



# Paternity and parental leave policies across the European Union

Janna van Belle



# Preface

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This policy brief was developed by RAND Europe, which in 2011 was commissioned by the European Commission's Directorate-General for Employment, Social Affairs and Inclusion to provide content and technical support for the European Alliance for Families platform, which became the European Platform for Investing in Children (EPIC) in 2013.

The European Platform for Investing in Children (EPIC) was set up to explore demographic and economic challenges in the EU from a child and family-focused perspective. Its purpose is to share the best of policymaking for children and their families, and to foster cooperation and mutual learning in the field. This is achieved through information provided on the EPIC website, which enables policymakers from the member states to search evidence-based child-focused practices from around the EU and to share knowledge about practices that are being developed, and also by bringing together government, civil society and European Union representatives for seminars and workshops to exchange ideas and learn from each other.

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The document is designed to provide insights into issues of interest to policymakers and practitioners. It has been reviewed externally by an EPIC expert in child and family policy, and internally, following RAND's quality assurance processes.

The opinions expressed do not necessarily reflect the position of the European Commission.

# Table of contents

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Preface.....	1
Table of contents.....	2
Executive summary.....	3
1. Introduction.....	3
2. Family-related leave policies across Europe .....	5
3. Differences between parental leave and paternal leave .....	7
3.1 Paternity leave is short, but well-compensated .....	7
3.2 Parental leave varies in length and is rarely fully compensated.....	8
3.3 Fathers' uptake of paternity and parental leave is low.....	9
4. Outcomes: why is a father's leave uptake so important? .....	10
4.1 Economic outcomes .....	10
4.2 Social outcomes .....	11
4.3 Demographic outcomes.....	12
5. What are current obstacles for uptake?.....	13
5.1 Maintaining the level of family income is key .....	13
5.2 Decisions about uptake are made within the family context.....	13
5.3 It is hard to break the cultural norm .....	14
5.4 What works?.....	15
6. Future directions .....	16
6.1 Work–life balance is important across the lifespan .....	16
6.2 Unpaid labour counts.....	16
7. Conclusions.....	18
References .....	19

# Paternity and parental leave policies across the European Union

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## Executive summary

- Despite the positive effect of paternity and parental leave uptake by fathers on a number of economic, social and demographic outcomes, the current uptake of leave by fathers across Europe is low.
- Research has shown that there is a large number of interlocking factors that affect uptake of leave by fathers, including the level of compensation, the availability of affordable childcare, the flexibility of leave arrangements, gender norms and cultural expectations. In this brief, we describe the different policies available across Europe that address the uptake of paternity leave and parental leave, discuss the link between uptake of leave by fathers and the various outcomes associated with uptake, and give an overview of the existing barriers to uptake.
- We find that although low or non-existent compensation levels during leave are a key factor why fathers choose not to, or are unable to, take their leave entitlement, an increase in uptake will most likely result from an interlocking set of family policies that help dual-earner families to combine work and family life in a sustainable manner. These include policies that directly encourage fathers to take leave, such as well-compensated individual leave entitlements, and policies aimed at creating a sustainable solution to the challenges of combining work and family life, such as leave arrangements that are flexible and adaptive to individual needs, but also policies aimed at changing workplace cultures.

## 1. Introduction

There are various types of leave available across the EU to parents following the birth of a child. The vast majority of this leave is still taken up by women: of the leave that can be shared between parents, about 40 per cent is taken by women and only 2 per cent by men (2010 data, from Miani & Hoorens 2014). This remains to be the case, despite efforts to increase the uptake of leave by men, such as policies that reserve part of leave for fathers, or introducing fathers' quotas. Research has shown that there is a large number of interlocking factors that affect uptake of leave by fathers, including the level of compensation, the availability of affordable childcare, the flexibility of leave arrangements, gender norms and cultural expectations (Eurofound 2015c; COFACE 2015).

Increasing the uptake of leave by fathers is important because it is thought to enhance gender equality at home, may reduce the barriers to parenthood and can have positive effects on a child's development. Prolonged leave uptake by mothers (i.e. over a year, see Ruhm 1998; Thévenon & Solaz 2013) weakens their link with the labour market, which in turn can have a negative effect on women's career progression and earnings (Orloff 2009).

Parental leave taken by fathers contributes to the ability of parents to reconcile family and work responsibilities, yet policies affording men the opportunity to share parental responsibilities in the early stages of a child's life have received relatively little attention.

The focus of this policy brief will be to provide a synthesized overview of paternity leave policies and policies which encourage sharing parental leave between new parents, as currently implemented in Europe.

The outline for this brief will be as follows:

1. Introduction: A description of the different policies available across Europe that address the uptake of paternity leave and parental leave.
2. Outcomes: Why is it important for fathers to take up paternity and/or parental leave? We will examine the effect(s) of existing policies, and how differences in the length, temporal flexibility and compensation of leave affect the outcomes.
3. Barriers: What are current obstacles to uptake? What is the role of labour market demands? Are there differences in uptake between job sectors, or between individuals from different socioeconomic backgrounds? How do paternity leave policies interact with other family policies in different European member states? What are the cultural constraints or facilitators at work?
4. Future directions: How do changes in the labour market and employment conditions interact with paternity leave and parental leave? For example, to what extent do policies cover the self-employed? Do current policies restrict or enhance labour market mobility (both for mothers and fathers)?

## 2. Family-related leave policies across Europe

Family-related leave entitlements comprise a set of leave entitlements that give employment protection, and in some cases income support, to parents who take time off to care for their children. There are four different types of leave:



Maternity leave: a job-protected period of leave for employed women prior to and after childbirth, and in some countries around adoption, with some type of public income support provided.



Paternity leave<sup>1</sup>: a job-protected period of leave for employed men with income support provided in some cases.



Parental leave: a job-protected period of leave for employed parents, which is often supplementary to maternity or paternity leave. The level of income support varies between countries.



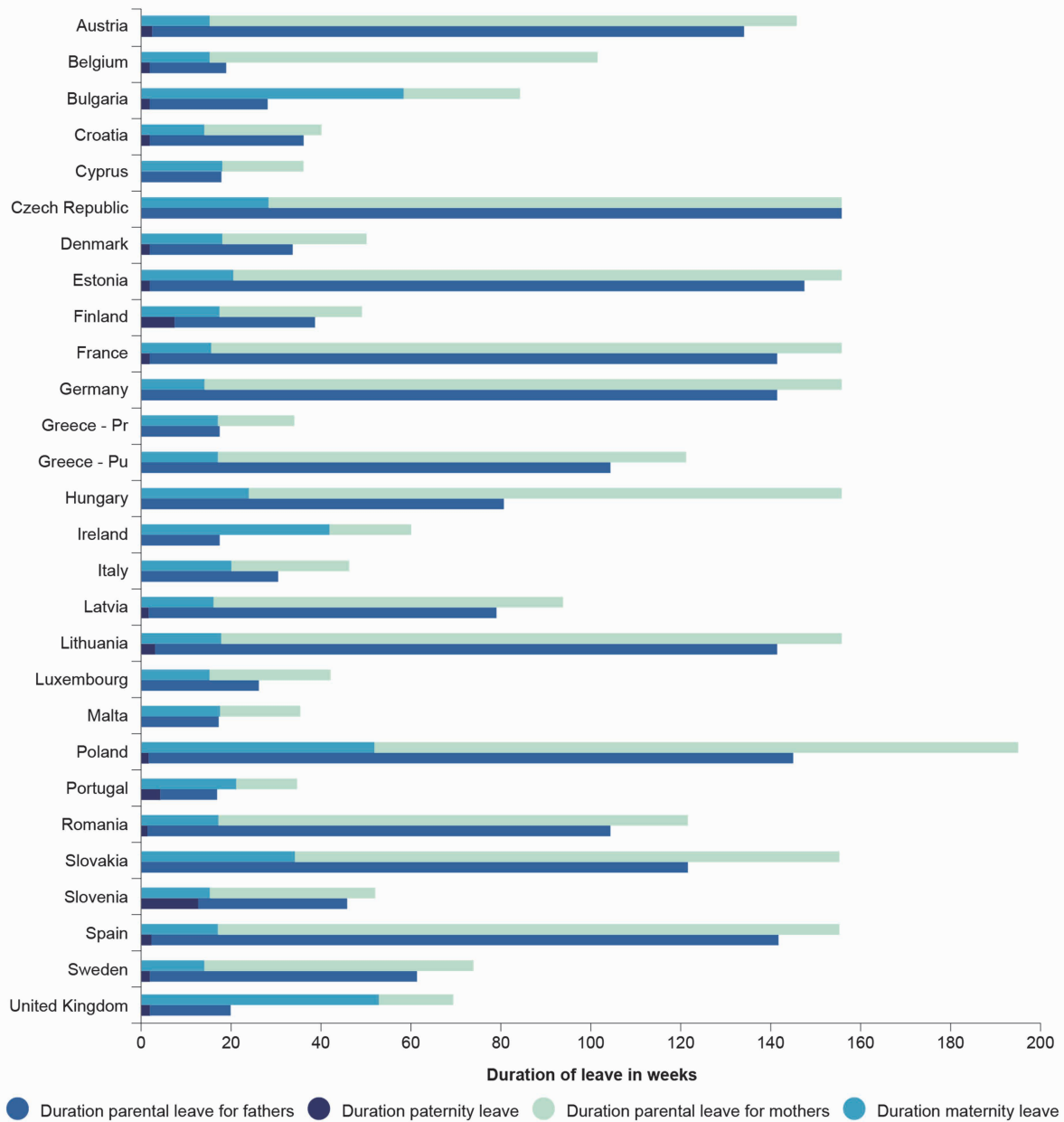
Home care leave: job-protected leave, which can follow parental leave, and entitles a parent to provide care at home, generally until the child is two or three years old. Home care leave is rare in the EU, and is generally unpaid.

Between European countries there is considerable variation in the combination of leaves available, as can be seen in **figure 1**. These differences are related to the fact that family-related leave policies can be used by countries to serve different policy objectives: they affect labour force participation and can be used to regulate the labour market (economic objectives); they affect maternal health, the work–life balance of parents, and the physical and emotional development of children (social objectives); and by affecting the work-life balance of parents they may reduce the barriers to parenthood (demographic objectives).

In this brief, we focus on the effect of leave policies on paternal involvement in childcare, and insofar as these policies are successful in balancing childcare between parents, how increased gender equality in childcare affects these economic, social and demographic outcomes. Specifically, we will focus on paternity and parental leave, as these are the key policy levers that can be used to encourage paternal involvement, although we will include in our discussion the interaction between maternity, paternity and parental leave. From here on, the term parental leave will be used to indicate the shared leave available to parents after the birth of a child, rather than the set of leave entitlements (maternity, paternity, parental and home care leave) that is sometimes referred to as parental leave.

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<sup>1</sup> The distinction between paternity leave and father-only parental leave can be unclear and confusing: in a number of countries paternity leave includes a period of time that only fathers can take. Here paternity leave is narrowly defined as a short period immediately after the birth that is only available to fathers and is in addition to parental leave.



**Figure 1: Comparison of the maximum combined maternity and parental leave entitlement (light blue and turquoise) with paternity and parental leave duration (dark blue and blue) per EU Member State in weeks. ‘Duration parental leave for fathers’ thus reflects the case where all the available shared parental leave is taken by the father, and ‘duration parental leave for mothers’ reflects the case where all the available shared parental leave is taken by the mother). Greece – Pr/Pu = private and public sector, respectively. The Netherlands was excluded because of the specific way the duration of parental leave is calculated. Based on data from 2012–2014, from European Parliament 2015b.**



### 3. Differences between parental leave and paternal leave

#### 3.1 Paternity leave is short, but well-compensated



*Paternity leave* is a short-term leave of absence for employed fathers at the time of childbirth, taken in parallel with maternity leave. Paternity leave is different from parental leave provisions reserved for fathers (i.e. the ‘daddy-quota’)(ILO 2014; European Parliament 2015b), although recently there is a trend in which some countries, for example Iceland, are moving away from a specific leave for fathers and mothers, in favour of a more generic ‘parental leave’, with specific proportions for fathers only, mothers only, and a part that can be shared (Moss 2015). Paternity leave is an individual right, i.e. the leave entitlement is reserved for the father. Eighteen of the EU-28 countries offer paternity leave and the EU-average **length** is 12.5 days, ranging from one day in Italy to 64 working days in Slovenia. As can be seen in **figure 2**, in all cases where the duration of paternity leave is seven days or shorter, the **compensation** is 100 per cent of previous income. Compensation varies in the cases where paternity leave is longer than seven days: of the 13 countries that offer ten days or more, eight provide 100 per cent compensation; the other five provide less than 100 per cent.

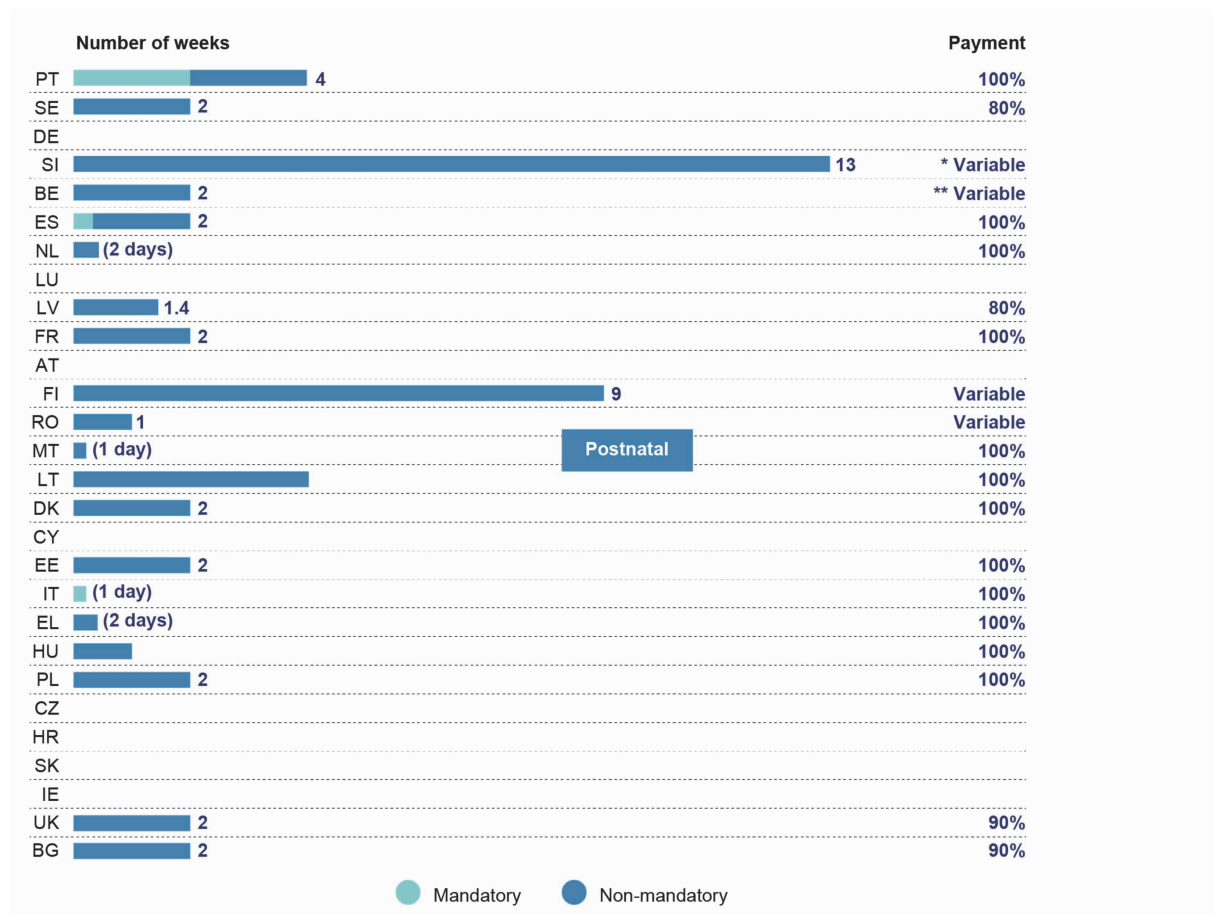


Figure 2: Duration and compensation of paternity leave in EU-28 countries, from European Parliament 2015a. \*SI 15 days ‘paid’ + 75 days ‘non-paid’ (non-paid means that the state pays social security contributions based on the minimum salary (approximately €174 per month)).\*\*BE 100% for 3 days (paid by the employer), 82% of salary for the remaining period.

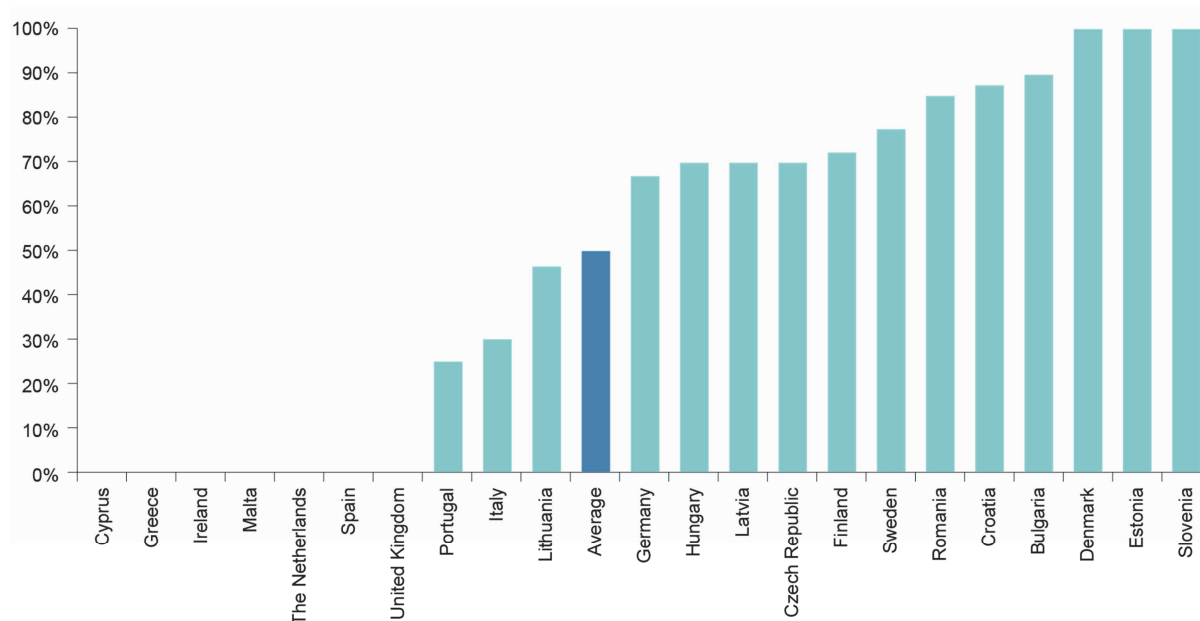
### 3.2 Parental leave varies in length and is rarely fully compensated



*Parental leave* can be either an individual right or a family entitlement; in the latter case the leave is tied to the family and can be transferred between parents. As a measure to increase uptake of parental leave by fathers, some countries divide the parental leave up into a shared part and a non-shared part, or ‘daddy quota’.

All EU countries currently provide parental leave. The average **length** of parental leave in the EU is 87 weeks, but there is wide variation between countries, from 18 weeks in Cyprus to two years per parent in Greece.

As can be seen in **figure 3**, all but six countries offer some **compensation** during parental leave. The average compensation rate is 50 per cent of earnings. In those countries that offer compensation, the amount varies between 25 per cent and 100 per cent of earnings. There are also seven countries not included in figure 3, which offer a flat rate, ranging from €139 per month in Poland to €1,778 per month in Luxembourg (not included in figure 3).



**Figure 3: Overview of the compensation rates, as a percentage of previous incomes, during parental leave in all member states that offer parental leave and do not have a flat rate allowance. Adapted from European Parliament 2015b.**

Lastly, aside from variation in length and compensation, countries differ with regards to the **entitlement** rules: in 14 EU countries parental leave is a family entitlement, and the total duration of parental leave depends on the uptake of each parent. In France, for example, the total parental leave duration for a family is eight months, four months for each parent. However, if only one parent takes parental leave, this duration is reduced to only six months. In 12 countries, parental leave is an individual right that cannot be shared between parents, while in two countries (Portugal and Sweden) the leave consists of a shared and a non-shared part (European Parliament 2015b; Eurofound 2015c). Figure 1 shows the maximum duration of leave that is available to fathers, split by individual entitlement and family entitlement.

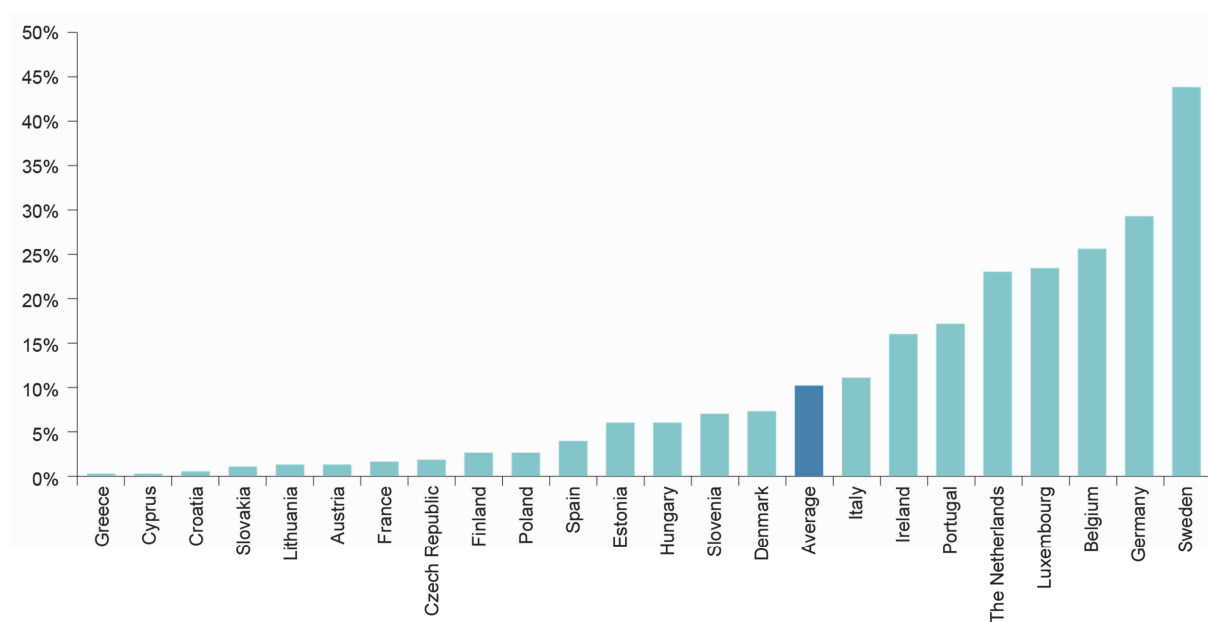
### 3.3 Fathers' uptake of paternity and parental leave is low



*Uptake of paternity leave and parental leave by fathers.* The goal of a differentiation between individual and family-based parental leave entitlement is to increase uptake by fathers, because it has repeatedly been shown that parental leave based on a family entitlement (i.e. not tied to the father) is predominantly used by mothers (Moss & Deven 2015). Despite the large number of policy initiatives aimed at increasing fathers' uptake of leave, there is a lack of good quality data on the uptake, primarily because countries do not keep administrative data of leave usage. The data that is available indicates that uptake of paternity and parental leave is tied to similar predictors. A comparative analysis of the leave taken by fathers across 24 EU countries from 2003–2007 (O'Brien 2009) showed that fathers were more likely to take paternity or parental leave under the following conditions:

- High income replacement – at or near 100 per cent of previous income – because this makes it more affordable for fathers to take time off work.
- Individual rather than family-based entitlement, targeted specifically at fathers on a use-it-or-lose-it basis.
- Appropriately timed leave around the time of birth or linked to the mother's return to employment.

Figure 4 provides an overview of parental leave uptake by fathers for those member states that have data available. For 23 EU member states, on average only 10 per cent of fathers take parental leave, ranging from 0.02 per cent in Greece to 44 per cent in Sweden. There is no comparative data available for paternity leave uptake.



**Figure 4: Take-up of parental leave by fathers in 23 member states as percentages of the available leave. Adapted from European Parliament 2015b.**

## 4. Outcomes: why is a father's leave uptake so important?

The uptake of paternity leave and father specific parental leave has been linked to various economic, social and demographic outcomes.

First and foremost, by promoting the uptake of parental leave and paternity leave by fathers, governments aim to facilitate a more gender-equal sharing of care and related housework, supporting the mother's return to the labour market, and to equalize the circumstances in which women and men enter the labour market (European Parliament 2014). The uptake of paternity leave and father-specific parental leave has a positive effect on the **work-life balance** of families (OECD 2016; COFACE 2015; European Commission 2014). Work-life balance, or the reconciliation of work and family responsibilities as supported by state policies, has been regarded the most important factor influencing female **economic** activity (Hobson et al. 2011; OECD 2011; Esping-Andersen 2009). The involvement of fathers in childcare has also been linked to women's decisions to have children (Duvander & Andersson 2006; Oláh 2003), thus affecting **demographic** outcomes. The relation between family policies and the various outcomes is, however, complex. And success of various policies in reaching their aim has been shown to depend on a number of conditions, which we will discuss below and in Section 5.

### 4.1 Economic outcomes

The most important *economic outcomes* often linked to the uptake of leave by fathers are:

- *Reduced labour market inequality* as a consequence of more women re-entering the labour market after having children (European Parliament 2014, 73–76). The so-called 'motherhood penalty' reflects that more women than men leave employment after the birth of a child: women with children under the age of 12 work 11 per cent less than women without children, whereas men with children under the age of 12 work 7 per cent more than men without children (Miani & Hoorens 2014). This gender difference in the employment rate represents the **gender employment gap**; filling this gap is an important economic objective of gender equality measures and part of the Europe 2020 target of an employment rate of 75 per cent for both men and women (European Commission 2010). The uptake of leave by fathers can reduce the motherhood penalty by enabling mothers to return to the labour market, as evidenced by studies that have shown that the involvement of fathers in childcare has a positive effect on mothers' full-time employment (Norman et al. 2014; Fagan & Norman 2016).
- *Reduction of the gender pay gap* (GPG, average gross hourly earnings of men and women expressed as a percentage of the average gross hourly earnings of men). In 2014 the GPG in the EU-28 was 16.1 per cent, which means that for every euro men got paid in the EU, women got paid only 83.9 cents (Eurostat 2016). The GPG gap exists equally after correction for occupation and education level. However GPG data on part-time compared to full-time jobs is not available for all countries, which limits the interpretation of this data. There is a wide range of factors that contribute to the existence of the GPG, such as firm size, pay transparency, the minimum wage, the level of unionization (the representation of unions in different sectors) and an individual's education level (European Parliament 2014; European Commission 2014). In addition to these factors, there is a bi-directional relation between female labour market participation and the GPG that is relevant in the context of fathers'

leave uptake. On the one hand, when women re-enter the labour market after having children, they often return to part-time jobs, which are often poorer quality jobs with lower pay, and fewer options for career progression (Crompton 2006). This so called ‘child penalty’ leads to an increase in the GPG in countries where women return to the labour market (European Parliament 2014; European Commission 2009) On the other hand, the GPG in itself lowers the economic returns of working for women and thus influences the decision of labour market re-entry, as it has been shown that payment rates are a key factor in deciding which parent takes leave and which parent returns to work. (Thévenon & Solaz 2013) An increase in fathers’ leave uptake can reduce the ‘child penalty’, by allowing mothers to return to work full time. Additionally, an increase in leave uptake by fathers has the potential to equalize the effect of the child penalty between parents, thereby mediating the long term effects of the child penalty on the GPG, although this is speculative in the absence of studies on the causal relation between leave uptake by fathers and the GPG.

- *Lower female pension gap*: the gender pension gap is the difference in accumulated pensions between genders for persons older than 65 (European Parliament 2014). The most recent data estimates the gender pension gap to be 40 per cent (2011 data from Tinios et al. 2015), which is more than twice the gender pay gap. Increased leave uptake by men can, insofar as increased leave uptake by fathers reduces leave uptake by mothers, reduce the length of career interruptions for women, reduce part-time work by women and potentially reduce the GPG, all of which are leading causes of the gender pension gap (European Commission 2014).

The above paragraph discusses the economic impact of father’s take up of leave, insofar there is evidence that father’s uptake of leave affects female labour market participation. However, *how* exactly father’s uptake of leave affects female labour market re-entry, and what the mediating circumstances are, is still a topic under investigation. For example, does father’s uptake of leave directly reduce the motherhood penalty on pay by making it more acceptable for all parents to take leave, or does father’s uptake of leave reduce the motherhood penalty on pay by reducing the GPG, following wage and career penalties for fathers taking leave? Answering these questions is outside the scope of this brief, and will likely depend on the wider cultural and policy context within European countries.

## **4.2 Social outcomes**

Some of the *social outcomes* linked to the uptake of leave by fathers are:

- *Improved equality in the division of paid employment and unpaid care and house work*. (European Parliament 2015b; Kotsadam & Finseraas 2011; Kotsadam & Finseraas 2013; Fagan & Norman 2016) Even under equal employment conditions, women spend more time on care and unpaid housework than men: women working full time spend about 19 hours a week on care and household work, compared with ten hours a week for men who work full time (Eurofound 2015a). There is evidence that men undertake more domestic work in the policy context that supports female employment (childcare services) and the father’s engagement in care (father’s quota) (Hook 2006; Kotsadam & Finseraas 2011). Increased uptake of leave by fathers thus positively affects equality at home, leading to an improved *work–life balance* (COWI 2008; ILO 2014).

- *Improved child development*: there is evidence of improved cognitive outcomes in children with high paternal involvement – specifically following paternal involvement at age two or three (Huerta et al. 2013) – although there is evidence that this positive effect is mediated by the mother’s education level, suggesting that it is tied to care by a highly-educated father displacing care by a less educated mother (Cools et al. 2015). In terms of child wellbeing, research suggests that a father’s involvement has a positive effect on father–child bonding (Nepomnyaschy & Waldfogel 2007; Haas & Hwang 2009).

### **4.3 Demographic outcomes**

Lastly, the uptake of leave by fathers can affect *demographic outcomes*:

- *Foster conditions that allow parents to have the number of children they want* (Thévenon & Solaz 2013): The involvement of fathers in childcare has been linked to women’s decisions to have children, with higher involvement having a positive effect on fertility (Duvander & Andersson 2006; Oláh 2003; Feyrer et al. 2008).

## **5. What are current obstacles for uptake?**

As mentioned in the previous section, simply offering leave to fathers is not sufficient to reach the objectives parental leave policies are designed for: there are a number of conditions that affect the uptake of leave, and thereby mediate the effect that paternity and parental leave has on various outcomes. These conditions are set by the wider set of family policies that allow parents to work and give families the opportunity to balance work and care responsibilities (IPPR 2015). What are the obstacles that keep fathers from taking leave?

### **5.1 Maintaining the level of family income is key**

There are some specific elements in the design of paternity leave and parental leave for fathers that have a direct effect on the level of uptake. As discussed in Section 2, low compensation levels are a key factor influencing the take up of leave by fathers. Restricted eligibility is another example of how policy decisions with regards to the design of parental leave can affect uptake.

The level of **compensation** is one of the strongest predictors of uptake of both paternity and parental leave by fathers: countries with the highest compensation rates have the highest proportion of companies with employees taking leave (Eurofound 2007). High levels of compensation reverse the financial logic that the lowest earner – which is often the mother – stops working, because the household income is unaffected by the father taking leave. Providing adequate<sup>2</sup> income compensation also reduces social inequalities: under low compensation levels, paternity and parental leave is predominantly taken by highly-educated fathers working in middle- to high-income jobs, as taking time away from work is more difficult and often unaffordable for fathers in low income families, or families where the father is the sole breadwinner. Higher levels of compensation thus equalize the uptake of parental leave by fathers with different socioeconomic backgrounds (O'Brien 2009).

**Eligibility** criteria directly influence who can take leave. In most countries, paternity and parental leave is conditional on employment on a continuous basis over a certain period (usually for a year), with the exception of Scandinavian countries, the Netherlands and Germany (OECD 2001; Huerta et al. 2013). For this reason, self-employed fathers, or those with a short or unstable work history are excluded from paternity and parental leave benefits.

### **5.2 Decisions about uptake are made within the family context**

The design of the broader set of family policies equally affects uptake, insofar as it affects the family circumstances that allow fathers to take up leave.

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<sup>2</sup> In the study by O'Brien, adequate compensation is defined as 50 per cent or more of earnings. However, to increase uptake in general, compensation levels at or near income replacement level are required (Moss 2015).

**Flexibility in the timing of uptake** is another important determinant of fathers' uptake. Flexible timing in this context refers to:

- Flexibility in when during the child's lifetime the leave is taken
- Flexibility in distribution over time (whether it can be taken in separate periods).
- Flexibility in whether it is taken full time or part time.

Flexibility is specifically important in enabling parents to combine work and childcare, and a lack of flexibility for fathers to choose when they take leave entrenches existing role patterns, as it makes it more difficult for fathers to reconcile work and family responsibilities. Part time work may also help parents to maintain a connection with their work and reduce the impact of parental leave for employers, since the employee is not completely absent, and in this way can change company attitudes toward working parents.

Another key factor in the success of leave policies for fathers is **childcare**. Parental leave uptake by fathers only serves its goal of increasing women's labour market participation if affordable childcare is available near the time parental leave ends (Eurofound 2015c). If this is not the case, parental leave only postpones women leaving the labour market, instead of equalising labour market participation.

Finally, the **tax system** in place can act as a strong disincentive to share parental leave: either a high tax rate on the income of the second earner, joint taxation, or tax breaks for non-employed spouses or children discourage dual earnership (Miani & Hoorens 2014).

### **5.3 It is hard to break the cultural norm**

Although harder to quantify, social norms and workplace cultures play an important role in determining uptake of leave by fathers (Moss & Deven 2015). The organization of leave policies can entrench existing social beliefs about gender roles, and equally employer's attitudes towards fathers reducing work hours to spend time with their family influence the uptake of leave by father.

The level of **employers' support** affects uptake of leave by fathers. Aside from the state's regulatory framework, companies can offer work-life balance arrangements (e.g. crèches, company babysitting services, cleaning or shopping services), flexible working time accounts, collective agreements on working time and two-way reversibility options where employees can both increase and decrease their working hours, depending on family needs. According to Fagan and Walthery (2011), companies that offer these types of arrangements are also more likely to have male employees who take up parental leave, suggesting that **company culture** is an important factor that determines leave uptake by fathers. Aside from the countries that have national policies that grant employees the right to request adjustable working hours (Sweden, Belgium, the Netherlands, Germany and the UK), there are large differences across EU member states in terms of what companies offer. Management attitudes, the sector a company works in, company size, trade union presence and the proportion of female employees can all contribute to a company's 'culture', as reflected in the likelihood that employees are allowed working time adjustments (Fagan & Walthery 2011). This is illustrated by the results of the European Establishment Survey on Working Time, which was carried out by Eurofound in 2004–2005 (Riedmann et al. 2005): large companies (with more than 500 employees) in the public sector service domain, where employees are represented in a trade



union, and which have a high proportion of female employees, are most likely to offer individual working time adjustments (Fagan & Walthery 2011).

A statutory right to parental leave for fathers is important in order to make it more acceptable in workplace cultures for fathers to use reconciliation policies (Moss & Deven 2015; COWI 2008).

Wider **cultural beliefs** and attitudes about gender divisions additionally underlie parents' behaviour, with fathers in families with a non-traditional gender role division more likely to take leave: fathers who take leave are more likely to have partners that have higher levels of education and employment (Huerta et al. 2013; European Commission 2005).

#### **5.4 What works?**

Aside from providing a high level of income compensation, the following policy measures have proven to be successful in increasing uptake among fathers. These incentives serve to overcome the obstacles of existing cultural beliefs and gender bias that may stand in the way of fathers claiming their entitlement.

- **Individual entitlement** (or 'daddy quota'). The uptake of father-specific leave tends to be higher in countries that reserve part of the parental leave for fathers. In Germany, uptake rose from 3.3 per cent in 2006 to 29.3 per cent in 2012 after the introduction of a two month individual entitlement (European Parliament 2014). In Iceland and Sweden, uptake has doubled since the introduction of the daddy quota (OECD 2016). Outside the EU, Norway's leave quota was followed by an increase in the uptake of paternity leave from 3 per cent (1993) to 70 per cent (2000) (Rege & Solli 2013).
- **Bonuses in cash or time** if both parents take leave: in Sweden, for example, parents receive a cash bonus on top of the daily allowance if parental leave is equally divided between parents. This bonus is only granted if both parents take the full 240 days of leave, not the two months for each parent that is reserved and non-transferrable. In the Italian region of Piedmont, fathers receive a bonus of €400 per month on top of the existing 30 per cent compensation of previous income if they take parental leave during the child's first year. This rises to €540 per month if they take at least three months (Eurofound 2015b).
- **Information campaigns:** public awareness campaigns can raise awareness and encourage fathers to take leave. In Sweden, for example, the uptake of parental leave by fathers increased following information campaigns (Bergman & Hobson 2002).

Most of these factors do not act in isolation, but interact. As a result, policies aimed at increasing uptake can lead to different outcomes in different EU member states. A **lack of comprehensive and comparable basic statistics** stands in the way of an evaluation and understanding of the use and impact of the many different types of leave policy that exist. Resolving this would be the first step in understanding how policy can increase leave uptake by fathers (Moss & Deven 2015).

## 6. Future directions

### 6.1 Work–life balance is important across the lifespan

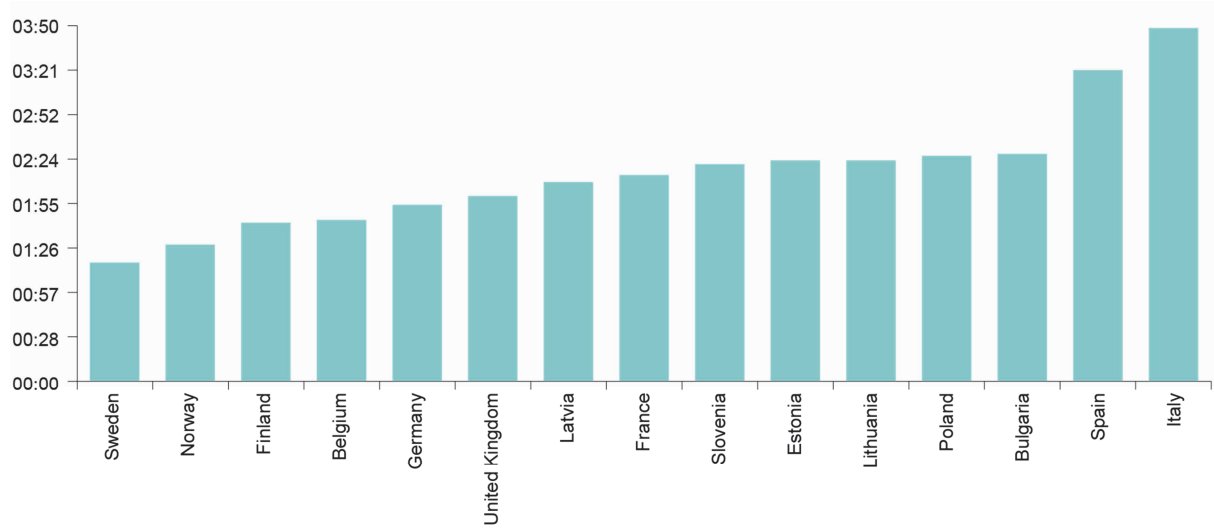
The dual-earner family model is now the most common family structure in Europe, due to the increased labour participation of women and increased living costs (IPPR 2015). At the same time, as a consequence of demographic ageing, the current working population will have a longer working life. Between 2014 and 2080 the proportion of the population aged 80 years or older is expected to more than double, while the working population is expected to decline during the same period (European Commission 2013).

So far, the motivation for and outcomes of increased leave uptake by fathers have been considered in the context of the employee benefits for young fathers, with the economic returns measured by increased female labour participation. However, in the context of dual-earner families, the outcome of a successful policy might not necessarily be measured by female participation levels, but instead by its success in supporting a sustainable working pattern for both parents, and a more gender-equal division of work and care responsibilities. The economic return for companies in this case is the retention of talented employees, enhanced wellbeing and an associated increase in the productivity of their employees, and a return of investment made in employees. If sufficiently supported, the larger economic returns may come from parents' ability to develop themselves professionally and personally, and to continue doing so throughout their working lives. This in turn enables them to build up decent pensions, thus reducing calls on income-related benefits to redress poverty in old-age.

The previous section discussed the importance of sufficient income compensation for increasing leave uptake by fathers. A life-course perspective on balancing work and family responsibilities requires policies that are adaptive to the needs of individuals, and which allow flexible use depending on individual circumstances. This means policies that are available to all, regardless of employment status or the age of those who need care.

### 6.2 Unpaid labour counts

Finally, the gender division in unpaid labour is an important factor in understanding why the gender inequality in leave uptake is so hard to change. As **figure 5** shows, even in the countries with a high uptake of parental leave by fathers, women still do most of the unpaid domestic work (European Parliament 2014). Even when working equal hours as men, women spend on average 12 hours per week more doing unpaid housework. Combined with care responsibilities, this inequality in unpaid work results in more women reducing work hours, or leaving the labour market, than men (COFACE 2015). There is strong evidence from Sweden and Norway that the introduction of a father's quota has a positive effect on male take-up and involvement in household work (Ekberg et al. 2013; Kotsadam & Finseraas 2011).



**Figure 5: The number of hours devoted to domestic activities by men daily as subtracted from the number of hours devoted to domestic activities by women daily. Adapted from Szelewa 2013.**

## **7. Conclusions**

Fathers taking leave is of key importance for female labour force participation, enabling families to reconcile work and family responsibilities and child development. In this brief, we have shown that, although the majority of EU countries offer paternity and parental leave for fathers, a lack of uptake may hamper the potential impact of these leave policies.

Although low or non-existent compensation levels during the leave are a key factor as to why fathers choose not to, or are unable to, take their leave entitlement, research suggests that an increase in uptake will most likely result from an interlocking set of family policies that help dual-earner families to combine work and family life in a sustainable manner. These include policies that directly encourage fathers to take leave, such as well-compensated individual leave entitlements, and policies aimed at creating a sustainable solution to the challenges of combining work and family life, such as leave arrangements that are flexible and adaptive to individual needs, but also policies aimed at changing workplace cultures.

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