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Carmen Castro-García & Maria Pazos-Moran


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PARENTAL LEAVE POLICY AND GENDER EQUALITY IN EUROPE

Carmen Castro-García and Maria Pazos-Moran

ABSTRACT

This article uses data from 2008–10 to analyze parental leave policies in twenty-one European countries and their influence on men's behavior. It examines entitlement characteristics, such as nontransferability, duration, payment, compulsory period, and other policies to assess their effect on the proportion of leave men use out of the total parental leave in each country. The findings, which suggest that a large majority of men take nontransferable and highly paid leave, and a small minority take other types, provide the basis for developing the Parental Leave Equality Index (PLEI). PLEI ranks countries by the degree to which parental leave policies reinforce or diminish the gendered division of labor. Results indicate that although Iceland's parental leave policies do the most to advance gender equity, no country has equal, nontransferable, and well-paid leave for each parent. This policy arrangement would be a precondition to men's and women's equal participation in childcare.

KEYWORDS

Fatherhood, family policy, gender equality, gender roles, parental leave, public policy

JEL codes: I38, J16, J38

INTRODUCTION

This article contributes to a gender-impact assessment of the paid parental leave system in twenty-one European countries. The term parental leave applies both to leave from paid work immediately after the birth of a child and to parental leave taken in the first years of child's life. Whatever the specific names these leaves adopt in each country (maternity, paternity, or parental leave), our interest is in the practical impact of each leave provision on its use by men and women.

Research shows that the birth of a child is a crucial moment in the crystallization of gendered parental roles (Marianne Sundström and Ann-Zofie Duvander 2002). It establishes and shapes emotional ties with the

child; develops gendered patterns of sharing care between women and men; and influences the way care responsibilities are allocated to family and friends (María Gutiérrez Domenech 2007; Alison J. Smith and Donald R. Williams 2007; María José González, Marta Domínguez, and Pau Baizán 2010; Gerardo Meil 2011).

How does parental leave support this configuration of gender roles? Some researchers argued that parental leave has a positive effect on equality regardless of whether leave entitlement conditions enable men's or women's take-up. Countries have been classified according to a combination of entitlement components relating to compensation for and duration of parental leave without establishing a distinction between transferable and nontransferable leave (Karin Wall and Fred Deven 2009).¹ Others included all leave policies within the general category of policies that help families combine work and childcare (Anders Björklund 2006). Earlier researchers claimed that these policies have a positive effect on women's employment (Christopher Ruhm 1998), and some even argued that parental leave promotes two-breadwinner families (Tommy Ferranini 2006). In these analyses, the deficit of men's participation was rarely considered as a source of gender inequality (Marit Rønsen and Ragni Hege Kitterød 2015). In fact, often the present situation is compared with the absence of parental leave in the past, as opposed to examining and comparing the impact of diverse current policies.

The creation of maternity leave is associated with increasing women's labor force participation. However, correlation does not imply causality, as Anna Thoursie (2008) explained. Moreover, Anita Nyberg (2004, 2008) maintained that women's labor participation is not a consequence of public policy; rather, she emphasized that this policy development was a response to women's participation. According to her research, the positive correlation between the length of women's leave and the value of women's employment rate does not confirm that maternity leave increases employment. Instead, she argued the contrary: leave policies were designed to incentivize women not to entirely abandon their household duties. Indeed, women's employment rate is also high in countries (such as the United States and many emerging economies) where parental leave and social benefits to care at home scarcely exist (Carmen Castro-García and María Pazos-Morán 2008). Therefore, comparisons should not be made between the present and the past when parental leave did not exist, and women's labor market participation was limited. Instead, the focus should be the widely accepted goal of crafting leave policies with a conscious aim to strike a balance between work and childcare that is equally distributed between men and women.

In this context, feminist economics literature has directed greater attention to the ways in which gender roles are solidified within couples and to the importance of enabling egalitarian parental leave use for achieving

equal distribution of childcare between parents (Nancy Folbre 1994; Ann-Zofie Duvander and Gunnar Andersson 2006; Anders Chronholm 2007, 2009; Linda Haas and Philip C. Hwang 2008; Ann-Zofie Duvander and Ann-Christin Jans 2009; Meil 2011).

The use of parental leave may affect women's and men's wages (James W. Albrecht, Per-Anders Edin, Marianne Sundström, and Susan B. Vroman 1999). Elly-Ann Johansson (2010) found that Swedish women earned 4.5 percent less for every month spent on parental leave, while men earned 7.5 percent less. However, for each additional month a man took leave, the mother's wage increased by 6.7 percent.

Moreover, imbalanced take-up between women and men negatively impacts all women's salaries, not just mothers', as all women are affected by the consequent "statistical discrimination" (Nabanita Datta Gupta and Nina Smith 2002; Thoursie 2008; Nabanita Datta Gupta, Nina Smith, and Mette Verner 2008).

We argue that men's involvement in childcare at the same level as women (and absence from work for the same length of time) is essential for eliminating differentiated gender roles. Thus, an increase in the use of parental leave by women (and not by men) will have a negative impact on gender equality; and an increase in the use of leave by men will have a positive impact.

Consequently, our aim is to determine the effects of parental leave policies on the feasibility of the equal distribution between parents. We have specifically tried to answer the following question: How should parental leave schemes be designed to achieve equal participation rates by women and men? Or, in the words of Nancy Fraser (2013: 134), who describes the postindustrial welfare state (the "universal caregiver" model): Is there any specific parental leave design that would "induce men to become more like most women are now?" Since men's participation rate is systematically far less than that of women, the fundamental question becomes how to increase men's use of parental leave until a balance is reached.

This study focuses first on collecting and providing evidence on the relationship between the parental leave policy of each selected country and the social norms which define and enforce behavior, especially men's. We analyze leave regulations and data on take up in twenty-one European countries selected to allow a wide range of policies. The paper adds to other statistical work that has tried to clarify complicated European parental leave regulations (Peter Moss and Karen Wall 2007; Karin Wall 2007; Peter Moss and Marta Korintus 2008; Rebecca Ray 2008; Wall and Deven 2009; Sheila B. Kamerman and Peter Moss 2009; Peter Moss 2009, 2010, 2011). This study's specific contribution is the Parental Leave Equality Index (PLEI).

As we later show, there is overwhelming evidence that most fathers only take the part of parental leave that is nontransferable and highly paid (at

close to 100 percent of salary). The majority of women take most of the paid leave time (except the very low-paid portion). The gender-differentiated use of parental leave, and lack of variability in these patterns, allows a base line for comparison to a parental leave system that would give each individual an equal, nontransferable, and fully paid parental leave. We argue that equal, nontransferable, and fully paid parental leave is most likely to induce fathers to spend equal time on parental leave (that is, fathers would take a proportion of total leave close to 0.5). On the other hand, total inequality at the extreme is where fathers take none of the total leave.

Bearing these two extreme situations in mind, and all of the existing evidence about the impact of current policy on behavior, PLEI is a predictor of the proportion of total leave time that men and women would use in each country.

First, we attribute to men the leave that is likely to be used by most men (that is, the nontransferable and highly paid leave); and we attribute to women the leave that is likely to be used by the majority of women (that is, all leave except that which is paid at a very low rate). Then we compare both figures; and calculate the proportion attributed to men. That proportion (between 0 and 0.5) is the value of our indicator in each country.

This indicator will allow us to rank countries by the degree of gender equality promoted by their parental leave policies. The value 0 corresponds to total inequality, while 0.5 corresponds to total equality.

Although abundant literature addresses the differences in parental leave take up between women and men, this evidence has not been applied toward assessing the impact of parental leave policy on this observed pattern of behavior. Like Rebecca Ray, Janet Gornick, and John Schmitt, we focus on “the degree . . . leave policies promote an egalitarian distribution” (2008: 2, 2010). Ray, Gornick, and Schmitt’s Gender Equality Index (RGS Index hereafter) “measures countries’ parental leave policies on a fifteen-point scale, with fifteen points indicating full equality of workplace and caregiving benefits to men and women” (2008: 3, 2010).

While groundbreaking, the RGS Index has shortcomings. This index gives positive points to transferable leave, even though most fathers transfer this leave to the mother. As the authors point out, “‘use it or lose it’ days are often the only ones that fathers take” (2008: 11); so transferable leave would increase gender inequality. The RGS Index also awards positive points to unpaid or low-paid parental leave for fathers, even though the majority of fathers do not take this leave, even when designated exclusively for them.

The computation of the leave payment for fathers in “full-time equivalent” terms also raises concerns. For instance, the RGS Index gives the same amounts of points to two months for fathers paid at 80 percent of the salary as to four months paid at 40 percent of the salary. However,

evidence indicates that a large majority of fathers would take two months in the first case, while most would not take any time off from work in the second case (although a minority would take some).

Finally, the RGS Index grants the maximum amount of nontransferability points to “a country that reserves a third, at least, of its parental leave exclusively for fathers” (Ray, Gornick, and Schmitt 2010: 202). However, in this case, fathers would use one-third of the total parental leave only if the leave is well paid, whereas mothers would use two-thirds. This distribution, which is the social norm in Iceland and the closest any country has arrived to reaching parental leave equality, is still a far cry from promoting a balanced distribution.

Our approach is instead computing in positive terms only those characteristics that promote men’s use of parental leave and giving the maximum number of points to a system that would promote total equality in participation between women and men. PLEI emphasizes mainstream patterns of behavior instead of giving points on a pre-settled scale as in Ray, Gornick, and Smith (2008, 2010). PLEI predicts the actual percentage of men’s leave participation, and it has the advantage of being simple and provable, although the absence of reliable statistics on take-up rates makes complete “proof” impossible. The usefulness of PLEI is based on the ability to show that behavior is a direct consequence of policy design (among other factors), and it demonstrates the gender equality deficit of each country.

PARENTAL LEAVE SCHEMES IN EUROPE

Each country has its own set of regulations for parental leave as well as particular criteria for labeling policies, making any attempt to develop a cross-country analysis complex. Table 1 offers a wide-angle view of existing parental leave schemes, across most European countries.

Figure 1 shows the duration, nontransferability and payment of parental leave schemes in each country (for further details on these data, see Supplemental Table S1, available online on the publisher’s website).

Transferability and nontransferability

The characteristics of individuality and nontransferability do not generally exist in paid parental leaves.² In most countries, a portion of leave entitlements can be transferred to the other parent. Transferable leaves appear to be fair and equal, since they do not formally allot childcare to women and even allow for family choice. In practice, the problem is that this so-called free choice leads almost invariably to women using parental leave whenever it is transferable, which interrupts their careers prospects and jobs. Countries that implemented transferable parental leave, such as

Table 1 Definitions and characteristics of parental leave policies

Type of leave	Who can take it	When	Duration	Payment	Reason
Maternity	Mothers (in some countries they can transfer a portion to the other parent)	After giving birth (it can start earlier)	European average: 20.5 weeks	Generally between 75% and 100% of salary	Recovery from childbirth and childcare
Paternity	Only fathers	After birth	European average: 2.5 weeks	Generally the same as maternity leave	To help during recovery from childbirth
Parental	It is usually transferable from one parent to the other (some countries have nontransferable portions)	After maternity leave and before a maximum age of the child	Between 3 months and 2.5 years	Generally poorly paid (notable exceptions: the Scandinavian countries and Slovenia)	Childcare

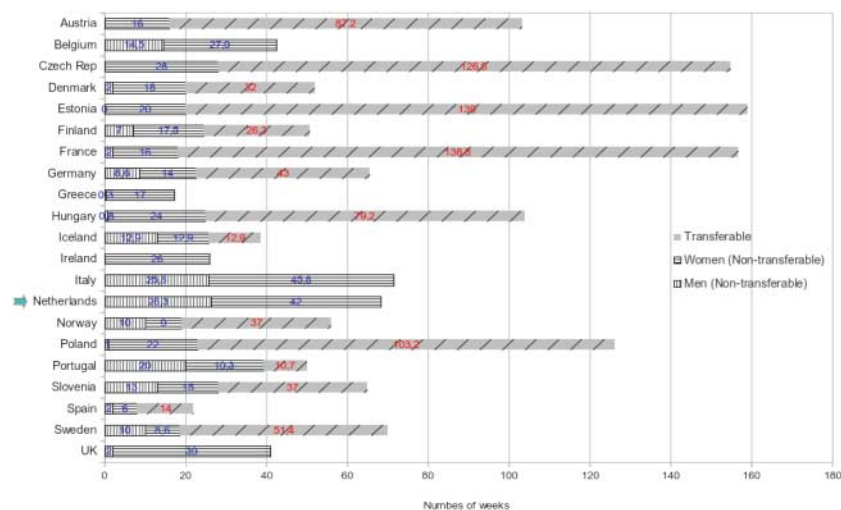


Figure 1 Paid parental leave in Europe, 2010

Sources: Based on data from Moss (2009, 2010, 2011); Janneke Plantenga and Chantal Remery (2009).

Note: For the Netherlands: See note *j* in Supplemental Table S1, available online on the publisher's website.

Norway, Sweden, and Iceland, have since developed fathers' quotas, as the only effective way to mainstream men's acceptance of their entitlement.

Transferable parental leave can generally be taken following the mother's exclusive leave period. In some countries, this type of leave is a family legal entitlement. In others, such as Spain, a portion of maternity leave (10 weeks) can be transferred to the other parent, if the partner is willing to take it, even if it is originally the mother's legal right.

Duration

In most countries that consider women and men as separately entitled to nontransferable parental leave, women's nontransferable leave is longer than men's. Norway and Sweden allot men longer periods of nontransferable leave than women by granting "father days," which must be used simultaneously with the mother's leave with the purpose of increasing men's participation in childcare. Iceland is the only country where men and women get the same number of days of nontransferable leave.

Figure 1 makes clear that, in general, the women's nontransferable leave is longer than men's. This is the case for the United Kingdom (52 weeks and 2 weeks, respectively, even though only 33 of those 52 weeks include compensation), Denmark (18 and 2), Finland (17.5 and 7), France (16 and 2) and even Spain (6 and 2). In most countries, joint or transferable leave (frequently called parental leave) has a longer duration than maternity and paternity leave.

Payment

Another relevant policy characteristic concerns parental leave payment, which could be a percentage of salary or a flat rate. In most countries, there is a ceiling for salary-based payment. Generally, this ceiling is higher than the average salary for maternity and paternity leave, but it is lower for parental leave in some non-Scandinavian countries as the UK, Germany, and Ireland (where the low ceiling acts as nearly a flat rate).

Overall, maternity leave is compensated at a rate close to 100 percent (Austria, France, Germany, Denmark, Spain, Slovenia, Estonia, Greece, and the Netherlands). Finland and the UK are at a rate of 90 percent (for the first 56 days in the case of Finland, and the first 6 weeks in the UK), and Italy, Ireland, and Norway are at 80 percent. In a few countries, wage replacement is set between 70 and 80 percent – such is the case in Sweden (77.6 percent since 2008) and Iceland (75 percent since 2010) – while in Hungary and in Finland during the last 48 days of leave the rate is 70 percent, and in Czech Republic it is 60 percent.

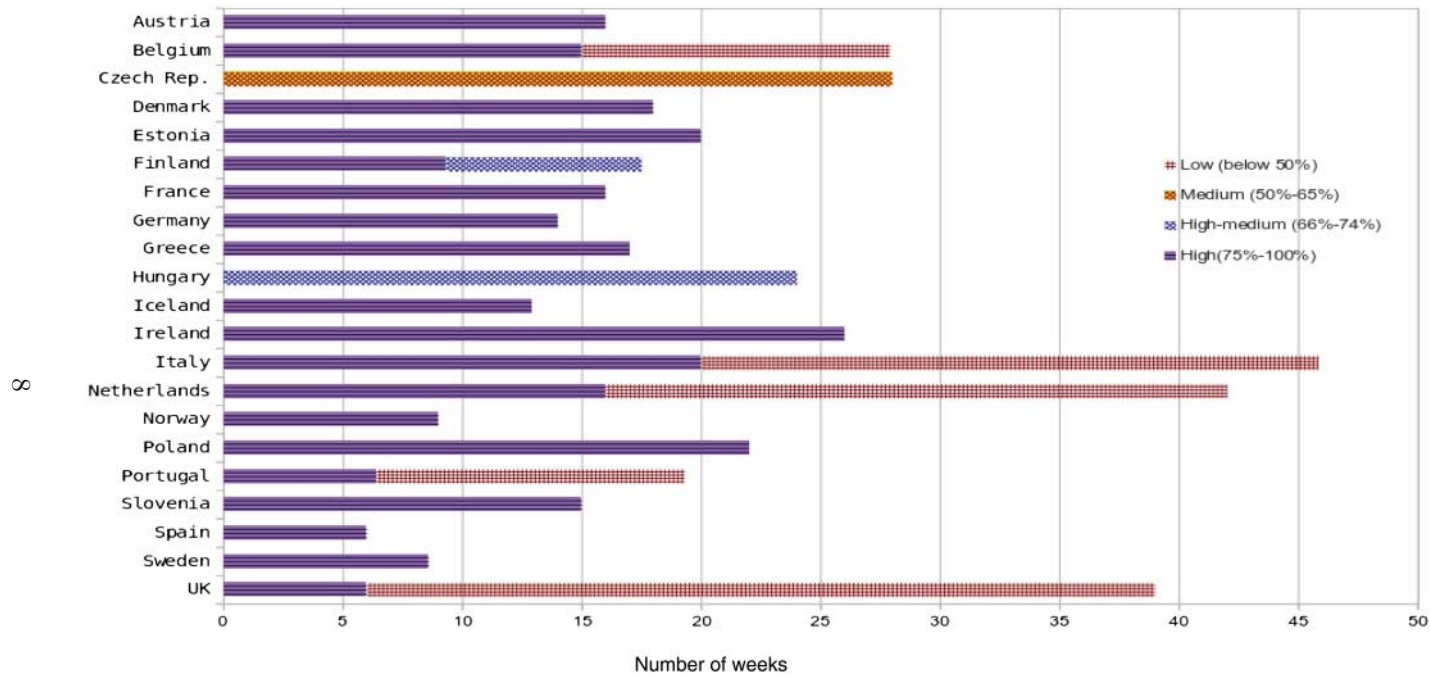


Figure 2 Nontransferable paid leaves in Europe and level of payments, 2010 (women)

Sources: Based on data from Moss (2009, 2010, 2011).

In most countries, parental leave schemes designed exclusively for men (usually referred to as paternity leave) tend to have the same payment rate as maternity leave. However, it is lower in a few countries, such as Finland (70 percent for men and 90 percent for the first 56 days and 70 percent for the rest for women); Germany is at 67 percent (100 percent for women) and the UK has a rate of €150 per week of leave (or 90 percent of salary if this last amount is lower). In Estonia, the payment for the 2 weeks paternity leave ceased to exist in 2009, while women receive 100 percent of salary.

Payment for transferable leave tends to be paid at a flat rate or a low percentage of salary. Notable exceptions are the Scandinavian countries and Slovenia, where transferable payments are set at the same relatively high level as nontransferable payments.

It is important to differentiate degrees of payment in order to evaluate the possible effect on the behavior of men and women, therefore we distinguish four types of payment: *highly paid* (75–100 percent of salary), *high-medium-paid* (at 60–74 percent of salary), *medium-paid* (at 50–59 percent of salary) and *low-paid* (below 50 percent of salary or for a fixed amount). Figures 2 and 3 show the duration of nontransferable leaves for men and women according to compensation; a quick review reveals that

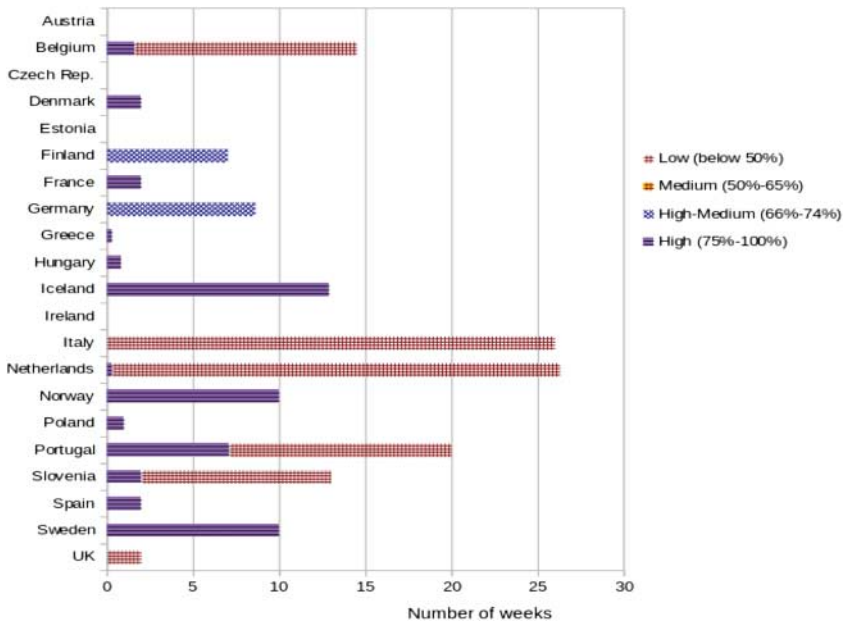


Figure 3 Nontransferable paid leaves in Europe and level of payments, 2010 (men)
Sources: Based on data from Moss (2009, 2010, 2011).

there are better payments during nontransferable leave for women than men. High-medium-paid leaves (at 60 to 74 percent of salary) often exist for both women and men, despite the short leave duration for men. Figure 4 shows level of payments for transferable leaves.

LEAVE TAKE UP: GENDER DIFFERENTIATED BEHAVIORAL PATTERNS

It is not always easy to obtain data on men's and women's use of parental leave. Many countries offer sex-disaggregated data on the number of persons using different kinds of leave, but almost none offer average durations. Only Scandinavian countries provide an indicator of the total number of days of leave taken by men and women each year.

In what follows, we summarize the existing evidence on men's and women's behavior toward parental leave based on Moss (2009, 2010, 2011), unless otherwise indicated. Though limited, this information identifies patterns of behavior. The slight variation in the generalized responses of each gender to different policies compensates for the scarcity of data.

Who makes use of nontransferable leave?

The number of women who do not take their nontransferable and paid leave tends to be insignificant. In contrast, the level of payment is crucial to men's behavior. The highest percentage of men's use of some nontransferable parental leave is exhibited in the countries where the highest payment is offered: Spain (80 percent take-up; 100 percent pay), Denmark (89 percent take-up; 90 percent pay), Sweden (90 percent take-up; 80 percent pay) and Iceland (91 percent take-up; 80 percent pay).³

Countries where the majority of men do not take their nontransferable leave include Estonia (50 percent in 2008, which was the only year in which a two-week paid paternity leave was in effect) and Germany (20 percent of fathers took up their nontransferable equivalent leave).⁴ One possible explanation for this low take-up rate is that Germany provided low payments after the 2007 reform (67 percent of salary with a ceiling of €1800 per month).

Figure 5 shows the percentage of days taken by men compared to the total number of days taken by both genders in Scandinavian countries. It makes clear that men are not indifferent to nontransferable leave, if it is highly paid.

In Iceland the number of days taken by fathers increased as parental leave reform was implemented (between 2001 and 2003). The country established a highly paid nine-month parental leave, which is divided into three nontransferable months for fathers (one month in 2001, two months

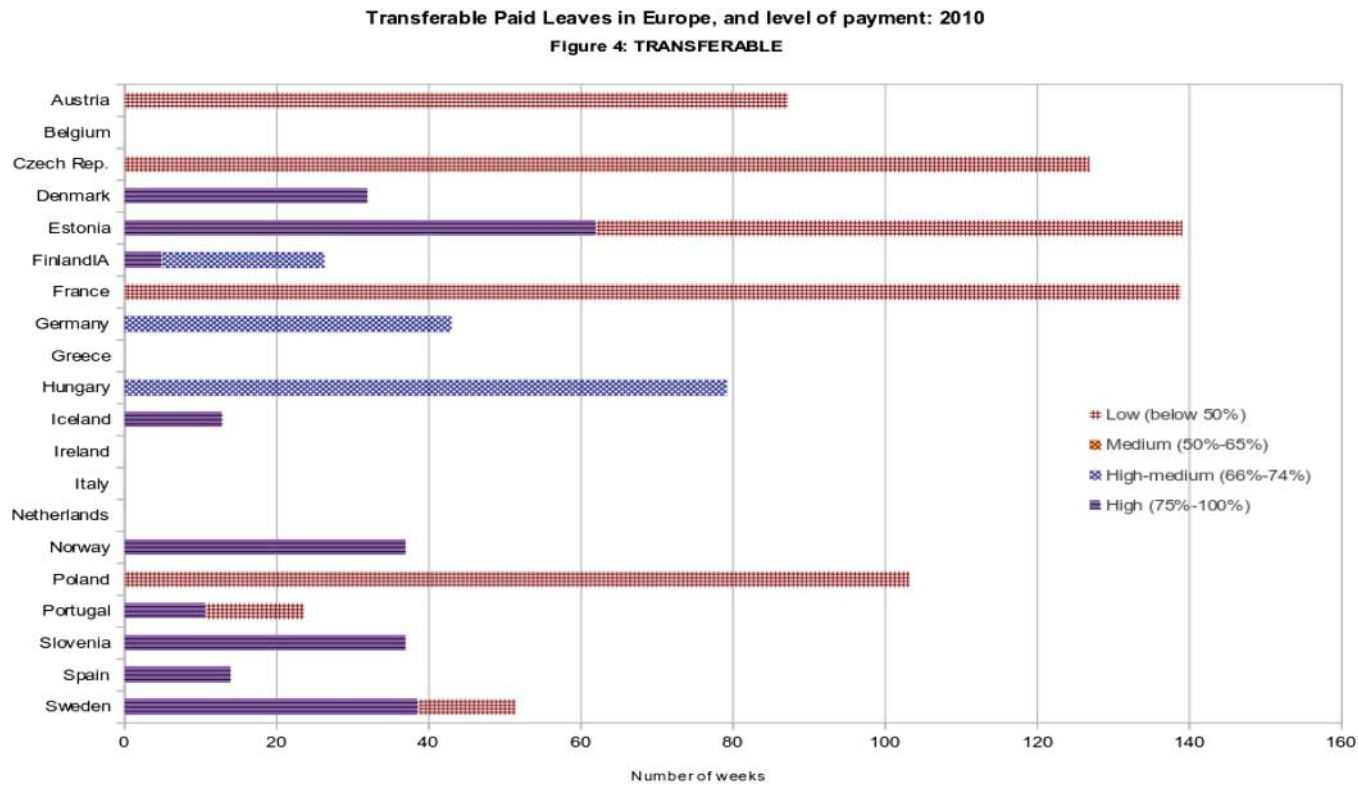


Figure 4 Transferable paid leaves in Europe and level of payments, 2010

Sources: Based on data from Moss (2009, 2010, 2011).

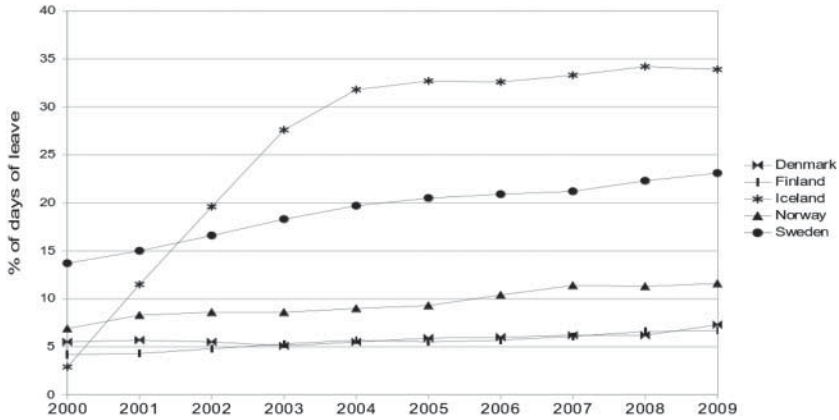


Figure 5 Days of leave (%) taken by men
 Source: Nordic Social Statistics Committee (NOSOSKO; 2010).

in 2002, and three months since 2003); three nontransferable months for mothers; and another three months that can be divided by mutual agreement. Interestingly enough, the actual 33 percent of leave taken by men (the remaining 67 percent is leave taken by women) corresponds to the three months of nontransferable leave for men out of the total nine months.

The case in Sweden is also clear: men took 22.3 percent of the total duration of available leave in 2009, which represents the sum of just over two months of nontransferable parental leave plus ten nontransferable “father days.” In this country, the introduction of the first “father month” led to an increase (from 40 to 68.6 percent) in the number of men taking parental leave (John Ekberg, Rickard Eriksson, and Guido Friebel 2005). After the second “father month” was introduced, the percentage rose to 70.1 percent (Rickard Eriksson 2005).

The trend in Norway points to slow but sustained growth in the participation of men, which is related to successive reforms: until 2005, men had five weeks of nontransferable leave (“father’s quota”), which was 7.7 percent of the total available leave that men took. In 2006, the entitlement went up to six weeks, and statistics for 2007 show that more than 70 percent of fathers were taking at least five weeks of leave. This trend continued as the number of weeks increased to 10 in 2009, which was 18 percent of total leave (56 weeks) in 2010.

Many authors highlight this way in which the use of leave by men in Sweden, Norway, and Iceland is widening through reforms awarding fathers nontransferable, highly paid leaves (Ingólfur V. Gíslason 2007; Guðný Björk Eydal and Ingólfur V. Gíslason 2008; Ann-Zofie Duvander, Trude

Lappegard, and Gunnar Andersson 2010; Ann-Zofie Duvander and Mats Johansson 2012).

The case of Finland shows another pattern of behavior: if men must take some portion of the transferable leave, then in practice a majority of them will not take a significant amount of time. The average time taken by Finnish men is 15 days, even though they have a “father month” (18 workdays plus 12 “bonus” days, which came down to 24 days in 2010). But as the “bonus” days are conditioned on the use of the last two weeks of transferable (parental) leave, men do not generally make use of those days.

Other measures have also proved to be ineffective, such as the “gender equality bonus” introduced in Sweden in 2008, which consists of a cash bonus to incentivize better sharing between parents. This measure had no impact on the use of leave by either men or women (Duvander and Johansson 2012; Guðný Björk Eydal and Tine Rostgaard 2011; Ingólfur V. Gíslason, Guðný Björk Eydal, Tine Rostgaard, Johanna Lammi-Taskula, and Berit Brandth 2011). This is precisely the reason we do not consider the “conditioned” portions of leave nontransferable in this paper.

This evidence from Scandinavian countries coincides with the fragmented data from other countries. Men make little to no use of unpaid or low-paid leave, regardless of transferability. In Spain, less than 1 percent of eligible men take non-paid leave (*excedencias*), consisting of up to 3 years of unpaid or very low-paid leave, with men taking 5 percent of the total time taken by both genders (Irene Lapuerta 2012).

Who makes use of transferable leave?

> Mainly women take transferable leave; in every country, only a small minority of men takes this type of leave. The percentages of women/men who take up some portion of their paid transferable leave are: 96/0.6 percent in Austria; 90/1.4 percent in Czech Republic; 94/24 percent in Denmark; 80/4 percent in Estonia; 100/12 percent in Finland; 90.3/19.7 percent in Iceland; 25/4 percent in Italy; 50/2.5 percent in Poland; 100/5.6 percent in Slovenia; 98.4/1.6 percent in Spain; and 90/18 percent in Sweden.

Women take leave for longer periods of time than men. In Finland, only 1 percent of women do not take the whole transferable leave. Parents in Iceland share the three months of transferable leave according to the following ratio: 80 days on average for women and 10 days for the fathers. In Spain, most mothers use the (100 percent paid) transferable leave for its entire duration, so that 99.5 percent out of the total leave time corresponds to them, as compared to 0.5 percent of the total time used by fathers or other parents.

When transferable parental leave is low paid, the percentage of women who accept their entitlements decreases just as this payment does, although this percentage may be considerable in some countries, depending on the existing conditions and resources alternatives. For example, in Poland this transferable leave was paid at a flat rate of approximately €100/month until 2009, and it was still used by approximately 50 percent of women, mostly those with low paid jobs and lower levels of education (Irena E. Kotowska and Anna Baranowska 2006).

In practice, a very simple pattern or social norm defines men's and women's behavior in terms of their take up of transferable parental leave. Most men do not take it, while women generally take it, unless it is very low paid or other resource options are available.

PARENTAL LEAVE EQUALITY INDEX (PLEI)

Based on the evidence shown regarding the majority use of parental leave, we can reasonably predict the proportion of available leave that men and women are likely to take, as behavioral responses to these policy conditions are essentially the same across countries. Behavior is systematically different for women and men and changes when policy changes.⁵ We use this evidence to construct the PLEI that allows for cross-country comparisons according to the potential effects of leave policies on gender equality. PLEI is defined for each country as the proportion of leave men are likely to use out of the total time taken by men and women in each country. Thus PLEI will predict that proportion as a function of the correspondent country's leave policy.

We build PLEI in two steps: first, we analyze each country's leave policy and attribute to men and women the leave that the majority is likely to take. This "social norm" in each country roughly matches, in the countries where we have good data, the actual values of the statistical indicators of leave participation. The second step is simple: We calculate the value of the time men would take (the "social norm" for men) out of the total time we predict for men and women altogether. This predicted proportion is the value of PLEI in each country (thus a figure between 0 and 0.5; 0 being the value corresponding to total inequality, that is, a system where the majority of men are likely not to take any time of leave; and 0.5 corresponding to total equality, that is, a system that would favor men taking as much leave as women).

For example, in Iceland, the "social norm" would be that the majority of men take three months (their nontransferable and highly paid fathers' quota), and that the majority of women would take six months (their quota and the transferable part, both highly paid). Three months (the time for fathers) is one third of the total time (nine months), so the value of our indicator is one in three in Iceland.

The social norm in the use of parental leave

As women are traditionally responsible for childcare, they will use any type of leave, especially if it is the childcare option they have. A great majority of women will take up all the highly paid leave, whether their own or transferred by the other parent. The take up of low-paid or unpaid leave depends fundamentally on two factors: that men take over their care responsibility for some time during the first few months upon childbirth, and subsequently, on the availability of childcare services. Probably many mothers would prefer not to take low-paid or unpaid leave, but they do not have alternatives if their partners do not share childcare responsibility or if services are unavailable. This explanation is consistent with the comparative analysis of the “cash for care” introduced in Nordic countries, and particularly with the low take-up rate of leave in Sweden, where childcare is generally available (Anne Lise Ellingsæter 2012).

Men, on the other hand, see themselves (and are perceived) as collaborators in covering childcare obligations that women are unable to address on their own and always as long as their income does not diminish. Most men take their leave when it is nontransferable and highly paid (at rates close to 100 percent of salary). Only a small fraction of men in each country take transferable or low-paid leave.

Figure 6 depicts a prediction of this social norm in each country. Based on observed behavioral patterns on majority population trends of each sex (as previously described), a reasonable estimate of an expected number of weeks of leave use is attributed to each sex. So, the estimate for women includes transferable and nontransferable leaves, except for when they are very low-paid (below 50 percent or at a flat rate below minimum salary). Whereas for men, we only incorporated nontransferable, highly paid leave (over 75 percent of salary) and 25 percent of high-medium-paid leave (between 60 and 74 percent of salary).

PLEI in parental leave policy

Figure 7 shows the values of PLEI. PLEI is a further development of Figure 6, through calculating the social norm for men as a percentage of the total duration of leave available for both parents (for instance, the value in Spain would be 0.09 and is the result of dividing the two weeks of men in Figure 6 by the total number of weeks in that figure, which is 22).

Discussion of results

When comparing Figure 7 with Figure 5 for the Scandinavian countries, we see that the data on real use of leave is very close to the prediction offered by PLEI. In other countries, the fragmentary data also confirm the hypotheses.

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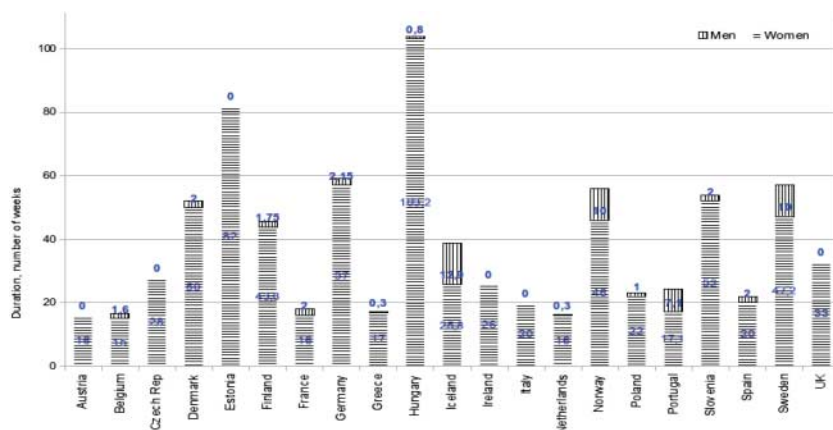


Figure 6 Predicted “social norm” for paid parental leave in Europe, 2010
 Source: Authors’ calculations from data from Moss (2009, 2010, 2011).

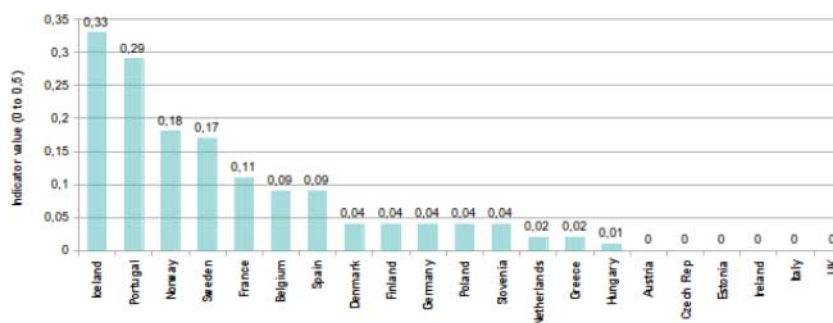


Figure 7 Parental Leave Equality Index (PLEI) 2010
 Source: Authors’ calculations from data from Moss (2009, 2010, 2011).

Comparing the values of PLEI with the RGS Index (Ray, Gornick, and Schmitt 2008, 2010), we find some disparities that correspond to the differences of criteria we explained earlier. For instance, Greece and Italy obtain a relatively high score in the RGS Index; while the values of PLEI for these countries are very low (0.02 and 0, respectively) since we don’t include the unpaid or low-paid time reserved for fathers. In fact, the scarce data available confirms that a very low percentage of eligible men (4 percent in 2007) took parental leave in Italy (Moss 2011).

The PLEI reveals three types of countries:

- *Countries that promote co-responsibility.* Iceland, Norway, Portugal, and Sweden make up this first group of countries that show the highest PLEI values.⁶ All of these countries have enacted reforms leading to greater

use of leave by men, giving them nontransferable, highly paid parental leave of considerable duration (more than eight weeks). No country actually reaches full equality, since they all have a transferable portion of leave.

- *Countries that consider men to be “incidental collaborators” in childcare.* This group includes countries with nontransferable, highly paid parental leave of a few weeks for fathers. France, Belgium, Spain, and Denmark are in the highest part of the group with two weeks on average. Poland follows with one week. Finland, Germany, and Slovenia offer longer durations for the nontransferable portion of leave but also lower payment, which in practice is less effective at generating men’s take-up. The system in these countries has more to do with separating women from employment (partially or totally) during early childrearing. Men generally contribute to childcare immediately following childbirth.
- *Countries that most reinforce the gendered division of labor.* This group, showing indicator values of below 0.02, includes countries that do not consider men to be even marginally responsible for childcare. Some, such as Hungary, the Netherlands, and Greece offer fathers between two and five days of highly paid leave. In Austria, Italy, Ireland, and the Czech Republic, this right belongs exclusively to mothers.

CONCLUSIONS

This paper has attempted to determine whether parental leave policy could be designed to promote equal take-up by men and women. We examined leave policies enacted in twenty-one European countries by first describing the existing policy schemes vis-à-vis duration, payment, and transferability.

Second, the study analyzed sex-disaggregated patterns of behavior to identify the most influential conditions that affect women’s and men’s leave take-up. The cross-country analysis of twenty-one countries revealed the existence of a social norm in parental leave use, with little variability between countries. Women make use of the totality of the leave time they are allotted, both in their own right and as a joint right. Only low-paid leave shows low levels of take-up by women, especially in countries that offer childcare alternatives. Men are most likely to take up leave if it is nontransferable and at the same time compensated at rates close to 100 percent of salary, while a significant minority takes up high-medium-paid leave (between 60 and 74 percent of salary). But, no country shows a significant use of leave by men when it is low paid or transferable.

These patterns of behavior allow us to build the PLEI. PLEI provides a prediction of the proportion of available leave men would take in each country, out of total time available to both men and women. Its values vary from 0 to 0.5, where 0 stands for total inequality whereas 0.5 would represent full equality (0.5 not being attained by any country).

When ranking all twenty-one countries in order of accordance with PLEI values, three types of parental leave policy become distinguishable. Each of these is associated with a certain orientation underlining public service policies generally and with a definite notion of societal gender roles. The group with the highest PLEI values (countries that promote co-responsibility) is the closest to reaching a model of “equal breadwinners/caregivers.” The second group (countries that consider men to be “incidental collaborators” in childcare) consists of countries that promote a “modified male-breadwinner” gender regime. Lastly, countries with PLEI values below 0.02 are those that most reinforce the gendered division of labor.

Although no country has implemented policy conditions enabling full equality, Iceland’s leave policy reform in 2000 allowed men three months of highly paid, nontransferable leave.⁷ This country is followed by Norway and Sweden, where in spite of the progress achieved, the length of transferable leave makes it difficult to progress toward full equality.

Spain, France, and Belgium have significant potential for greater balance. Since parental leave is still relatively short for women, it would be easier to reach a greater degree of equality, depending on how parental leave schemes are reformed.

Insight from an international perspective and a comparative analysis of parental leave policies offer a realistic way to include men in childcare at 50 percent. If nontransferable and well-paid parental leave is the only leave men will take, their balanced participation can only be promoted through equal, nontransferable parental leave, compensated at 100 percent of salary.

This finding is highly comparable to the policy proposal of Janet C. Gornick and Marcia K. Meyers (2009). This paper further supports their proposal with essential evidence. Other authors with similar objectives have advanced other proposals. Harry Brighthouse and Erik Olin Wright (2008: 362) support “more radical equality-promoting policy” that would make the amount of leave available to mothers contingent on the amount of leave taken by fathers. Anca Gheaus and Ingrid Robeyns (2011) identify the downsides of Brighthouse and Olin Wright’s (2008) proposal. There is no need for the policy Brighthouse and Olin Wright propose given the response to the nontransferable and highly paid parental leave in all countries in our study. Moreover, well-paid, equal, nontransferable parental leave would fulfill the classic feminist goal of social rights individualization.

It is worth emphasizing that nontransferability and high payment must be combined in order to produce high take up by men. This consideration is absent from some responses that label Gornick and Meyer’s (2009) proposal as “optimistic” without looking to the empirical evidence.⁸

We have focused on the main features of parental leave provisions, but there are other important details that determine men’s behavior regarding

parental leave. For example, the maximum period of time during which the parental leave can be taken is very long in some countries (in Sweden, parental leave can be taken at any time until a child's eighth birthday). Gheaus and Robeyns (2011) are concerned about these details and advance a "default proposal" in order to increase the men's leave participation rates.

This analysis is the best that can be undertaken in the absence of detailed data on uptake in all countries. Other reforms, such as the further commodification of household services as proposed by Barbara Bergmann (2008), universal public childcare, and reducing the maximum legal length of full-time work, should be also considered to attain gender-balanced distribution of care. However, well-paid, equal, nontransferable parental leave would be, by itself, an important step toward a society in which all individuals can equally be caregivers as well as breadwinners.

Carmen Castro-García

*Economics, Quantitative Methods and Economic History Department
Pablo Olavide University, Seville, Spain
e-mail: carmen@singenerodedudas.com*

Maria Pazos-Moran

*Research Area on Gender and Public Policies
Institute for Fiscal Studies, Madrid, Spain
e-mail: maria.pazos@ief.minhap.es*

NOTES ON CONTRIBUTORS

Carmen Castro-García specializes in gender mainstreaming and European gender-issue policy. She coordinates the network on gender issues (SinGENERODEDUDAS.com) and has managed several gender-equality projects. She is the author of handbooks on gender-equality policies and an international consultant on gender mainstreaming. She was awarded the Equal Opportunities Award in 1997 from the Spanish Federation of Progressive Women and selected by the European Institute for Gender Equality (EIGE) as one of the "Women Inspiring Europe" in 2014 and by the UNDP Roster as Expert in Gender Equality and Women's Empowerment in Public Administration (GEPA) for 2014–17.

Maria Pazos-Moran has worked for the Spanish Ministries of Labor and Finance and spent three years at the OCDE. She has been the Director of the research area on gender and public policies at the Institute for Fiscal Studies since 2004. She has lectured on gender and economics at various Spanish universities. Her major research interest is the effect of different labor market policies and welfare regulations on gender (in)equality. She is the author of the book *Desiguales por ley: Las políticas públicas contra*

la igualdad de género ([Unequals by law: Public policies against gender equality]; Catarata 2013).

NOTES

- ¹ Nontransferability refers to an entitlement condition, which does not allow another partner to take up leave in place of the entitled partner.
- ² Revised Parental Leave Directive (2010/18/EU) establishes an individual right to four months of leave (nontransferable as general criteria), but this leave does not have to be paid.
- ³ In 2008, budget adjustments brought leave payments down to 77.6 percent in Sweden and 75 percent in Iceland.
- ⁴ See note *h* of Supplemental Table S1. The German parental leave system includes a parental benefit conditioned to shared parental take up. Total length is twelve months, of which two are nontransferable for mothers and the other ten are transferable. But, in cases where the fathers or co-mothers use two months, the total parental leave period increases by two months: 12 + (2). These two months are thought to be used by the father and act, in practice, as a “use it or lose it” leave; we have considered them as “nontransferable equivalent” leave.
- ⁵ These results are confirmed by, among others, Janet C. Gornick and Marcia K. Meyers (2009).
- ⁶ Portugal is a singular case: it joined this group after the 2009 reform.
- ⁷ Portugal’s 2009 reform established policy conditions that achieved a high value on our equality index, even though it is still too soon to determine if this reform will be fully implemented. In fact, austerity policies imposed in Portugal could affect the implementation of that parental leave reform.
- ⁸ For example Gheaus and Robeyns (2011) and Barbara Bergmann (2008) state that about 40 percent of Swedish fathers do not take any leave at all. Countering this affirmation, Moss (2011) gives the data provided by the Swedish Social Insurance Agency showing that nine out of ten fathers of children born in 1998 took parental leave in Sweden.

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PARENTAL LEAVE POLICY AND GENDER EQUALITY

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