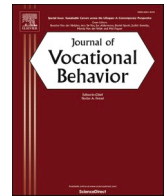


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# Family-friendly policies and workplace supports: A meta-analysis of their effects on career, job, and work-family outcomes

Rutger Blom<sup>a,\*</sup>, Eva Jaspers<sup>a</sup>, Eva Knies<sup>b</sup>, Tanja van der Lippe<sup>a</sup>

<sup>a</sup> Department of Sociology, Utrecht University, the Netherlands

<sup>b</sup> School of Governance, Utrecht University, the Netherlands

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## ABSTRACT

Today, many individuals face the challenge of combining work and family responsibilities. To help employees tackle the issues they face when juggling work and family, organizations often provide formal family-friendly policies. In addition, other people in the workplace, such as supervisors and coworkers, can support employees in an informal way in work and family reconciliation. In this study, we provide the most comprehensive meta-analytic review to date that examines the effects of family-friendly policies and workplace supports on career, job, and work-family outcomes. Based on 1680 effect sizes from 229 samples, our findings indicate that, overall, small to moderate positive effects exist across a wide range of outcomes. Supports tend to have an overall stronger effect than policies, although the differences between individual policies and supports are more nuanced. Moderator analyses indicate that people with greater family demands, such as parents, seem to benefit less. In addition, family-friendly policies and supports appear more valuable in national and organizational contexts that are disadvantageous for people that need to combine work and family responsibilities.

## 1. Introduction

Today, many individuals face the challenge of combining work and family responsibilities. As the traditional heteronormative model of the working man and the stay-at-home woman is being replaced by a dual-earner model (Bagger & Li, 2014), dividing care responsibilities has become increasingly complex. At the same time, due to an ageing population and government policies, an increasing number of people have been tasked with caregiving responsibilities (Kayaalp et al., 2021), not only for their children but also for other family members or friends. These changes have led to a substantial challenge for people since increasing and competing demands arise from both the work and family domain. To help employees tackle issues when juggling work and family, organizations can provide family-friendly policies (French & Shockley, 2020). In addition, other organizational actors, such as supervisors and coworkers, can help employees in work and family reconciliation. These policies and supports are viewed as essential for a healthy work-family balance and are thought to be beneficial for other work-related outcomes as well, including career and job outcomes.

An increasing number of organizations is aiming to create a more family-friendly environment, through formal policies and informal supports (Mesmer-Magnus & Viswesvaran, 2006), to also achieve better organizational outcomes (Akter et al., 2022), but good practices are not disseminated widely yet (Lyonette & Baldauf, 2019). The aim of this study is to gain insight into how important family-friendly policies and workplace supports are by conducting a comprehensive meta-analysis of their differential effects on a wide range of career, job, and work-family outcomes.

\* Corresponding author at: Padualaan 14, 3584 CH Utrecht, the Netherlands.

E-mail address: [g.d.blom@uu.nl](mailto:g.d.blom@uu.nl) (R. Blom).

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In this respect, we utilize a growing body of research that has emerged in the past two decades. Many of these studies, including previous meta-analyses, are insightful on their own, but they often focus on a limited number of policies, supports, or outcomes, or do not take the various stages of implementation into account (Fan et al., 2022). For example, a number of meta-analyses have focused exclusively on family-friendly workplace supports (French et al., 2018), on a specific type of family-friendly policy (Butts et al., 2013), or solely on work-family outcomes (Mesmer-Magnus & Viswesvaran, 2006; Vaziri et al., 2022). This variability in scope makes it difficult to obtain a broad overview of how important family-friendly policies and supports are for the functioning of employees. It also makes it difficult to compare the effects of policies to those of supports. Moreover, while these studies often acknowledge that impacts on employee outcomes differ across recipient, organizational, and national characteristics, moderating effects are rarely assessed empirically. In addition to the differences in scope, studies are scattered across different fields of research, including economics, management, sociology, and psychology. While this reflects the interdisciplinary nature of the topic, this diffusion can act as a barrier for cross-fertilization, especially if there is a lack of an interdisciplinary core group of scholars (Li & Zhang, 2023).

Following the issues described above, we address the variability in scope and outlet by meta-analyzing findings from previous studies and address questions of what works, who benefits and in which context does it work. This study aims to do this by 1) providing an overview of the differential effects of family-friendly policies and workplace supports on career, job, and work-family outcomes, 2) investigating the moderating effect of recipient, organizational, and national characteristics, 3) assessing the state and quality of existing research, and 4) identifying gaps in the literature and promising avenues for future research. See Fig. 1 for the relationships that are analyzed in this study.

Scientifically, answers to these questions help understand to what degree family-friendly policies and supports can help employees, and how their usefulness varies for different people and across different work environments. In particular, we contribute to two persisting debates in the literature. First, this study contributes to the literature by bringing research on the impact of policies and supports together, which are traditionally studied separately (French & Shockley, 2020). Our analytical approach allows us to directly compare their effects and, consequently, determine their relative importance for employee outcomes. Second, our study contributes to the debate to what extent effects of policies and supports are contextual and how the effects differ between recipients, sectors, and nations. Most notably, inconsistencies exist in the literature on how the effects vary, dependent on whether policies and supports are theorized as a signaling function of an organization's care or as an instrumental resource for employees (e.g., Butts et al., 2013). Here, the effects are expected to be either stronger or weaker, respectively, for employees with greater family demands and in sectoral and national contexts that are disadvantageous for combining work and family. Our findings shed light on the merit of the different theories to understand when and for whom policies and supports matter most.

For practitioners, our findings can be used as input for the development of evidence-based policies and training for strengthening support with the aim of improving employee outcomes and, ultimately, improving organizational outcomes. It does so by showing which policies and supports are effective when having specific outcomes in mind and under which circumstances they are most helpful.

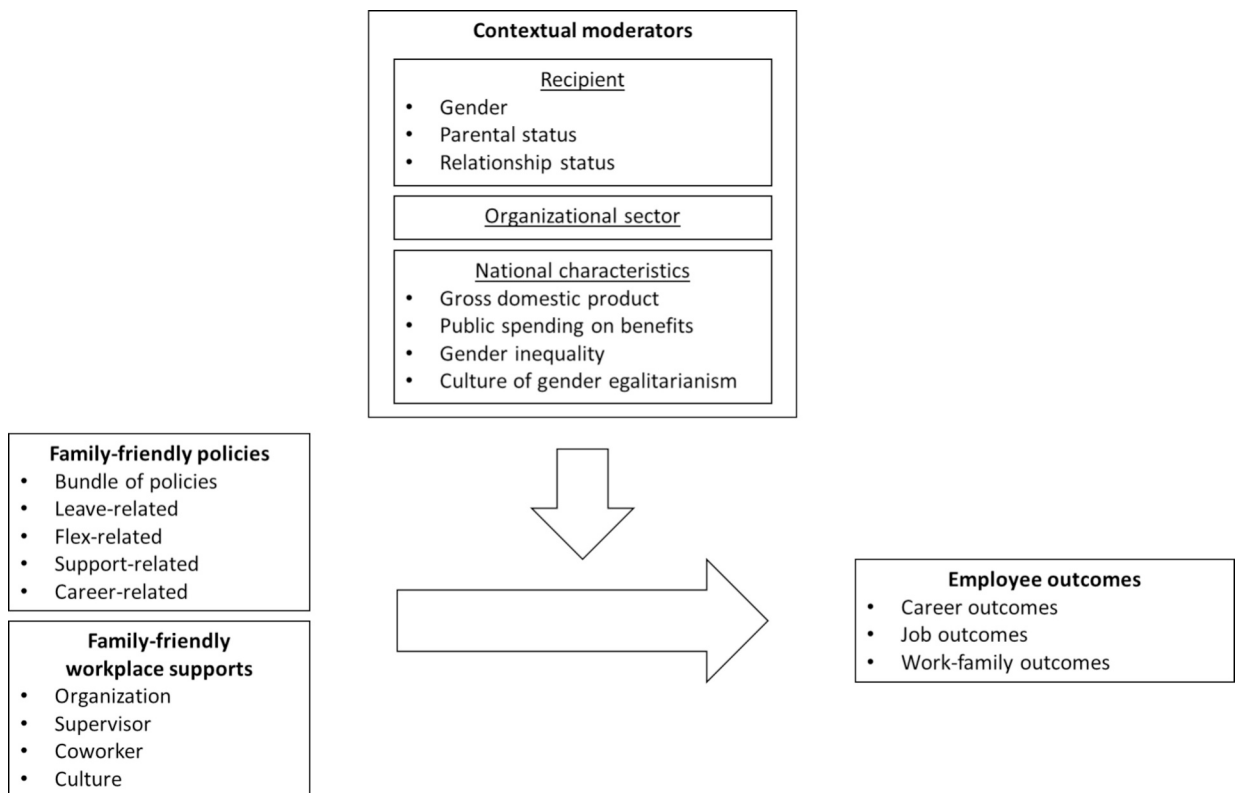


Fig. 1. Conceptual model of study.

In the remainder of the article, we will provide an overview of the distinct types of policies and supports, discuss the theoretical arguments for why they are related to employee outcomes, and how the effects may differ across contexts. Next, the method and the results of our meta-analyses are presented, followed by a discussion of our findings.

## 2. Theoretical background

### 2.1. Family-friendly policies and workplace supports

In the literature, a clear distinction is drawn between family-friendly policies initiated by the organization on the one hand and support provided by organizational actors such as an HR official, the supervisor, and a colleague on the other hand (Fan et al., 2022). Both policies and supports are aimed to help employees cope with demands from the work and family domain and are therefore expected to improve not only work-family outcomes (i.e., reduction of work-family conflict), but also career (i.e., lower turnover intentions) and job outcomes (i.e., higher job satisfaction). However, the mechanisms driving their influence differ as we will discuss below.

#### 2.1.1. Family-friendly policies

Previous studies have examined a range of different family-friendly policies, which can be defined as formal policies aimed to aid employees in the form of time, service, or finance with the goal to combine work and family demands (Butts et al., 2013). Some studies have tested one or multiple policies individually to determine the effect of a specific policy type and to differentiate across policies. For example, Chen et al. (2018) and Kramer et al. (2022) focused on single policies by examining the effects of flextime and parental leave. Other studies have aggregated a set of policies into a bundle or index to reflect the overall family-friendliness of an organization. For example, Kopelman et al. (2006) tested the effect of a family-friendly index containing twenty-one policies on multiple outcomes. While some studies have constructed such bundles based on their intended aid, more often they are constructed from policies 'that are commonly mentioned in the literature' (Thompson et al., 1999).

Based on the means through which a family-friendly policy is intended to help employees, we distinguish four types of policies: flex-related, leave-related, care support-related, and career-related policies (French & Shockley, 2020). Flex-related policies aim to help employees by allowing them some degree of autonomy in when or where work is performed, for example via different start or finish times, parttime work or telework. Leave-related policies refer to any type of leave that allows employees to tend to the needs of others, such as related to the birth of a child or elderly care. Care support-related policies refer to tangible support directly aimed at enabling employees to care for others. Examples include formally providing, financing or assistance in finding childcare or eldercare facilities and employee assistance programs aimed to help employees with caregiving burdens. Finally, career-related policies aim to make sure that combining work and family responsibilities have no negative consequences for one's career, such as providing career breaks and stop the tenure clock. These policies typically accompany other policies which are notorious for their (perceived) negative career impact, such as parental or carer's leave (Feeney et al., 2014). For example, usage of parental leave is often seen by management and even coworkers as displaying a lack of commitment to the organization and can have negative career consequences for the user. Career-related policies are meant to protect the user and mitigate these negative career consequences.

#### 2.1.2. Availability, accessibility, and usage

To study the effects of family-friendly policies, one needs to be aware that the provision of a policy by an organization (availability) does not equal to how it is delivered by the responsible supervisor to their employees (accessibility) nor if it is utilized by the employee (usage). Following the HRM process model of Wright and Nishii (2013), the implementation process from availability to usage is influenced by various institutional, organizational, and individual factors. For example, high levels of line managers' discretion have been linked to high variability in the number of employees who have access to and make use of family-friendly policies (e.g., Medjuck et al., 1998; Reeve et al., 2012). These factors can act as barrier or facilitator for the delivery and usage of policies, resulting in strong differences between availability, accessibility, and usage.

Besides differences that can occur during the implementation process, the mechanisms through which family-friendly policies influence employees are said to differ between availability, accessibility, and usage. In other words, policies do not only have an effect if they are being used, but their (perceived) availability and accessibility influence employees as well (Fan et al., 2022). For example, an employee without children is unlikely to use childcare support, but the availability of this policy may have a positive effect on how they feel about the organization.

#### 2.1.3. Family-friendly workplace supports

Family-friendly workplace supports, also referred to as informal supports, are defined as any psychological or material resources provided through social relationships that can mitigate strain resulting from competing work and family demands (French et al., 2018). Thus, they are relational in nature, meaning that they represent perceptions and receptions of support provided by or attributed to another actor. Where family-friendly policies are developed by the organization and, typically, delivered by line managers, family-friendly support can originate from several sources. In the work domain, these actors are, for example, an HR official, the supervisor, coworkers, and even customers and clients (French & Shockley, 2020). Each of these sources can provide four different types of support: emotional, instrumental, appraisal, and informational. Emotional support refers to providing resources, such as being empathetic and caring, to help the other emotionally. Instrumental supports are tangible resources which enables the other to mitigate strain directly, such as a supervisor allowing an employee to come in late or a coworker offering to take over a shift to meet family

demands. Appraisal support aims to help the other by changing the way of appraising the magnitude and impact of the experienced strain, such as offering alternative ways of viewing things/acknowledging the difficulties. Informational support, finally, refers to providing information that may help the other in mitigating strain, a colleague pointing towards possible helpful organizational policies.

Additionally, perceptions of the organization's family supportiveness are identified as unique from support received from specific people (Allen, 2001). Following organizational support theory (Eisenberger et al., 1986), employees personify the organization as if the actions by people in control are made by the organization itself. Based on this personification, employees develop global beliefs on the degree to which the organization values them, referred to as perceived organizational support (POS). While POS refers to general beliefs on an organization's attention for wellbeing, family-friendly organizational support refers specifically to beliefs on how supportive the organization is for work-family reconciliation (Allen, 2001).

## 2.2. Relation to employee outcomes

Previous findings indicate that family-friendly policies and workplace supports have a positive impact on various employee outcomes. Most prominently studied are work-family outcomes, where meta-analyses have shown that policies and supports are related to lower levels of conflict, higher levels of enrichment and better work-life balance (French & Shockley, 2020; Vaziri et al., 2022). Career outcomes, such as career success, and job outcomes, such as job satisfaction, while rarely examined in a meta-analysis (for an exception, see Butts et al., 2013), have also been positively linked to family-friendly policies and supports in individual studies (Masterson et al., 2021). Multiple theories have been posited to explain how family-friendly policies and supports influence employees. Broadly speaking, these theories can be categorized as either signal- or resource-oriented (Hobfoll, 2002; Spence, 1973).

First, signal-oriented theories emphasize the role that policies and supports play in communicating the intentions of the organization or supervisor to the employee and the attitudes and behaviors resulting from this communication. Signaling theory (Spence, 1973) states that signals help convey information about the sending person or entity that would otherwise remain unobservable to the receiver. Organizational-level signals convey information to the others about the organization's values, intentions, and culture, while individual-level signals help to demonstrate one's competencies and values (Yong Kim et al., 2017). Following this notion, family-friendly policies and organizational support act as organizational-level signals showing that the organization cares about work-family reconciliation, while support from organizational actors do the same at the individual-level of the employee. These signals, when assessed positively by employees, can lead to positive employee outcomes. The signaling effects are most prominent for work-related attitudes, as they are more proximal outcomes of signaling process.

Second, resource-oriented theories are based on the idea that resources can help employees cope with work and family demands. Resources can be seen as anything that is perceived as helpful by the individual to meet these demands. Following conservation of resources theory (Hobfoll, 2002) and the proactive coping model (Aspinwall & Taylor, 1997), employees are considered to pursue resources to mitigate (future) stressors. Juggling between work and family can be seen as a constant process that involves preparing for future stressors and (re)distributing resources to meet demands from both domains. Accumulation of resources, through family-friendly policies and supports, therefore helps employees to gain control of their (work)life, for example by better aligning work with nonwork hours. These resources are most directly related to positive work-family outcomes such as work-to-family enrichment, as they are specifically designed to help employees with combining work and family. Indirectly, an accumulation of family-friendly resources can impact career and job outcomes as well because positive work-family outcomes act as resources that positively impact career and job outcomes (Zhang et al., 2018).

## 2.3. Contextual factors moderating effects of family-friendly policies and supports

Following signal- and resource-oriented theories, if signals are viewed equally positive across individuals and resources are distributed equally and in accordance with individual demands, universal effects can be expected across contexts. However, in practice, the provision, delivery, usage, and perception of family-friendly policies and supports is dependent on the context in which it takes place. Strategic HRM scholars have long argued that the study of HRM, including family-friendly policies, is inherently contextualized (Jackson et al., 2014), although empirical research still largely assumes universal effects across contexts. However, literature on family-friendly policies and supports has identified contextual factors at the micro, meso, and macro level (Fan et al., 2022), in this study operationalized as recipient, organizational sector, and national characteristics, respectively, that moderate the impacts of family-friendly policies and supports.

### 2.3.1. Recipient characteristics

Coined receiver attention (Connelly et al., 2011), signaling theory posits that signals gain more attention and have more impact if the receiver is actively scanning the environment for them. In this respect, people with greater family demands are more likely to look for these signals than those with lesser family demands, and, in the presence of the family-friendly policies and supports, stronger effects of family-friendly policies can be expected. Some empirical evidence, however, suggests that the effects may actually be less positive for those employees with greater family demands (Butts et al., 2013; Feeney & Stritch, 2019). Scholars have used resource-oriented theories to explain these findings, by arguing that the greater family demands faced by some employees (e.g., women, parents, caretakers) are not adequately alleviated by policies or supports on their own. Greater family demands require greater accumulation of resources, perhaps not only from the work domain, to address these demands. Employees with fewer family demands, such as those without (young) children, may experience enough help from existing policies and supports at the workplace to accommodate their

needs.

Following either signal-oriented or resource-oriented theories, competing outcomes can be expected for policies and supports among groups with varying degrees of family demands. To determine which theories are most explanatory, we examine three recipient characteristics that reflect expected differences in family demands. First, female workers often have more caregiving responsibilities than male workers. Second, parents typically face greater family demands than nonparents, and third, a similar pattern can be argued for non-singles versus singles. Combinations of these three characteristics are of interest as well. For example, it is expected that mothers face greater family demands than fathers and women without children.

### 2.3.2. Organizational sector characteristics

There are differences in the adoption, implementation and impact of family-friendly policies and supports across sectors (Lee & Hong, 2011). Several perspectives can be taken as to why differences exist. First, some sectors are traditionally more concerned with the wellbeing of their employees, including the ways in which they are able to combine work and family responsibilities. The public sector, most notably governmental organizations, is often characterized as a model employer that aim to take care of their employees (Brown, 2004). This image is reflected in the availability of family-friendly policies and in the presence of a family-friendly culture. In these organizations, signals are more prominently present and usage is encouraged, which leads to positive evaluations by employees and, in turn, to improved employee outcomes. Second, there are differences between sectors in the percentages of female workers, which determine the need for work-family reconciliation of personnel. In female-dominated sectors, such as healthcare and education, there is a greater need for family-friendly policies and supports than sectors that are male-dominated (e.g., manufacturing, security). On the one hand, from signaling theory, we would expect this to increase receiver attention to these policies, and effects may, therefore, be stronger in female-dominated sectors. On the other hand, the total amount of family demands is greater as well, and policies and supports at the workplace may not be enough in these sectors, leading to weaker effects. Finally, the nature of work also determines the degree to which specific family-friendly policies and supports are useful. For example, many jobs in government and service for-profit business are suitable for flexible working schedules and flexwork, but this is much less the case for many jobs in healthcare or manufacturing businesses. While differences between organizations in the same sector exist, we expect that, overall, organizations in some sectors are more suited than others for family-friendly policies and supports, leading to differences in effects.

### 2.3.3. National characteristics

Characteristics at the national context may facilitate or hinder the potential of family-friendly policies and supports at the organizational level (Las Heras et al., 2015). We focus on the economic, political, social, and cultural context as factors that moderate the effects of family-friendly policies and supports. Economically, the gross domestic product (GDP) of a country reflects the economic conditions under which people earn a living. Worse economic conditions force people to work additional hours to provide for their family, resulting in increased work-family conflict (French et al., 2018). In this situation, family-friendly policies and supports may be more useful as a resource and valued more. Politically, the level of public spending on family benefits may affect the potential impact of organizational policies. While national policies and organizational policies can be complementary to each other, strong national family-friendly policies also may decrease the potential value of organizational policies. If combining work and family responsibilities is already well supported by government policies, organizational policies have less marginal value and need to be more generous to be useful. Thus, if public spending on family benefits is high, the impact of organizational policies is likely to be lower. Socially, gender inequality can influence the potential of family-friendly policies and supports as it can both complicate or simplify combining work and family. In societies with traditional gender norms and roles, gender inequality usually means lower labor market participation of women. This translates to lesser work demands and greater family demands for women, and greater work demands and lesser family demands for men. In these societies, family-friendly policies and supports may be less important as there is less need to combine work and family responsibilities. However, gender inequality combined with high(er) labor market participation of women, dual earners and increasing caregiving responsibilities complicates combining work and family, particularly for women as they are more often responsible for caregiving tasks. In this case, family-friendly policies and supports are expected to be more valuable and impactful (Bosch et al., 2018). Culturally, prevailing values of gender egalitarianism, which indicate how a society divides roles between women and men, may affect the potential of family-friendly policies and supports. On the one hand, the potential value of organizational family-friendly policies and supports may be higher in more traditional societies, as fewer possibilities to receive support outside the organization may be present (Kim & Faerman, 2013). On the other hand, the potential value in more egalitarian societies may be higher, as the positive effects of using family-friendly policies and supports are much less likely to be dampened by backlash effects, such as stigmatization or negative career prospects (Perrigino et al., 2018).

## 3. Method

### 3.1. Literature search

To identify relevant studies, we took several steps in the period November 2022 until January 2023. First, we conducted a keyword search of the online databases Web of Science, PsycINFO and Scopus, which were chosen for their complementary focus. To identify studies from different research fields that focus on support or policies, we used the following keywords: “family-friendly support”, “family-friendly practices”, “family-friendly policies”, “family-friendly HRM”, “family-friendly employer”, “family-friendly supervisor”, “women-friendly HRM”, “inclusive HRM”, and “employer engagement”. These keywords, which are in line with previous reviews (Butts et al., 2013; Guo et al., 2024; Hao et al., 2024; Kossek et al., 2011; Masterson et al., 2021), were chosen to identify those policies

and supports that aid employees with the goal to combine work and family demands. Second, for each keyword, we searched the first ten pages of Google Scholar to identify available online but not yet published studies and dissertation and theses. Third, the reference lists of three related reviews were checked for any studies that were missed using the database and Google Scholar search (Butts et al., 2013; Lapierre et al., 2018; Michel et al., 2011). In contrast to our study, these reviews did not perform a meta-analysis, focused solely on policies or supports, or included a limited range of outcomes. In total, 3640 potentially useful studies were identified using this search strategy.

### 3.2. Inclusion criteria

Only studies that met the following criteria were included in the analyses. First, studies had to examine one or more types of family-friendly policies or supports, thereby excluding studies focusing on support received from family members or national policies (Ruppanner, 2013). Second, studies had to examine at least one career, job, or work-family outcome. Thus, we excluded studies that focused solely on outcomes not directly related to work, such as childbirth decision (Wong et al., 2011) and parenting behaviors (Estes, 2004). We also excluded studies that investigated outcomes at the organizational level. Third, only studies that provided the necessary statistical information to perform our meta-analyses (i.e., zero-order correlations and sample sizes) were included. Fourth, if the same sample was used in multiple studies, unique relationships were only coded once. If multiple studies provided the same information, the first-published study was included. Finally, only studies that were published in English were included.

We used ASReview during the selection process (Van De Schoot et al., 2021). ASReview is a machine learning tool aimed to 'help scholars and practitioners to get an overview of the most relevant records for their work as efficiently as possible while being transparent in the process' (p. 127) and used in a variety of research fields (Adamse et al., 2024; Huizenga et al., 2022; Rodriguez Müller et al., 2021). The tool is trained with relevant and irrelevant abstracts selected by the user to predict study relevance. Simulation studies have shown that the performance of ASReview at least equals that of doing it by hand. Abstracts were screened with the help of ASReview by the first author for eligibility based on the first inclusion criterion. We decided to finish screening after 100 sequential exclusions, which is a conservative stopping criterion compared to previous reviews using ASReview (Huizenga et al., 2022; Nagtegaal et al., 2023). We reached this criterion after reviewing 1139 studies (31 %), leaving with 765 possible eligible studies. The full texts of these studies were assessed for eligibility based on all inclusion criteria, which resulted in 229 independent samples from 211 studies. See Appendix A for an overview of the identification process. The list of included studies can be viewed in the online Supplemental Material.

### 3.3. Coding procedure

In line with recommendations for reliable coding in systematic reviews (Pigott & Polanin, 2020), the first author developed a coding book containing information on what to code and related decision rules and a coding scheme. The first author and a graduate student coded study characteristics related to the study's context and the main concepts that are relevant in this paper, and relevant statistical information (i.e., sample size and zero-order correlations) using the coding book and scheme. Both coders first independently coded the same ten studies each for cross-validation and refinement of the coding scheme and book. After minor adjustments, both coders independently coded a separate set containing half of the studies, after which the first author checked the final coding scheme.

### 3.4. Main concepts

#### 3.4.1. Family-friendly policies and supports

Policies and supports were coded in two steps. First, we coded if the effect size referred to a family-friendly policy or a form of support before we made a further distinction. As mentioned earlier, the goal of family-friendly policies is to aid employees via time, services, or finance with the goal to combine work and family demands (French & Shockley, 2020). Within family-friendly policies, we coded whether a bundle of different policies (FFPs) or a single type of policy was measured (leave-related, flex-related, care support-related, and career-related). FFPs specifically refer to constructs that contain a mix of different policies. Thus, if a study aggregated distinct types of policies into a single bundle (e.g., flexwork with parental leave and childcare support) then we coded this bundle as FFPs. If multiple similar policies were aggregated into a bundle (e.g., flexwork and flextime) then we coded this bundle as a single type of policy (e.g., flex). In addition, we coded whether the availability, accessibility, or usage of these policies was measured. Availability refers to the presence or provision of policies in the organization, both actual and perceived. Accessibility refers to whether an employee has access to rather than be aware of any policy. Finally, usage refers to the actual use of family-friendly policies by the employee.

For family-friendly supports, defined as psychological or material resources provided through social relationships at work (French & Shockley, 2020), we distinguished between perceptions of the support received by the organization (family-friendly organizational support; FFOS), family-friendly supervisor support (FFSS), and family-friendly coworker support (FFCS). In addition to these three types of support, family-friendly culture (FFC), is also included as it represents social structures and relationships at the workplace. It is characterized as supporting work-family reconciliation and can be viewed as generic perceptions of support one perceives from their workplace. It is often operationalized in terms of negative career consequences as a result of having family responsibilities and of the degree to which success at the job was dependent upon sacrificing personal time for work (Heras et al., 2021; Thompson et al., 1999).

### 3.4.2. Employee outcomes

We made a distinction between career, job, and work-family outcomes (Masterson et al., 2021). We acknowledge that these three outcomes are distinct, but also related. *Career outcomes* refer to the choices, aspirations, behaviors, and attitudes related to one's career, such as perceived career success and turnover (intentions). *Job outcomes* relate to behaviors that people display on the job and attitudes they have towards their job and organization. Following Borst and Blom (2021), we made a distinction in job attitudes between hedonic, eudemonic, relational, and health well-being. Hedonic wellbeing refers to passive experiences of work happiness, such as satiation, contentedness, and calmness, and is generally related to job satisfaction and organizational commitment. Eudemonic wellbeing refers to active experiences of happiness, and is often used interchangeably with work engagement. Relational wellbeing refers to the state and quality of the interactions and relations with coworkers and supervisors. Health wellbeing refers to the absence of work-related stress reactions. *Work-family outcomes* refer to attitudes related to the interaction between the work and family domain, which can be positive (i.e., work-family enrichment), or negative (i.e., work-family conflict). In line with the literature (Mesmer-Magnus & Viswesvaran, 2005), we distinguished between work-to-family and family-to-work interactions.

### 3.4.3. Moderators

We coded several recipient, organizational sector, and national characteristics. On the recipient level, we coded the gender, parental status, and relationship status of the sample. On the organizational sector level, we coded the sector that was studied. Following the reasoning that there may be differences between sectors due to public status, percentage of female workers, and nature of work, we differentiated between government, education, healthcare, security, manufacturing for-profit business, and service for-profit business. On the national level, we used four indicators that reflect the economic status of the country, political interest in work-family reconciliation, social structures, and cultural values regarding gender equality. In this respect, we coded a country's GDP per capita (World Bank, 2023), percentage of public spending on family benefits (OECD, 2019), gender inequality index (UNDP, 2021), and culture of gender egalitarianism (House et al., 2004). While the last two indicators may have considerable overlap, the correlation in our data is only moderate ( $r = -0.27$ ), so we decided to retain both indicators.

## 3.5. Analytical procedure

To calculate meta-analytic correlations, three-level random effects models were fitted using the meta3L function of the *metaSEM* package in R (Cheung, 2015). In contrast to fixed-effects models, random-effects models assume that variance in effect sizes depends on both sampling error and differences between studies. In line with the notion that research in social sciences always varies on study characteristics, the random-effects model was deemed most appropriate (Borenstein et al., 2021). As many studies reported more than one relevant correlation for one relationship, three-level models were needed to account for interdependency. Effect sizes were calculated based on zero-order correlations provided in the included studies or calculated if sufficient statistical information was given. Likelihood-based confidence intervals (LCBIs) were calculated to interpret the uncertainty of the effect sizes.

### 3.5.1. Moderator analysis

To assess sources of heterogeneity in the effect sizes, we performed subgroup analyses and mixed-effects models. In a three-level meta-analysis, statistics for the absolute amount of variation on Level 2 ( $\tau^2_{(2)}$ ) and the amount of variation on Level 3 ( $\tau^2_{(3)}$ ) are given besides the regular Q statistic. In a similar vein, the proportions of the total variation are allocated to either Level 2 ( $I^2_{(2)}$ ) or Level 3 ( $I^2_{(3)}$ ). In this respect, considerable values for  $\tau^2_{(2)}$  and  $I^2_{(2)}$  indicate large variation on Level 2 and the presence of within-study moderators, while considerable values  $\tau^2_{(3)}$  and  $I^2_{(3)}$  indicate large variation on Level 3 and the presence of between-study moderators. Given that our moderators only varied between and not within studies, we were only concerned in assessing for sufficient variation at Level 3. To determine whether sufficient variation existed in the effect sizes to justify moderator analysis, we checked each bivariate relationship for a significant Q value,  $I^2$  values that exceeded 25 %, and substantial values for  $\tau^2$  (Borenstein et al., 2021).

## 4. Results

### 4.1. Overview of studies

Our final dataset contained 1676 effect sizes from 229 unique samples in 211 studies, with a total unique sample size of 748,796 respondents. Most effect sizes were coded for work-family outcomes (40.9 %), followed by job outcomes (36 %), and least for career outcomes (23.1 %). Slightly more effect sizes were coded for policies (51.6 %) than supports. Within policies, most effect sizes were coded for flex-related policies (36 %), followed by bundles of policies (33.9 %) care support-related policies (19.7 %), and leave-related policies (9.7 %). Career-related policies were barely found (0.7 %). Policy availability was measured most often (55.1 %), followed by usage (31.1 %), and accessibility (13.8 %). Within supports, most studies focused on family-friendly supervisor support (45.5 %), followed by family-friendly culture (32.6 %), family-friendly organizational support (13.2 %), and family-friendly coworker support (8.3 %).

Most studies were conducted in Anglo-Saxon countries (52.6 %), followed by Confucian Asian (16.1 %), Southern Asia (8.5 %), Latin Europe (7.1 %), and Nordic Europe (4.7 %). Studies relied often on a mixed-sector sample (57.3 %), followed by service for-profit businesses (17.5 %), educational institutions (7.6 %), government organizations (6.6 %), healthcare organizations (6.2 %), manufacturing for-profit businesses (3.8 %), and security organizations (3.3 %).

Regarding study design, the vast majority used a cross-sectional design (84.5 %), a sizeable minority used a lagged or longitudinal

design (13.3 %), and only few studies employed an experimental design (2.1 %). Almost all studies relied on self-reports from employees to measure the policies or supports and outcome (95.7 %).

#### 4.2. Main effects of family-friendly policies and supports

Table 1 shows the main effects of family-friendly policies and supports on career, job, and work-family outcomes, sorted by mean sample-weighted correlation. Small to moderate significant effects are found for most of the outcomes. The strongest effects are found for wellbeing and work-to-family interactions, most notably relational and hedonic wellbeing, work-life balance, and work-family enrichment.

Regarding career outcomes, family-friendly policies and supports are positively related to people's intentions to stay at the organization and their perceived career success. Furthermore, family-friendly policies and supports are negatively associated with the number of working hours. For job outcomes, moderate significant effects are found for relational, and eudemonic wellbeing, while small effects are found for health wellbeing and positive behaviors. Finally, for work-family outcomes, family-friendly policies and supports are significantly related to better work-life balance, increased enrichment, and decreased conflict between work and family domains.

As indicated by the values of  $\tau^2$ ,  $I^2$ , and  $Q$ , considerable heterogeneity is present for almost every outcome. In other words, effect sizes vary within and between studies, pointing towards the presence of moderators. For example, for intentions to stay, the  $Q$  value is significant and the  $I^2$  values indicate that approximately one third of the heterogeneity is attributable to within-study variation, while two third is attributable to between-study variation. To assess sources of heterogeneity, within- and between-study moderation analyses are therefore warranted.

#### 4.3. Subgroup analyses for type of policy and support

One of the sources of heterogeneity can be related to the type of policy and support.<sup>1</sup> As indicated in Table 2, there are significant differences in the effect sizes between policies and support for most of the outcomes. Except for career success, wage, and work-life balance, the effects are different for policies than supports. In all cases, the effects are stronger for supports. To further disentangle these differences, we conducted subgroup analyses for types of policies and supports across career, job, and work-family outcomes.

##### 4.3.1. Family-friendly policies

The effect sizes for types of family-friendly policies on career, job, and work-family outcomes are presented in Tables 3, 4, and 5. For career outcomes, all types of policies show a positive effect on intentions to stay, with a stronger effect for bundles of FFPs and leave policies than flex and care support policies. For working hours and wage, the only significant effect is that of care support policies on working hours.

For job outcomes, the results show a mixed picture, with mostly small to moderate effect sizes. Most data are available for hedonic wellbeing, where small to moderate effects are found for FFPs and leave policies and small effects for flex and care support policies. Bundles of FFPs are also significantly related to relational and eudemonic wellbeing, and positive behavior. Of the other types of policies, only flex policies show another significant positive effect, especially on eudemonic wellbeing.

For work-family outcomes, clear positive effects are found for bundles of FFPs and flex policies on work-life balance. In addition, stronger effects are found for work-to-family conflict and enrichment than family-to-work conflict and enrichment. Interestingly, flex policies are positively related to family-to-work conflict.

*Measure of family-friendly policies.* In addition to testing differences between types of policies, we assessed differences between effect sizes in the way the policy was measured. As shown in Table 6, policy measure significantly explains variance for all outcome categories. Availability, and accessibility for job and work-family outcomes, consistently show higher effect sizes than usage.

##### 4.3.2. Family-friendly supports

The effect sizes for type of family-friendly support on career, job, and work-family outcomes are presented in Tables 7, 8, and 9. For career outcomes, all types of support show a positive small to moderate effect on intentions to stay, with a slightly stronger effect for FFOS and FFSS than FCSS and FFC. In addition, all supports, except for FFCS, are negatively related to working hours. No significant effect sizes are found for wage.

For job outcomes, the results show small to moderate effect sizes across all forms of wellbeing and behavior. Most consistent results are found for hedonic wellbeing, where all types of support show similar positive effect sizes. Furthermore, effect sizes for positive behavior, while mostly significant, are generally lower than for wellbeing.

Finally, for work-family outcomes, significant effects are found across all outcomes. For positive work-family outcomes (WLB, WFE, FWE), specific types of support appear more strongly related than culture, whereas this is not the case for negative work-family outcomes (WFC, FWC).

<sup>1</sup> Additional methodological moderators have been tested and the results can be found in the supplementary material.



**Table 1**  
Meta-analytic correlations of main effects for career, job, and work-family outcomes.

	#ES	k	N	r	95 % CI	$\tau^2_{(2)}$	$\tau^2_{(3)}$	$I^2_{(2)}$	$I^2_{(3)}$	Q <sup>b</sup>
Career outcomes	387	103	270,602	0.08 <sup>a</sup>	0.05: 0.11	0.016	0.018	46.5	52.4	13,419
Intentions to stay	128	44	34,210	0.21 <sup>a</sup>	0.17: 0.25	0.015	0.011	54.5	41.8	2962
Career success	14	6	1917	0.19 <sup>a</sup>	0.09: 0.29	0.007	0.008	37.9	44.5	58
Working hours	122	51	103,465	-0.05 <sup>a</sup>	-0.08: -0.02	0.011	0.006	63.8	33.1	1997
Wage	75	19	138,797	0.01	-0.03: 0.06	0.009	0.006	61.1	37.8	1188
Job outcomes	608	138	643,136	0.20 <sup>a</sup>	0.17: 0.22	0.018	0.010	63.9	35.7	176,436
Relational wellbeing	19	11	149,032	0.26 <sup>a</sup>	0.14: 0.38	0.032	0.016	66.5	33.4	1315
Hedonic wellbeing	328	92	492,411	0.23 <sup>a</sup>	0.20: 0.26	0.019	0.011	63.0	36.7	89,358
Eudemonic wellbeing	63	17	10,942	0.19 <sup>a</sup>	0.15: 0.23	0.015	0.001	83.1	7.2	805
Health wellbeing	43	17	11,490	0.16 <sup>a</sup>	0.10: 0.23	0.013	0.013	46.8	47.1	522
Positive behaviors	86	26	9990	0.11 <sup>a</sup>	0.07: 0.16	0.007	0.007	41.5	41.5	429
Work-family outcomes	685	156	124,105	0.19 <sup>a</sup>	0.16: 0.21	0.018	0.016	51.5	44.6	15,136
Work-life balance	82	20	13,431	0.32 <sup>a</sup>	0.24: 0.39	0.007	0.023	21.8	75.0	1534
Work-family enrichment	83	38	20,756	0.25 <sup>a</sup>	0.20: 0.30	0.013	0.012	47.7	47.1	1567
Work-family conflict	336	118	102,925	-0.18 <sup>a</sup>	-0.21: -0.15	0.024	0.012	63.6	32.7	7266
Family-work enrichment	23	11	7210	0.11 <sup>a</sup>	0.03: 0.19	0.009	0.012	37.6	50.2	167
Family-work conflict	146	51	48,068	-0.08 <sup>a</sup>	-0.12: -0.04	0.009	0.014	37.1	56.5	1599

ES = effect size; k = number of studies; N = total sample size; r = mean sample-weighted correlations; 95 % CI = 95 % confidence intervals;  $\tau^2_{(2)}$  = variance within studies;  $\tau^2_{(3)}$  = variance between studies  $I^2_{(2)}$  = proportion of variance explained by level 2;  $I^2_{(3)}$  = proportion of variance explained by level 3;  $p_{type}$  = significance test for difference between policies and supports.

<sup>a</sup> Confidence interval around correlation excludes zero.

<sup>b</sup> All Q statistics suggest significant heterogeneity.

**Table 2**  
Effect sizes for policies and supports.

	Policies		Supports		$p_{type}$
	r	95 % CI	r	95 % CI	
Career outcomes	0.06	0.02:0.09	0.10	0.07:0.14	0.011
Intentions to stay	0.12	0.08: 0.16	0.30	0.25: 0.33	<0.001
Career success	0.19	-0.09: 0.46	0.19	0.05: 0.34	0.913
Working hours	-0.01	-0.05: 0.02	-0.09	-0.13: -0.05	0.001
Wage	0.02	-0.03: 0.06	0.00	-0.06: 0.07	0.738
Job outcomes	0.12	0.10: 0.14	0.28	0.26: 0.30	<0.001
Relational wellbeing	0.11	-0.04: 0.26	0.35	0.22: 0.48	0.014
Hedonic wellbeing	0.14	0.11: 0.16	0.35	0.32: 0.38	<0.001
Eudemonic wellbeing	0.14	0.09: 0.20	0.24	0.18: 0.29	0.004
Health wellbeing	0.01	-0.07: 0.08	0.26	0.19: 0.32	<0.001
Positive behaviors	0.08	0.03: 0.13	0.15	0.11: 0.20	0.001
Work-family outcomes	0.10	0.07: 0.12	0.25	0.23: 0.28	<0.001
Work-life balance	0.30	0.22: 0.39	0.32	0.25: 0.39	0.596
Work-family enrichment	0.14	0.07: 0.21	0.27	0.22: 0.31	0.001
Work-family conflict	-0.07	-0.10: -0.04	-0.28	-0.31: -0.25	<0.001
Family-work enrichment	0.03	-0.04: 0.11	0.20	0.12: 0.28	0.002
Family-work conflict	0.01	-0.03: 0.04	-0.15	-0.19: -0.11	<0.001

r = mean sample-weighted correlations; 95 % CI = 95 % confidence intervals;

$p_{type}$  = significance test for difference between policies and supports.

**Table 3**  
Subgroup analyses for types of policies and career outcomes.

	Intention to stay			Working hours			Wage		
	r	95 % CI	ES (k)	r	95 % CI	ES (k)	r	95 % CI	ES (k)
FFPs (bundles)	<b>0.17</b>	0.11: 0.23	23 (17)	-0.04	-0.11: 0.03	16 (13)	0.06	-0.07: 0.18	8 (7)
Leave policies	<b>0.27</b>	0.18: 0.35	2 (2)	0.01	-0.06: 0.07	10 (7)	0.03	-0.10: 0.15	16 (7)
Flex policies	<b>0.04</b>	0.00: 0.09	16 (11)	-0.04	-0.10: 0.02	25 (17)	0.04	-0.01: 0.10	17 (9)
Support policies	<b>0.07</b>	0.04: 0.10	13 (11)	<b>0.06</b>	-0.00: 0.13	9 (8)	-0.03	-0.14: 0.09	12 (8)

r = mean sample-weighted correlations; 95 % CI = 95 % confidence intervals; ES = effect size; k = number of studies.

**Table 4**  
Subgroup analyses for types of policies and job outcomes.

	Relational			Hedonic			Eudemonic		
	<i>r</i>	95 % CI	ES (k)	<i>r</i>	95 % CI	ES (k)	<i>r</i>	95 % CI	ES (k)
FFPs (bundles)	<b>0.19</b>	0.09: 0.29	3 (3)	<b>0.19</b>	0.14: 0.23	59 (31)	<b>0.20</b>	0.15: 0.24	9 (6)
Leave policies	–	–	–	<b>0.16</b>	0.10: 0.21	15 (8)	–	–	–
Flex policies	0.07	–0.05: 0.20	2 (2)	<b>0.12</b>	0.08: 0.16	51 (28)	<b>0.12</b>	0.03: 0.20	15 (6)
Support policies	–	–	–	<b>0.07</b>	0.04: 0.10	42 (21)	0.10	–0.06: 0.26	3 (2)
	Health			Positive behavior					
	<i>r</i>	95 % CI	ES (k)	<i>r</i>	95 % CI	ES (k)			
FFPs (bundles)	0.01	–0.11: 0.13	7 (4)	<b>0.06</b>	0.01: 0.11	28 (11)			
Leave policies	–	–	–	–	–	–			
Flex policies	0.08	–0.12: 0.27	5 (3)	0.03	–0.12: 0.18	7 (6)			
Support policies	–	–	–	–0.01	–0.06: 0.06	2 (2)			

*r* = mean sample-weighted correlations; 95 % CI = 95 % confidence intervals; ES = effect size; k = number of studies.

**Table 5**  
Subgroup analyses for types of policies and work-family outcomes.

	WLB			WFE			WFC		
	<i>r</i>	95 % CI	ES (k)	<i>r</i>	95 % CI	ES (k)	<i>r</i>	95 % CI	ES (k)
FFPs (bundles)	<b>0.29</b>	0.09: 0.49	8 (5)	<b>0.11</b>	0.05: 0.16	12 (9)	–0.11	–0.17: –0.06	55 (32)
Leave policies	0.13	–0.30: 0.55	3 (2)	–	–	–	–0.17	–0.28: –0.05	10 (8)
Flex policies	<b>0.25</b>	0.19: 0.32	10 (2)	<b>0.17</b>	0.08: 0.26	5 (5)	–0.08	–0.11: –0.04	60 (40)
Support policies	–	–	–	–	–	–	–0.02	–0.06: 0.01	25 (19)
	FWE			WFC					
	<i>r</i>	95 % CI	ES (k)	<i>r</i>	95 % CI	ES (k)			
FFPs (bundles)	0.03	–0.02: 0.07	10 (6)	–0.06	–0.13: 0.01	20 (16)			
Leave policies	–	–	–	–0.16	–0.39: 0.06	3 (3)			
Flex policies	0.00	–0.14: 0.15	2 (2)	<b>0.06</b>	0.03: 0.09	30 (18)			
Support policies	–	–	–	–0.01	–0.08: 0.05	14 (7)			

*r* = mean sample-weighted correlations; 95 % CI = 95 % confidence intervals; ES = effect size; k = number of studies.

**Table 6**  
Subgroup analyses for measure of policy.

	#ES	k	<i>r</i>	95 % CI	<i>P</i> <sub>measure</sub>
<i>Career outcomes</i>					<0.001
Availability	114	45	0.08	0.05: 0.11	
Accessibility	31	16	0.02	–0.03: 0.07	
Usage	67	28	0.02	–0.02: 0.05	
<i>Job outcomes</i>					<0.001
Availability	181	60	0.13	0.11: 0.16	
Accessibility	36	18	0.15	0.11: 0.20	
Usage	79	29	0.07	0.04: 0.11	
<i>Work-family outcomes</i>					<0.001
Availability	280	89	0.11	0.08: 0.15	
Accessibility	42	21	0.09	0.04: 0.14	
Usage	96	35	0.06	0.02: 0.10	

ES = effect size; k = number of studies; *r* = mean sample-weighted correlations;

95 % CI = 95 % confidence intervals;

*P*<sub>measure</sub> = significance test for difference between policy measurements.

#### 4.4. Moderator analyses of recipient characteristics

To understand who benefits from family-friendly policies and supports, we conducted a series of mixed-effects models based on three recipient characteristics: gender, parent status, and relationship status. Given the limited number of studies, separate models were analyzed for policies and supports. For each outcome category, we carried out the analyses in two steps. In Step 1, we included the three characteristics as predictors of the effects of policies or supports on each outcome category. The effect sizes estimated in this step were used to assess the individual effects of each characteristic. Next, in Steps 2a, 2b, and 2c, we added the two-way interaction terms between gender, parent status, and relationship status. These interaction terms essentially allowed us to assess combinations of characteristics by comparing the effects between four groups. For example, the interaction term between parent and relationship status compared single parents, non-single parents, single nonparents, and non-single nonparents. The results of these analyses are presented

**Table 7**  
Subgroup analyses for type of support and career outcomes.

	Intention to stay			Working hours			Wage		
	<i>r</i>	95 % CI	ES (k)	<i>r</i>	95 % CI	ES (k)	<i>r</i>	95 % CI	ES (k)
FFOS	<b>0.34</b>	0.26: 0.41	11 (10)	<b>-0.12</b>	-0.20: -0.05	4 (4)	0.08	-0.23: 0.07	4 (4)
FFSS	<b>0.30</b>	0.26: 0.35	28 (24)	<b>-0.05</b>	-0.09: -0.01	27 (25)	0.03	-0.03: 0.09	9 (9)
FFCS	<b>0.21</b>	0.06: 0.36	2 (2)	0.02	-0.07: 0.11	8 (7)	0.01	-0.15: 0.16	4 (4)
FFC	<b>0.24</b>	0.18: 0.32	23 (17)	<b>-0.15</b>	-0.22: -0.08	20 (16)	0.00	-0.21: 0.21	3 (3)

FFOS = family-friendly organizational support; FFSS = family-friendly supervisor support;  
 FFCS = family-friendly coworker support; FFC = family-friendly culture;  
*r* = mean sample-weighted correlations; 95 % CI = 95 % confidence intervals;  
 ES = effect size; k = number of studies.

**Table 8**  
Subgroup analyses for type of support and job outcomes.

	Relational			Hedonic			Eudemonic		
	<i>r</i>	95 % CI	ES (k)	<i>r</i>	95 % CI	ES (k)	<i>r</i>	95 % CI	ES (k)
FFOS	0.22	-0.15: 0.60	3 (3)	<b>0.34</b>	0.27: 0.42	18 (13)	<b>0.31</b>	0.23: 0.38	4 (3)
FFSS	<b>0.46</b>	0.37: 0.56	5 (5)	<b>0.38</b>	0.33: 0.42	57 (40)	<b>0.29</b>	0.22: 0.37	14 (9)
FFCS	-	-	-	<b>0.34</b>	0.24: 0.44	10 (9)	-	-	-
FFC	<b>0.28</b>	0.03: 0.54	2 (2)	<b>0.29</b>	0.22: 0.35	50 (27)	0.08	-0.09: 0.25	13 (4)
	Health			Positive behavior					
	<i>r</i>	95 % CI	ES (k)	<i>r</i>	95 % CI	ES (k)			
FFOS	<b>0.26</b>	0.24: 0.28	2 (2)	<b>0.06</b>	-0.00: 0.13	12 (4)			
FFSS	<b>0.20</b>	0.13: 0.28	12 (10)	<b>0.18</b>	0.14: 0.22	22 (11)			
FFCS	-	-	-	-	-	-			
FFC	<b>0.28</b>	0.18: 0.38	15 (7)	<b>0.11</b>	0.04: 0.18	7 (6)			

FFOS = family-friendly organizational support; FFSS = family-friendly supervisor support;  
 FFCS = family-friendly coworker support; FFC = family-friendly culture.  
*r* = mean sample-weighted correlations; 95 % CI = 95 % confidence intervals;  
 ES = effect size; k = number of studies.

**Table 9**  
Subgroup analyses for type of support and work-family outcomes.

	WLB			WFE			WFC		
	<i>r</i>	95 % CI	ES (k)	<i>r</i>	95 % CI	ES (k)	<i>r</i>	95 % CI	ES (k)
FFOS	<b>0.43</b>	0.36: 0.49	7 (7)	<b>0.26</b>	0.11: 0.41	8 (7)	<b>-0.33</b>	-0.39: -0.27	15 (15)
FFSS	<b>0.37</b>	0.33: 0.42	23 (11)	<b>0.30</b>	0.25: 0.35	29 (24)	<b>-0.26</b>	-0.29: -0.24	71 (65)
FFCS	<b>0.34</b>	0.20: 0.49	4 (3)	<b>0.28</b>	0.23: 0.33	7 (7)	<b>-0.13</b>	-0.20: -0.05	15 (13)
FFC	<b>0.24</b>	0.14: 0.35	20 (7)	<b>0.22</b>	0.10: 0.33	16 (12)	<b>-0.33</b>	-0.38: -0.27	62 (36)
	FEW			FWC					
	<i>r</i>	95 % CI	ES (k)	<i>r</i>	95 % CI	ES (k)			
FFOS	-	-	-	<b>-0.21</b>	-0.30: -0.14	8 (8)			
FFSS	<b>0.24</b>	0.19: 0.29	5 (5)	<b>-0.14</b>	-0.18: -0.09	33 (29)			
FFCS	<b>0.39</b>	0.25: 0.52	2 (2)	<b>-0.11</b>	-0.13: -0.09	8 (6)			
FFC	-0.03	-0.17: 0.12	3 (3)	<b>-0.21</b>	-0.27: -0.16	18 (13)			

FFOS = family-friendly organizational support; FFSS = family-friendly supervisor support;  
 FFCS = family-friendly coworker support; FFC = family-friendly culture.  
*r* = mean sample-weighted correlations; 95 % CI = 95 % confidence intervals;  
 ES = effect size; k = number of studies.

in Table 10.

For career outcomes, looking at the main effects, the effect of supports significantly differs based on gender ( $B = -0.16$ ), where the effect size for women is lower or even negative compared to men. In other words, receiving family-friendly supports is less beneficial or even detrimental for female workers' careers than for male workers. A similar result is found for non-singles, where the effects of both policies ( $B = -0.08$ ) and supports ( $B = -0.15$ ) is significantly lower than for singles. No significant interaction terms are found. For job outcomes, no main and interaction effects were found. For work-family outcomes, the results indicate that parents benefit less from supports than nonparents ( $B = -0.08$ ). For example, work-family conflict may be less alleviated by workplace supports for employees with children than those without children. Two significant interaction terms were found (see Appendix B for the interaction plots). First, the interaction between gender and parental status was significant for policies ( $B = -0.16$ ). The effect of parental status is

**Table 10**  
Results from mixed-effects models for recipient characteristics.

	Career outcomes		Job outcomes		Work-family outcomes	
	Policies	Supports	Policies	Supports	Policies	Supports
	B (SE)	B (SE)	B (SE)	B (SE)	B (SE)	B (SE)
<i>Step 1</i>						
Female	-0.01 (0.04)	<b>-0.16 (0.07)</b>	-0.06 (0.03)	-0.00 (0.05)	0.06 (0.04)	-0.02 (0.03)
Parent	0.02 (0.04)	0.12 (0.11)	0.07 (0.05)	-0.02 (0.05)	-0.04 (0.05)	<b>-0.08 (0.03)</b>
Nonsingle	<b>-0.08 (0.04)</b>	<b>-0.15 (0.08)</b>	-0.03 (0.04)	-0.04 (0.06)	0.01 (0.05)	0.05 (0.03)
<i>Step 2a</i>						
Female x Parent	0.07 (0.08)	-0.21 (0.14)	-0.04 (0.09)	0.09 (0.12)	<b>-0.16 (0.09)</b>	-0.10 (0.07)
<i>Step 2b</i>						
Female x Nonsingle	0.09 (0.08)	-0.20 (0.13)	-0.01 (0.07)	-0.09 (0.18)	-0.12 (0.09)	-0.10 (0.07)
<i>Step 2c</i>						
Parent x Nonsingle	0.05 (0.09)	-0.08 (0.23)	0.09 (0.09)	0.07 (0.13)	0.07 (0.10)	<b>-0.10 (0.07)</b>
k	51	46	55	54	69	81
#ES	152	109	199	177	241	271

Note: Effect sizes in bold indicate that the 95 % confidence interval does not include zero.  
k = number of studies; ES = effect size.

opposite for women than for men. Here, women with children seem to benefit less from policies than women without children, whereas men with children benefit approximately equally from policies as men without children. Somewhat unexpectedly, recipients that benefit least are women with children. Second, the interaction between parental and relationship status was significant for supports ( $B = -0.10$ ). Being in a relationship seems to matter only for nonparents and not for parents. That is, among employees without children, having a relationship is associated with stronger effects.

4.5. Moderator analyses of organizational and national characteristics

Next, we conducted multiple mixed-effects models to understand which organizational sector and national characteristics influence the effects of family-friendly policies and supports. As zero values on the national characteristics are not useful for interpretation and the characteristics are measured on different scales, we used standardization. A zero value reflects an “average” country, for example with a mean GDP per capita, and nonzero values reflect the number of standard deviations from the mean. Given the small number of effect sizes for some values of the factors if separate analyses for policies and supports are conducted, only combined models are presented in Table 11.

Looking at the organizational sector characteristics, the results indicate few differences between sectors. For career outcomes, significant effects are found for studies examining healthcare ( $B = 0.29$ ), service ( $B = 0.09$ ) and manufacturing businesses ( $B = 0.19$ ), and a mix of sectors ( $B = 0.17$ ). Larger effect sizes are found for healthcare and manufacturing businesses, although only healthcare differs significantly from the other sectors ( $z_{range}: 1.94-2.49$ ). Thus, family-friendly policies and supports appear more beneficial in healthcare organizations than in other types of sectors. For job outcomes, effect sizes for all sectors, except security, are significant and positive ( $B_{range}: 0.13-0.22$ ). Only minor differences are found across sectors, where effect sizes appear slightly smaller in education, healthcare, and security. For work-family outcomes, the effect sizes in all sectors are positive and significant ( $B_{range}: 0.18-0.25$ ), and no significant differences are found. Thus, family-friendly policies and supports appear equally important across sectors for work-family

**Table 11**  
Results from mixed-effects models for organizational sector and national characteristics.

	Career outcomes			Job outcomes			Work-family outcomes		
	#ES (k)	B	95 % CI	#ES (k)	B	95 % CI	#ES (k)	B	95 % CI
<i>Organizational sector</i>									
Government	18 (5)	0.04	-0.09: 0.17	50 (8)	<b>0.22</b>	<b>0.14: 0.30</b>	48	<b>0.19</b>	<b>0.09: 0.29</b>
Education	11 (5)	0.03	-0.11: 0.16	35 (8)	<b>0.13</b>	<b>0.05: 0.21</b>	41	<b>0.16</b>	<b>0.07: 0.26</b>
Healthcare	8 (4)	<b>0.29</b>	<b>0.13: 0.44</b>	41 (8)	<b>0.15</b>	<b>0.07: 0.24</b>	44	<b>0.23</b>	<b>0.14: 0.32</b>
Security	9 (4)	0.07	-0.08: 0.23	12 (4)	0.09	-0.05: 0.23	19	<b>0.23</b>	<b>0.10: 0.36</b>
Service business	36 (14)	<b>0.09</b>	<b>0.01: 0.18</b>	93 (24)	<b>0.16</b>	<b>0.11: 0.21</b>	93	<b>0.19</b>	<b>0.13: 0.24</b>
Manufacturing business	8 (5)	<b>0.19</b>	<b>0.05: 0.34</b>	11 (4)	<b>0.20</b>	<b>0.07: 0.33</b>	23	<b>0.25</b>	<b>0.14: 0.36</b>
Mixed	249 (55)	<b>0.07</b>	<b>0.03: 0.11</b>	337 (72)	<b>0.22</b>	<b>0.19: 0.21</b>	392	<b>0.18</b>	<b>0.15: 0.21</b>
<i>National characteristics</i>									
GDP	362 (95)	<b>-0.03</b>	<b>-0.06: -0.01</b>	567 (123)	<b>-0.02</b>	<b>-0.04: -0.00</b>	622 (135)	-0.02	-0.04: 0.00
Public spending on benefits	321 (81)	<b>-0.03</b>	<b>-0.06: -0.00</b>	461 (100)	-0.01	-0.04: 0.03	516 (104)	0.00	-0.03: 0.03
Gender inequality index (GII)	355 (93)	<b>0.03</b>	<b>0.01: 0.06</b>	516 (120)	<b>0.02</b>	<b>0.00: 0.05</b>	602 (132)	<b>0.02</b>	<b>-0.00: 0.04</b>
Culture of gender egalitarianism	351 (91)	-0.02	-0.06: 0.02	569 (122)	-0.02	-0.05: 0.01	606 (128)	-0.01	-0.04: 0.02

Note: Effect sizes in bold indicate that the 95 % confidence interval does not include zero.  
ES = effect size; k = number of studies.

outcomes.

Three of the four national characteristics significantly moderate the effects of family-friendly policies and supports. First, the results indicate that GDP per capita negatively moderates the effects on career ( $B = -0.03$ ) and job outcomes ( $B = -0.02$ ). In other words, higher GDP per capita is associated with smaller effect sizes. Second, public spending negatively moderates the effects on career outcomes ( $B = -0.03$ ). If the percentage of public spending on family benefits increases, the effects of family-friendly policies and supports decrease. Third, gender inequality positively moderates the effects on all outcomes in such a way that higher gender inequality is associated with higher effects of policies and supports ( $B_{range}$ : 0.02–0.03). A culture of gender egalitarianism does not significantly moderate any of the effects.

## 5. Discussion

This study provides a state-of-the-art overview of the effects of family-friendly policies and supports on career, job, and work-family outcomes. Using a meta-analytic approach, we examined a broad range of policies, supports, outcomes, and contextual moderators. In Table 12, we present a summary of our key findings. Our primary objective was to address the variability in research on this topic by conducting the most comprehensive examination to date. Doing so allowed us to answer questions relating to what works, who benefits and in which contexts does it work. Nevertheless, we are aware of our own study's limitations and acknowledge that questions still remain.

### 5.1. Which policies and supports work?

Starting with the question of what works, our study corroborates previous meta-analyses that found positive effects on work-family conflict (French et al., 2018; Mesmer-Magnus & Viswesvaran, 2006; Michel et al., 2011), work-family enrichment (Lapierre et al., 2018) and hedonic wellbeing at work (Butts et al., 2013), but it also demonstrates that the range of outcomes that is affected positively is much broader, including relational, eudemonic, and health wellbeing at work and positive employee behaviors. Important to note is that the meta-analytic correlations vary substantially across outcomes, where more proximal attitudinal outcomes, such as intentions to stay and relational wellbeing at work, often show larger effect sizes than more distal health or behavioral outcomes.

Our findings also show considerable differences in the effect sizes between and within policies and supports. Overall, supports demonstrate stronger effects on almost all outcomes than policies. Receiving family-friendly workplace supports leads to higher wellbeing at work, lower intentions to leave, and more positive perceptions of how work and family influence each other. The impact is particularly high if support is received from the supervisor, and perhaps even essential if a positive supervisor-employee relationship is pursued. The difference between policies and supports may be due to the strength of the signaling effect that is associated with both types. Family-friendly policies, while they function as organizational signals of care for work-family issues, are not always known to all employees, and research has repeatedly identified an implementation gap for family-friendly policies (Budd & Mumford, 2006). In addition, based on the concept of receiver attention (Connelly et al., 2011), people who are not searching for help to combine work and family demands are less likely to encounter these policies. In contrast, family-friendly supports are perceivable to a larger share of employees, even if they are not searching for them, as it is ingrained in the organizational and team culture and visible in supervisor behaviors. Thus, the signaling effect of policies is generally weaker, leading to less positive evaluations and reciprocal behavior by employees.

The differences in effect sizes within policies and supports indicate that they are not interchangeable and that their variety should be considered when studying them. For policies, in line with proposed additive effects in HR literature (Macky & Boxall, 2007), a bundle of policies appears most consistent in improving employee outcomes than individual policies, although not for every outcome. For example, in line with Butts et al. (2013), leave policies appear more useful than a bundle on some occasions, particularly in

**Table 12**  
Summary of key findings.

<b>Main effects</b>	
Career outcomes	Small overall positive effect. Moderate effects on career attitudes, nonsignificant effects on 'objective' career aspects (e.g., working hours).
Job outcomes	Moderate overall positive effect. Effects are strongest on job attitudes and relational outcomes, and weaker on health and behavioral outcomes.
Work-family outcomes	Moderate overall positive effect. Effects are strongest on work-to-family interactions and work-life balance, and weaker on family-to-work interactions.
<b>Effects of types of policies</b>	Various types of policies can be beneficial but depends on outcomes. Bundle of policies show more consistent positive effects than single policies. Policy availability shows stronger effects than policy usage.
<b>Effects for types of support</b>	Overall stronger effects for supports than policies. Family-friendly organizational and supervisor support show the strongest effects.
<b>Moderator effects</b>	
Recipient characteristics	Effects differ across recipients for career and work-family outcomes. Effects are generally weaker for those who need it the most, such as mothers.
Organizational sector characteristics	Few differences between sectors, although findings indicate that career outcomes are more positively affected in sectors that are less family-friendly due to their nature of work (e.g., healthcare, manufacturing).
National characteristics	National context moderates the effects of family-friendly policies and supports, such that in disadvantageous contexts (i.e., low GDP, low public spending on family benefits, high gender inequality) the effects are stronger.

reducing work-family conflict and turnover intentions.

Another difference within policies is seen for policy measurement. In line with previous findings that policy availability has a stronger effect than policy usage on work attitudes (Butts et al., 2013), we extend the literature by showing that this difference holds for a broad range of outcomes. A difference in signaling ability between availability and usage has been used to explain this difference, but it may also be related to backlash mechanisms associated with usage (Perrigino et al., 2018). Negative responses or experiences associated with policy usage, such as perceived unfairness by others and stigmatization, may offset its positive effects. We also extend the literature by including accessibility as a separate and distinct construct. For an employee to use a policy, they not only need to be aware of its availability but also have (perceived) access to it (Fan et al., 2022). How policy accessibility compares to availability and usage regarding employee outcomes is not straightforward, as the findings show that its effects are often similar to availability for job and work-family outcomes but not for career outcomes. Perhaps the attention that is signaled from the availability of policies is enough to positively affect career outcomes, and that policy accessibility is not providing additional signals to employees.

### 5.2. Who benefits from policies and supports?

Family-friendly policies and supports are intended to help those employees that need to juggle between work and family responsibilities but given their signaling properties also affect others. Signal-oriented theories would expect that the effects are stronger among employees with greater family demands, such as women, parents, and married/cohabitating people. However, our findings found no difference for job outcomes and even indicate the opposite for career and work-family outcomes. Here, employees with greater family demands seem to benefit less from these policies and supports. Following research that found lower accessibility among people most likely in need of policies and supports (Budd & Mumford, 2006), we show that the effects are often smaller for this group as well.

Therefore, resource-oriented theories seem more applicable in explaining these findings. Similar to Butts et al. (2013), our results indicate that the policies and supports in place are not adequate to alleviate the greater demands faced by women and parents (both fathers and mothers). As family demands affect career and work-family outcomes more directly and more instrumental support is likely needed to allow for changes in career or work-family allocation, this may explain why the differences are more pronounced for these outcomes. The lower effects for some outcomes may also result from negative spillover of using family-friendly policies (Perrigino et al., 2018). Research has shown negative unintended consequences of using policies, primarily flex-related, such as reduced work-life balance and increased conflict. As women, parents, and married/cohabitating employees are more likely to use these policies, this backlash mechanism affects these groups more severely.

### 5.3. In which context do policies and supports work?

As emphasized in the literature, the study of policies and supports aimed to help employees is inherently contextualized and universal effects are rarely found (Fan et al., 2022; Jackson et al., 2014). The same can be said about the moderating effects of organizational sector and national characteristics, although our findings are not straightforward. Overall, we found that, in contexts that disadvantage people with greater work-family issues, family-friendly policies and supports provided by the organization are more useful. Career outcomes in particular are more positively affected when contexts are less family-friendly, for example when the type of work hinders usage (i.e., healthcare, manufacturing), when economic conditions are poor, or when there is a high level of gender inequality in society.

This stronger effect of organization-provided family-friendly policies and supports in disadvantageous contexts may reflect both an instrumental and symbolic value (Butts et al., 2013). First, when combining work and family responsibilities is not well supported by sector and national conditions, such as in family-unfriendly work or countries with weak national-level policies, policies and supports provided by the organization can have a more direct impact as a resource. For example, in countries that do not provide parental leave at the national level, employees rely on organizations for them. Second, policies and supports provided by the organization have a stronger symbolic value in disadvantageous contexts. Sector and national conditions partly determine the basic level of support for combining work and family that people expect and receive. If these conditions are already very advantageous to employees with family demands, it is difficult as an organization to stand out. In contrast, organizations that provide family-friendly policies and supports in disadvantageous contexts will be viewed as going above and beyond to help their employees, resulting in stronger effects.

These findings are somewhat at odds with our findings that people who need it the most often benefit the least. Perhaps the mechanisms proposed by signal- and resource-oriented theories act out differently across levels, and that different theories are needed to explain differences between contexts than between people. In this respect, it appears that, on average, employees benefit more from family-friendly policies and supports in disadvantageous contexts, but that for certain groups of people these resources are not helpful enough.

### 5.4. Limitations and directions for future research

In addition to our study's contributions, we acknowledge that there are also several limitations pertaining to our set of studies included in the analyses. These limitations can act as starting points for future research. First, most of the studies included in our analyses are cross-sectional and rely on self-reports to measure the policies or supports and outcomes. This inhibits our ability for inferring causality and does not exclude the possibility of reverse causality. Moreover, those studies that applied experimental or longitudinal design tended to focus on career outcomes, such as job attractiveness and working hours. Thus, for most of the outcomes,

only cross-sectional studies were found. More longitudinal and experimental research is therefore needed, especially for job and work-family outcomes.

Second, there is a dearth of quantitative research on the effects of career-related policies. Flex-, leave-, and care support-related policies, while associated with many positive outcomes, are also notorious for the negative career consequences when using them (Feeney et al., 2014). Even when the organization is supportive of combining work and family, both women and men often face stigmatization and negative spillover effects when using policies such as parental leave. Career-related policies, such as stop the clock, are meant to protect the user, and mitigate negative effects of other family-friendly policies. Most of the studies on this type of policy are qualitative and the results from the few quantitative studies are mixed. For example, some studies found positive effects on the probability to work (Bächmann et al., 2020) and work-family conflict (Chou & Cheung, 2013), while others found no significant effects (Feeney et al., 2014) or even negative effects (Antecol et al., 2018). There is much we do not know about when and how career-related policies affect employees, separately and in combination with other policies.

Third, while we depicted family-friendly policies and workplace supports as two related but distinct concepts, the clear distinction between these two resources is sometimes blurred within organizations (Leroy et al., 2018). This blurring seems particularly applicable to supervisors, whose supportiveness has been argued to be dependent on the prevailing organizational culture and their access to work-family resources (Crain & Stevens, 2018; Straub, 2012). In other words, when supervisors are supportive within an organizational context that values family-friendliness, it becomes increasingly difficult to distinguish their impact independently of the context. An interesting avenue for future research would therefore be to compare supportive supervisors within organizations with varying degrees of family-friendliness, or to assess the impact of supervisors who fail to be supportive despite working within a family-friendly organization (Walsh et al., 2019).

Finally, our study suffers from range restriction when considering the countries included in the analyses. While studies from a wide range of countries are included, from the US to China and Chile, most of it can be considered WEIRD (western, educated, industrialized, rich, and democratic; Henrich et al., 2010). This restriction has several implications. It may affect the type of policies and supports that we have found as organizations can vary, because of political, cultural, or historical reasons, in which type is emphasized. For example, organizations in Scandinavian countries generally offer employees access to flex-related policies while only a minority does this in many Eastern European countries (Chung, 2018). As the diffusion of policies is not random, the sample of countries in our analyses may affect the results. The range restriction also has implications for interpreting the effect of national characteristics. Although countries at both ends of the scales of our national moderators were included, our sample is skewed towards countries that are richer, more supportive of combining work and family, and more gender equal. As range restriction is often argued to lower correlations, the moderating effects of national characteristics are probably stronger than our findings indicate (Hunter et al., 2006). However, to truly be able to understand how the effects of policies and supports on employees differ across countries, it is important that the range of countries in which studies are conducted widens.

### 5.5. To conclude

A growing body of research has emerged the past decades on the potential benefits of family-friendly policies and workplace supports for employees. This study utilized previous findings in a comprehensive meta-analysis to investigate which policies and supports work, who benefits and the impact of national and organizational factors. Overall, our results show that family-friendly policies and supports have the potential to stimulate a various range of career, job, and work-family outcomes. In general, organizations seem to benefit most from focusing on workplace supports as a means to elicit positive employee outcomes. However, the effects we found are dependent on the type of policy and support, the circumstances under which they are provided and used, and the characteristics of the recipient. Therefore, to fully realize their potential, practitioners, such as HR managers and supervisors, need to tailor their policies and supports according to these dependencies.

### CRediT authorship contribution statement

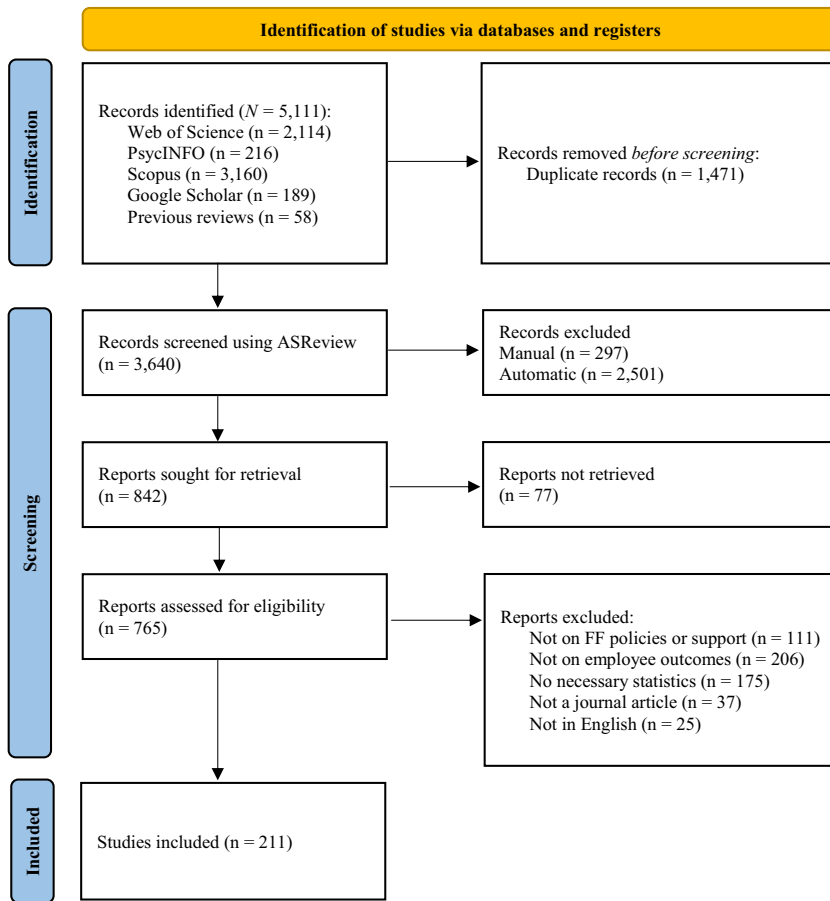
**Rutger Blom:** Writing – original draft, Visualization, Software, Project administration, Methodology, Investigation, Formal analysis, Data curation, Conceptualization. **Eva Jaspers:** Writing – review & editing, Supervision, Funding acquisition, Conceptualization. **Eva Knies:** Writing – review & editing, Supervision, Funding acquisition, Conceptualization. **Tanja van der Lippe:** Writing – review & editing, Supervision, Funding acquisition, Conceptualization.

### Declaration of competing interest

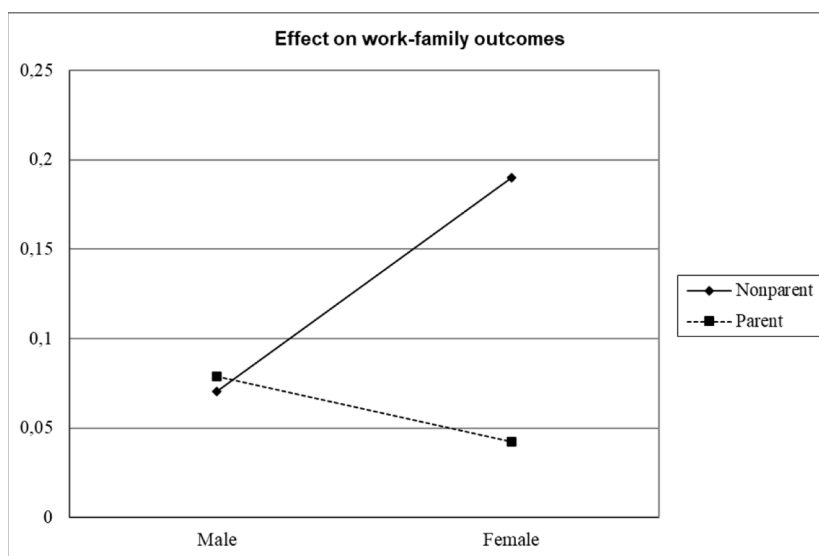
The authors declare the following financial interests/personal relationships which may be considered as potential competing interests:

Tanja van der Lippe reports financial support was provided by Dutch Research Council (NWA.1328.19.002). If there are other authors, they declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

**Appendix A. Prisma flow diagram**



**Appendix B. Interaction plot for recipient characteristics**



**Fig. B1.** Interaction of gender and parental status for the effect of policies on work-family outcomes.



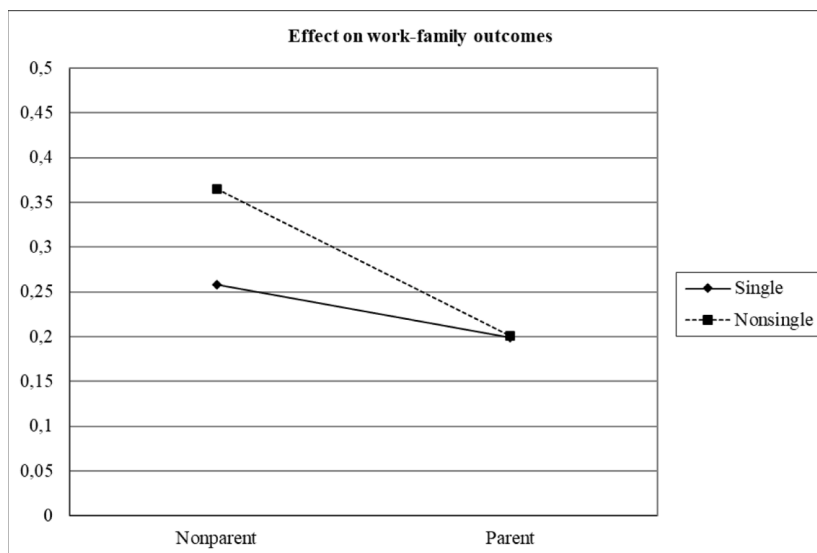


Fig. B2. Interaction of parental and relationship status for the effect of supports on work-family outcomes.

## Appendix C. Supplementary data

Supplementary data to this article can be found online at <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jvb.2025.104091>.

## Data availability

Data will be made available on request.

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