



Facilitation of Employability for Maternity and Parental Leavers in Europe

a Scoping Review

Extended Summary

About the report

This report presents the findings of an European project concerning facilitation of employability for parental leavers in European countries. The conclusions and recommendations in this report build on comparisons of relevant European policy documents, country notes from five European countries (France, Hungary, the Netherlands, Norway and Slovakia) and a search in relevant databases. Taken together, these data form an approximate scoping review. The concepts of maternal and parental leave are used in the present report. Research related to leave in connection with young children use the term maternity leave until the last decades where more frequent parental leave is used. We are aware that a distinction between parental and maternity leave does not apply in some countries.

Background for the study¹

The longer the parents, and in most countries, mothers stay at home with children, the more difficult it seems for them to return to work (European Commission, 2018). Over the years, they may lose working habits, overview of the opportunities available on the labour market and they lack new skills required. In addition, they may have trouble with the work-family

¹ This section builds on: European Parliament, A new directive on work-life balance, EPRS, Legislative Briefing, April 2019. Retrieved from:

[http://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/BRIE/2018/614708/EPRS_BRI\(2018\)614708_EN.pdf](http://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/BRIE/2018/614708/EPRS_BRI(2018)614708_EN.pdf)



life. Despite these challenges, most parental leavers find it important to return to work after maternity or parental leave.

Mothers still make up the majority among parents that stay at home with the child until the children start at school. As confirmed by the statistics, employment of women is 67.4 % (Eurostat, 2019) whereas the employment rate of women with children under six years of age in the EU is on average eight percentage points lower than that of childless women. However, in Central Europe, including Hungary and Slovakia, the difference is more than 30 percentage points (European Commission, 2017). The difference is even bigger when it comes to employment of mothers with the smallest children. Legislative measures that govern the maternal leave, welfare and business rules as well as employers that have prejudices and limited part time work opportunities may influence their decisions and situation.

The European Union (EU) highlights several issues concerning female employment, unemployment and related subjects to this such as caring responsibilities. Achieving a 75 % employment rate is one of the Europe 2020 strategy goals. Enhancing women's participation in the labour market may help to reach this employment rate besides the target of lifting 20 million people out of poverty or social exclusion. Therefore, to support female employment and importantly to contribute to gender equality, work-life balance is one of the forefront EU policy initiatives. This also implies legislation through directives, the two most relevant being the Maternity Leave Directive and the Parental Leave Directive.² The 1992 Maternity Leave Directive (EU Council, 1992) set the minimum period for maternity leave at 14 weeks, with two weeks' compulsory leave before and/or after confinement and an adequate allowance subject to national legislation.

The Parental Leave Directive (EU Council, 2010) replaced Directive 96/34/EC, following the adoption of a revised Framework Agreement on Parental Leave, concluded by the European social partners on 18 June 2009. The Parental Leave Directive sets minimum requirements for parental leave for male and female workers, and for related employment protection. The main elements of this directive are:

- workers are entitled to parental leave on the birth or adoption of a child
- men and women workers must get equal treatment, irrespective of their type of employment contract
- parental leave must be granted for at least four months as an individual right of both parents; provisions on taking leave; provisions on the right of workers to return to work after taking parental leave, and on their right to non-discrimination

² This section builds on: European Parliament, A new directive on work-life balance, EPRS, Legislative Briefing, April 2019. Retrieved from:

[http://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/BRIE/2018/614708/EPRS_BRI\(2018\)614708_EN.pdf](http://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/BRIE/2018/614708/EPRS_BRI(2018)614708_EN.pdf)



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A revised proposal has been made for an update on the parental leave directive. A so-called provisional agreement (European Parliament, 2019) was approved by the European Parliament's Employment and Social Affairs Committee in February 2019, and then adopted in plenary June 2019.

The purpose of the study

The study elaborates different approaches and good practices in partner countries as well as in other countries in supporting parental leavers on the labour market. Through this international exchange of best practice, more systematic solutions to address the issue of parental leavers will be presented.

Further, based on a scoping review, the study will investigate and present research-based evidence concerning facilitation of employability of parental leavers. Scoping reviews, a type of knowledge synthesis, follow a systematic approach to map evidence on a topic and identify main concepts, theories, sources, and knowledge gaps (Levac, Colquhoun & O'Brien, 2010).

Based on these different sources, the study will identify and analyse successful practices and policies which facilitate employment opportunities as well as employability skills of parental leavers. In addition to positive examples and results, the analysis will look at the barriers and limits encountered by our target group in finding a good quality employment. The study also maps the possibilities for parental leavers to gain professional experience during the period of parental leave.

Main results from the study and conclusions

A main finding is that parental leave and employability is a complex and context sensitive area. This relates to the fact that parental leave must be seen in connection with both individual, organisational, cultural, historical and political (legislative) issues on both national and European level. In this study, the focus has been mainly descriptive on the political (legislative) level, while a more interpretative analysis is made on how to develop tools and educational programs concerning development of employability skills relevant for parental leavers and employers.

FRANCE

In France, the current maternity leave lasts 16 weeks and 26 weeks for mothers with three or more children. The number of weeks increases with a twin birth up to 34 weeks or with a multiple birth 46 weeks. The law ensures that maternity leavers return to their former job or an equivalent with the same salary. During the maternity leave, the Security System pays 100 % of the employee's salary and the time is counted for the retirement calculation.



The parental leave allows the mother and / or father to take a break from their professional life (total or partial) when a child (born or adopted) arrives. To be eligible for this policy, an employee must be employed in the company for at least one year. The law does not provide for the maintenance of remuneration but there are financial aids. After the coming back, an interview with the employer is compulsory to consider a career guidance or a repositioning. In all cases, parents are entitled to get back equivalent work as before parental leave.

There are no specific training tools for parents taking parental leave. As the parental leavers are not considered as “jobseekers”, the Public System does not finance the training. When parents return to work after parental leave the company should propose the necessary updates. For those who are jobseekers or decide to stop their contracts after the parental leave, the Labour offices propose usually a “Skills Assessment”³ to define their professional project. In addition, there are not studies about the missing skills for this group as it is too large to do a generalisation. What Labour Offices consider is that after a break in their careers, some parents need a tool to redefine their professional projects; to identify their skills and competences; and to gain confidence. That is why the “skill assessment” is the main tool recommended for parents by Labour Offices.

HUNGARY

In Hungary, parents are allowed to stay at home with the child for up to three years. During this period, they can take three forms of support. For the first one they are entitled until the child is six months old, for the second until the child is two years old, while for the third until the child is three years old. The available total is getting lower and lower along with the progressing of time. The higher total that is due in the first two funding periods can only be taken if the parent, who applies for the funding, was insured for at least 365 days within two years preceding the birth of the child, i.e. he/she worked or studied at a higher education institution (Act LXXXIV of 1998 on family support). From 2020, if the parents decide to do so, they can transfer the entitlement for childcare allowance to the grandparent. This refers to grandmothers and grandfathers who are active employees, i.e. who are not retired.

During the time of childcare benefit (GYES)/childcare allowance (GYED), the employment is not terminated, so in general, it has to be continued as it used to be before having children. In the framework of a project “Women in the family and at work” 71 Family and CareerPOINTS were set up in the area of Hungary until the end of 2018. The two main target groups of the service offered by the centres are the employers and the families, and within that, especially women raising little children or disadvantaged women. Those who were stuck in career building or those who find it hard to return to the labour market can get in

³ Ministère du travail (2019). Bilan de compétences (online text). <https://travail-emploi.gouv.fr/formation-professionnelle/droits-a-la-formation-et-orientation/bilan-competences>



touch with the centre. In addition, the professionals working there help or provide guidance on whom one can turn to with a particular issue.

NORWAY

In Norway, the leave is 49 weeks with a 100 per cent coverage or 59 weeks with an 80 per cent coverage. It has only been an adjustment for a total of seven weeks in the last 25 years. Four of them have been justified by the extension of the father's quota, father's-imposed part of the parental leave. In addition to the 49 weeks, each parent is entitled to one year's unpaid leave each for each birth. This leave has to be completed immediately after the first year. Parental leave entitles parents to paid leave in connection with childbirth or adoption. The right is anchored in the Working Environment Act. In 2019, parents have had the right to leave for a total of 49 weeks (100 %) in connection with childbirth. These 49 weeks include mother's right to leave for up to 15 weeks during pregnancy and six weeks of leave after birth.

There are no specific training programmes or guidance services for parental leavers to facilitate their return to work, as they are not viewed to be a specifically vulnerable social group when it comes to their employability.

SLOVAKIA

In Slovakia, a woman or a man in a work relationship or a similar work relationship can only take the maternity leave for 34 weeks. In the case of a single mother, the maternity leave is 37 weeks and in the case of a woman who has given birth to two or more children up to 43 weeks. If a woman does not exhaust her entire six weeks of maternity leave before childbirth because she gives birth at an earlier date, as determined by the doctor, she is entitled to maternity leave of 34 weeks, 37 weeks if she is solitary and 43 weeks if she gives birth to two and more children as described above.

Systematic support for maintaining or deepening qualifications during parental leave is not among official policies in the Slovak Republic as there are virtually no supporting tools in place, which would facilitate the education or training of this target group. Therefore, in general, parental leavers must rely on themselves and look for individual opportunities when it comes to keeping their knowledge and skills updated.

THE NETHERLANDS

In the Netherlands, women are entitled to 16 weeks of fully paid leave, which include maternity leave and parental leave (National Government, 2016). Paternity leave in the Netherlands is small. In Europe, the Netherlands is at the bottom of the list together with Italy, Estonia and Malta (European Parliament Research Service, 2014; International Labour



Organization, 2014). From 2017, men are eligible for five days of paid leave. This includes two days of "maternity leave" – also known as paternity leave – and three days of "parental leave" – also known as partner leave (National Government, 2016). After that, both mother and father can demand for parental leave. The following applies to each child: 26 x the number of

hours the mother or father works. This is unpaid leave, unless stated otherwise in the collective labour agreement or additional employment conditions (WOMEN Inc., 2015b).

Currently, one in two employees combines work with caring for children. Almost one in five employees combines work with informal care tasks. A modern employer takes the child care duties of employees into account and contributes to a good balance between work and child care. Employers and corporate cultures therefore play an important role in the possibility for men to combine work and care for children (WOMEN Inc., 2016).

Due to the short period of maternity leave in the Netherlands, the situation around education and development of skills and competencies of parental leavers regarding their return to work is not so relevant.

MAIN FINDINGS IN RESEARCH

Norms appear to influence return after maternity leave. A study by Bartoš and Pertold-Gebicka (2018) referred to a social norm that mothers should stay home with children younger than three years of age. This has a strong effect on job search prospects of women returning to the labour market after parental leave.

In academic contexts, mothers experienced other challenges. Women with young children reported need to continue labouring on academic research outputs while on maternity leave. Those who have traditional gender relationships in the home appear to experience much more stress in keeping up with the demands of the labour process (Huppatz, San & Napier, 2018). Maxwell, Connolly and Ní Laoire (2019) identified in an Irish university context that maternity leave and flexible working arrangements often are governed by informal attitudes rather than institutional practices that support women to avail of such provisions without a career penalty resulting.

Some women experienced dissonance between stated organizational family-friendly policy and line management decisions and attitudes (Nowak, Naude & Thomas 2013). A study by Fodor and Glass (2018) identifies employers as critical gatekeepers who translate public entitlements into the lived experience of workplace gender inequality. Companies can use maternity leave to discipline workers, to screen out those who have become superfluous or whose performance does not meet their expectations. The workers were dependent on personal alliances and employer goodwill in order to access basic legal guarantees. They



appealed to the goodwill and understanding of companies and individual supervisors and felt lucky and grateful when they received any form of accommodation. Mothers of young children in Hungary experience the dearth of work opportunities, the inflexibility of work schedules, and employers' discrimination as a challenge to return to work. Women on the lengthy insured parental leave become the ideal supply of ad hoc informal employment, an invisible reserve army of labour (Fodor & Kispeter 2014).

Given the role that the partner is expected to have in the provision of the child care, that facilitates the mothers return to work, is the importance of workplace flexibility for men (Nowak, Naude & Thomas 2013).

Begall and Grunow (2015) describe that leaving employment after the first birth has become less common in the Netherlands and that over time the probability that new mothers reduced their working hours increased substantially. This trend has been facilitated by three related policy developments: the introduction of part-time parental leave (reducing the exit probability), the strong growth in part-time jobs, and concurrent improvements in the labour market position of part-time workers (increasing the probability of a work hour reduction).

In Germany they modified the parental leave benefit and its entitlement period. At the same time, the parental leave period, which involves job protection for three years, remained unchanged. The study described that the reform yields most of the intended effects: the fraction of mothers who plan to return to the labour market within a year after the interview increased by 14 percentage points (Bergemann & Riphahn 2011).

Kalb (2018) claims that the period of leave cannot be too short, since then women are at risk of exiting the labour force at childbirth rather than having to return to work too quickly, nor too long, since then women are at risk of losing human capital which is likely to affect their earnings growth and career development. From seven months up to around one year as a maximum appears to be optimal. Linking the payment level of paid parental leave to previous earnings would encourage women to participate in the labour market and pursue a (well-paid) career before starting a family as this investment is likely to be worthwhile (Kalb 2018). However, with the right length of payment period it also induces mothers to return to work. Fodor and Kispeter (2014) also refer to the lack of daycare for children as a challenge to return to work after maternity leave.

SUMMARY OF RESULTS

Analysis of the situation regarding parental leavers' employment in the partner countries shows that maternal employment in France, Slovakia and Hungary is rather low. Although, in Hungary there are networks which provide special counselling for women and support them when it comes to their (re)integration into the labour market. In Western Europe, such as



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the Netherlands and Norway, the situation is more favourable, employers are more flexible and part-time job is a frequent option offered. However, the up-to-date level of skills of parental leavers coming back to work may be a challenge in these countries too.

The duration and generosity of paid parental leave seems to affect when (after what time) parents return to work. The period of leave cannot be too short, nor too long. The optimal length of the leave varies greatly depending on national conditions and cultural frameworks. In any case, it should not be so long that the parental leavers become uninteresting for the labour market and lose working competence (Kalb, 2018; Whitehouse, Romaniuk, Lucas & Nicholson, 2013).

MAIN CONCLUSIONS

- Women who have maternity leave between seven months and up to one year maintain contact with their own work more often according to research
- Investing in maternity coaching may ease the transition back to work for women after maternity leave and increase retention and job satisfaction
- Coaching and learning programs may help with practical aspects such as preparing for discussions and negotiations in relation to return to work
- Social norms and management decisions and attitudes have influence on women's return after maternity leave
- Lack of daycare for children is a challenge for returning to work after maternity leave
- Each countries laws and guidelines, culture and attitudes related to women's employment opportunities have to be acknowledged in developing learning programs for maternity and parental leavers.