



# Return to the labour market after parental leave: A gender analysis

## Executive summary

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- Parental leave policies have proved to be vital in helping parents to balance job and family responsibilities. However, women are still the primary caregivers, so the employment gap widens with parenting duties. Only a small number of fathers choose to take parental leave following the child's birth.
- Evidence shows that availability of subsidised care services has the most significant impact on reducing gender gaps in employment. Modelling by the European Institute for Gender Equality (EIGE) estimates that use of care services increases the probability of greater gender equality by about 13 %.
- How parental leave is structured can help improve gender equality. An increase in fathers' uptake might be achieved through greater flexibility and higher payment levels.
- Shorter parental leave may have the potential to reshape traditional gender roles. Long duration of leave usually adversely affects a woman's career and pay when she returns to work.
- Returning to work can be challenging physically and mentally. This can be made easier through flexible and family-friendly working arrangements. Specific labour policies should aim to make re-entry to work easier.



## Introduction

Parental leave is essential to enable new parents to balance their work and family responsibilities. However, it can affect employment opportunities and gender equality <sup>(1)</sup>. Women take on the bulk of domestic and caregiving work <sup>(2)</sup> and face hurdles entering or returning to work after childbirth. The low-paid paternity and parental leave in several EU Member States <sup>(3)</sup> stops fathers from taking time off work to care for their children. A more balanced uptake of family-related leave will depend on the availability of accessible, affordable and high-quality care services. These are essential to enable parents and caregivers to be part of the workforce. Eliminating financial barriers to working can also increase the options available to second earners (usually women) when taking on paid work. Inequalities in work–life balance policies, or unequal uptake of the opportunities offered by such policies, maintain gender stereotypes and the gender care divide.



In recent years, the EU has adopted decisions on parents' right to leave and on ensuring work–life balance for parents and carers. In 2017, the European Pillar of Social Rights reinforced the principle of work–life balance and followed this up with legislative and non-legislative measures <sup>(4)</sup>. In 2019, the **work–life balance directive** <sup>(5)</sup> highlighted the challenges that parents still face in work–life balance and in returning to work. It recognised the urgent need to improve working and living conditions for parents, particularly mothers. They remain under-represented in the labour market and have lower wages than men <sup>(6)</sup>. The directive introduced minimum standards for paternity, parental and carers' leave. It also expanded the right to request flexible working arrangements to carers and working parents of children up to 8 years old.

Closing gender gaps in care and the labour market are the key objectives of the **2020–2025 EU gender equality strategy** <sup>(7)</sup>. In 2022, the Commission presented the **European care strategy** to ensure quality, affordable and accessible care services across the EU. The aims are, among other things, to increase women's employment, improve women's working conditions and advance gender equality.

- <sup>(1)</sup> European Institute for Gender Equality (EIGE), 'Parental-leave policies', in *Gender Equality Index 2019 – Work–life balance*, Publications Office of the European Union, Luxembourg, 2019 ([https://eige.europa.eu/publications-resources/publications/gender-equality-index-2019-work-life-balance?language\\_content\\_entity=en](https://eige.europa.eu/publications-resources/publications/gender-equality-index-2019-work-life-balance?language_content_entity=en)).
- <sup>(2)</sup> EIGE, *A Better Work–Life Balance – Bridging the gender care gap*, Publications Office of the European Union, Luxembourg, 2023 ([https://eige.europa.eu/publications-resources/publications/better-work-life-balance-bridging-gender-care-gap?language\\_content\\_entity=en](https://eige.europa.eu/publications-resources/publications/better-work-life-balance-bridging-gender-care-gap?language_content_entity=en)).
- <sup>(3)</sup> Blum, S., Dobrotić, I., Kaufman, G., Koslowski, A. and Moss, P., *19th international review of leave policies and related research 2023*, International Network on Leave Policies and Research, 2023 ([http://www.leavenetwork.org/lp\\_and\\_r\\_reports](http://www.leavenetwork.org/lp_and_r_reports)).

- <sup>(4)</sup> <https://op.europa.eu/webpub/empl/european-pillar-of-social-rights/en/>.
- <sup>(5)</sup> Directive (EU) 2019/1158 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 20 June 2019 on work–life balance for parents and carers and repealing Council Directive 2010/18/EU (<https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=celex%3A32019L1158>).
- <sup>(6)</sup> Caracciolo di Torella, E., 'One more step along the way: The 2019 work life balance directive', *Revue de Droit Comparé du Travail et de la Sécurité Sociale*, Vol. 4, 2020, pp. 70–81 (<https://doi.org/10.4000/rdctss.803>).
- <sup>(7)</sup> Commission communication – A Union of equality: Gender equality strategy 2020–2025 (COM(2020) 152 final) (<https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=CELEX%3A52020DC0152>).

## The employment gap widens with parenting duties

Within the household, inequalities in the division of housework increase after the birth of the first child. About 56 % of women with children aged under 12 years spend at least 5 hours per day on childcare, compared with 26 % of men <sup>(8)</sup>. Housework and cooking activities are more equally distributed between single women and men than between those living in couples with children. As many as 55 % of single women and 48 % of single men are involved in such activities daily. In couples with children, the division of tasks increases sharply to 72 % of women and 35 % of men <sup>(9)</sup>.

An EIGE survey found that 34 % of women and 30 % of men with children aged under 12 years experience difficulties combining paid work with childcare responsibilities on at least 4 days a week <sup>(10)</sup>. The gender care gap and the challenge of balancing work and family responsibilities are key factors in the declining employment rate of women with children. This becomes more noticeable as the number of children in their care increases <sup>(11)</sup>.

The difference between the employment rates of people with and without children varies between women and men. In 2023, the employment rate of women with at least one child under 6 years was 10.5 percentage points (pp) lower than the employment rate of women without children (Figure 1). For men with children under 6 years, the employment rate goes up by 8.2 pp. Although the employment gap for parents is gradually decreasing (in 2009, it was –13.7 pp for women and 8.7 pp for men), it remains significant.

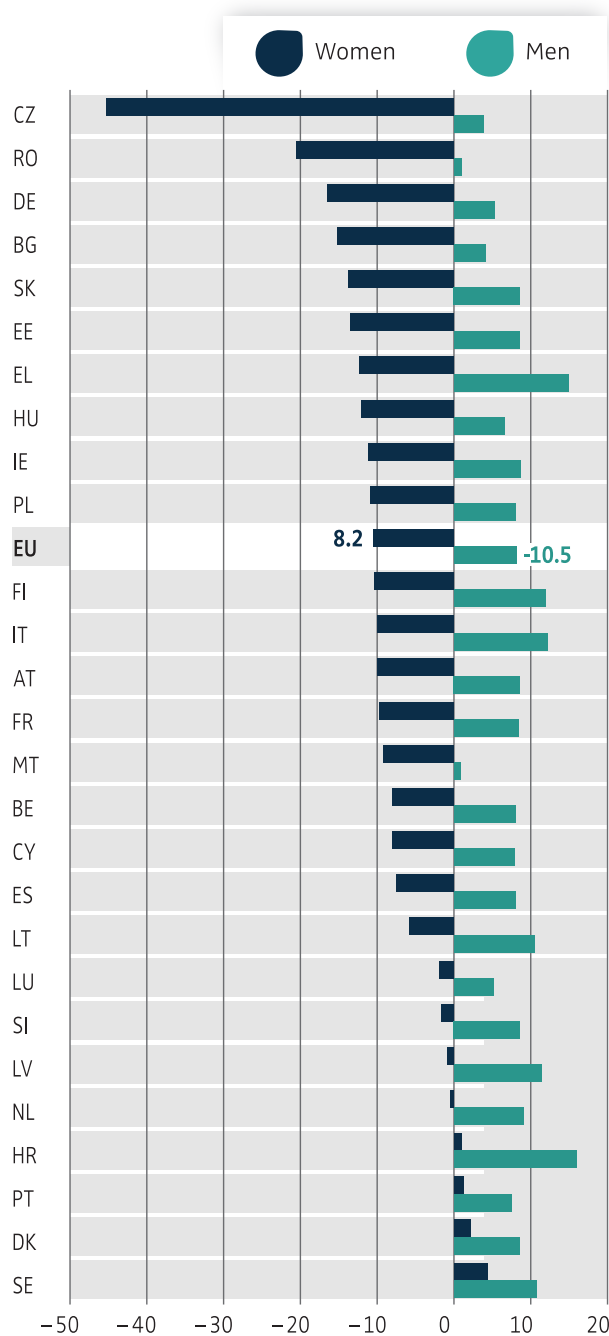
<sup>(8)</sup> EIGE, *A Better Work–Life Balance – Bridging the gender care gap*, Publications Office of the European Union, Luxembourg, 2023 ([https://eige.europa.eu/publications-resources/publications/better-work-life-balance-bridging-gender-care-gap?language\\_content\\_entity=en](https://eige.europa.eu/publications-resources/publications/better-work-life-balance-bridging-gender-care-gap?language_content_entity=en)).

<sup>(9)</sup> EIGE, *Gender Equality Index 2023 – Towards a green transition in transport and energy*, Publications Office of the European Union, Luxembourg, 2023 ([https://eige.europa.eu/publications-resources/publications/gender-equality-index-2023-towards-green-transition-transport-and-energy?language\\_content\\_entity=en](https://eige.europa.eu/publications-resources/publications/gender-equality-index-2023-towards-green-transition-transport-and-energy?language_content_entity=en)).

<sup>(10)</sup> See footnote 8.

<sup>(11)</sup> See footnote 8.

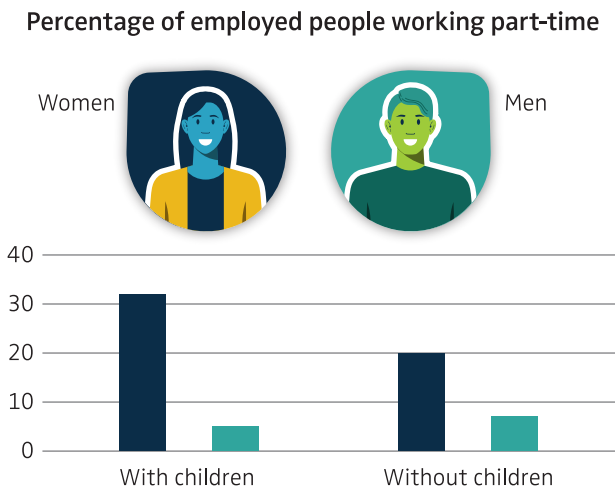
**Figure 1 | The parental employment gap for women and men with at least a child under the age of 6 (pp, 25–54, EU, 2023)**



NB: The parental employment gap is calculated by the difference in employment rate for people (aged 25–54) with at least one child under the age of 6 years and people (25–54) without young children, by gender (in pp).

Source: Eurostat (EU Labour Force Survey (EU-LFS)) (fst\_hheredch).

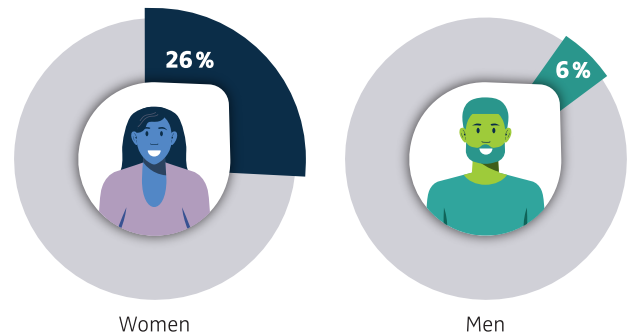
**Figure 2 | Women and men (aged 25–54) in part-time employment among those with and those without children (% , EU, 2023)**



Caregiving responsibilities lead to reduced working time, limited career progression and financial consequences, mostly for women. For instance, the gender gap in the full-time-equivalent (FTE) employment rate<sup>(12)</sup> is most pronounced among couples with children, at – 26 pp; for couples without children, it is – 5 pp<sup>(13)</sup>. This is due to a higher rate of part-time employment among mothers. In 2023, 32 % of employed women (aged 25–54) with children worked on a part-time basis in the EU, compared with 20 % of women without children (5 % and 7 % of men, respectively) (Figure 2)<sup>(14)</sup>.

Every fourth woman (26 %), compared with a mere 6 % of men, reported that looking after children or incapacitated adults was the main reason for working part-time (Figure 3)<sup>(15)</sup>.

**Figure 3 | Women and men (aged 15-64) working part-time due to care responsibilities (% , EU, 2023)**



On average, men with children work more hours and earn higher rates of pay than men without children<sup>(16)</sup>. Mothers' wages significantly decrease after the birth of a child and remain lower in future years. Fathers' wages are hardly affected<sup>(17)</sup>. Eurostat data<sup>(18)</sup> highlights the gender pay gap for part-time workers, varying from 11 % in Ireland to almost 22 % in Croatia.

In the EU, the gender pay gap, which reflects differences in gross hourly earnings, stands at 13 % (2022). The gender pay gap is generally much lower for new labour market entrants. It tends to widen with age because of the career interruptions that women often experience during their working life<sup>(19)</sup>. The gender overall earnings gap – which considers hourly earnings, monthly average of hours paid and the employment rate – is as high as 36 % (2018), to the disadvantage of women. This measure indicates significant gender gaps in labour market opportunities, including due to the gender care gap. The EU gender pension gap of 26 % reflects the impact of lifetime cumulative

<sup>(12)</sup> EIGE's calculations using microdata from the 2022 EU-LFS. The FTE employment rate is a unit to measure employed people in a way that makes them comparable even though they may work a different number of hours per week. The unit is obtained by comparing an employee's average number of hours worked with the average number of hours worked by a full-time worker. A full-time worker is therefore counted as 1 FTE, and a part-time worker gets a score in proportion to the hours they work. For example, a part-time worker employed for 20 hours a week where full-time work consists of 40 hours is counted as 0.5 FTE.

<sup>(13)</sup> EIGE, *Gender Equality Index 2023 – Towards a green transition in transport and energy*, Publications Office of the European Union, Luxembourg, 2023.

<sup>(14)</sup> Eurostat (lfst\_hhptety), 2023.

<sup>(15)</sup> Eurostat (lfsa\_epgar), 2023.

<sup>(16)</sup> Glauber, R., 'Race and gender in families and at work: The fatherhood wage premium', *Gender and Society*, Vol. 22, No 1, 2008, pp. 8–30.

<sup>(17)</sup> Kleven, H., Landais, C. and Sogaard, J. E., 'Children and gender inequality: Evidence from Denmark', *American Economic Journal: Applied Economics*, Vol. 11, No 4, 2019, pp. 181–209 (<https://doi.org/10.1257/app.20180010>).

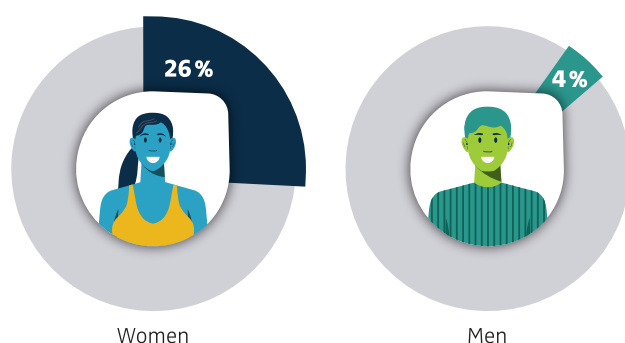
<sup>(18)</sup> Eurostat Statistics Explained, 'Gender pay gap statistics', 2024 ([https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php?title=Gender\\_pay\\_gap\\_statistics#Possible\\_causes\\_of\\_the\\_unadjusted\\_gender\\_pay\\_gap](https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php?title=Gender_pay_gap_statistics#Possible_causes_of_the_unadjusted_gender_pay_gap)).

<sup>(19)</sup> See footnote 18.

factors, such as, among others, inequalities in working hours and time out of the labour market <sup>(20)</sup>.

Family responsibilities can lead to inactivity, especially for women. People tend to start families and raise children from the ages of 25 to 54 years – prime working age. Around 8 % of men in this age group are outside the labour market, compared with 18 % of women <sup>(21)</sup>. In 2023, 26 % of women aged 25–54 who were willing to work were inactive due to care responsibilities. This rate was only 4 % for men (Figure 4) <sup>(22)</sup>. The gender gap in individualised income (an estimated income-pooling measure) among people who are economically inactive for care reasons is 48 %. This shows the considerable financial vulnerability of carers, who are mostly women <sup>(23)</sup>.

**Figure 4 | Women and men (aged 25-54) inactive due to care responsibilities (% of population not working and wanting to work, EU, 2023)**



One reason for inactivity or reduced working time is the lack of available, accessible and quality formal care services, especially for children. Nearly half of part-time workers in the EU indicate that they would be willing to move to full-time jobs if care services and more flexible working arrangements were

available <sup>(24)</sup>. It is estimated that, of various work–life balance measures, the provision of subsidised care services has the most significant impact on reducing gender gaps in employment <sup>(25)</sup>. In 2023, the share of children below the age of 3 years in education and care services was 37 % (14 % for 1–29 hours and 23 % for 30 hours or more per week) <sup>(26)</sup>. EIGE’s probability modelling <sup>(27)</sup> based on 2022 EIGE’s CARE survey data and 2023 Gender Equality Index scores shows that the use of care services increases the probability of greater gender equality by about 13 %.

## Women make up the majority of parental leave users

Parents are supported when returning to paid work through different forms of family-related leave <sup>(28)</sup>. Despite changes in regulation to encourage men to take parental leave, only a small number of fathers choose to do so following the arrival of a child. When they do, their time off is much shorter than that of mothers <sup>(29)</sup>. Increasing fathers’ role in informal care through parental leave is crucial to promote gender equality at home and at work.

<sup>(24)</sup> European Commission, *Flash Eurobarometer 470 – Work–life balance, 2018* ([Work-life balance - October 2018 - - Eurobarometer survey \(europa.eu\)](https://ec.europa.eu/eurobarometer/survey/europa.eu)).

<sup>(25)</sup> Olivetti, C. and Petrongolo, B., ‘The economic consequences of family policies: Lessons from a century of legislation in high income countries’, *Journal of Economic Perspectives*, Vol. 31, No 1, 2017, pp. 205–230.

<sup>(26)</sup> Eurostat (ilc\_caindformal), 2023.

<sup>(27)</sup> EIGE used a probit model, which shows that the use of care services increases the probability of having a Gender Equality Index score higher than the median by about 13 %.

<sup>(28)</sup> This policy brief focuses mainly on parental leave. However, reference to the other forms of family leave are also included. All national systems of family leave are unique and are characterised by different terminology. This leads to issues in international comparison. According to the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) Family Database, there are four main forms of family-related leave. Parental leave is an employment-protected leave of absence for employed parents, often supplementary to specific maternity and paternity leave periods. Maternity leave is typically granted for employed women before and after giving birth. Paternity leave is usually taken by fathers. Home care leave or childcare leave is less common and is often unpaid employment-protected leave. It sometimes follows parental leave and is taken to care for a child until they are 2 or 3 years old. OECD Family Database, ‘PF2.1: Key characteristics of parental leave systems’ (<https://www.oecd.org/els/family/database.htm>)

<sup>(29)</sup> Eurofound, *Parental and Paternity Leave – Uptake by fathers*, Publications Office of the European Union, Luxembourg, 2019 (<https://www.eurofound.europa.eu/en/publications/2019/parental-and-paternity-leave-uptake-fathers/>).

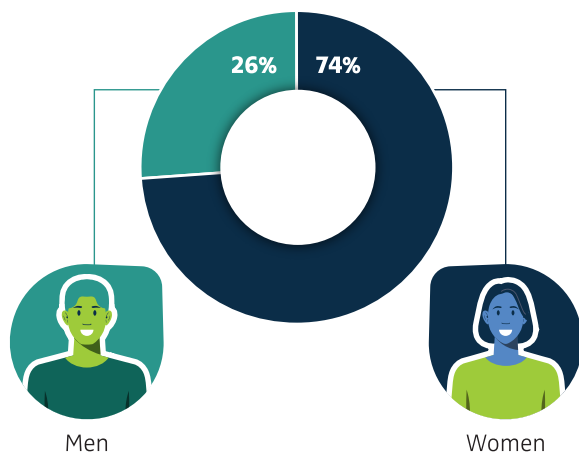
<sup>(20)</sup> EIGE, *Financial Independence and Gender Equality – Joining the dots between income, wealth and power*, Publications Office of the European Union, Luxembourg, 2024 (<https://eige.europa.eu/publications-resources/publications/financial-independence-and-gender-equality-joining-dots-between-income-wealth-and-power>).

<sup>(21)</sup> Eurostat (ifsa\_ipga), 2023.

<sup>(22)</sup> Eurostat (ifsa\_igar), 2023.

<sup>(23)</sup> See footnote 20.

**Figure 5 | Men and women among all recipients/users of publicly administered parental leave benefits or paid parental leave (% , average, 2021 or latest year available)**



NB: Data available for Belgium, Czechia, Denmark, Germany, Estonia, Ireland, France, Italy, Lithuania, Luxembourg, Austria, Poland, Portugal, Finland and Sweden.

Although data collection is very limited, recent data published by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) <sup>(30)</sup> shows that the majority of users of publicly administered paid parental leave are women. The difference is small in a few countries (Denmark, Portugal and Sweden), where around 45 % of benefit recipients are men. Luxembourg is the only country where the men's share (53 %) is higher than that of women. However, this is the result of differences in the length of maternity and paternity leave <sup>(31)</sup>. Although it is limited to few countries and not comparable, OECD data shows that the average number of days of parental leave benefits paid per child in a year is higher for women than for men <sup>(32)</sup>.

<sup>(30)</sup> OECD Family Database, 'PF2.2: Use of childbirth-related leave benefits' (<https://www.oecd.org/els/family/database.htm>).

<sup>(31)</sup> As specified by the OECD, most men in Luxembourg opt for part-time or a fraction of parental leave. Most women take full-time parental leave. Fathers in Luxembourg have substantially shorter paid paternity leave entitlements than mothers with maternity leave entitlements. Some men may rely more on parental leave when taking absence from work to care for their newborn (OECD Family Database, 'PF2.2: Parents' use of childbirth-related leave', p. 4 (<https://www.oecd.org/els/family/PF2-2-Use-childbirth-leave.pdf>)).

<sup>(32)</sup> Data is available only for Denmark, Germany, Portugal, Finland and Sweden. OECD Family Database, 'PF2.2: Use of childbirth-related leave benefits' (<https://www.oecd.org/els/family/database.htm>).

If men can take paternity leave, they often do so on the birth of their child. The low uptake of parental leave by fathers is often influenced by concerns about income and job security after returning to work <sup>(33)</sup>. OECD data confirms that men account for just 26 % of parents taking parental leave, but mostly driven by higher uptake in the Nordic countries (Figure 5) <sup>(34)</sup>. In countries where leave benefits are linked to income, workers with a relatively high income take parental leave more often. Those with a low income fear a reduction in income. Company support is important when fathers decide whether to take parental leave. Evidence shows that fathers often feel pressure from their employers not to take leave <sup>(35)</sup>. This, together with uncertainty about income, affects men's uptake of parental leave.

### Parental leave eligibility, flexibility and payment can increase men's interest

The policy design of parental leave can affect gender equality and whether men and women take their fair share of leave. Relevant aspects include the following <sup>(36)</sup>:

- eligibility rules
- the length of leave
- flexibility
- payment levels
- coordination with early childhood education and care (ECEC) services.

Parental leave is granted in all Member States, but the policy design and eligibility rules vary. Not all women and men in the EU are eligible for parental

<sup>(33)</sup> Eurofound, *Parental and Paternity Leave – Uptake by fathers*, Publications Office of the European Union, Luxembourg, 2019 (<https://www.eurofound.europa.eu/en/publications/2019/parental-and-paternity-leave-uptake-fathers>).

<sup>(34)</sup> See footnote 30.

<sup>(35)</sup> Evertsson, M. and Duvander, A.-Z., 'Parental leave – Possibility or trap? Does family leave length effect Swedish women's labour market opportunities?', *European Sociological Review*, Vol. 27, No 4, 2011, pp. 435–450 (<https://academic.oup.com/esr/article-abstract/27/4/435/514086>).

<sup>(36)</sup> EIGE, 'Parental-leave policies', in *Gender Equality Index 2019 – Work-life balance*, Publications Office of the European Union, Luxembourg, 2019 ([https://eige.europa.eu/publications-resources/publications/gender-equality-index-2019-work-life-balance?language\\_content\\_entity=en](https://eige.europa.eu/publications-resources/publications/gender-equality-index-2019-work-life-balance?language_content_entity=en)).

leave<sup>(37)</sup>. EIGE's eligibility simulation (2017) shows that leave policies may reinforce labour market and other inequalities by excluding those most at risk. For instance, in six Member States, more than 25 % of young employed women and men aged 20–24 were ineligible for parental leave. Same-sex couples were not eligible for parental leave in 11 Member States<sup>(38)</sup>.

The design of parental leave policies generally favours employees in standard forms of employment. Persons ineligible for parental leave are more likely to be economically inactive (e.g. students), to be in non-standard types of employment, such as self-employment or engaged in platform work, or to have been in their job for less than 12 months. The eligibility simulation results clearly illustrate how certain flexible working arrangements, such as short-term contracts or other new forms of work, can be seen as a double-edged sword. While providing flexibility, and therefore supporting a good work–life balance, non-standard work can also put parents in a precarious situation owing to exclusion from social protection. The increasing prevalence of new forms of work is a fast-growing trend in the labour market, making it urgently important to revisit social protection mechanisms designed for standard forms of work<sup>(39)</sup>.

Women are more likely to leave work when they become mothers and take longer to go back after giving birth<sup>(40)</sup>. This is often due to limited flexibility

of leave and for financial reasons<sup>(41)</sup>. Parental leave with more flexibility allows parents, and lone parents in particular, to tailor their time off to better suit their needs and those of their family. This can mean taking shorter-term, but more frequent, leave. Another option is being able to work reduced hours instead of taking a whole day or week off all at once. This flexibility can be helpful for parents who may not be able to take extended periods of time off work (e.g. lone parents). Others may have other responsibilities that they need to balance with their parental leave. Having more flexibility in parental leave can also help to reduce some of the financial strain that parents may face when taking time off work. For instance, by working reduced hours or taking shorter-term leave, parents may be able to maintain a steady income.

Parental leave is generally less well compensated than maternity and paternity leave. OECD data<sup>(42)</sup> shows that parental leave benefits typically cover 48 % of an individual's previous earnings. Research confirms that increased flexibility and well-paid leave lead to higher rates of uptake among men<sup>(43)</sup>.

More equal sharing of parental leave between parents paves the way for more equal sharing of housework<sup>(44)</sup>.

<sup>(37)</sup> EIGE, *Who is eligible for parental leave in the EU-28?*, Publications Office of the European Union, Luxembourg, 2021 ([https://eige.europa.eu/sites/default/files/documents/20210524\\_mh0121038enn\\_pdf.pdf](https://eige.europa.eu/sites/default/files/documents/20210524_mh0121038enn_pdf.pdf)).

<sup>(38)</sup> EIGE, 'Parental-leave policies', in *Gender Equality Index 2019 – Work–life balance*, Publications Office of the European Union, Luxembourg, 2019 ([https://eige.europa.eu/publications-resources/publications/gender-equality-index-2019-work-life-balance?language\\_content\\_entity=en](https://eige.europa.eu/publications-resources/publications/gender-equality-index-2019-work-life-balance?language_content_entity=en)).

<sup>(39)</sup> EIGE, *Eligibility for Parental Leave in EU Member States*, Publications Office of the European Union, Luxembourg, 2020 ([https://eige.europa.eu/publications-resources/publications/eligibility-parental-leave-eu-member-states?language\\_content\\_entity=en](https://eige.europa.eu/publications-resources/publications/eligibility-parental-leave-eu-member-states?language_content_entity=en)).

<sup>(40)</sup> Hofman, J., Nightingale, M., Bruckmayer, M., de Silva, A., Picken, N. and Kunertova, L., *After Parental Leave: Incentives for parents with young children to return to the labour market*, publication for the Committee on Employment and Social Affairs, Policy Department for Economic, Scientific and Quality of Life Policies, European Parliament, Luxembourg, 2020.

<sup>(41)</sup> Ziegler, L. and Bamieh, O., 'What drives paternity leave: Financial incentives or flexibility?', *IZA Discussion Papers*, No 15890, 2023 (<https://doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.4338212>).

<sup>(42)</sup> OECD Family Database, 'PF2.4: Parental leave replacement rates' ([https://www.oecd.org/els/family/PF2\\_4\\_Parental\\_leave\\_replacement\\_rates.pdf](https://www.oecd.org/els/family/PF2_4_Parental_leave_replacement_rates.pdf)).

<sup>(43)</sup> Ziegler, L. and Bamieh, O., 'What drives paternity leave: Financial incentives or flexibility?', *IZA Discussion Papers*, No 15890, 2023 (<https://doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.4338212>). Hofman, J., Nightingale, M., Bruckmayer, M., de Silva, A., Picken, N. and Kunertova, L., *After Parental Leave: Incentives for parents with young children to return to the labour market*, publication for the Committee on Employment and Social Affairs, Policy Department for Economic, Scientific and Quality of Life Policies, European Parliament, Luxembourg, 2020. Lewis, S. and den Dulk, L., 'Parents' experiences of flexible work arrangements in changing European workplaces', in Christensen, K. and Schneider, B. (eds), *Workplace Flexibility – Realigning 20th-century jobs for a 21st-century workforce*, Cornell University Press, Ithaca, NY, 2017, pp. 245–261 (<https://doi.org/10.7591/9780801458446-015>).

<sup>(44)</sup> Lammi-Taskula, J., 'Fathers on leave alone in Finland: Negotiations and lived experiences', in O'Brien, M. and Wall, K. (eds), *Comparative Perspectives on Work–Life Balance and Gender Equality: Life course research and social policies*, Vol. 6, Springer International Publishing, Cham, 2017, pp. 89–106 ([https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-42970-0\\_6](https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-42970-0_6)).



## The length of parental leave can reshape or reinforce traditional gender roles

Leave policies are important policy instruments for supporting child, maternal and paternal health and well-being, birth rates and various labour-market outcomes, such as increased women's employment and reduced gender pay gaps<sup>(45)</sup>. Similarly, leave policies can be seen as seeking to support children's right to have time with and care from both parents<sup>(46)</sup>. Although a generous parental leave entitlement could be seen as beneficial from a child well-being point of view, there is no agreement on the optimal duration of parental leave. However, for policies and services to benefit the whole population, their design should account for gender norms, stereotypes and gender inequalities.

Parental leave duration may depend on the availability of ECEC services or an informal support network. Good-quality and affordable services can allow parents to return to work. A lack of gaps between the end of well-paid leave and the start of subsidised, high-quality ECEC increases women's participation in the labour market<sup>(47)</sup>. This highlights the importance of coordination between the two policy areas.

<sup>(45)</sup> Andersen, S. H., 'Paternity leave and the motherhood penalty: New causal evidence', *Journal of Marriage and Family*, Vol. 80, 2018, pp. 1125–1143 (<https://doi.org/10.1111/jomf.12507>).

<sup>(46)</sup> Haas, L. and Hwang, P., 'Parental leave in Sweden', in Moss, P. and Deven, F. E. (eds), *Parental Leave: Progress or pitfall? Research and policy issues in Europe*, Netherlands Interuniversity Demographic Institute / Population and Family Study Centre Publications, The Hague and Brussels, 1999.

<sup>(47)</sup> OECD, 'How does access to early childhood education services affect the participation of women in the labour market?', *Education Indicators in Focus*, No 59, OECD Publishing, Paris, 2018 (<https://doi.org/10.1787/232211ca-en>).

The decision to take up parental leave by both parents is affected by perceived potential risks and difficulties when returning to work. Evidence shows that longer leave periods may make it more difficult for mothers to restart work<sup>(48)</sup>. Traditional gender roles and societal expectations put greater pressure on women to choose childcare over career development<sup>(49)</sup>.

Policies extending parental leave may help improve parents' job stability post-childbirth, but long absences could also lead to discrimination in the workforce and demotion. Studies<sup>(50)</sup> have shown that longer periods of leave can harm parents' career advancement and wages, especially for women, due to gender bias in the workplace. Mothers at work are often thought to be less dedicated and deserving of promotions and fair wages than women without children and with similar qualifications<sup>(51)</sup>. Women who have taken extended periods of leave are also disadvantaged due to skills falling behind during time away from the workplace. Some women take only a few months of leave, fearing that otherwise they will lose either career opportunities or their job<sup>(52)</sup>.

<sup>(48)</sup> Canaan, S., Lassen, A. S., Rosenbaum, P. and Steingrimsdottir, H., 'Maternity leave and paternity leave: Evidence on the economic impact of legislative changes in high income countries', *IZA Discussion Papers*, No 15129, 2022.

<sup>(49)</sup> Torres, A. J. C., Barbosa-Silva, L., Oliveira-Silva, L. C., Miziara, O. P. P., Guahy, U. C. R., Fisher, A. N. and Ryan, M. K., 'The impact of motherhood on women's career progression: A scoping review of evidence-based interventions', *Behavioral Sciences*, Vol. 14, No 4, 2024, p. 275 (<https://doi.org/10.3390/bs14040275>).

<sup>(50)</sup> Grimshaw, D. and Rubery, J., 'The motherhood pay gap: A review of the issues, theory and international evidence', *Conditions of Work and Employment Series*, No 57, International Labour Office, Geneva, 2015. Correll, S. J., Benard, S. and Paik, I., 'Getting a job: Is there a motherhood penalty?', *American Journal of Sociology*, Vol. 112, No 5, 2007, pp. 1297–1339 (<https://doi.org/10.1086/511799>).

<sup>(51)</sup> See footnote 50.

<sup>(52)</sup> Lewis, S. and den Dulk, L., '12. Parents' experiences of flexible work arrangements in changing European workplaces', in Christensen, K. and Schneider, B. (eds), *Workplace Flexibility – Realigning 20th-century jobs for a 21st-century workforce*, Cornell University Press, Ithaca, NY, 2017, pp. 245–261 (<https://doi.org/10.7591/9780801458446-015>).

## Returning to work after parental leave: the physical and mental burdens

Returning to work after maternity leave causes additional stress for mothers<sup>(53)</sup>. Many women may need to reassess their career prospects and organise their time differently to account for childcare and work. This can have an impact on mental health and work satisfaction<sup>(54)</sup>. Mothers may feel guilty about leaving their children in the care of others. At the same time, they may be anxious about whether they can continue their working lives and give the same performance as before. These concerns are often subject to pressure from social norms. These may place a greater emphasis on women's role as caregivers, making it difficult for mothers to prioritise their careers<sup>(55)</sup>. Such conditions are particularly difficult for single mothers<sup>(56)</sup>, who are usually the only wage earner and carer in their families.

Fathers are less likely to feel pressure to choose care over their careers but may still struggle to balance work and family responsibilities. Due to traditional masculinity norms, fathers may feel the pressure to distance themselves from children and their family as a sign of commitment to work and the workplace<sup>(57)</sup>.



Research shows that, in some cases, men feel judged during parental leave by managers and peers in their workplace for not putting their work ahead of family interests<sup>(58)</sup>. They may suffer retaliation in the form of a lack of pay rises or dismissal<sup>(59)</sup>.

## Going back to work after parental leave: what to consider

Various factors affect parents' decisions to return to work after parental leave. These include gender, education, number of children, household income, whether or not they have migrant background and cultural values relating to gender roles. Employment characteristics and legal regulation also factor into the choices made. Workplace-related factors that parents' may need to consider include the workplace culture, options for flexible working, leave benefits, the availability or otherwise of ECEC and job protection<sup>(60)</sup>. Active labour market policies (ALMPs) also play a

<sup>(53)</sup> Chung, H. and van der Horst, M., 'Women's employment patterns after childbirth and the perceived access to and use of flexitime and teleworking', *Human Relations*, Vol. 71, No 1, 2018, pp. 47–72.

<sup>(54)</sup> Franzoi, I. G., Sauta, M. D., Luca, A. D. and Granieri, A., 'Returning to work after maternity leave: A systematic literature review', *Archives of Women's Mental Health*, 2024 (<https://doi.org/10.1007/s00737-024-01464-y>). Morgan, F., *Improving Well-being in Working Mothers: Well-being levels and intervention to mitigate the negative impact of maternal guilt*, dissertation, Northeastern University, Boston, MA, 2023 (<https://doi.org/10.17760/D20621609>). Srikruthi, C. H. and Vijayan, D., 'Fear of reintegration and maternal guilt in working women-post maternity leave', *International Journal of Health Sciences and Research*, Vol. 14, No 5, 2024.

<sup>(55)</sup> Torres, A. J. C., Barbosa-Silva, L., Oliveira-Silva, L. C., Miziara, O. P. P., Guahy, U. C. R., Fisher, A. N. and Ryan, M. K., 'The impact of motherhood on women's career progression: A scoping review of evidence-based interventions', *Behavioral Sciences*, Vol. 14, No 4, 2024, p. 275.

<sup>(56)</sup> According to Eurostat data in 2020, there were 195.4 million households in the EU and almost one third of these households (29 %) included children. Around 14 % of households with children (7.8 million households) consisted of single parents, accounting for 4 % of total households (<https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/web/products-eurostat-news/-/edn-20210601-2>).

<sup>(57)</sup> Balan, C., van den Marieke, B. and Benschop, Y., 'New fathers, ideal workers? New players in the field of father-friendly work organizations', *Gender, Work & Organization*, Vol. 30, No 3, 2022, pp. 957–981.

<sup>(58)</sup> Eurofound, *Parental and Paternity Leave – Uptake by fathers*, Publications Office of the European Union, Luxembourg, 2019 (<https://www.eurofound.europa.eu/en/publications/2019/parental-and-paternity-leave-uptake-fathers>).

<sup>(59)</sup> Cunha, V., Atalaia, S. and Wall, K., *Policy Brief II – Men and parental leaves: Legal framework, attitudes and practices*, Institute of Social Sciences of the University of Lisbon and Commission for Equality in Labour and Employment, Lisbon, 2017 (<https://eeagrants.cig.gov.pt/wp-content/uploads/2018/02/Policy-Brief-II-Men-and-Parental-Leaves-Legal-framework-attitudes-and-practices.pdf>).

<sup>(60)</sup> Hofman, J., Nightingale, M., Bruckmayer, M., de Silva, A., Picken, N. and Kunertova, L., *After Parental Leave: Incentives for parents with young children to return to the labour market*, publication for the Committee on Employment and Social Affairs, Policy Department for Economic, Scientific and Quality of Life Policies, European Parliament, Luxembourg, 2020.

crucial role. They represent one of the first sets of policies that may incentivise parents to go back to work <sup>(61)</sup>. ALMPs for single parents – who are often recognised as a vulnerable group – have generally had positive job outcomes. Other vulnerable subgroups of parents (e.g. parents of several children, of children with disabilities or who have a migrant background) have not been so well recognised <sup>(62)</sup>. Within ALMPs, financial incentives and income benefits can help overcome potential disincentives for parents to return to work. This is important for single parents when going back to work after having children <sup>(63)</sup>.

The 2019 EU work–life balance directive <sup>(64)</sup> seeks to influence Member States to actively encourage both parents to be involved in taking care of their children, including through the right to request flexible working arrangements (e.g. reduced working hours, flexible working hours and flexibility about the place of work). Flexible working helps parents to undertake a gradual return to work, allowing them to continue in employment that is compatible with care and family responsibilities <sup>(65)</sup>. Men benefit from greater availability of flexible working arrangements than women, in part due to their greater uptake of jobs in the private sector and in managerial positions, which today offer greater work flexibility than the jobs in the public sector or occupations requiring a lower level

of qualification (e.g. clerical support workers or service and sales workers).

If voluntary and temporary, reduced working hours may be a desirable solution following parental leave. However, this solution can become a trap for women, as it may harm their economic independence, career prospects and future pension entitlements. Public policies need to ensure sufficient, affordable and high-quality care services that enable women to return to full-time jobs if and when they so decide <sup>(66)</sup>.

### Box 1 | Examples of Member States promoting parents' involvement and equal sharing of parental leave

#### Nordic countries

In 1993, Norway implemented a 'daddy quota' as part of its parental leave policy, earmarking weeks specifically for fathers. If fathers do not use these weeks, the family forfeits them. This idea of daddy quotas has since been adopted by all the Nordic countries. Studies have shown that men have increased their use of parental leave following the introduction and expansion of these quotas. The quotas have also helped to shift attitudes towards paternity leave. The Nordic countries are also highly committed to addressing compensation levels and allocate a significantly larger amount of public funds to parental leave allowances than the OECD average.

#### Germany

In 2022, the Federal Ministry for Family Affairs, Senior Citizens, Women and Youth in Germany started a new action programme 'Equality in the labour market – creating perspectives' (GAPS). It builds on the successful outcomes of the European Social Fund federal programme 'Perspective re-entry – Developing potential' (2007–2021). GAPS aims to empower women and men to achieve financial independence and further their careers. Among others specific objectives and related actions, the GAPS

<sup>(61)</sup> ALMPs include, for instance, work-related benefit top-ups, tax credits, income benefits and job subsidies.

<sup>(62)</sup> Hofman, J., Nightingale, M., Bruckmayer, M., de Silva, A., Picken, N. and Kunertova, L., *After Parental Leave: Incentives for parents with young children to return to the labour market*, publication for the Committee on Employment and Social Affairs, Policy Department for Economic, Scientific and Quality of Life Policies, European Parliament, Luxembourg, 2020.

<sup>(63)</sup> Knoef, M. and van Ours, J. C., 'How to stimulate single mothers on welfare to find a job: Evidence from a policy experiment', *Journal of Population Economics*, Vol. 29, No 4, 2016, pp. 1025–1061 (<https://doi.org/10.1007/s00148-016-0593-0>).

<sup>(64)</sup> Directive (EU) 2019/1158 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 20 June 2019 on work–life balance for parents and carers and repealing Council Directive 2010/18/EU (<https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=celex%3A32019L1158>).

<sup>(65)</sup> De Laat, K., Doucet, A. and Gerhardt, A., 'More than employment policies? Parental leaves, flexible work and fathers' participation in unpaid care work', *Community, Work & Family*, Vol. 26, No 5, 2023, pp. 562–584 (<https://doi.org/10.1080/13668803.2023.2271646>). Eurofound, *Parental and Paternity Leave – Uptake by fathers*, Publications Office of the European Union, Luxembourg, 2019 (<https://www.eurofound.europa.eu/en/publications/2019/parental-and-paternity-leave-uptake-fathers>). Bosoni, M. L. and Mazzucchelli, S., 'The invisible gap between public policy and company practices in supporting fatherhood: The Italian case', *Community, Work & Family*, Vol. 21, No 2, 2018, pp. 193–208 (<https://doi.org/10.1080/13668803.2018.1428176>).

<sup>(66)</sup> EIGE, 'Parental-leave policies', in *Gender Equality Index 2019 – Work–life balance*, Publications Office of the European Union, Luxembourg, 2019 ([https://eige.europa.eu/publications-resources/publications/gender-equality-index-2019-work-life-balance?language\\_content\\_entity=en](https://eige.europa.eu/publications-resources/publications/gender-equality-index-2019-work-life-balance?language_content_entity=en)).



programme supports those who want to return to work after a career break. As part of GAPS, since the beginning of 2023 the project 'Perspectives 4.0 – A platform for gender equality' has been offering free online courses and a quarterly open-participation equality lounge. The project is primarily aimed at people – especially women – who have interrupted their professional activity due to taking on family responsibilities (childcare or long-term care) and wish to re-enter the workforce, individuals who want to better balance work and family responsibilities, those who want to undergo professional changes (e.g. development/promotion or a change due to chronic illness) and those who see the need to strengthen their retirement income.

Sources: Nordic Council of Ministers (2019), *Shared and Paid Parental Leave – The Nordic gender effect at work*, Nordisk Ministerråd, Copenhagen (<https://doi.org/10.6027/NO2019-055>). Federal Ministry for Family Affairs, Senior Citizens, Women and Youth, *Startseite – Perspektiven schaffen* (<https://www.perspektiven-schaffen.de>).

Workplace policies, in addition to national and regional policy measures, are crucial to the decisions that parents make about coming back to work. Some companies go beyond government regulations in promoting flexible work arrangements (Box 2) <sup>(67)</sup>. Furthermore, measures such as coaching, childcare provision, breastfeeding facilities in the workplace and encouraging fathers to take leave can make it easier for women to return to work.

<sup>(67)</sup> De Laat, K., Doucet, A. and Gerhardt, A., 'More than employment policies? Parental leaves, flexible work and fathers' participation in unpaid care work', *Community, Work & Family*, Vol. 26, No 5, 2023, pp. 562–584 (<https://doi.org/10.1080/13668803.2023.2271646>).

## Box 2 | Examples of companies promoting parents' involvement and equal sharing of parental leave

### Vodafone

Vodafone has implemented a parental leave policy for non-birthing parents, offering 16 weeks of fully paid leave to employees. It is aimed at supporting families by allowing all parents to have more time with their new children. In the UK, this has been integrated into the paternity leave policy. It allows any employee to take up to 16 weeks of paid leave within the first 18 months. This applies to an employee whose partner is expecting a baby, who is adopting a child or who is becoming a parent through surrogacy. In addition, Vodafone employees have the option to gradually return to work by transitioning to a 30-hour week at full pay for a further 6 months. This is similar to Vodafone's maternity policy.

### Danone

Danone has a global parental policy. Through this, it provides support to parents from the beginning of the pregnancy until the child's second year of life. As part of the policy, Danone provides minimum paid parental leave that applies to both birth and legally adoptive parents. If the local laws offer more generous benefits, those will be implemented. At the employee's request, a communication channel can be set up between the company and the employee to share information. This allows the employee to keep up to date on new developments at Danone and is designed to keep parents informed. It facilitates a smoother transition back to work after parental leave, as do interviews with the human resources team to discuss additional support. This may include help such as flexible working schedules and lactation facilities within the company.

Sources: Vodafone UK (2022), *Lost Connections: Supporting parents and caregivers in the workplace – A WPI report for Vodafone UK*, Vodafone UK, Newbury. Bousquet, A. (2017), *Danone Global Parental Policy*, Danone S. A., Paris ([https://www.danone.com/content/dam/corp/global/danonecom/about-us-impact/policies-and-commitments/en/2017/2017\\_06\\_23\\_DanoneGlobalParentalPolicy.pdf](https://www.danone.com/content/dam/corp/global/danonecom/about-us-impact/policies-and-commitments/en/2017/2017_06_23_DanoneGlobalParentalPolicy.pdf)).

## Key policy recommendations

For the EU-level institutions and agencies, the following actions are recommended.

- Encourage Member States to go beyond the minimum standards set out in the work–life balance directive and ensure that the directive’s objectives are integrated into relevant policy initiatives and the EU long-term budget.
- Ensure the collection of comparable EU-level data on, and EU-wide monitoring of, the uptake of parental leave by women and men.
- Promote mutual learning across Member States to shift societal attitudes in favour of more equal sharing of caregiving responsibilities between women and men.

For Member States, the following actions are recommended.

- Implement gender impact assessments of parental leave policies, specifically in terms of eligibility, length, payment levels, flexibility and compatibility with other work–life balance policies.
- Launch public awareness campaigns regarding gender stereotypes and traditional gender roles that discourage fathers from taking parental leave.
- Encourage employers to create a supportive work environment that promotes work–life balance for women and men employees and diverse families (e.g. lone parents, parents of children with disabilities, same-sex parents). This might include flexible working arrangements, parental leave benefits and policies to support caregivers returning to work.



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