in place. In the **LTC sector**, by contrast, workers report that existing protocols and procedures are not implemented consistently.

"No, it's ignored. I mean, we don't receive any training. Personally, I've sought out information and even been guided by experts—like personal trainers—so I've learned how to move a child, how to lift them safely. But in general, we aren't provided with training or support." Petra, ECEC

"Definitely, yes, and not just mentally—also in terms of physical strain, lifting, workload, moving around, and the use of equipment. Right now, it's certainly a physically demanding job. Our backs are often stressed in ways that aren't correct because we don't have the proper aids. And to get any equipment, you have to bring it up in each team meeting and hope someone listens. And it doesn't always happen." Noemi, LTC

Regarding stress, while all workers acknowledge that a certain level of mental strain is inherent to the relational nature of their work, many report increased stress linked to the **deterioration of relationships** with colleagues, management, and families.

"I think that having problems with colleagues—if we want to look at it in terms of the percentage of work-related issues—takes up a lot of [mental] space. Dysfunctional dynamics between colleagues definitely account for more than half of the problems." Arianna, LTC

"It's a daily struggle, both with our "superiors"—for lack of a better word, since they still insist on calling themselves that, which already shows a lack of collaboration—and with our own colleagues." Annamaria, LTC

"You're on your own, you don't have all the resources that a facility might provide, and you're in close contact with families who don't always recognize the professionalism of the worker." Noemi, LTC

For ECEC workers in particular, **relationships with families** are a central concern. Their accounts reveal a widening divide in parent interactions: some parents are disengaged and see the school merely as daycare, while others are highly involved, to the point of questioning the authority and expertise of the staff. Although workers recognize that family relationships are an integral part of their role, many feel that the associated pressures and stress have intensified over time.

"From my point of view, this is wrong. Let's start with the fact that I have a life outside of work, and when I finish at school, I want to completely disconnect. I already get messages from parents at midnight… it's disrespectful. I mean, I'm getting messages at midnight, and I'm supposed to have a Facebook group to hear from a parent telling me how to put their child to bed, how to get them to sleep? No, thanks. I wouldn't do that to a doctor, an office worker, or a baker—I wouldn't tell them how to do their job, so why should I accept that? I really believe in this, and I believe in respecting the mental health of us teachers and educators, whatever our role is, because at a certain point, you just… burn out." Sabrina, ECEC

"Our work is based first and foremost on empathy with the child, and secondly with the parents. So if you don't have empathy for the parent—who may have had a particular life story…—it can be difficult. But parents can be very demanding, that's for sure, with messages, calls, questions, and sometimes even a bit inappropriate. If you're absent for personal reasons, they want to know why their teacher isn't there." Giada, ECEC

"What you create is wonderful, but on the psychological side, it's very stressful. Meeting certain requests or needs—which, of course, parents have—isn't always easy, because they often expect us to be everything: teacher, doctor, psychologist. And so, sometimes it's really difficult." Petra, ECEC

2.5 Perceived social value of care work

While workers resent, to various extents, the scarce consideration of their skills and value within the organisation and the lack of adequate remuneration, the feeling of being undervalued tends to increase when thinking about the social perception of their job. In general, workers within both sectors feel that society at large does not have an idea of the responsibilities that come with the job and of the skills required to perform it.

"It's a role that really doesn't have its own identity, because people end up mistaking us for caregivers, housekeepers, or "pseudo-nurses." You get asked to prep medication, do dressings, or even take out the trash when needed. All the professionalism we've built up over the years—for the families and even for our employers—just doesn't seem to matter." Noemi, LTC

"People really don't get how much responsibility we have. We're highly trained in pediatric life-saving techniques, anti-choking maneuvers, and even things like giving adrenaline shots in case of severe allergies. Honestly, I sometimes feel more important than a doctor, because during the day you're dealing with stuff like a child falling, getting a cut that needs stitches—you have to handle the situation, calm the parents, make the right calls. These are huge responsibilities, but so often they go completely unrecognized. This is something I care deeply about, because the responsibility we carry is enormous—way more than in a lot of other jobs—and we barely get any acknowledgment for it." Petra, ECEC

In ECEC, some educators in nursery schools feel that their role is particularly underestimated, even compared to workers in kindergartens. he latter tend to be considered as the first step of the child's educational trajectory, while nursery schools, being more focused on the care tasks, do not receive the same kind of social recognition and consideration.

"Nursery educators, even though we work with such a delicate age group—which isn't just me saying it, it's what pedagogists and psychologists say—don't really get the recognition we deserve. I've always felt that. Already at the kindergarten level, some parents—though not all—treat you differently. They see you as a "teacher." And that word, "teacher," doesn't really fit the role of an educator. I'm proud to be an educator; I always say, "I'm not a teacher, I'm an educator," because I like it, and it covers more of what I do. But people still think more of "the teacher". Sara, ECEC

Overall, workers in both sectors feel that there is little real commitment to investing in the sector or to meaningfully reforming its governance. One public-sector ECEC worker describes a recent ministerial evaluation initiative as merely cosmetic. Another worker in the private sector says she has been considering job opportunities abroad, convinced that the educational care sector in Italy is particularly undervalued.

> *"They wanted to make it look like they were really asking teachers for their input by sending out a questionnaire to schools. But the scientific committee sent out this questionnaire that was honestly ridiculous — it was just a checklist where everything was already supposed to be fine, so there wasn't really any room to say otherwise. Some people even said, "Let's not fill it in as a form of protest."*
> *Cristina, ECEC*

> *"The importance they place on the role of the educator already makes a difference, because for them it is the most important thing they have in the country. You have to develop future workers, people who will then carry forward what has been built so far, and they place great value on this. As a result, both salaries and professional status improve over time. It's not like in Italy, where you graduate, reach a certain level, and then from the age of twenty-five to sixty or seventy you stay at that same level, with no real potential for career growth." Petra, ECEC*

3. Proposed Solutions

Workers in both sectors agree on the need of a radical change in national care policies. They call for the **public recognition of the value of both sectors, beginning from an increase in public investment**. This investment request is articulated both in terms of investment in personnel and in the service overall.

> *"Our sector really needs to be rethought, starting with financial support and proper economic recognition. You'll see how many people would return to this work if they started paying at least 1,800 euros per month. You'd see the line of people wanting to become nursing assistants (OSS)" Silvia, LTC*

> *"I mean, a lot should be invested in education, in my opinion—starting with educators, teachers, and everything that surrounds them. We really need to invest in education, especially in today's society, in my view." Giada, ECEC*

Workers in both LTC and ECEC express a strong desire for **changes in organizational practices to achieve a more sustainable organization of work**. They call for increased staffing levels, a decrease in the user-to-operator ratio, improved shift scheduling to enhance predictability and reduce stress, and a more balanced distribution of tasks and workloads. In the LTC sector, workers emphasize the importance of ensuring sufficient rest time between shifts, while ECEC workers highlight the need to establish adequate breaks during the working day. In private ECEC settings, where contractual working hours are largely devoted to face-to-face activities, workers emphasize the need to rebalance working time by allocating dedicated hours for preparation and training. In the public ECEC sector, where collective agreements already include a higher share of non-contact hours, workers argue that these hours remain insufficient and should either be increased or supported by higher staffing levels to make the current allocation sustainable.

> *"We should all have the same range of hours so we can easily cover for each other. In healthcare, there's this on-call system — the so-called 'pronta disponibilità' — so when you call, you know you can swap shifts or make changes that are more or less equal in terms of hours…Also, in terms of our own protections—against work-related wear and tear, for example—things like clearer regulations and more balanced work shifts would help. For instance, not having to handle four baths in one shift." Silvia, LTC*

> *"Honestly, having fewer hours would really help, because that's a big issue for us — we're working a lot of hours. Thirty-five hours, and that's a lot—face-to-face. At least if they were, I don't know, twenty-five face-to-face hours and ten for activities, preparation, and so on… Instead, we have thirty-five face-to-face hours." Paola, ECEC*

> *"We have a very short lunch break, about twenty minutes, and that's it. There's no real coffee break or pause… Yes, we have to go to the bathroom, so we ask a colleague to watch the children for a minute, or maybe you need to make an urgent phone call, but breaks aren't officially provided. In my opinion,*

being able to take a short pause to clear your mind—even if not every two hours—would be very important." Petra, ECEC

Regarding health and safety, workers in both sectors emphasize the importance of **having adequate work tools and access to psychological support**. ECEC workers, in particular, stress the need to acknowledge the physical and psychological stressors inherent in their job and to implement effective support measures.

"But there are definitely situations in your day-to-day work that cause real physical discomfort, and over time they're bound to lead to physical problems. Just think about how things are set up: the sinks and washbasins where you wash the children and take care of their intimate hygiene, the changing table, or a table that's too deep so you can't reach the child properly and end up stretching like Superman or standing up a million times. The furniture, for sure — and the overall layout of the space. […] I believe there are furnishings or tools that could make that work different." Ada, ECEC

"In addition to this, educators should also have—if I may say—support, as we mentioned before, on a physical level, such as training to prevent reaching a breaking point, like back injuries or joint problems. But there should also be psychological support, because we are often subjected to significant mental and physical stress. So, in my view, psychological support—or even group mindfulness sessions for the team—are areas where the organization should invest, because I think they are very important." Petra, ECEC

"We definitely need external support, like a dedicated professional, a psychologist, or joint courses—team-building sessions, for example. I think that would be extremely important, and in my opinion, it's largely missing in our organization. I've seen that when we do it on a small scale among ourselves, it really brings results—maybe just for a few days, but the effects are immediately noticeable. It should really be a continuous initiative throughout the year." Giada, ECEC

Most workers expressed frustration at their limited involvement in decision-making and wish for their **professional expertise to be better recognized**. Those who have experienced difficulties with management or coordinators emphasize the need to **improve selection and recruitment processes**.

"We've been asking for this forever: let's build a team within our facility, let's really create this team, but starting from the bottom, from all the workers — kitchen staff, maintenance workers, support staff, care assistants, nurses — everyone, no one excluded." Annamaria, LTC

"We would also like to participate in meetings, perhaps with the council, to share some of our needs as teachers—not strictly for bureaucratic or school-related decisions. Maybe a few meetings have been held, but these are always the requests that often aren't fully addressed." Petra, ECEC

"Regarding management, in my opinion, they should take into account not only years of experience but also the educational background and the curriculum of those assigned to positions of responsibility." Noemi, LTC

Finally, many workers highlighted the importance of **enhancing and expanding training opportunities**. Improving training during the onboarding process is viewed as a way to reduce turnover and address gaps in the skills of new employees. At the same time, ongoing training is seen as a means to strengthen workplace dynamics, improve interactions with families, and keep staff up to date with current practices.

> *"So, if I had to talk to a colleague who is new to this work, it's all about mentoring; doing a period of shadowing or guidance—but not just any mentoring, where you're thrown into home care, and I quickly give you two pieces of information in the office, and then off you go. Mentoring should allow you to enter families with proper guidance. You come with me, and I show you, not because I'm better, but because I know the family. I show you how I structured the intervention so we can work together in synergy." Noemi, LTC*

> *"I believe that ongoing training is the answer. I find it particularly useful, for example, the training we currently do, which is promoted by the local authorities and takes place directly in the schools, even the municipal ones. It provides concrete tools. They often also address issues like burnout and the challenges of managing relationships with families, which is another very important topic. For instance, the suspension of judgment—these kinds of aspects. That is, not judging families, but seeing to what extent they can engage with the educational project and thus draw out the positive contributions they can make." Cristina, ECEC*

4. Voice and Representation

Low levels of workers' engagement and participation are a fundamental issue in the care sector in general, but particularly in the ECEC and LTC sectors. When asked why, in their opinion, it is so hard to organise workplace or national protests workers across the two sectors have provided several possible answers.

Part of the answers confirm the **"prisoner of love" dynamic**, whereby more disruptive forms of protest are avoided due to a sense of responsibility towards the service users:

> *"It's just not possible to do something like that. It's not the first time we've thought about it, but when you stop and think about the resident, the elderly person themselves, you realize it wouldn't be right for them. Even if it would help both them and us, it's just not fair to the person in that moment—they might really need something else. It's hard. Really hard." Elisa, LTC*

> *"Even the idea of going on strike… maybe it's because we work in such a small place that you just don't see strikes here. It's not like in Milan. But you always put your work first. Going on strike would mean not showing up, maybe all of us together—but then you think, "What about my kids?" You've got this bond with them and with their parents, and you'd almost feel bad for them. It's wrong, because sometimes we should put ourselves first and make our voices heard. I don't know why it's like this. And honestly, I've never even heard of anyone striking over this." Federica, ECEC*

However, one of the most important reasons for lack of participation, according to workers who are more experienced and more active in the workplace, is the **lack of awareness** of their colleagues on their rights and responsibilities:

> *"But the problem is the group isn't there, and if you don't have a solid group, it's hard to plan—you risk it being a complete flop. Like, you call a strike, and then only two people show up. That's why I say we need to start from the ground up: build a group, get everyone on the same page. And honestly, even when there's a national strike, a lot of colleagues don't really get how it works. People come back to cover for those on strike, thinking the others are still striking anyway." Arianna, LTC*

> *"I've noticed, as I mentioned earlier, that incoming OSS (social-health workers) are not adequately trained regarding their rights and responsibilities, both from an ethical and professional standpoint. It's not just about knowing how to carry out hygiene tasks; it encompasses the entire scope of the OSS role. For instance, if you know you are not authorized to prepare therapy, you must not do it—because you would be legally responsible—but if no one informs you, you simply won't know. There have been times when the team has been told, "You must prepare the therapy." My response is: wait a moment, we're not required to prepare therapy—we know how, and we do—but if I refuse, no one can reprimand me. Without this foundational understanding, it's difficult to achieve meaningful results with younger or less experienced workers." Noemi, LTC*

This impression is also confirmed by workers with less experience with workplace representation, who feel that they do not have any trusted source of information. This feeling is enhanced when no one in the workers' environment who is familiar with these topics or has experience with the unions.

In these cases, a good relationship with colleagues becomes fundamental to accessing information about their rights and responsibilities.

> *"From my point of view, in the end, we're kind of just thrown into the working world. I mean, even at university—at least the one I went to—no one really explained what we were supposed to do, or anything like that. When I got hired… well, before becoming an educator, I'd always worked as a waitress and in other jobs, but none of my bosses ever said, "Look, if you have any problems, here's who to talk to," or anything like that. Nobody ever tells you." Federica, ECEC*

Both experienced and less experienced workers have, in various moments, felt isolated, and refer to **rising individualism** as one of the causes for lack of engagement.

> *"I used to work in the services, and back then, the service really meant something. Now, that's not how it is anymore. It's no longer about the service—it's about your class, your colleague. Even the school itself isn't seen as a whole; it's "my kids, your kids." But really, they're the school's kids—they're neither mine nor yours. I think this all comes from a way of thinking that's changing, and maybe that's why the union side of things is losing ground too, because individualism is taking over." Lucia, ECEC*

This feeling of isolation is enhanced by a **lack of trust in the support from society at large:**

> *"I agree that maybe we don't make ourselves heard enough, but I also see that it's still a profession that people don't really value. If the starting assumption is already that it doesn't matter… I've often been told things like, "What effort are you putting in? You're with the kids all day—what's so hard about that? You're not down in a quarry hauling marble," for example. If that kind of ignorance—pardon the term—is the baseline, there's only so much you can do. I can say, "Yes, I'm protesting," but if people don't even understand the work of those who are protesting, it's hard to get anywhere." Petra, ECEC*

> *"Even parents tend to take us for granted from the get-go. That's why I was saying—they'll ask for things that leave me thinking, "How am I supposed to do this for your kid when I've got seven others to look after?" I feel like it all comes from a messed-up idea of society, and I catch myself thinking, "How am I supposed to change the way people think?" So yeah, I go in already a little skeptical." Petra, ECEC*

The combination of isolation and mistrust can feed into the idea of the **futility of organised protest**:

> *"So, I figure, even if there are people out there who're supposed to look out for our basic rights… well, if nothing's happened so far, I'm already skeptical. Honestly, I've never really thought about it, because even though I'm young, I'm like, "Yeah, if nothing's changed all these years…" Petra, ECEC*

Finally, participation is often **actively discouraged by management**, which tends to isolate, if not punish, those workers who are more vocal about problems in the workplace.

"For me, they're really scared of what happened to me, because over the years they've seen how it went—how I got all those letters and everything. So even if they want to complain, they just do it among ourselves. But with him, they treat him like he's untouchable. See, he likes being treated nicely, hearing that he's good at what he does—which I don't do—so they play it safe. Honestly, a lot of people avoid trouble that way. And who ends up as the scapegoat? Me—the one who's now collecting all the letters." Elisa, LTC

Regarding their relationship with the unions, workers show **different levels of knowledge and trust**. An active and present workplace representation is associated with higher levels of trust, while workers who never experienced workplace representation tend to see unions mostly as service providers or as last resort options in case of contract-related issues.

"I'm in contact with them, but I've never been a member. Often, it's people who have had some kind of problem for one reason or another who join. One of my colleagues comes to mind—she even went for help with calculating her hours. They also provide support with contracts, because some of the older generation had the old teaching degree and then did this six-month course." Paola, LTC

"I've never felt the need, because I always find it better to have a direct conversation with the person above you—your management, so to speak—rather than going elsewhere. Of course, it's a worker's right to reach out to the union if needed, and that's the correct route if there's a problem. But I think it's usually better to start with dialogue: if an issue arises, try to understand why. If you don't get an answer, or you hit a wall, then of course you act differently. But I think it's right to go directly to the people above you—the management, the principal, the administration, an office, whoever is in charge." Giada, ECEC

The interviews seem to confirm that the two main confederal unions, CGIL and CISL are the most represented within workplaces. Alternative forms of representation are rarely mentioned, although one worker in the public sector reports participating in a pedagogical association promoting an alternative model of education (the Movement for Cooperative Education https://www.mce-fimem.it/).

Despite these observations, which in many ways confirm the obstacles to organising highlighted by national and local union representatives (cit.), **the interviews return the image of a workforce that is more vocal than expected**. Several of the workers in larger workplaces, including those who are not representatives, have at various moments in their lives been vocal about issues at their workplace, both individual and collective.

"Certainly, if there were a national strike for the renewal of our contracts, I would be committed to explaining why we should participate. Our team is relatively young, though with a few people nearing retirement, and it has recently come together. The members are generally willing to listen to these issues. They're not politically active—apart from one colleague, the others aren't involved in politics at all—but they are open to listening, and it seems to me that there is still a sense of awareness and concern." Ada, ECEC

"When I arrived, I noticed that, especially in early childhood settings, the typical annual school assembly with union representatives was basically ignored. I came in and said, "Excuse me, you're complaining about this, that, and the other thing, but consider that I come from schools where, even during COVID, when there was an assembly, we all connected through the smartboard from the main hall, and activities started afterward." In other words, everyone participated, also out of respect for the two or three people who actually take the time to do it. I have to say that one colleague agreed with me, but she used to be in the minority. So gradually, even the temporary staff are told that the assembly is a right, that it's paid, and that it's not the same as a strike. Now, in our school, we'll all be taking part together this year as well." Cristina, ECEC

Others note that their own involvement in workplace organising has had a positive impact on them:

"It was a really intense experience, but also super formative—something I'll carry with me forever. It helped me open my eyes and develop more critical thinking in my field, to be more careful, and to be able to recognize a problem and step up personally when needed. And believe me, we have plenty of problems. So yeah, that period was tough, but I think in the end we got what we'd been asking for. I've got to say, it felt amazing to see our requests actually recognized. But, of course, there was a flip side—some of us just couldn't handle the stress it brought." Silvia, LTC

This observation might have been influenced by our snowballing channels. However, even in the smaller non-unionised workplaces, workers report having brought up organisational issues to the management outside of traditional representation channels and being open to forms of sector-wide organised protest, including strikes.

"Let's say that sometimes decisions are made that we don't agree with— That's when the grumbling starts, and we end up having a proper discussion about it. And quite often, we actually win. […] I've argued with the principal of my school—if I have something to say, I say it. Sure, he'll get mad, but then it passes, like with anyone. Maybe nothing will change, but on the other hand, if you don't say anything, everything just goes on as it is." Paola, ECEC

[Interviewer: Would you participate in a strike for a renewal of your collective agreement?] "I think everyone would. Because honestly, this is really starting to… really, our salaries are low, even considering the current cost of living." Paola, ECEC

Within the sample, **propensity to engage in more radical forms of protest was higher than expected**. Although on the one hand, interviews confirm the existence of a fear of damaging the service users, the worsening of working conditions and the increased economic pressure seem to have provided to push to overcome these fears, at least in part of the workforce.

"I'd say that a strike in a nursing home ends up being mostly symbolic, but honestly, I think it's the only tool we've got. To me, a strike or protest outside the facility—like in front of the regional offices or the head of ARIS—is the strongest move. Right now, it seems like the only way, because at least you can hope journalists write good pieces that might shake things up, even if I'm skeptical. But you can

really see how scared they are about the facility's image, especially where I work. I just don't get why the union reps have never pushed to put up banners—either I'm missing something, or they just never really went that far." Arianna, LTC

"I think the first thing we can do is bring these issues to our union representatives and have them raise them, because we're lucky to have a forum where the unions and public administration representatives meet and actually listen to us. After that, if those steps aren't taken seriously or nothing comes of them, I personally would move on to more concrete actions, like strikes or things like that — although I'm not sure how much support they would really get." Ada, ECEC

With few exceptions, **unions still seem to struggle to see or intercept this organising propensity** when it presents itself, even in workplaces that have in-house representatives.

"From what I hear, the unions are scared to call assemblies because they're afraid no one will show up. So we end up back at square one: we have to form a group to get people there and explain things properly. People just don't have any culture around their work rights—they don't know what it means to take part in an assembly, or what company-level bargaining is, or even what our contract really says. Honestly, if I were a union rep, I wouldn't get mad if people didn't come—I'd ask why. I wouldn't just think, "Let's not organize an assembly because no one might show up." Arianna, LTC

"I feel like the union should make sure their reps actually do their job. Right now, it seems like reps get chosen and then left there indefinitely, without anyone checking on what they're actually doing. I mean, if a provincial rep comes to an assembly and sees only a handful of people show up once, twice, three times… assemblies don't get called unless the union requests them. Don't they ask themselves, "Something's off here"? And what do they say? "This isn't a unionized environment." Well, no kidding—it's hardly unionized. There's barely any information, and we feel pretty abandoned." Arianna, LTC

When they do manage to intercept it, however, the relationship with the workers drastically improves and they obtain significant results also in terms of membership:

"Some of us only became members fairly recently; I was already a member. But [in this protest] the union wasn't a tool for achieving my personal goals—it was a form of protection. There were services, sure, but I had never felt protected like this before. In this case, I felt supported by the union, which took our requests forward. They [came in and] formalized and signed off on the demands we had been making for years." Noemi, LTC

5. Conclusions

The findings broadly align with the trends highlighted in the national report. Declining pay and working conditions, along with steadily increasing workloads in both sectors, have negatively impacted LTC and ECEC staff and diminished their workplace well-being. The shifting of costs and risks onto employees, combined with the low societal recognition of these professions, has made jobs in these fields less appealing—not only to potential newcomers but also to those already employed.

While wages and other aspects of working conditions—such as hours, contract duration, and contract type—clearly emerge from the interviews as core components of "job quality", workplace well-being plays a crucial role in job satisfaction.

Care workers' idea of well-being is centred around the acknowledgment and the fostering of their skills. Wages are only one part of this acknowledgment, which requires instead the active involvement of the worker in decision-making and the empowerment of the workers to perform their job according to their standards. The implementation of more horizontal management styles emerges a fundamental step to foster job quality and retain younger and more experienced workers in the sector. Still, the incapacity of wages to keep up with living costs and inflation, especially in the private sector, represents a fundamental failure of the Italian care system, which is turning the decision to quit the sector into a necessity rather than a preference.

Regarding workers' voice and participation, the observations largely confirm the obstacles to organising highlighted by national and local union representatives. The prisoner of love dilemma, the isolation, the lack of awareness, and the fear of repercussions all come together to discourage engagement and unionisation. However, the interviews also return the picture of a workforce that is more active and vocal than expected, despite all of these obstacles.

The worsening of working conditions and the gradual exclusions of workers from the organisation of the service seem to have fostered a more proactive attitude amongst the workers interviewed. Despite the analytical limitations deriving from the small size of the sample, the interviews seem to suggest that there are untapped organising resources in the two sectors that unions might utilise to support mobilisation and targeted campaigns. This would require overcoming certain preconceptions about workers in the sector and creatively adapting communication and organisational strategies to the needs of the workforce.