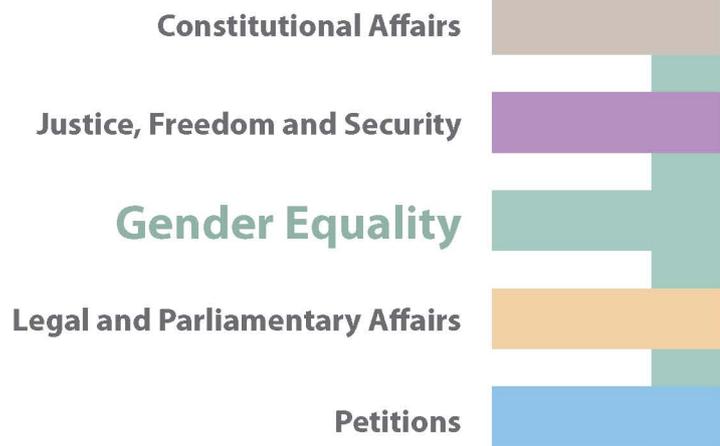


DIRECTORATE-GENERAL FOR INTERNAL POLICIES

**POLICY DEPARTMENT** **C**  
CITIZENS' RIGHTS AND CONSTITUTIONAL AFFAIRS



# Benefits of maternity / paternity leave in the EU27 - Literature review

NOTE





**DIRECTORATE GENERAL FOR INTERNAL POLICIES**  
**POLICY DEPARTMENT C: CITIZENS' RIGHTS AND**  
**CONSTITUTIONAL AFFAIRS**

**GENDER EQUALITY**

**BENEFITS OF A**  
**MATERNITY / PARENTAL LEAVE**  
**IN THE EU27 -**  
**Literature review**

**NOTE**

**Abstract**

Maternity/Parental leave and the relevant benefits constitute important means through which welfare states provide support to families to contribute to social reproduction, to guarantee a good start in life for children, to protect children's and mothers' wellbeing and more recently to address current demographic and economic problems and help families achieve work/family balance, a declared EU priority. This note presents the important benefits and the crucial role maternity/parental leave plays on the societal and family level in the context of the EU-27.

This document was requested by the European Parliament's Committee on Women's Rights and Gender Equality.

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

Since the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century a lot of changes have shaken the traditional notion of male breadwinner/female homemaker model, which used to be the cornerstone of family policy. Falling fertility rates due to increasing women's participation in the labour market have brought about new family arrangements such as lone mother families headed by unmarried or divorced women, or based on cohabitation of hetero or homosexual couples. Greater family fluidity has made previous policy assumptions questionable and difficult to sustain (Lewis 2006, 2009).

Social rights (which can include the right to care and to be cared for) are in a process of re-conceptualisation, from being burdens on business to becoming contributors to efficiency and from being negative and judicially enforced to becoming positive and proactive (Fredman 2006).

The global economic integration and the prioritisation of the discourse of growth and competitiveness have impacted significantly on welfare states, which have been increasingly seen as highly regulated and costly and have faced retrenchment, cost-containment and 'rolling-back' (Gauthier, 2002/3). The individualisation of public and private life across Europe also challenges the structures that used to support children and provide care. Market individualism has attacked the assumptions of the Western welfare state and the way of life in Eastern Europe. Social individualism and the individual management of one's life and its risks have also spread across east and west (Pascall and Lewis 2004).

Traditional gender roles and labour market divisions dictate that the overwhelming amount of child care is provided by women, with negative implications for their labour market prospects; at the same time, men are deprived of the opportunity to participate equally in infant and child care. The shifting gender balance in the labour market has given rise to debates about the state/family division of childcare responsibility (Leira 1998). State intervention has involved both the (paid) employment and the (unpaid) care work sides and has blurred the boundaries between cash and services (Lewis 2009).

Walby (2004) identifies several ways of transition to a gender regime: first, the social democratic route (Nordic countries) where the development of public services enables women to increase labour market participation; second, the market route (US) where services to enable women to be in employment are private; third, the regulatory route (EU), where women's employment is helped by the removal of discrimination, regulation of working time, policies to promote social inclusion.

Ageing (and the associated increasing needs), fertility and child poverty are linked with employment policies, including the participation of women in the labour market, but not necessarily with considerations about gender equality. The issue of care, however, is central and policy deals with questions about how it is valued and shared between man and women and between the market, the state, the employers and the family (Lewis 2006).

An important problem in welfare literature is that it tends to analyse policies related to employment and less so policies for population segments that do not participate in formal employment (Henderson and White 2004). The eligibility criteria, the allocation principles, the interpretations of the social citizenship status of the caregivers are elements of national variations (Fodor et al. 2002). Family allowances may be universal (awarded on a per-child basis) or selective (income- or means-tested and providing more support to certain types

of families, such as single-parent ones); they may be based on the social insurance principle and awarded on the basis of the employment of the parents; they can be at a flat rate, or earnings-related. They can also follow population policies, e.g. be pro-natal and reward families with more children (Rostgaard 2004). Parental leave arrangements can be seen as one measure in an attempt to meet the challenges of combining work, care and other activities, responsibilities and complexities of contemporary life, by creating primarily time for childcare or as enabling attachment to work (Deven and Moss 2002).

There is a growing awareness of the need for policy to intervene at the household level so as to enable households manage care with increasing participation of men in care activities (Pascall and Lewis 2004). The modernisation of the gender regime creates a political constituency of working women who try to negotiate their right to combine employment with home-making. Parental legislation and policy has to be seen in a broader context of EU legislation that considers gender equality as one of its fundamental pillars. Moreover, it has to be seen in the context of the overall political strategy of the EU, which includes concerns about social cohesion and the necessary regulation of labour markets (Walby 2003).

Attempting to disentangle all the dimensions and interconnected elements of maternity/parental leave benefits is a very complex task, since it involves so many different settings and actors. For the purpose of this note, we use “maternity” and “parental leave” almost interchangeably, as in some countries only the latter is used as a gender-neutral term. Moreover, evidence shows that in most countries it is predominantly taken by mothers as a natural extension of maternity leave.

After a brief presentation of the common EU legislative framework and the member states diverse responses, an account of the main health and socio-economic benefits of maternity/parental leave follows from societal and family perspectives. The most important challenges, policies and trends are mentioned. Policies are also informed by a multitude of other factors such political parties, civil society and social partners, international organisations influencing domestic economies, which due to space constraints could not be included.

## **2. THE EU LEGISLATIVE FRAMEWORK**

The 1957 Treaty of Rome introduced equal pay between women and men (Article 119). A series of legally-binding directives from the 1970s set out to implement gender equality in employment, equal pay for equal work, equal access to employment, training, promotion, working conditions, equal treatment in social security (Walby 2004).

In 1992, a European Council recommendation on childcare suggested that member states develop and encourage initiatives to enable women and men to reconcile occupational, family and child care responsibilities (Council of the European Union 1992). The recommendation suggested others, including childcare services, parental leave, family-friendly policies in the workplace and measures to promote participation of men in child-caring activities. In 1993, the concept of “reconciliation of working and family life” was invoked in the context of concerns about developing an EU labour market policy to boost growth and tackle unemployment. Individualisation of taxation and social security systems was proposed. Flexibility was emphasised and this signified a shift from gender equality in the labour market to helping women through flexible working conditions and the introduction of family policies.

In 1996, a Parental Leave Directive was adopted which set out minimum individual rights to three months parental leave for both men and women (in addition to maternity leave). It

was supposed to be non-transferable, but the absence of remunerations specifications made it de facto less likely to be deployed by men (Lewis 2009, Henderson and White 2004). The European Commission's recognition that women's labour market entry and the new gender balance necessitated modernisation of social protection was registered as early as 1997 and a subsequent text emphasised that the familist ideology of the old welfare establishment, which was based on the traditional roles of men and women and the male breadwinner model was detrimental to both labour market supply and family formation (Esping-Andersen 1999).

The European Employment Strategy after the Treaty of Amsterdam introduced measures for work/family reconciliation and aimed at strengthening equal opportunities in the context of flexible female employment. Member states were to design and implement family-friendly policies, including affordable and high quality child care and parental and relevant leave schemes (Commission of the European Communities 2001). The Lisbon agenda treated reconciliation as a dimension contributing to a good work environment and facilitated by flexible work organisation (Stratigaki 2004). A new 'flexicurity' strategy connecting social policy with flexible labour markets, as well as economic with demographic policies, was established. Since 2005, the issue of increasing fertility has been part of the agenda.

Overall, the EU childhood policy consists of the legal right to maternity and parental leave, public support for working parents and for early education for all children (Pascall and Lewis 2004). The goal of promoting gender equality has been sidelined and policy has focused on the provision of childcare services, rather than long childcare leaves (Lewis 2009). Directives on the regulation of working time and parenthood have started to incorporate the concept of the worker-parent in employment law. However, implementation of EU equality directives is uneven and conditioned on national differences in legal arrangements, political will and different ways of transposing EU law, while care subsidisation rests with the authority of the member states. In addition, the EU strategy of gender mainstreaming is supported only by "soft" law interventions, i.e. advisory rather than enforceable (Walby 2004).

### **3. DIVERSITY IN THE MEMBER STATE CONTEXT**

Family policies are an amalgam of policies, programmes and laws targeting families. State support for families can be of the following form:

- a) Direct and indirect subsidies for parents (family allowances, childcare benefits, vouchers, tax benefits)
- b) Provision of childcare and education services in public nurseries, pre-schools etc.
- c) parental leave policy (maternity, paternity, parental and child-rearing leaves)
- d) Direct and indirect subsidies for private services provided by individual, NGOs, enterprises (grants, tax benefits and credits) (Rostgaard 2004).

In many European countries, "parental leave" refers to leave granted to mothers/fathers for longer term care of children after the initial maternity/paternity leave period (Ray et al 2008). In most cases, it is gender-neutral, job-protected leave from employment. For mothers, it usually follows after the exhaustion of maternity leave. Child rearing leave is a supplemental leave added to maternity leave. Family leave includes maternity, paternity, parental, child-rearing, care for an ill-child or personal leave (Tanaka 2005; Haas 2003). National states are characterised by particular gender regimes, namely 'interconnected systems, through which paid work is connected to unpaid work, state services and benefits

are delivered to individual or households, costs are allocated, and time is shared between men and women in households, as well as between households and employment' (Deven and Moss 2002, p.247).

Maternity and parental leaves are part of the arrangements provided by the state to give to mothers and fathers the opportunity to take time off work after childbirth whilst maintaining job security and minimising the risks of losing one's job (Han et al. 2009). State regulation of the relationship between the family and the market responsibilities has shaped maternity leave legislation and parliamentary representation of women can among other factors explain variations in paternity leave arrangements, as well as the deployment of them in different countries (Rostgaard 2002, (O'Brien 2007). Cultural parameters, such as attitudes to family or religious dispositions, can also mark the profile of the state/family relationship and will interact with contemporary cross-country tendencies (often emanating from the EU), e.g. the promotion of gender equality.

One way to approach family policies is through the perspective of the "caring dimension of the welfare states". Relevant questions in this respect include: whether care is private or public responsibility, whether it is paid or unpaid, whether it contributes to the dependence or independence of caregivers (Haas 2003). Daly and Lewis (2000) identify a tendency to collectivise care by providing tax-funded parental leave and subsidised public child care, as well as a tendency to privatise care, by encouraging family members or volunteers to provide it.

Using care as an analytical category, Haas (2003) classifies the EU-15 welfare states in four main clusters. In the **privatised care model** (Greece, Italy, Portugal, Spain),<sup>1</sup> care is a privatised responsibility, primarily by mothers or extended family members, while men are oriented towards the labour market; private and public spheres are starkly differentiated. Fathers are not encouraged to take leave (because either it is unpaid, or not guaranteed in all companies or not a non-transferable right). In the **family-centred care model** (Austria, Germany, Belgium, France and Luxembourg),<sup>2</sup> family values are central in society, the preservation of the family is important to policymakers, women's contribution is more recognised, but men are still held responsible for the family income. Fertility is promoted and there is public support for care-giving. Parental leave can be seen as childbearing leave and can theoretically be taken by either parent, while some incentives are given to fathers to take leave. In the **market-oriented model** (Ireland, UK, Netherlands),<sup>3</sup> parental leave policies are limited and there are no incentives for fathers to

<sup>1</sup> Southern European countries are characterised by the centrality of family in social arrangements, together with the notably underdeveloped family policy, which through its inactivity reproduces the ideological assumption of the family as main provider in society (Ferrera 1996, Rhodes 1997, Flaquer 2000, Darmanin 2006).

<sup>2</sup> In France, family is the major issue for public policy, rather than the individual, and family policy implies the legal recognition that family plays a major role in the maintenance of social cohesion. The state is considered to have a great responsibility vis-à-vis children. Much of the support for women's employment has been of a pronatalist, rather than gender equality orientation. State nurseries are well-organised and nearly all children from age three to six, as well as substantial numbers of two-year olds, attend state nursery schools. There are also crèches for the under-2s and also tax relief on childcare expenses. Women have benefited from the child care provided by the state and the majority of them are in employment, often full-time. France presents a good example of a holistic approach to work/family policies, in that the introduction of the 35-hour week was intended to alleviate the unemployment problem, but also to respond to the employees' requests for better work/family balance (Crompton and Lyonette 2006, Letablier 2004).

<sup>3</sup> UK is a neo-liberal regime, where flexibility in the labour market is encouraged; British women have among the highest levels of part-time work in the EU. With the election of the New Labour government in 1997, family policy was placed at the centre of the agenda for the first time, a major objective being the reduction of child poverty through increase in parental employment. Cash transfers to low-income families

take unpaid parental leave. Instead of designing state policies to financially support employees (childcare, paid maternity leave, paid paternity leave), these countries have been working on convincing employers to become more involved in helping employees combine work and family through flexible work arrangements. Finally, the *valued care model* (Denmark, Sweden, Finland),<sup>4</sup> implies that care is a joint public/private responsibility, provides to parents the opportunity to take parental leave in order to care for young children, offers financial compensation and guarantees job security, gives access to affordable care services and encourages fathers to take parental leave so as to help divide care responsibilities equally.

The ambiguous function of family benefits, often maintaining the segmentation between labour market employment and domestic care work and the associated gendered divisions, has often been stressed (Bieback 1993). Other commentators (Henneck 2003, Gangl and Ziefle 2009, Spiess and Wrohlich 2006) argue that generous maternity leaves, alongside the absence of childcare provisions as additional support, have socially conservative effect, as they create economic incentives for women to stay out of the labour market during childbearing with obvious implications for experience and promotions.

The post-communist countries are of particular interest, as they are still in a transitional phase and are following quite different trends, despite their common past. At the point of transition, labour market participation rates of women were quite high.<sup>5</sup> Social assistance schemes became central in the process of transformation into market economies (Cerami 2008). After the collapse of communism, a male breadwinner model was assumed to be the dominant model and state policies included the closing down of childcare centres and the withdrawal of financial support. Refamilialisation has been emphasised as the common feature in the former communist countries, but diversity of policies have started to be also an object of study (Szelewa and Polakowski 2008; Saxonberg and Szelewa 2007).<sup>6</sup> Great

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have been introduced, including childcare allowances. Work/life balance has been on the agenda, but provision of childcare centres has been limited; parents of children under six have the right to request flexible working hours (Crompton and Lyonette 2006).

<sup>4</sup> In Denmark, public funding of childcare is developed, a high proportion of mothers are in the labour force, and there is paid parental leave for families and paid childcare leave. Fathers are given some incentives to take parental leave, but only low percentages take it because of low compensation rates, employer resistance and fear of dismissal. As a result, it is mainly mothers who use parental leave. Finland is characterised by more traditional family arrangements, with little interest in the redistribution of childcare. Public childcare is available, while only low percentages of fathers taking parental leave (which is available only on a full-time basis). Sweden is considered the most gender-egalitarian welfare state, which reconciles demands of the market with the demands of children. Some of its dimensions include: an individualised taxation system; equal employment legislation, which supports equal pay for equal work and enables women to enter male-dominated occupations; heavily subsidised high quality childcare; parental leave packages, whereby fathers are given incentives through non-transferable adequately paid paternal leave with maximum flexibility. These arrangements have promoted high labour participation of women and greater involvement of men in family life (Haas 2003).

<sup>5</sup> About 80% in Czechoslovakia, Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania, and about 70% in Poland, Hungary and Romania, while the pay gap was about 11% in Hungary and 13% in Poland (UNICEF 1999).

<sup>6</sup> Szelewa and Polakowski (2008) argue that some post-communist nations have followed different paths of familialisation, while others have stressed defamilialising elements. In their typology they identify four policy-types: a) *explicit familialism* (Czech Republic, Slovakia, Slovenia), where the state pursues more active policies to support the family model; paid periods of parental leave are longer, there is no subsidisation of childcare centres, women are perceived of as carers and are given incentives with long periods of paid leave; b) *implicit familialism* (Poland) or *private maternalism* (Fodor et al. 2002; Glass and Fodor 2007), where policies are residual, there is lack of childcare centres and care is de facto left to families and in particular women; c) *female-mobilising* (Estonia, Latvia), where generosity of parental leave provisions are low, quality of childcare is high and care is not considered the responsibility of the family and access to commodification is considered important and indeed women are not given incentives to leave the labour market d) *comprehensive support* (Lithuania, Hungary), where quality of childcare services is high, parental leave is generous, policies are more diversified and families and women are both

support was provided to large families for demographic purposes (Fultz and Steinhilber 2003).

National variations in maternity and parental leave arrangements are to be anticipated and taken seriously, not least because of different social constructions of motherhood, fatherhood and childhood, which have an 'important bearing in our understanding both of leave policies themselves and how and why leave policies are used' (Deven and Moss 2002, p.247).

## 4. A MULTI-DIMENSIONAL OVERVIEW OF THE BENEFITS OF MATERNITY/PARENTAL LEAVE

Certain facts are independent of any national welfare context, such as the need of parents to spend time with their newborn children so that bonds are formed and parenthood develops. The significance of maternity/parental leave to this aim is indisputable and multi-faceted. This section presents some of the maternity/parental leave benefits that relate to the spheres of health, economy and society.

### 4.1. Health-related Benefits

Staying at home for some weeks after birth offers mothers the opportunity to recover, helps breastfeeding and can also contribute to the prevention of certain health problems both for the mother and the child (Berger et al. 2005). Extended parental leave periods impact positively on children's health due to direct parental care (e.g. breastfeeding or systematic vaccination), as well as later enrolment into group childcare or into care provision by non-relatives (Han et al 2009).

Public health agencies have in the recent years emphasised the benefits of breastfeeding for children's subsequent health and have recommended six months of exclusive breastfeeding (e.g. US, Canada).<sup>7</sup> Studies have reported benefits for children associated with breastfeeding, such as decreases in ear infections, gastro-intestinal diseases, asthma, lower respiratory infections, sudden infant death syndrome and chronic digestive diseases.

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paid and relieved as far as care is concerned and thus both earners in the family can be mobilised but have also more options for resolving the problem of employment and childcare. However, tax policies have not been an obstacle for women, as they have followed the communist tradition of individual taxation that does not discourage women from entering the labour market.

Bulgaria and Romania have presented the common trend of retrenchment of the formal labour market. Bulgaria, in particular has entered a vicious circle of negative population growth, mass impoverishment, unemployment, deteriorating health status of the population and high emigration rates. Still, there is strong protection for working mothers, but this might be a disadvantage as a privatised firm cannot meet the costs of extended maternity and parental leave in Bulgaria and Romania. Slovenia suffered job losses under privatisation and restructuring in the 1990s, together with withdrawal of women and older workers from the labour market and towards informal economies, but has recovered since the mid-1990s and by the mid-200s only 12 per cent of women with young children were at home caring for them (Tang and Cousins 2005).

<sup>7</sup> The International Labour Organisation (ILO) recommendation on breastfeeding includes: a) the provision of a minimum of 14 weeks of paid maternity leave; b) entitlement to one or more paid breastfeeding/lactation breaks or reduction of working hours daily (without pay loss) to continue breastfeeding for longer periods; c) job protection and non-discrimination of breastfeeding workers. The ILO also suggests that maternity leave payments should be at least two thirds of previous earnings. Some countries go beyond these recommendations, yet some others have not fully implemented them legally. The standard of breastfeeding breaks is not frequently met. Overall, breastfeeding rates fall short of the recommended targets set by national policies, international agencies and professional associations (Cattaneo et al. 2005).

For mothers, benefits include improved bone mineralisation and a reduced risk of ovarian and breast cancer (Baker and Milligan 2008).

Data have consistently attributed the decision of some mothers to stop breastfeeding (or not start at all) to the need to return to work and to economic considerations; as a result, employment after birth is associated with a shorter breastfeeding period, while maternity leave legislation has proven to give rise to longer periods out of work and longer periods of breastfeeding (e.g. the case of the Canadian leave reform in 2000). Labour market policy seems a viable way of achieving breastfeeding objectives (Baker and Milligan 2008).

Several studies have found that longer job-protected paid maternal leave has significant effects on reducing infant mortality rates, even after controlling for other factors like expenditure on family services (Tanaka 2005). Winegarden and Bracy (1995) and Ruhm (2000) have used time-series data on European countries to show that longer leave is associated with lower rates of infant and young child mortality. However, non-paid leave or not job-protected leave does not seem to have any significant effect, which suggests that these circumstances may result in an early return to work.

Certain studies have shown that parental leave policies would impact positively on infant health through increased parental time, but not on medical care or household commodities, unless they have a significant effect on income (Ruhm 2000, Tanaka 2005). Other have pointed out that maternal return to work within the first six weeks of a baby's life might be associated with less adequate health screening, immunisation etc. Parental time and health-related goods, such as vaccines, nutritious foods etc., enhance a child's health capital, which suggests that parental leave (particularly the paid type) has positive effects on child health (Tanaka 2005).

Maternal work during the first year of a child's life is associated with lower cognitive test scores during childhood, as well as with behaviour problems (Han et al 2009, Baum 2003). There is increasing evidence that parental care and bonding affect positively the cognitive, behavioural and social development of the child (Baker and Milligan 2008, 2010), as well as their emotional welfare. Possible reasons for the association between early maternal employment and poor child cognitive outcomes can be: a) women who return to work earlier might not be able to provide a stimulating home environment because of stress or fatigue b) women who return to work earlier are less likely to breastfeed c) children whose mothers work in the first year are more likely to be placed in non-maternal care (Waldfogel et al. 2002). Research has shown that 'children whose mothers spend more time at home in the first months of life may benefit in the longer-run, through having fewer behavioural problems and better language and verbal abilities, because they have the chance to develop more sensitive and responsive relationships with their mothers and/or because the quality of care they receive at home is better than what they would have received in non-parental child care' (Berger et al. 2005, p.F34). Generally speaking, children do better if their mothers do not work full-time in the first year (Waldfogel 2006), as their developmental outcomes are better served by having a one-to-one interaction (Lewis and Campbell 2007). There is also evidence that the involvement of the father in the early years is very significant for a child's later emotional, cognitive and social welfare (Lamb 2004, O'Brien 2007). Non-parental care, on the other hand, seems to be leading to problem behaviour, namely disobedience and aggression, and these effects are more intense the more non-parental care is received in the first year (Belsky 2006, Loeb et al. 2007).

The effects of maternal employment on mothers' own health have been relatively understudied. Very few, if any, economics studies have investigated the effect of the length of maternity leave on the well-being of the mother. Most economics studies have examined the impact of maternal leave and relevant policies on labour market outcomes (types of job, wages, job continuity) (Chatterji and Markowitz 2005). Still, research (e.g. Gjerdingen et al. 1995, using a sample of Minnesota mothers) have indicated that women who are employed soon after childbirth suffer more physical health problems than other women, possibly due to increased stress. Such problems include respiratory infections, breast symptoms and gynaecological problems. Children and other family members can also suffer emotional and financial distress under such circumstances. In their US study, Chatterji and Markowitz (2005) focus on depression among women in childbearing age and have discovered that returning to work one week later is associated with 6-7% reduction in depressive symptoms; in addition, longer maternity leave tends to increase outpatient visits. In a Wisconsin study, Hyde et al (1995) have found that shorter leaves and lower rewards were linked with poorer mental health at four months postpartum. McGovern et al. (1997) have indicated that the length of maternity leave has a positive effect on the welfare of the mother, measured at seven months after birth with respect to mental health, vitality and role function.

Klein et al. (1998) investigated the effect of employment status, maternity leave and role quality on women's mental health one year after delivery in a sample of US women. Their study showed that at twelve months postpartum the length of maternity leave did not have significant effects on mental health and that there were no differences among homemakers and women in part-time or full-time employment regarding four measures of mental health, namely depression, anxiety, anger and self-esteem. The quality of multiple roles (family and work) that women occupied, as well as the relative emphasis they placed on each of them, turned out to be quite important for the mental health state of women during their transition from leave to the labour market. Klein et al. emphasise the significance of different individual responses to maternity leave and suggest that policy (either government or corporate) should allow long and paid maternity leaves so that women can have a real choice as to how much leave they take. Similar suggestions derive from a growing body of literature which highlights the huge value of parental presence in the home after the arrival of a child and the ways in which policies can facilitate this.

## **4.2. Socio-economic Benefits**

Governments across Europe encourage women's employment, even when their children are young. Work/family balance has become a policy priority, as it is argued that women's employment will create more and new jobs to meet the requirements for the caring and (unpaid) domestic work once previously carried out by women. Female earnings are expected to help families stay out of poverty and make a contribution to rising welfare costs (Crompton and Lyonette 2006). Maternity leave arrangements should work towards the same effect.

Family policies are an important policy tool to reduce the risk of poverty for families with children, redistribute income from childless households to those with children and also grant recognition to families for the societal benefits that children generate (Rostgaard 2004). Policies about family and work have also demographic dimensions to the extent that they have been regarded as tools addressing the challenges of an ageing society and the falling fertility rates (Lewis 2006).

In economic terms, children are often seen as “public goods” for the whole society and therefore state provisions for their rearing and education are required. Recognition of the public benefits of children entails the establishment of institutions to alleviate parents from associated costs and to socialise the costs of children; parental leave and universal entitlement to childcare are measures towards this direction. Limited public responsibility for childcare costs brings income problems, time poverty, gender inequality, problematic childcare arrangements and poor outcomes for the children (Gornick and Meyers 2003).<sup>8</sup> Since dual-earner families are common, women should be granted entitlements as individuals, rather than mothers or wives (Bittman 1999).

‘Social investment’ has emerged in recent years as an ideal promoted by the OECD and the EU among else. The term ‘social investment state’ (Giddens 1998) was proposed as an alternative to the traditional welfare state to emphasise investment in human capital, rather than direct provision of economic maintenance. Publicly supported early childcare (and education), both parental and non-parental, is the instrument that serves the children-as-social-investment perspective and its future focus. It is supposed to serve three goals: fight the long-term effects of child poverty; help parents balance work and family; prepare children for the labour market of the future. Implicit in the social investment perspective is the provision of equal opportunities for all children regardless of their family background, as well as investment to avoid anti-social behaviour and poor citizenship in the future. Investing in children’s schooling will help make them well-prepared workers and responsible citizens, which will benefit society on the whole (Jenson 2006). However, it is equally important to make sure that the present well-being of the children, rather than their future prospects, is given more serious consideration and that policies enable them to flourish (Lister 2006).

Child day care is important both in terms of socialisation and learning and as a tool for children’s general welfare, having positive impact on survival, growth, development and learning (UNESCO 2003). High childcare costs have been found to keep certain women from joining the labour market, while making others leave their job prematurely; childcare benefits result in women being more likely to enter the labour market, as well as being more likely to be employed full-time (Crawford 2006). The logic behind cash transfers is to increase parental choice regarding childcare, as well as giving parents more time to stay at home; however, parents may choose to use the cash to receive private day care and continue employment, which will boost informal markets of childcare rather than state-run centres, or may seek additional income, often through the male breadwinner, thus reproducing the traditional gendered division of labour (Leira 1998). Cash-for-care has often be seen as supporting traditional family arrangements, although this depends on the whole package of family benefits that is offered (Crompton and Lyonette 2006).

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<sup>8</sup> Of interest here is the differentiation between a ‘pedagogical’ discourse and ‘childcare’ discourse. The former is dominant in the Nordic countries and is about the provision of a service for all young children and families irrespective of parental employment status. This service is seen as complementary to the home and offers children ‘qualitatively different experiences and relationships’. The latter, dominant in liberal, English-speaking states, is about the transfer of domestic care to the market. This clearly liberates women from childcare provision, but it is questionable whether it is right to assume that the experiences and relationships in early childhood services can be a substitute for those developed at home care (Moss 2006, p.158). On the other hand, formal care can provide a raised standard for children from disadvantaged or problematic backgrounds (e.g. illiterate, poor or violent parents) who would be worse-off in family care alone. A combination of both the opportunity to care at home (through maternity and parental leave package) with formal childcare, as exemplified in France, seems to be necessary for the development of the child.

Paid leave gives parents financial security and supports children. Family allowances are an anti-poverty tool for children. A 2000 study of child benefits and child poverty across Europe divided countries into three groups: a) Denmark and Luxembourg, where child poverty rates are low regardless of (quite generous) family benefits b) Spain, Italy, Greece, Portugal, where child poverty rates are high but are affected little by the removal of (small) family benefits c) UK, Belgium, Austria, France, the Netherlands, where family benefits are relatively large and relatively successful in keeping children out of poverty; poverty rates rise significantly if benefits are removed (Immervoll et al. 2000). Unpaid leave is not helpful for low and middle-income families, as they cannot afford to take it.

In the EU maternity and parental leaves are seen as parts of strategies to increase women's employment, facilitate work-family balance and encourage couples to have children and counter the low fertility rate, which threatens future economic productivity (Haas 2003). It has been documented that the availability of maternity leave may be important in the decision of a woman to participate in the labour force, either through initially drawing her to paid employment or through enabling her to return after birth (Averett and Whittington 2001). Waldfogel (1997) finds that maternity leave is associated with higher pay for working mothers, partly because returning to the same employer leads to work experience and job tenure. Joesch (1995) uses event history analysis to demonstrate that women who are given the option to take paid leave increase their attachment to the labour market.

Several studies have demonstrated that women's return to employment increases alongside the duration of parental leave (e.g. Ruhm 1998, Lalive and Zweimüller 2005, Rösen and Sundström 1996), that maternity leave has very small long-term effects on subsequent earnings of mothers (Albrecht et al. 1999), or that it does not have a significant negative impact on subsequent employment (Gutierrez-Domenech 2005). Ondrich et al (2003) link the reduced returning to work for mothers to general attitudes about motherhood which may function as social pressures keeping mothers at home. In general, they dissociate the trend of mothers not returning to work from maternity leave policy and attribute this trend to broader social and political circumstances; in this sense, maternity policy might be seen as reacting so as to help mothers' employment (e.g. through helping them find day care).

As Sen (2006) has shown, the market works better when it is supported by a framework of social entitlements (education, health etc.), which protect the individual and ensure well-equipped and productive workers. Studies have shown that work/family conflict for women is related to health problems, higher healthcare costs, lower organisational commitment and job satisfaction (Allard et al. 2007).

Flexible leave arrangements, on the other hand, and the possibility of combining leave with part-time work enables parents to stay close both to their children and to their jobs, which has benefits for both the employees and the employers. Some countries, permit parents to be on parental leave and collect full benefits while working part-time, e.g. the UK's up to 10 'Keep in Touch' days during maternity leave. Flexible arrangements reduce barriers to take leave, as well as employers' resistance (Ray et al. 2008). Indeed, parental leave policies help employers retain their human capital investment, instead of hiring and training new employees. They also decrease the cost of labour and labour market inflexibility (Ondrich et al. 2003). Leave benefits in most cases are financed through social insurance schemes; as a result, costs are distributed across all employers, rather than paid by individual employers (who might otherwise discriminate against leave-takers). Further, they are

administered at the national and regional level so that individual employers do not have to pay benefits directly to each employee (Ray et al. 2008).

Additionally, employers increasingly realise that when fathers take leave they build more skills and have greater potential as workers, especially at the managerial level, as they become more adept to handling stress, engaging in multiple tasks and responsibilities, developing interpersonal abilities (Haas 2003).

Companies have been forced to rethink the way work is organised and this has been often beneficial for them through cross-training, telecommuting, fathers keeping in touch while on leave, flexible work arrangements, teleworking etc. (Haas 2003). These trends are compatible with broader transformation in the world of work and are enabled/facilitated by advances in ICTs that make various forms of work possible through networking and the rise of new business models and the network enterprise (Castells 1996).

Not only is flexibility compatible with the increasing salience of individual decision-making, autonomy and reflexivity in late modernity (Giddens 1990), but it might also prove to be rewarding from the point of view of employers, if parental leave takers achieve emotional and personal fulfilment through their time out of work and return to work rejuvenated and happier. Flexible labour market arrangements combining work with leave arrangements might be the way forward for employers, employees, children, families and communities. Having said that, the state needs to set limits and give incentives to parents, so that not too much of negotiation is left between employees and employers (Brandth and Kvande 2002). The compulsory parental leave quota for fathers improves their negotiating position vis-à-vis employers (Leira 1998).

From a demographic viewpoint, higher fertility rates are often associated with longer maternity leaves but lower maternity benefits, as this way states can keep expenses low. However, higher fertility rates tend to be accompanied by better child benefits (Henderson and White 2004).

Post-communist countries present some of the lowest birth rates in the EU, with Christian Orthodox countries (e.g. Bulgaria, Romania) having lower rates than the others. Declining marriage rates mean that in the end more children are born out of wedlock. Many of them grow up with single parent. Teenage mothers are about 50% in these countries compared to 33% in the EU. Children in single parent households are four times more likely to live in poverty compared to those in two-parent families (UNICEF 2000), which necessitates an effective family support framework. Strong social attitudes about having children are in conflict with peoples' concern that they will not be able to provide adequate economic resources for their children (Robila 2004).

Demographic changes in families and increased labour market participation for women have forced governments to change their family policies; however, conflicting demands, such as those from a growing elderly population, have also been a constraining force in family policy-making.

## **5. LEAVE BENEFITS AND WORK/FAMILY BALANCE**

The modernisation of the gender regime, which is taking place in Western countries, involves the increasing participation of women in the labour market, their augmenting presence in the state, the increased permeability of the family. The role of the state in gender relations is often seen in literature in relation to whether or not it provides

substitutes for domestic forms of caring. However, it is also important to consider the role of the state in the regulation of the labour market and to assess the gender implications of this role (Walby 2003).

Two approaches to care can be identified from the perspective of policy. On the one hand, policies strengthening the traditional gender arrangements, including the expansion of the rights of carers through cash transfers and social security benefits for informal carers. On the other hand, policies challenging traditional arrangements through the provision of state-sponsored day care centres, alongside generous rights to maternity, paternity and parental leave which facilitate care-sharing responsibilities (Leira 1998).<sup>9</sup>

Work/life balance has become a 'hegemonic value', a functioning in advanced industrialised societies, the lack of which can affect one's health and well-being (Hobson et al. 2010). A way of assessing the degree to which different member states facilitate work/family reconciliation is the concept of 'defamilisation', meaning the extent to which the welfare state promote women's economic independence (Taylor-Gooby 1996; Bambra 2004), using the criteria of female labour participation, maternity leave compensation and average female wage. The results have shown high defamilisation scores for the Nordic countries, which treat women as workers, but also make allowances for care work for single or partnered women (Lewis 2006).

Policies to promote the reconciliation of work and life in reality help reproduce and consolidate women's responsibilities as primary carers (Stratigaki 2004). In this sense, it becomes a crucial question whether women should be given the choice to do care work, rather than paid work, although the former might be arresting the evolution of their career and their pension entitlements. This becomes a more complicated policy question if men choose not to care and thus constrain women's choices (Lewis 2009).

Work/family policies are framed in both economic and social terms. In economic terms, the consideration is to increase employment in ways to achieve growth and competitiveness,

<sup>9</sup> A survey on childcare across Europe has shown that while in West European countries childcare rests with mothers, shared between partners, or the immediate family, in Eastern Europe there is greater reliance on other family members. East European women have reported less work/family conflict than those in the west. Household chores are overwhelmingly undertaken by women in the East European countries, with the exception of Slovenia (Tang and Cousins 2005).

Best practices, observed mostly in Finland and Sweden include: a) generous paid leave b) non-transferable leave quotas for each parent c) universal coverage with modest eligibility rules d) financing structures that distribute risk among many employers e) flexibility in the scheduling of leave. They show that a generous, universal, gender egalitarian and flexible parental policy, financed through social insurance would contribute a great deal in spreading childcare costs more equitably between mothers and fathers, parents and non-parents, employers and employees (Ray et al 2008).

Netherlands is the only country to have established the universal citizen worker/carer model, which promotes part-time work and part-time care as the ideal situation for men and women (Lewis 2006). This has involved changes in taxation policy and policies on working time, but is still far from realised: it has come into line with the Western European norms of a one and a half worker pattern, with women predominantly still doing the care work and a strong ideology behind (Pascall and Lewis 2004).

It is important to note that in the post-communist context both the liberal model (Poland) and the conservative model (Czech Republic) have failed to allow women to balance work and family. The pronatalist principles of the communist era have been abandoned in favour of budget cuts following the recommendations of the World Bank; as a result, both countries have experienced a significant drop in fertility, as well as a moderate reduction in female employment. Governments are aware of the need to promote gender equality, but defamilialisation is facing budget constraints. Recently, EU pressures have resulted in the adoption of extended parental leave rights, with low compensation rates, which, together with the anti-feminist ideological legacy, discourage fathers from making use (Kocourkova 2002, Saxonberg and Szelewa 2007, Saxonberg and Sirovatka 2006, Heinen and Wator 2006).

which means taking into account the viewpoints of employers and businesses. In social terms, the family is given priority and employment is seen as a means for social inclusion and children welfare. The two logics are in conflict, e.g. regarding the time to work and the time spent with the family and the process of negotiation is quite intense and involves the state, employers and employees (or parents); the resulting policy packages are contentious and often ambiguous regarding their gender equality aspiration and effectiveness (Lewis and Campbell 2007).

The EU has been ambitious in promoting equal employment opportunities, but has neither contested the division of domestic unpaid work nor promoted enough the involvement of fathers. The Parental Leave Directive acknowledged that unless men share care work women will not be able to enter paid employment on equal terms. However, it does not give right to remuneration while on leave, leaving out the most important consideration for a family to take parental leave (Fredman 2006).

Social conceptions of gender and parenthood play an important role in the paternity and parental leave arrangements across national contexts. Leave schemes themselves contribute to social constructions of motherhood and fatherhood and create norms as to what it means to be a good parent (Rostgaard 2002). The parameter of gender culture is important in examining the different social understandings of men's and women's roles, which underpin the organisation of family and work across different national settings (Tang and Cousins 2005).

A recent survey showed that work/family reconciliation, a dominant element in EU discourses, has been internalised by both men and women as a norm, though not as a practice; between 85 and 95 per cent of fathers and mothers with children under 12 claimed that the ability to combine employment with family was a serious consideration in their choice of work (Hobson et al. 2006). A longitudinal study of post-pregnancy work outcomes demonstrated that women's attitudes towards work and childcare may change when there is dissonance between one's initial idea of work/family reconciliation and the reality of the situation they are in; in the absence of facilitating factors, women showed that they were adaptive and viewed the situation positively. Moreover, the study showed that women's return to employment was conditioned by income, the level of support provided by the employer, but also their emotional and physical condition (Houston and Marks 2003).

The decision to take parental leave is a family decision that is dependent on a number of factors. If the amount of compensation is minimal in relation to the wages (of both parents) then the couple might go for a shorter leave period. By contrast, if the parental benefit compares favourably to the foregone income (to which a potential day care cost should be added) then one of the couple (in most cases the woman, who tends to have lower wages) will probably opt for taking longer periods of leave. Logistically the decision might be complex, but in any case the compensation rate is an important parameter to consider, not least because it puts into consideration the issue of whether men should take advantage of paternity and parental leaves. This unravels the gender dimensions of the economics of the household, as it concerns both the future employment prospects of the woman, as well as the chance of the man to learn how to be a father. In addition, both men and women risk losing their job, even under good job protection conditions, while they might also face discrimination from employers, particularly if the leave arrangements are generous in time and/or remuneration (Rostgaard 2004)

Recently, Nordic countries have moved towards parental leave arrangements that include periods of time that can be taken by the father only; these are supposed to strengthen the role of the father in childcare, as well as moving towards a more equitable distribution of care work between women and men (O'Brien 2007, Haas 2003). The introduction of the 'daddy quota' represents the institutionalisation of the right of employed fathers to care for their children and signals a state intervention in employment arrangements with the intention of influencing the gendered division of caring responsibilities (Leira 1998). As a result of these policies, employers are under more pressure to help fathers with taking their parental leave, as families lose significant benefits otherwise. Greedy organisations and firms which represent the intensification of working life stand in contrast to demands for flexibility in combination of work and family life (Brandth and Kvande 2002).<sup>10</sup>

The portion of leave available to fathers or reserved exclusively for fathers and the generosity of parental leave in terms of wage replacement are the main factors used in assessing the gender equality of policy. If parental leave for fathers is of limited duration and/or does not replace a substantial portion of fathers' earnings then it is the mothers who will tend to take leave, rather than the fathers. The period in which parental leave is available is also a factor affecting father's uptake of leave; flexibility would increase uptake. Single parents have the right to use the full share of paid leave of two parents in Sweden, but in other country cases they try to balance concerns about extended leave periods, particularly of mothers, with concerns about child welfare (Ray et al. 2008).

In EU countries, where compensation rates are earnings-related, deployment of paternity and parental leave is high. Lower uptake of paternity or parental leave by fathers in less secure and poorly regulated occupations remind of the importance of financial considerations in the question of leave-taking. Infants in poor households may experience less parental involvement than those whose parents enjoy paid job-protected leave (O'Brien 2007, Whitehouse et al. 2007). According to other studies, fathers who had a supportive workplace environment regarding parental leave were much more likely to interact with their children at the age of 3 months and 9 months. Policies providing parental leave or flexible working arrangements may result in fathers being more involved in childcare (Tanaka and Waldfogel 2007).

## 6. CONCLUDING REMARKS

The benefits of maternity/parental leave to society are multifarious. Parental leave contributes to increasing fertility rates which counteract the increasing numbers of retired employees. Children who are well cared for in their early life are less likely to suffer health problems that society would have to pay for later on. Parental leave can reduce unemployment through cross-training and can help individuals cope with increasing demands in work and life (Haas 2003).

Parental leave policy can contribute to gender equality, both regarding the labour market and the care-giving dimensions. However, it can also have the opposite effect, if restricted to mothers only. Policies that divide leave and payments between mothers and fathers on a

<sup>10</sup> Doucet and Merla (2007) have studied the work/family practices fathers engage in, including working from home, working according to more flexible schedules, or even assuming the main child-caring tasks. Allard et al. (2007) have studied work/family practices of Swedish fathers in managerial posts and concluded that those having flexible work arrangements experience less work/family conflict and promote gender equality in their family life.

non-transferable basis work towards gender equality in terms of roles and labour market participation. They also provide to fathers the opportunity (and possibly the financial support) to care for and spend time with their children (Ray et al 2008). Cross-national evidence shows clearly that parental leave should have a high rate of compensation, be an individual entitlement and be flexible, if fathers are to use it (Lewis and Campbell 2007).

On the level of the individual, parental leave should be seen as part of individual circumstances during a particular period in one's life, namely the early years of parenthood. Recognising these circumstances as individual should inform policies to empower people to use their time in their own way with a view to achieving what they think is a good life (including employment and other activities and also relationships and activities with their children) (Deven and Moss 2002).

Maternity, paternity and parental leave on their own are not a panacea; they can work together with other instruments, notably state-subsidised day care, to ensure that women do not sacrifice child-bearing for the purpose of remaining active in an increasingly competitive labour market. School scheduling in accordance with working hours, family leave, after-school services, flexible parental leave, working time spreading over a number of flexi-years, but also flexibility of place (home or workplace or somewhere else) and flexibility of contractual conditions, all can be used as devices to maximise people's control over their working and family lives (Pascall and Lewis 2004, Tang and Cousins 2005).

Social integration processes in the EU are facing conflicting policies between member states' legislation and EU directives. A possible welfare scenario would be a levelling-up of various national welfare states to simulate the advanced Nordic welfare model (through exchange of ideas and practices, as well as pressures from the European Commission (Henderson and White 2004).

All member states have a policy agenda for employment and the family, but more holistic policy approach is required to address both the care and the work sides. Parental leave provisions and day-care arrangements are considered the most important pillars of childcare policies.

If care is a universal human need (Nussbaum 2003), then it should be possible for anyone to be able to exercise this choice, which in turn presupposes adequate wages, generous family policies and secure work and family conditions. The nature of the policy package (which needs to combine childcare and parental leave) and the parameters of male and female entitlements, compensation rate and duration should be considered carefully for genuine choices regarding paid and unpaid work and care to be materialised (Lewis 2006, 2009), as the way a policy is shaped often determines whether it can be taken (Hobson et al. 2010). The politics of time and money are also a considerable dimension to be looked into (Lewis and Campbell 2007).

Clearly the need to support families will persist and, if anything, will become increasingly important under the contemporary conditions of low fertility. There might be risks of many sorts, not least economic, in the attempt to provide suitable arrangements for families to be supported. However, the biggest risk of them all might be that 'you cannot support the family if there is no family to support and the only way to encourage women to have children is by making it easier and not more difficult to balance work and family life' (Saxonberg and Szelewa, p.372).

It is in the best interests of children if mothers take a substantial leave of 12 months. Fathers are not as likely to take up parental leave, so, as Lewis puts it, 'it is arguably a pragmatic policy decision in the interests of children at present to focus work/family balance policies on women, rather than men' (Lewis 2009, p.198). Reconciliation policies for women provide a way of both maintaining informal care and of promoting labour market re-entry and they are easier to implement than policies addressing fathers.

The imposition of a common model across the EU might be futile, due to the mosaic of practices, institutional traditions, attitudes and behaviours. However, achieving common denominators and guaranteeing social minima, such as a longer maternity leave, are both a realistic prospect and a socially beneficial one in terms of the organisation of family and work in meaningful, economically viable, healthy, child-friendly, balanced and gender-equitable ways.

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