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Labour markets, families and public policies shaping gender relations and parenting: Introduction to the Special Issue

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Abstract

Objective: This article introduces the reader to the Special Issue “Labour markets, families and public policies shaping gender relations and parenting” and gives a theoretical and empirical overview of gender roles and gender equality in Europe.

Background: This Special Issue analyses the connection between labour markets, families, social policy, and gender relations in several European countries.

Method: The six included articles are based on qualitative and quantitative approaches and data that have been gathered in Finland, Norway, Poland, Spain, and across the entire EU.

Results: Key findings are: (1) In less egalitarian countries, children of single parents suffer more nutritional, educational and social life deprivation. (2) The institutional design of parental leave can contribute to reproducing gender inequality in the use of leave. (3) The institutional design interacts with cultural norms in shaping fatherhood practices of migrant fathers. (4) Individualised, performance-based wage and career schemes can counteract the effects of gender-equalising family policies. (5) Fathers taking leave independently from the mother and for an extended period are more involved in childcare beyond the leave period, and (6) the use of longer unpaid parental leave by mothers leads to a more unequal distribution of childcare between the parents.

Conclusion: This Special Issue highlights that even in the most egalitarian countries, there remain persistent challenges to achieving gender equality regarding labour market, institutions and family life.

Key words: family policy, fathering, gender, mothering, migrant father, parental leave, poverty



1. Theoretical advances and empirical trends in European welfare states

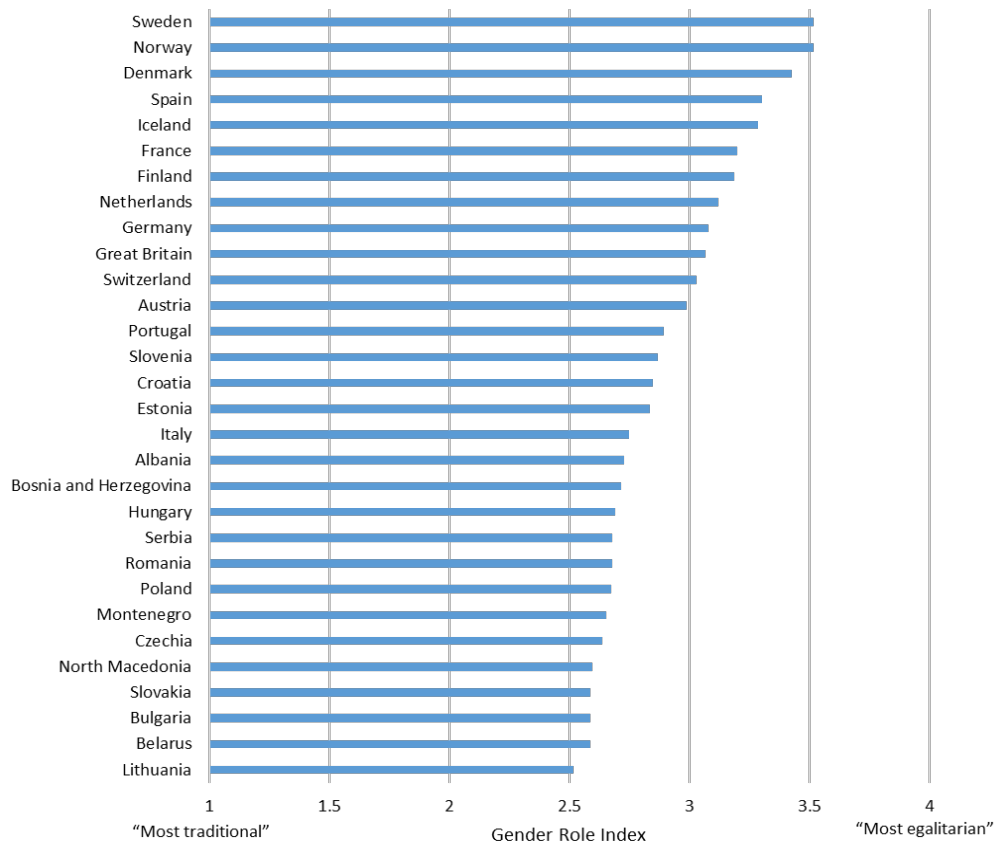
The last decades have generated an extensive body of research on welfare states and families, reflected, for example, in a growing number of handbooks (Blum et al., 2019; Castrén et al., 2021; Schneider & Kreyenfeld, 2021). This Special Issue contributes to this line of research by providing new findings on the connection between labour markets, family and social policy in different European countries, and by outlining how institutional changes and ideological norms shape gender relations in paid and unpaid work in these countries.

The sociology of family and work has interpreted trends in paid and unpaid work in Europe on the basis of theoretical paradigms such as the comparative welfare state approach and the Second Demographic Transition (SDT) Theory in response to recent developments in the areas of family and labour (Esping Andersen, 2009; Lesthaeghe, 2010). Since the 1990s, family and labour studies have moved from analyses focusing on single national contexts to comparative studies in order to identify converging trends and the specificities of each national context (e.g., Canaan et al., 2022; Peters & Blomme, 2019; Remery & Schippers, 2020). These studies show the transformations experienced by families with respect to living arrangements, gender relations, and care work. One of the most significant changes has been the development of work-family balance policies as a result of the rise in female labour force participation (Lewis, 2009) and the increase of father involvement in childcare (Day & Lamb, 2004). The analysis of family attitudes and behaviours in relation to the new challenges of combining work and family has been a priority in the sociology of the family. Many of these studies have found converging trends in Europe towards greater gender equality and individualisation of rights (Moreno Mínguez & Ortega, 2022; Remery & Shippers, 2020; Schneider, 2012). However, these same studies have also underlined the peculiarities and ambivalences of each cultural and regional context, highlighting nuances and differentiated trends. Gender role attitudes, the division of care work and the challenge of combining work and family for parents in the context of social policies of welfare states have probably been the most relevant themes in this area of research.

European countries still vary considerably with respect to their populations' attitudes regarding the roles of men and women in the spheres of work and family. Data from the European Values Study 2017 allows us to calculate a Gender Role Index, ranging from 1 (most traditional) to 4 (most egalitarian).¹ The average values for each country are reported in Figure 1. It shows that respondents in the Nordic countries have the most egalitarian attitudes, with Sweden and Norway scoring the highest values (3.5) on the Gender Role Index. By contrast, the Eastern European countries of Lithuania (2.5), Belarus (2.6) and Bulgaria (2.6) show the most traditional gender role attitudes.

1 The Gender Role Index was calculated by taking the average value of agreement with seven different statements regarding women and men's roles in society. Example items are: "When a mother works for pay, the children suffer", "A man's job is to earn money; a woman's job is to look after the home and family" and "On the whole, men make better business executives than women do". Cronbach's Alpha was 0.86, indicating high scale reliability.

Figure 1: Gender role attitudes in European countries, 2017



Source: Own calculations based on European Values Study (2017)

Note: Data weighted using calibration weights.

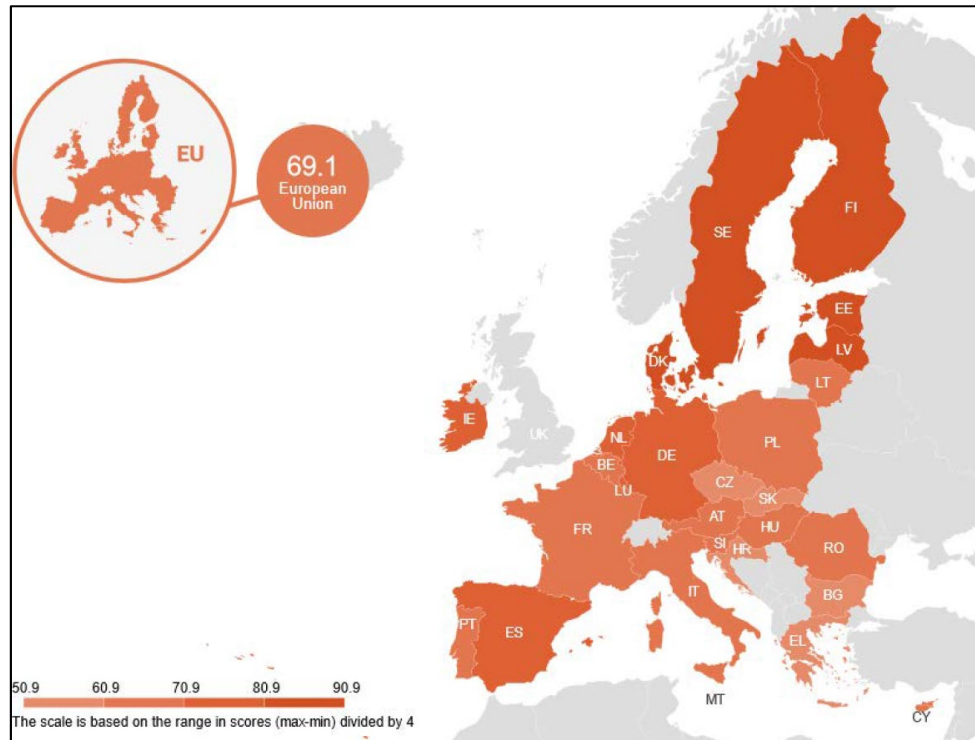
Marked differences between European countries not only exist in the area of gender role attitudes, but also regarding the degree to which actual gender equality has been achieved. Figure 2 presents data on gender equality in the area of care work from the European Institute for Gender Equality (2021). Northern and North-Eastern European countries, such as Sweden (90.9) and Latvia (89.8) score highest on the Gender Equality Index in the care activities dimension, whereas South-Eastern European countries such as Croatia (54.4) and Greece (50.9) rank lowest on the index. A similar pattern arises regarding the degree of gender equality in the area of work, with Northern and North-Eastern European countries again proving to be most equal (see Figure 3 and Moreno & Luiz in this issue). It should, however, be noted that gender gaps in these areas currently persist across Europe, even in the most equal societies such as Sweden. This has been shown for the area of paid work, with women across Europe exhibiting lower employment participation, shorter working hours, and lower wages than men (for a recent overview see Matysiak & Cukrowska-Torsewska, 2021). It also applies in the sphere of unpaid work, where women continue to do more housework and care than men (Altintas & Sullivan,

2016; Pailhé, Solaz & Stanfors, 2021) and take longer periods of parental leave (Castro-Garcia & Pazos-Moran, 2015; Karu & Tremblay, 2018; Meil et al., 2018).

Numerous theoretical paradigms and empirical studies have tried to assess the relationship between social policies, family behaviour and gender equality. There are two main theoretical interpretations of these processes: the SDT and the welfare state approach. The SDT identifies the culture of individualism as the driving mechanism behind the change in values underpinning the trend towards increasing family plurality.

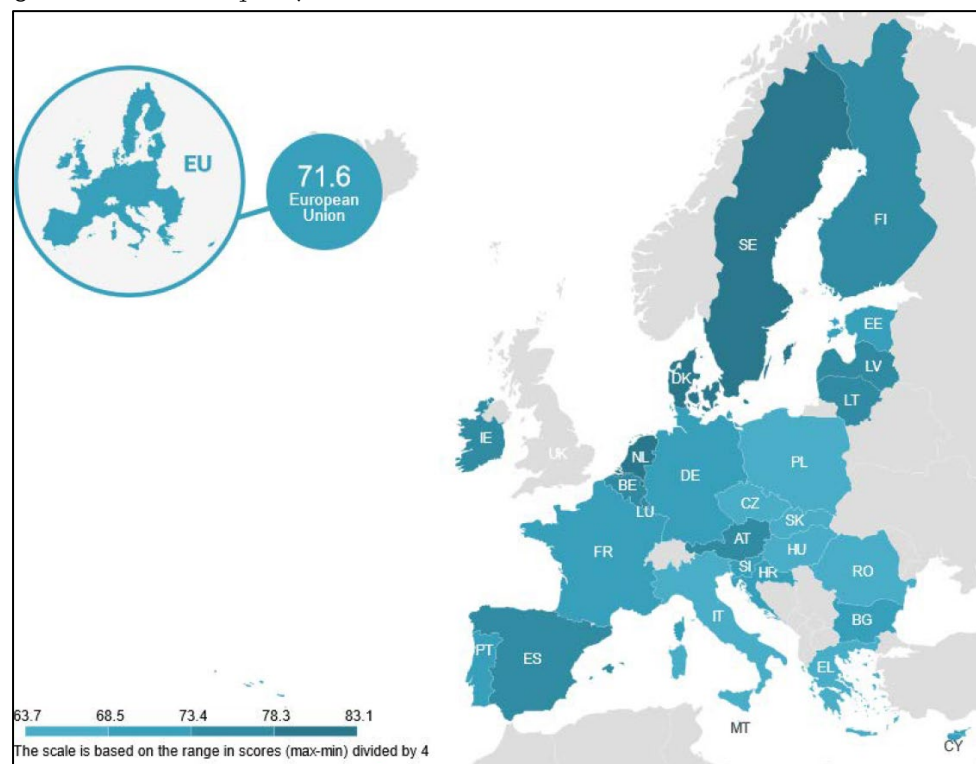
Major changes in family behaviour have been interpreted in terms of increasing plurality within the SDT and are well documented in the literature. These changes have occurred in convergence with increasing female labour force participation, declining fertility and greater gender equality. Demographic change has brought about changes in family structures and attitudes that have led to a transformation of gender roles in the public and private spheres, leading to greater involvement of men as fathers and caregivers, but with varying degrees of involvement depending on the national context and progress in gender equality. In short, the SDT Theory contains useful concepts for studying ongoing changes in family behaviour patterns in advanced, industrialised countries because it offers the appropriate interpretative framework for integrating the institutional, demographic and familial dimensions of the gender revolution (Bernhardt 2004; Goldscheider, 2015; Lesthaeghe, 2020).

Figure 2: Gender equality index in the area of care activities, 2019



Source: European Institute for Gender Equality (2021)

Figure 3: Gender equality index in the area of work, 2019



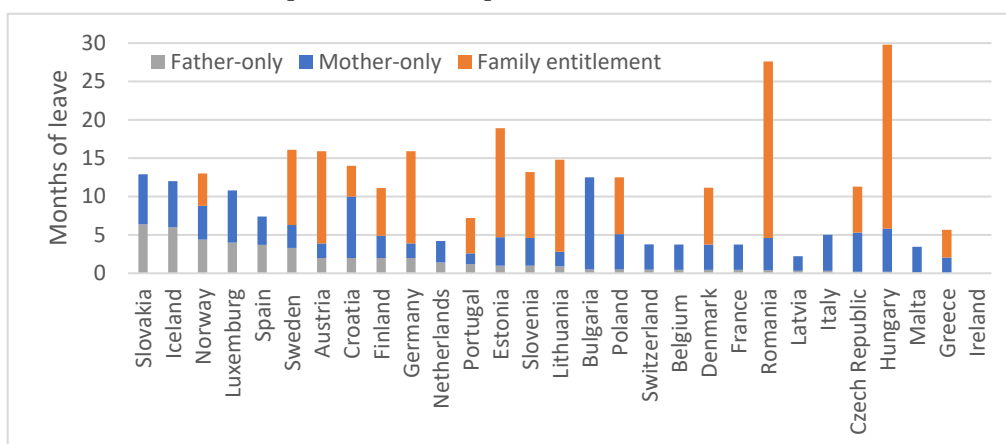
Source: European Institute for Gender Equality (2021)

This socio-demographic change runs parallel to the development of family policies supporting the individualisation of rights, such as advances in parental leave policies and progress in gender equality in care work (Moss et al., 2019). One of the criticisms of the SDT is that it does not adequately consider the changes in the labour market since the 1990s, ignoring the growing uncertainties that have emerged in this period (Cahn et al., 2018). The theoretical model of the SDT also partly ignores the segmentation of gender and implications of social policies (Ferragina, 2019; Ray et al., 2010; Saxonberg, 2013). It also does not take into account that the increase of family plurality has led to increasing precariousness and, in some contexts, the reproduction of intra- and inter-family inequalities (McLanahan, 2009).

It is at this point that the welfare state approach highlights new social risks. It brings a comprehensive perspective to the reconfiguration of societies, for example regarding gender, class and other group differences in paid and unpaid work and social risks such as the aging of the population and the increase in inter- and intra-family inequality (Cooke & Baxter, 2010; Lanau & Lozano, 2022). A central question is thus to what extent family policy can redress inter- and intra-family inequalities in parenting, care and labour participation in terms of gender equity in each European national cultural context. The articles collected in this Special Issue attempt to answer this question.

The aim of this Special Issue is to integrate in a single volume comparative and national studies on how family policies and gender norms shape work-family balance strategies in different cultural and socio-economic contexts in Europe. This Special Issue draws on theoretical and methodological contributions from the sociology of the family that have shown that family behaviour, parenting and gender equality are influenced by societal trends such as individualisation, migration, labour markets and growing social inequality as well as global factors including the financial crisis or the recent Covid-19 pandemic. European welfare states share the common objective of responding to these challenges by reducing adverse effects through spending policies, parental leave and labour regulations. Despite these shared objectives, each country differs in the implementation of these policies according to the cultural and socio-economic context. One central policy in this respect is the provision of well-paid leave to parents of newborn children. As shown in Figure 4 based on data from the Leave Network (Koslowski et al., 2021), European countries vary significantly not only in the total duration of overall parental leave, but also in the extent to which these are family entitlements or entitlements reserved for fathers or mothers only. Whereas fathers and mothers each command a considerable period of earmarked leave in countries such as Slovakia, Iceland, Norway or Luxemburg, many other countries provide no earmarked leave entitlements for fathers but instead offer mother-only or family entitlements.

Figure 4: Months of well-paid leave available to parents in the first 18 months after birth in European countries, April 2021



Source: European Institute for Gender Equality (2021)

This Special Issue brings together comparative empirical evidence on how the instruments of the welfare state approach offer a comprehensive perspective to examine the association between policies, labour markets, family behaviour and ideologies in the production of family well-being and progress of gender equality. This paradigm introduces comparative family policy research to contextualise the relationships between family, welfare state and labour market. It accounts for recent developments in welfare and employment regimes in terms of family strategies and comparative family policies.

This theoretical framework allows us to give meaning and value to the data and description of the phenomena, beyond abstract empiricism (Zagel and Lohmann, 2020). The literature has shown that cross-national differences in gender roles and families can be attributed to labour markets and variation in the systems of social protection and family policy (Böger and Öktem, 2019; Greve, 2022; Jenson et al., 2017).

2. Context and content of the Special Issue

The original idea for this Special Issue arose in one of the discussions and reflections of the committee of the Research Network 13 (RN13) “Sociology of Families and Intimate Lives” of the European Sociological Association (ESA). The research network formed more than ten years ago with the aim of connecting and supporting the work of European researchers in the sociology of the family. With currently 171 members, it is the second largest research network in the ESA. Among other activities, RN13 plays a vital part in the biannual ESA conferences, holds Interim Meetings in the intermitting years, and regularly issues a newsletter to provide information on the latest activities in European family research. Furthermore, RN13 frequently engages in joint publication efforts and has recently published another contribution to the sociology of the family, that is, the Palgrave Handbook of Family Sociology in Europe (Castrén et al., 2021). This Special Issue was started under the umbrella of this intellectual and research stimulus nurtured by scientific communication and exchange. It has sought to respond to how changes in the labour market and family policies are connected with changes in the division of paid and unpaid work and progress in gender equality in Europe. To this end, this article collection has brought together a group of RN13 researchers from across a range of European countries.

This Special Issue comprises six contributions from two main dimensions: The first dimension investigates the family in relation to the labour market, family policies and parenting. The second dimension is concerned with the interconnections between labour market, parental leave agenda and use, and parental practices.

2.1 *Dimension 1: Types of families and cultural norms shaping family life*

The first contribution, titled “Job insecurity and child well-being in single-parent families in Europe: A matter of family and gender policy” is authored by Almudena Moreno and Antonio Pérez (2022). It contains a novel comparative analysis of the effects of job insecurity on child deprivation of single parent families from a comparative European perspective. The approach is novel because it includes two variables absent until now in the analysis of child deprivation (employment gender equality and family cash benefits). In their study, the authors use multilevel logistic regression models to analyse microdata of the European Union Statistics on Income and Living Conditions (EU-SILC).

One of the novel findings of Moreno and Pérez’ study is that the risk of child deprivation is related to a country’s level of employment gender equality. More specifically, the article shows that in countries with less gender equality, such as those in

Southern Europe, children of single-parent families have a higher likelihood of suffering nutritional, educational, and social life deprivation. Furthermore, the analysis shows that family benefits diminish the effect of temporary employment only on clothing deprivation among children in single parent families. The analysis confirms that, apart from single parents' employment situation, there are other characteristics such as educational level, age, gender, and parents' nationality that have an influence on the risk of child deprivation.

This comparative study reveals the importance of policies that encourage gender equality in the labour market in order to improve the conciliation conditions and economic situation of parents and children, and to reduce child deprivation in single-parent households. The main contribution of this study is the empirical individual-level and contextual-level explanation for child deprivation in single-parent families. It varies cross-country depending on the welfare state and the level of gender equality in the labour market.

The article of Katarzyna Suwada (2022), titled "Care involvement and power relations. Parenting and gender in contemporary Poland" contributes to identifying the normative-cultural factors that associate personal choices with the characteristics of Polish family policy, with the aim of explaining the differential use of parental leave by gender. The article reviews the normative mechanisms of decision making identified in the literature. The objective is to explain how the opportunity structures of fathers and mothers work with respect to the use of parental leave rights in the context of the Polish parental leave system.

The study applies a qualitative methodology; 53 Polish parents with children aged between 1 and 8 years were interviewed. The analysis of the discourse from these interviews yields interesting results regarding the prevailing structures of power and negotiation in the division of family labour by gender. The analysis reveals that family decisions on the use of parental leave respond to normative patterns also inserted in the design of family policies of the Polish welfare state, prototype of the post-communist model. According to the results of the discourse analysis, mothers use situational power while fathers use debilitating power, given the legal framework of the parental leave. This explains the differential use of parental leave by sex. The novel insight from this study is that the institutional design of parental leave contributes to reproducing the existing inequality in the use of leave by sex. The findings of this contribution suggest the need to reform family leave policies in order to achieve greater gender equality in parental leave usage in Poland.

Brita Bungum and Elin Kvande (2022) deal with the situation of migrant parents in a Nordic country in their article "Polish migrant fathers using parental leave in Norway". Norway was the first country that introduced an exclusive leave for fathers in 1993. Since then, many European countries have had a gradual implementation of parental leave designs that, in different ways, promote their use by fathers, having Nordic countries as reference. Although research on the use of and consequences of using parental leave have increased in the last two decades, there are almost no studies about how migrants interpret and use a foreign public policy for childcare. Bungum and Kvande bring to this Special Issue this innovative research that takes into account how culture of origin and public policies of care are interrelated. In particular, this article analyses the practices of

Polish labour migrant fathers, who (back in their origin country) have an institutional care context that supports working mothers, but not fathers, in their roles as caregivers. By contrast, they now live in an institutional care context where both mothers and fathers are supported in interrupting their paid employment through an extensive and generous leave system, including a 15 weeks' father's quota.

Bungum and Kvande's article reports findings from a qualitative analysis based on 11 interviews with Polish fathers with young children in Norway. Their research questions focus on 1) which care practices Polish fathers adopt in Norway and 2) how Polish fathers' actions are shaped by the institutional system. Specifically, the authors explore the resources that fathers have for providing childcare in the context of labour migration and parental leave programs for fathers. The results show the importance of fathers taking at least part of their parental leave while the mother is at work. Fathers caring alone during parental leave express the responsibility they carry, and they pinpoint the necessity to be accessible in case the children are in need. Although these fathers speak about the "coercive nature" of the leave design of the father's quota, they recognise the opportunity it brings for fathers. Emotional change and learning are other results of fathers' leave found in this article, since the beginning of caring alone is frustrating, yet once time passes emotions are better managed. Polish fathers indicate that the father's quota may serve as a protective barrier allowing them to interrupt their paid work completely, as a signal for their employer. This experience is combined with a phase of leave use in their country of origin. Afterwards, when they come back to work, they feel the loss of presence with their children. This article contributes to the knowledge of how practices of migrant fathers dynamically interrelate with family policies. The main conclusion pinpoints the complex relation between national norms (Polish and Norwegian) that shapes fathers' practices and emotions.

2.1 Dimension 2: Parental leave and gendered practices

The fourth article "Parental leave versus competition for clients: Motherhood penalty in competitive work environments" by Sigtona Halrynjo and Marte Mangset (2022) enhances our understanding of the mechanisms driving gender differences in wages and career opportunities after entry into parenthood. Despite the fact that Norway exhibits strong norms for gender equality and extensive family policies supporting a gender equal division of labour, there remains a considerable gap in wages and careers between mothers and fathers that does not exist between childless women and men. Starting from the observation that neither gender stereotypes of employers nor diverging preferences of combining work and family between mothers and fathers can explain this motherhood penalty, the authors seek to uncover explanations connected to structural conditions on the labour market. They focus on the example of the finance sector, a labour market section where the gender wage gap is particularly large and "portfolio careers" are frequent, that is, each employee is responsible for building and maintaining their own portfolio of clients and rewarded accordingly.

Drawing on 30 in-depth interviews with both men and women in the finance sector, Halrynjo and Mangset show how this competitive, individualised work environment and the requirement of constant investment in and availability to the client base turns longer

absences such as parental leave into a career and wage risk for workers. However, gendered leave-taking patterns imply that this risk is primarily borne by mothers: Mothers (have to) start their leave with the birth of the child and typically take relatively long, continuous leave periods. Once they return to their workplaces, they find their clients reassigned to colleagues and are required to re-build their portfolio. By contrast, fathers often maintain their client portfolio during parental leave by flexibly adjusting their leave to their clients' needs, for example by taking shorter leave, splitting their leave into several periods or taking it during the quiet summer months. Overall, the article shows how individualised, performance-based wage and career schemes can counteract the efforts of otherwise gender-equal societies and family policies and generate a considerable motherhood penalty.

The fifth article by Petteri Eerola, Johanna Närvi, and Johanna Lammi-Taskula (2022), titled "Can fathers' leave take-up dismantle gendered child care responsibilities? Evidence from Finland", analyses the interconnection between fathers' leave-taking (and length of leave) and the subsequent division of care between mothers and fathers. Although take-up of leave by fathers has increased considerably in recent decades in Finland, fathers still account for only a small proportion of total leave taken. Furthermore, mothers do most of the care work in families with small children. Against this background, the study explores whether fathers' leave take-up can contribute to a more equal distribution of childcare tasks later on. The study moves beyond previous research in particular through its special focus on the different dimensions of parental responsibilities, namely (1) daily routine childcare, (2) interaction with the child, (3) community responsibilities, and (4) cognitive/mental labour.

Using retrospective data from a survey of mothers and fathers of four-year old children in Finland collected in 2019, Eerola et al. analyse the association between previous leave taken by fathers and the likelihood of them currently being involved equally or more strongly than mothers in a range of different childcare related tasks. Logistic regression analysis shows that among dual-earner families, fathers who had previously taken relatively long leave (of at least three months) were more likely than those who had taken no leave to be highly involved in several concrete child related tasks, such as daily childcare, caring for a sick child, and taking the child to hobbies. However, fathers' previous leave-taking was not associated with their current involvement in playing with the child or more cognitive responsibilities (e.g., making decisions for the child or communicating with day care). The results suggest that fathers taking leave independently from the mother and for an extended period can develop caring skills that enable them to take more responsibility in childcare beyond the leave period. The support of leave-taking among fathers by means of an extended fathers' quota is thus highlighted as a promising tool in breaking up gendered care patterns among parents.

The last article of this Special Issue is titled "Is Spanish parental leave 'traditionalising' the gender distribution of childcare and housework" and authored by Pedro Romero-Balsas, Gerardo Meil and Jesús Rogero-García (2022). In this article, the authors investigate the effect of parental leave among mothers. The research was conducted in Spain, where unpaid parental leaves are long and mainly used by mothers (although they have a gender-neutral design). The literature warns about the negative effects that a long time on parental leave has on the return to the previous job position.

Thus, the Spanish institutional context gives an exceptional opportunity to test if a “traditionalisation” at home is derived from long use of parental leave by mothers. This traditionalisation consists of a more traditional share of household and childcare tasks after the mother has taken a long parental leave.

Romero-Balsas, Meil and Rogero-García’s article has a quantitative approach, and they use data from the Spanish Fertility Survey, carried out in 2018. The analysis consists of multivariate logistic regression models that test if the use of a parental leave by mothers (including its length) has an impact on the distribution of childcare and housework tasks. The results show that the use of long parental leave (more than one year) is associated with a more uneven distribution of childcare tasks. However, if the leave period is shorter than one year or it is used part-time, the changes in childcare tasks are not significant. As expected, if the fathers take any leave for childcare, the division of childcare is more equal. As regards the distribution of housework tasks, the results showed no significant changes at any length of the use of parental leave by mothers. The authors interpret the lack of results in this area to be a result of the fewer non-material rewards that participation in housework provides compared to participation in childcare. The main conclusion of this study is that longer and unpaid parental leave used by mothers not only has negative effects on job career and working conditions but also leads to a more unequal distribution of childcare.

3. Implications

In summary, this Special Issue provides us with new clues about challenges in changing European welfare states, such as the gender inequality in the allocation of unpaid work, the efficiency of family policies in preventing child deprivation and the complicated relations between family policy design and cultural norms. The insights from this Special Issue also help us interpret a contemporary landscape marked by post-pandemic societies and the effects of the latest war in Europe, which provide new challenges in the relation between the welfare states, labour market, households and families. This Special Issue contains two articles about families from an Eastern European country: Poland. They focus on changes within the country and changes in Polish migrant families in a Northern European country. The findings from these articles may help understand the impact of family policies on the growing number of exiled Ukrainian families due to the 2022 war crisis, even though the Ukrainian policy, market and cultural context may not be exactly the same as that of other Eastern European countries. Furthermore, the relation between job insecurity and child deprivation may be of increasing interest in the Europe of the future, if the number of refugees in the region rises due to a prolonged military crisis. Persistent challenges to achieving gender equality in work and family life, even in the most egalitarian countries, are discussed in this Special Issue, and it informs about some factors preventing progress in this area. To conclude, the turbulent times at the beginning of the 20’s of the XXI century have repercussions for our societies, including implications for European welfare states, labour markets and households. The articles contained in this Special Issue bring new evidence about these changes.

Some avenues for future research emerge from this Special Issue. In particular, future studies could complement the cross-country focus with a closer look at the determinants of intra-country differences in the gender division of labour. The contributions in this Special Issue have already highlighted the relevance of migration background (Bungum & Kvande, 2022) and occupation (Halrynjo & Mangset, 2022) in this context. Future studies could investigate in more depth the interplay of social policies with educational level, occupation, country of origin, and other factors in shaping the gendered distribution of paid and unpaid work in different European countries.

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Information in German

Deutscher Titel

Der Einfluss von Arbeitsmarkt, Familien und Politik auf Geschlechterverhältnisse und Elternschaft: Einleitung zum Sonderheft

Zusammenfassung

Fragestellung: Dieser Artikel führt die Leserinnen und Leser in das Sonderheft „Der Einfluss von Arbeitsmarkt, Familien und Politik auf Geschlechterverhältnisse und Elternschaft“ ein und gibt einen theoretischen und empirischen Überblick über Geschlechterrollen und Gleichstellung in Europa.

Hintergrund: Das Sonderheft analysiert den Zusammenhang zwischen Arbeitsmarkt, Familien, Sozialpolitik und Geschlechterverhältnissen in mehreren europäischen Ländern.

Methode: Die sechs Artikel des Sonderhefts basieren auf qualitativen und quantitativen Analysen, und die zugrundeliegenden Daten wurden in Finnland, Norwegen, Polen, Spanien und der gesamten EU erhoben.

Ergebnisse: Die Kernergebnisse sind: (1) In weniger egalitären Ländern sind Kinder von Alleinerziehenden stärker von Deprivation in den Bereichen Ernährung, Bildung und Sozialleben betroffen. (2) Die institutionelle Ausgestaltung der Elternzeit kann zur Reproduktion von Geschlechterungleichheiten in der Elternzeitnutzung beitragen. (3) Der institutionelle Kontext wirkt zusammen mit kulturellen Normen auf elterliche Praktiken migrantischer Väter. (4) Individualisierte, leistungsbezogene Entlohnungs- und Karrieresysteme können die Effekte einer gleichstellungsorientierten Familienpolitik konterkarieren. (5) Väter, die Elternzeit unabhängig von der Mutter und für einen längeren Zeitraum nehmen, sind auch nach der Elternzeitphase stärker in der Kinderbetreuung engagiert. (6) Längere Elternzeitdauern bei Müttern führen zu einer ungleicheren Verteilung der Kinderbetreuung zwischen den Eltern.

Schlussfolgerung: Selbst in den egalitärsten Ländern existieren weiterhin Herausforderungen bei der Gleichstellung der Geschlechter mit Blick auf Arbeitsmarkt, Institutionen und Familienleben.

Schlagwörter: Familienpolitik, Vaterschaft, Gender, Mutterschaft, migrantische Väter, Elternzeit, Armut

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