

GENDER INEQUALITIES IN BECOMING A PARENT:

How to Increase Gender Equality in Work-Family Balance

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Aiming at Gender Equality in Parenthood and Family Life

European governments should aim at enhancing the quality of parenthood through supporting gender-equal parenting. With their long-term impact, changes in parenthood gender regimes would be a strong incentive for family formation among young people in Europe.

The key problem in family formation is still the existing gender inequality in Work-Family balance and the early phase of parenthood across Europe.

Recommendation 1:

Ensure gender equality in the labour market.

Recommendation 2:

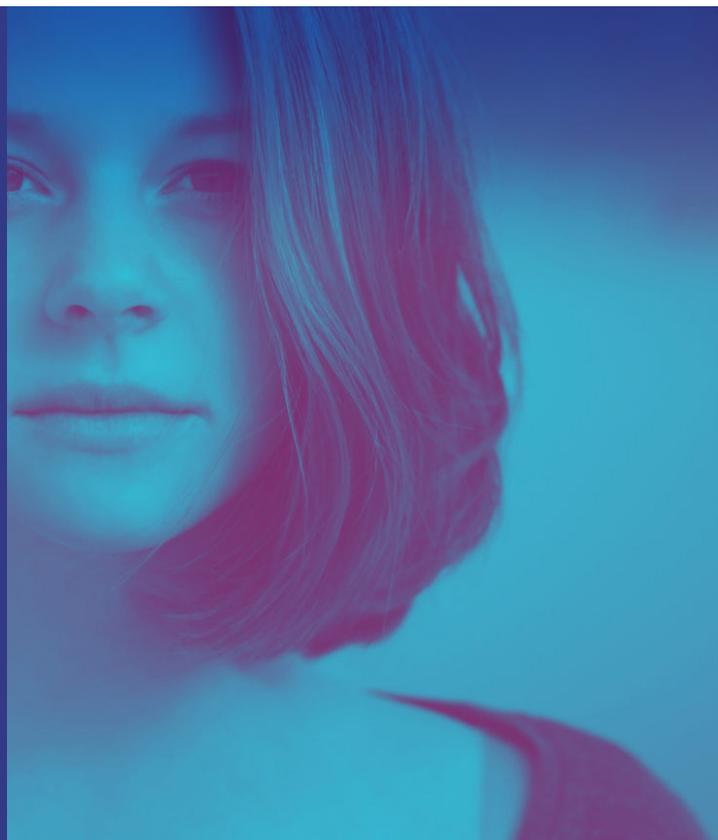
Facilitate gender equality in parental leave and childcare leave.

Recommendation 3:

Provide adequate childcare services.

*“I think I will have
no work to go back to
afterwards.”*

[a young woman reflecting on
becoming a mother]





Context

Family formation patterns across Europe show similar demographic and some other trends. Compared to other continents, Europe is characterized by the lowest fertility rate, with variations among countries from the “lowest-low” to the “highest low”.

On the other hand, the comparative analysis in this study reveals considerable variations in structural contexts in the background of family formation. Besides structural constraints, such as gender and social inequalities, precarious work, increase in costs of raising a child, and of opportunity cost for women when becoming mothers, there are also different opportunities in Work-Family balance: for example, changing men’s involvement in childcare (e.g. fathers’ quota), and services supporting early parenthood, such as availability of affordable facilities for childcare; housing support available to young people during family formation, as well as various state policies targeting low fertility with their diverse effects in different European countries. Additionally, in discussion of family formation among young people, diversity of parenthood should also be considered, for example, single parents of both gender, and parents in same-sex families, as well as timing of becoming a parent in different life stages and parents using biotechnology in conception.

Within these diverse frameworks across and within European societies, an issue appears to be common: gender asymmetry in transition to parenthood and early phase of parenthood. Family formation goes beyond a population policy issue, encompassing fulfilling personal and young couple’s needs of becoming a parent, and planning a ‘lifelong project’ of parenting. European societies should, therefore, aim at enhancing the quality of parenthood through more gender-equal parenting, which would then be a strong incentive for young people for family formation. Hence, this study suggests a broader family policy perspective - aiming at long-term impact and changes in gender equality in parenthood, rather than population policy approach.

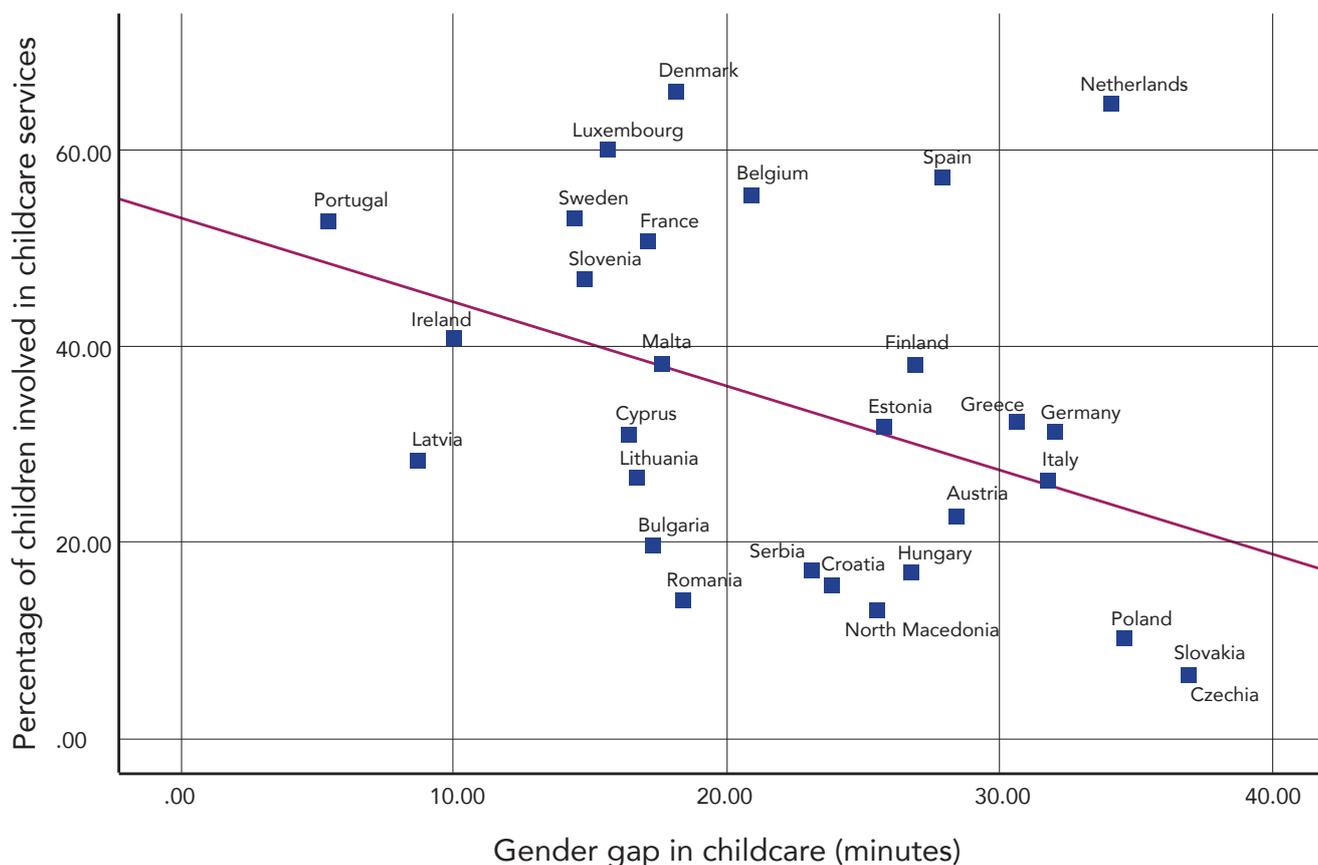
New Study

Family Formation Among Youth in Europe: Coping with Socioeconomic Disadvantages

This study comprises of eleven national reports on Bosnia and Herzegovina, Czech Republic, Germany, Hungary, Israel, Italy, Latvia, Lithuania, Malta, Portugal, and Serbia. It presents the differing ways European societies currently deal with the complex and intertwined issues associated with family formation among young people, and how policies are informed by their socioeconomic, cultural, and political contexts. This differentiation in societal background results in different models of family policy and broader public polices within welfare state

regimes. Achieving Work-Family balance in a particular social context depends on the values around mothers' employment (for example, whether women are expected to work full time, part time or not at all), the agreement between the partners, the life course phase of the child (as there are differing needs associated with young, preschool or adolescent children) and the family structures (for example, single-parent families have different needs compared to two-parent families).

Graph 1 The relationship between the percentage of children under 3 years old in the kindergartens and the gender gap in parental care



Sources: EQLS and EUROSTAT (Authors' calculations)

Key Findings

1. The gender gap in both employment and income continues to persist across Europe. This is coupled by the increased insecurity in all types of employment. There are significant gender inequalities related to employment, which affect family formation among the young. Opportunity costs of becoming a parent are greater for young women, particularly for those from lower social strata, ethnic minorities (for example, Roma) and other disadvantaged groups, and they include dropping out from education and/or withdrawal from the labour market when becoming a mother. For other women, maternity may include breaking the career path during maternity leave or taking up part-time employment through the early years of the child. Women and couples are more prone to become parents if the woman is employed, which makes women's integration in the labour market a significant factor informing family formation.

2. Unequal rights to parental leave after childbirth and leave for childcare for young women and for men are enhancing gender inequalities in early parenthood. More generous programmes tend to have a stronger impact on having the first child and subsequent children. Flexible programmes allow young parents to select the duration of the parental leave according to their needs. Individualized parental leave and childcare leave entitlements incite fathers to take out the leave and thus contribute to a more equal division of childcare between partners.

3. Social contexts, cultural norms and gender expectations for motherhood and fatherhood define to a great extent the modes of gender division of domestic labour and care activities. Those are also related to a type of support - formal (institutional) and informal (kin networks) that is available during the early phase of parenting, which is dependent on the dominant welfare state regime (for example, universalistic vs. sub-protective).

4. Accessible, affordable, and good quality childcare services have been found to have a positive effect on having children. As Graph 1 points, there is a positive correlation between participation of children under 3 in childcare services and gender symmetry in childcare activities at home, indicated by the difference in time (in minutes) mothers and fathers spend daily in childcare activities. Childcare facilities, together with different norms around appropriate age for a child to be enrolled in a kindergarten, are more important in urban than rural areas, and less in societies where informal networks are strong.

Recommendations

Recommendation 1: Ensure gender equality in the labour market

Policies should ensure a high level of job security, with a guarantee for labour rights and stable income (such as 'living wage') and gender equality in labour market position and income. More intensive measures are needed to employ women, and reduce the gender gap in employment, unemployment, and inactivity rates. It is especially important to develop employment measures for mothers with lower qualifications, since most of them have precarious work arrangements. It is necessary to ensure a quick and safe return to the labour market of women after parental leave, enabling them to continue with their jobs and pursue their careers.

Recommendation 2: Facilitate gender equality in parental leave and childcare leave

Fathers are not stimulated enough in most of the European countries to use leave for childcare, thus special mechanisms should be devised to increase their participation. The recommendations include: 1. Mandatory parental leave of the father for at least two weeks after the birth of the child, and 2. 'Fathers' quotas' as part of the leave for childcare, which only fathers could use and cannot be transferred to the mother. It is recommended that the quota should not be less than four weeks. The work culture should be sensitised to gender equality, and promote internal policies aimed at parents, especially fathers, who should be encouraged to take parental leave and take over part of the daily parental duties at home.

Recommendation 3: Provide adequate childcare services

Governments should further develop the network of preschool institutions, especially those for children under 3 years of age. Employers can also have a significant role in providing childcare services as well. It is necessary to detect the real needs of parents, especially for those who would choose to work if there was a possibility of employment and the existence of a childcare facility. A more balanced regional development of the childcare services network and the involvement of vulnerable groups are also needed. The services should be affordable in both state and private childcare facilities, and available to parents (particularly mothers) regardless of their employment status. Adequate childcare services encourage women to return to work and maintain their careers and stimulate greater involvement of fathers in childcare at home. The daily and weekly hours of childcare services should be adapted to work requirements of the parents, as an equivalent to full-time work with extended hours when necessary.

More information

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Policy Paper No.1 GENDER INEQUALITIES IN BECOMING A PARENT: How to Increase Gender Equality in Work-Family Balance

Policy Paper No. 2 CONSEQUENCES OF CURRENT LABOUR MARKET RISKS FOR FUTURE PENSIONS: How to Ensure an Adequate Old-Age Income for Young Europeans

Policy Paper No. 3 YOUTH WELLBEING DURING CRISES: How to Improve Young People's Resilience Through Civic Engagement

Policy Paper No. 4 REDUCING NEET RATE: How to Compose Efficient Policy Packages

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