Methodological Challenges in Paid Parental Leave Research & Policy
Post-workshop Report

September 2025

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TABLE OF CONTENT

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The 2019 EU Directive on Work-Life Balance for Parents and Carers[1] issued a set of legislative actions aimed at supporting work-life balance, encouraging equal sharing of informal care between parents and increasing women's participation in the labour market. Actions under the Directive include continued monitoring of policy outcomes and improved data on leave take-up and use of flexible work arrangements. However, sufficient data for adequate policy evaluations and routine monitoring are still out-of-reach.

The EU COST Action Sustainability@Leave Network brought together leave policy experts across academia, government and practice backgrounds for a workshop in May 2025 at the Luxembourg Institute of Socio-Economic Research (LISER). Each invited workshop participant brought experience with data collection, policy evaluation and/or policy translation to the discussion. In this report, we summarise the presentations and commentary from this unique gathering of researchers and representatives of key data collection institutions to draw practical lessons for future policy implementation and evaluation. We provide a list of participants and their affiliations at the end of this report.

Previously, members of the Sustainability@Leave COST Action Network identified data gaps in parenting leave policy research. In a 2023 publication, COST Action members assessed the most advanced administrative, survey and policy data relevant to parenting leave policy and research available to date, identifying advantages and limitations.[2] The assessment found many quality data sources that yet fall short of providing the necessary information to monitor progress on leave policy development and use.

Workshop participants shared the challenges of data collection and their latest progress in filling data gaps. As a basis for our discussions, the workshop first addressed the need to develop and use a common terminology. Establishing a common way of naming and defining parenting leave provisions lays the foundation for measuring how such provisions change. The terminology also informs decisions about what survey and administrative data would be needed to measure leave use and outcomes.

Ásdís Aðalbjörg Arnalds

The workshop thus addressed four actions: (1) synthesising leave terminology, (2) advancing administrative data, (3) improving survey data and (4) developing policy indicators. For each action, we addressed key questions, such as:

- To what extent do we use common terminology when discussing parenting leave policies?

- How can national statistical offices adapt to new data needs? How can they coordinate with government agencies tasked with monitoring progress toward EU equality goals?

- How do we introduce new questions in European surveys and improve administrative data access and aggregate outputs?

- Which consultation mechanisms and institutions do we need to put in place to facilitate the collaboration of different stakeholders (e.g., policymakers, researchers, advocacy groups) when developing and standardising leave policy indicators?

Workshop participants drew on their focused expertise and knowledge of leave rights and provisions. Key lessons include:

(1) The emerging term *parenting leaves* is a potentially effective term that captures all leave provisions related to caring for children.

(2) At a minimum, there is a need to improve administrative data infrastructure in order to calculate leave take-up rates among parents and leave-eligible populations.

(3) In surveys, linking parenting leave used in the past to specific children who received care during leave periods would also enable leave take-up monitoring.

(4) Creating a regular forum of knowledge exchange among experts would assure quality data collection and reduce duplication of efforts.

The following sections report in detail on each of the workshop's four action areas – terminology, administrative data, survey data and policy indicators. We then summarise the workshop outcomes and discuss recommendations in more detail at the end.

SYNTHESISING LEAVE TERMINOLOGY

This session featured two presentations by representatives of the International Network on Leave Policies and Research (the Leave Network) and the EU COST Action Working Group on terminology. Presentations were then followed by a panel discussion focused on building a shared understanding of leave terminology across jurisdictions and languages and between academics and policy makers.

As a starting point of discussions, we acknowledged that policy terminology shapes social action and enables cross-national learning and monitoring. Policy terminology is never neutral. Rather, it is an ideological battleground that is becoming more and more politicised. The labels and terms assigned to policies are commonly a result of political decisions, and there is often a lack of reflection on the political power of terminology.

International regulations, like ILO conventions and EU directives[3], identify different leave types with different purposes and rationales; namely: maternity leave for mother-infant health, paternity leave for family care around birth, gender-neutral parental leave to care for a child after maternity leave and before the start of early childhood education and care (ECEC) and gender-neutral carer's leave to care for sick children and other family members. As a note of caution, Anna Escobedo (EU COST Action & University of Barcelona) explained that changing to gender neutral names for a policy does not necessarily change its content if it is not accompanied with proper design that accounts for the different gendered effects for mothers and fathers and the potential effects on children. Experts from the Leave Network argued that gender-neutral language runs the risk of making maternity, paternity and parental leaves indistinguishable. Additionally, changing to gender-neutral terminology (i.e., parental or parenting leave), risks obfuscating the gendered profile of the main leave taker. Therefore, the gendered take-up by parents and the inclusivity of the policy design should be considered when terminological changes are debated.

A main theme of the presentations as well as the panel discussions was the historical origins of leave terminology and how policies, organisations, data, researchers and politics mutually shape how we describe leave provisions. Fred Deven (the Leave Network & CBGS, Brussels) provided one example of mutual influence, explaining how the EU Parental Leave Directive of 1996 (96/34/EC) prompted the research community to define parental leave policies and develop a methodology on how to consistently measure their variation across countries and over time. This effort ultimately led to the formation of the Leave Network. Leave terminology continues to develop in Leave Network annual reviews that monitor maternity, paternity and parental leave policies in a growing number of countries. Similarly,   Addati (International Labour Organization/ILO) explained that the maternity protection conventions (1919, 1952, updated 2000) and workers with family responsibilities convention (1981) gave the ILO the mandate to monitor maternity protection and parental leave policies across the globe.

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[3]   *ILO Maternity Protection Convention (2000, No. 183) and Maternity Protection Recommendation (2000, No. 191); EU Council Directive 92/85/EEC on maternal protection at work; EU Directive 2019/1158 on Work Life Balance.*

Yet, the ILO refers to the Leave Network reports, when measuring maternity, paternity and parental leave in their data sets, among other sources. Despite having no international labour standards on paternity leave, the ILO still includes these provisions in their data gathering. Furthermore, Alexandre Lloyd (OECD) explained that some terms are simply driven by data availability. The OECD's focus on maternity-, parental- and longer childcare leaves originate from the aim to monitor family leaves in member states through simple indicators that can capture policy diversity as well as convergence.

Panellists noted a tension between policy diversity and the need to use the same terms when describing leave provisions so that we can compare policies across countries. The Leave Network members explained that the academic community strives for conceptual validity when establishing definitions and measurements, and Pedro Romero-Balsas (EU COST Action & Autonomous University Madrid) stressed that it was important to be clear about the parameters of leave provisions so that we know what is being compared. Alexandre Lloyd (OECD) added that a consistent terminology together with detailed definitions of each concept used should ensure that researchers and policymakers can compare policies in different countries. Consistent with providing clear definitions, Alison Koslowski (the Leave Network & University College London) noted that the Leave Network's annual reviews always report the national terms alongside the international terminology to show the diversity of child-related leave terms. The predominant use of English across institutions helps to standardise the terms used to describe policies, but progress on standardising terminology is mainly based in Europe, running the risk of Eurocentric terminology.

A further tension arises when finding terms that are inclusive of various family types. Policies are strong norm-setters, though for various reasons, inclusive terminology is not always an option. For instance, Laura Addati (ILO) explained that the ILO uses a binary language when referring to parents, because the maternity leave convention is based on a binary definition of sex. In addition, ILO standards allow national laws to determine the details of parental leave provisions out of respect for different contexts and levels of development. Alison Koslowski (the Leave Network & University College London) noted that even a new focus on leave for same-sex couples tends to ignore the full diversity of the LGBTQ+ community. In this context, a word of caution was also raised: Binary language remains in the European Commission's documents as there is still limited consent for more openness around family types among EU member states. Some member states want to ensure that policy gains are made mainly on parenting leave for traditional family types, and it is up to national legislators to expand entitlements to LGBTQ+ families.

Greet Vermeylen, Laura Addati

Throughout the session, members of the EU COST Action Working Group on terminology promoted 'parenting leaves' as an umbrella term for time-off from work to provide care for children. Participants expressed openness to using this emerging summary term. While an alternative term, 'family leave', is already comprehensive, 'parenting leaves' provides a stronger focus on leave for parents to care for a child, including feeding and care for sick children. Also, the active tense paren*ting*, instead of

Alison Koslowski, Anna Escobedo

paren*tal'*, emphasises process over role and caring over other purposes, such as maternal and child health or employment and income protection. Parenting leave may also cover additional carers, beyond primary carers, such as grandparents or guardians. With its summary focus capturing child caring activities, the term also covers caregivers in sexual and gender diverse families.

Several contributors also pointed out that current terms like maternity leave, paternity leave, parental leave or even the newer term 'parenting leave' focus mainly on the rights of adults—parents or guardians—to take time off work to care for children. However, these terms do not reflect the child's own right to receive care. The child's perspective is largely missing both from the terminology and from broader discussions on children's rights. This absence highlights a gap: while adults are granted entitlements to provide care, the child's right to be cared for is not clearly acknowledged.

In summary, the participants expressed openness to using the term 'parenting leaves' to describe all leaves related to caring for children. There was a common understanding to maintain usage of maternity, paternity and parental leave, while also cautiously introducing this umbrella term which may also more effectively include diverse families.

ADVANCING ADMINISTRATIVE DATA

The quality of administrative data has implications for policy designs, data comparability and future reporting obligations under the EU Work-Life Balance Directive. This session outlined both the strengths and limitations of country-based and cross-country administrative data, especially the usefulness of such data for studying parenting leave take-up. Compared to surveys, administrative data are collected routinely and cover large populations, which allows

for more accurate estimates of parenting leave use and provides more statistical power to study subgroups. Administrative data covers whole years rather than one day (i.e., the time of the survey) as is the case with survey data.

Despite these advantages, administrative data also present several challenges that must be addressed to enable policy evaluation. First, the way parenting leave take-up is recorded in administrative data is dependent on the policy design and the reporting rules in each country. For example, Christian Fang (Statistics Netherlands) noted that in the Netherlands, only medium-size companies are obliged to report their employees' leave take-up. Several participants also explained

Marie Valentova

that self-employed parents are not required to report information about leave use in some countries (e.g., the Netherlands and Luxembourg). Additionally, the use of unpaid leave is often overlooked in administrative data, because information on parenting leave take-up is based on state records of benefit payments. Other data may also be available but not accessible, because, as noted by Marie Valentova (LISER and EU Cost Action member), some key data are not yet digitised. Bryan Halka (UK Department for Business and Trade) noted that some employers may be motivated to report parenting leave use among their employees, because the state compensates employers (small employers can reclaim 108.5% and large 92%) for the payments they provide employees during parenting leave. However, other employers may be discouraged from reporting if the administrative cost associated with reporting is perceived to be too high relative to the compensation. This may particularly be the case for reporting leave take-up by fathers, who take considerably shorter and therefore less costly periods of leave than mothers. In other countries, family – rather than individual – entitlements to parenting leave benefits can conceal which parent is taking leave.

Second, countries with limited administrative data accessibility have to deal with the absence of data linkages, an issue raised by both Bryan Halka (UK Department for Business and Trade) and Karolina Andrian (Share the Care Foundation, Poland). The inability to link data across government agencies stems from the structure of the administrative data files that offer only a limited number of indicators, such as the sex of the parent or relationships between the beneficiary and the child. Data linkage, the process of combining information from different data sources, allows the creation of a more comprehensive dataset with additional information about the parents who use parenting leaves. However, Bryan Halka (UK Department of Business and Trade) shared the use of employer Pay As You Earn (PAYE) data which links to tax records as a method to estimate parenting leave take-up.

Finally, another limitation repeatedly discussed was the exclusion of key population groups from administrative data. As Christian Fang (Statistics Netherlands) explained, with data from

Ann-Zofie Duvander, Håkan Nyman

Christian Fang

the Netherlands, leave records typically cover only legal parents or stepparents residing with the child, excluding non-resident or informal carers despite their involvement in childcare. These gaps contribute to an underestimation of leave take-up and create challenges for accurate policy evaluation. To address some of the diversity in family forms, Christian Fang (Statistics Netherlands) shared their efforts to identify couples. Rather than relying on traditional indicators, such as marriage records, Statistics Netherlands is building a cohabitation history file. To distinguish cohabiting couples from roommates, they wrote an algorithm to see whether two people move from one address to another together, whether benefits are applied together and whether they are fiscal partners (i.e., jointly file taxes). With this information, Statistics Netherlands is better able to understand the potential involvement of non-resident stepparents in a child's life, for example.

Starting in 2027, EU member states will be obliged to report on the implementation of the 2019 EU Directive on Work-Life Balance and provide aggregated data on the use of different types of leave by women and men. Workshop participants questioned how comparable these data will be and how to ensure the comparability of data on parenting leave take-up based on administrative data. As an example of how government agencies can collaborate, Håkan Nyman shared the work of NOSOSCO (and Nomesco), a cooperative body to the Nordic Council of Ministers. NOSOSCO brings together representatives of Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Norway, Sweden and the Faroe Islands to collect social statistics and related descriptions of policies. They are able to link parental leave information with other data, such as the age of the parent, and are working to link additional relevant information. In NOSOSCO, the concerned national agencies are involved in data collection, have detailed knowledge of administrative data and the difficulties in cleaning data and are experts in legislation.
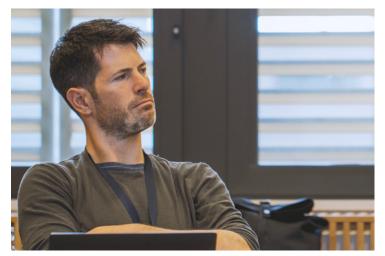
Data collected from the national agencies have been used to produce comparable tax-benefit calculations and cost of living tools that include paid parental leave data, and they currently have an indicator measuring fathers' share of parental leave.

Meaningful cross-country comparisons require harmonisation of definitions and breaking down the aggregated data on leave use by the age of the child in addition to sex of the parent. Ann-Zofie Duvander (EU COST Action member, Stockholm University & Mid-Sweden University Östersund) also stressed the importance of considering the population base when calculating parenting leave take-up rates. For example, do we calculate leave use among parents or only those eligible? Do we calculate leave use within a given year or for care of a specific child? Can we track the use of unpaid, job-protected leave?

There is also a need to understand who is eligible for parenting leave provisions, as noted by Ann-Zofie Duvander and Bryan Halka. Administrative data give us simple information on who is receiving parenting leave benefits each year, but this number will include parents with children of varying ages that will not necessarily be comparable across countries. For example, in some countries, parents may use their parental leave entitlements until their child is two years-old, while in other countries, leave can be used until a child's twelfth birthday.

Bryan Halka

Overall, to enhance the utility of administrative data for policy making, efforts should focus on: (1) improving data completeness, (2) enabling data linkages across administrative systems and (3) ensuring consistent reporting standards across countries. Such steps are essential for meaningful cross-national comparisons and effective monitoring of leave outcomes.

IMPROVING SURVEY DATA

For this session, we invited representatives of large survey data-gathering institutions and projects. While most surveys did not focus on collecting data on parenting leave use or other relevant measures, workshop participants were experts who provided quality data that could potentially be used or developed to assess parenting leave uptake and outcomes. We thus heard about available high-quality data that aims for accurate sample representation of populations and/or comparability across countries and/or over time. For example, Eurostat uses the same target population and definitions across all countries, making results comparable.

This and other large surveys, such as the Generations and Gender Survey (GGS), the European Social Survey (ESS) and the International Social Survey Programme (ISSP), are repeated regularly, resulting in data that is comparable over time as well as across countries.

However, there are some limitations to existing surveys, as noted in the 2023 EU COST Action report on data gaps. First, large-scale European surveys include few questions directly measuring parental leave use. For example, Eurofound's European Quality of Life Survey (EQLS) does not include questions directly concerning parental leave, though it contains questions concerning the reasons respondents are not working, including taking leave. However, the survey does not distinguish between sick leave and leave to care for children. The Luxembourg Income Study (LIS) likewise does not distinguish between different types of leave benefits, though it collects information on the amount of paid benefits received by a parent. As another example, the ISSP, which primarily measures attitudes, includes some questions about behaviour, but these questions ask mainly about the division of household chores and care tasks.

Second, survey respondents' use of parenting leave prior to the survey period (retrospective questions about leave use) is mostly unavailable. With some surveys, it is possible to calculate the percentage of respondents on paid parental leave at a given time, though that is not always the case. The Generations and Gender Survey contains information that can be used to calculate the percentage of respondents on paid parental leave as well as the duration of leave utilised by parents. However, the data is based on a low number of respondents where paid parental leave is concerned, leading to problems of statistical power for analysis.

Other information is also lacking. Most surveys do not measure whether the leave is paid or unpaid or the duration of the leave. Riccardo Gatto (Eurostat) explained that the Labour Force Survey (LFS) includes questions about paid parental leave but not its duration. The survey asks whether the respondent was entitled to a

Riccardo Gatto, Ásdís Arnalds

parental leave benefit due to their work history. If so, the leave is considered a job-related benefit, regardless of whether it is paid at a flat-rate or as a percentage of previous earnings. The LFS also includes a question about unpaid parental leave and its duration; however, if the

leave is longer than three months, the respondents are classified as unemployed. Respondents having worked as little as one hour per week are classified as employed and not asked any questions regarding parental leave.

Workshop participants also emphasised the difficulties in assessing whether workers meet eligibility requirements for receiving parenting leave benefits. Some people do not use parenting leave after having a child, because they are not eligible for it. Asking survey respondents directly about their eligibility for leave is problematic, because they often do not know whether they are eligible. This problem was noted by Ariane Pailhé (Generations and Gender Programme & French Institute for Demographic Studies), who explained that the information needed to assess a person's eligibility is not always provided in existing surveys. Collecting additional data that could be used to assess leave eligibility then runs up against limits to survey length, which is further restricted by the high cost of survey data collection.

Workshop participants additionally shared how they were addressing some of the survey data gaps. For example, Riccardo Gatto (Eurostat LFS) noted that there had been a need for a harmonised definition of parenting leave. With the 19th International Conference of Labour Statisticians (ICLS) resolution, a harmonised definition has been part of the LFS since 2021. Eurostat's Scientific Use Files provide anonymised or aggregated microdata for use in social research and includes information on people who are absent from work due to parental leave. In the years prior to the ICLS resolution, not all countries considered respondents on parenting leave as employed. Additionally, survey respondents on employer-provided parenting leave are not always identified as such, because surveys tend to focus on state provisions. The 2025 LFS work-life balance module will provide more information about parenting leave and will be available in 2026.

While Eurofound's EQLS does not measure parenting leave directly, the 2026 edition will collect new items on hours of unpaid work, informal childcare help received and given and preferences for working time, all of which offer indirect insights into leave-related behaviours and constraints. The survey asks about the number of hours spent on 'care duties', and results show that women still outperform men on a majority of care tasks. The EQLS also strives to capture work-life balance with a work-life balance scale. While the scale does not measure parenting leave use directly, it measures perceived balance between work and family life that may be of interest for researchers studying parenting leave outcomes. Following this workshop, Daphne Ahrendt (Eurofound, EQLS) said Eurofound could use its e-survey tool to test new questions on parenting leave.

The International Social Survey Programme (ISSP) is a cross-national collaboration conducting annual attitude surveys on various topics since 1984. The early modules focus on women's and mothers' work and consequence while fathers have been absent. Starting in 2012, however, the survey has more gender-symmetrical measures on attitudes about the length and sharing of parental leave between parents. Ida Öun and Jonas Edlund (ISSP Methodological Committee

members) noted that one repeated survey module focuses on the family and changing gender roles. This module was conducted in 1988, 1994, 2002, 2012 and 2022. The latter two modules contain repeated measures on parenting leaves, and to ensure that the respondents interpret the questions similarly across countries, the questions are posed in the form of hypothetical scenarios of leave taking (so-called vignettes).

There are opportunities to inform the questions included in the European Social Survey (ESS) as well. Tim Hanson (ESS) explained that academic teams are invited to propose new modules, and the next call for proposals of new modules will be issued in January 2026 for round 14 for which the data will be gathered in 2029. New modules need to fulfil the following criteria: Rotating modules for the ESS require questions that must be understood by all members of the public across Europe in simple and jargon-free wording. The questions also need to be relevant to all respondents, including younger and older populations, and those not affected by parental leave at the moment need to see the relevance of the questions. For questions about parental leave, proposed modules would need to be cautious of country-level differences in parenting leave terminology that could confuse respondents.

New cross-national comparative surveys are also emerging to fill the noted data gaps. For example, Ariane Pailhé (Generations and Gender Programme and the French Institute for Demographic Studies) introduced the new French Families and Employers survey (FamEmp), which has a similar design to the longer-running Generations and Gender Survey (GGS). Compared to the GGS, FamEmp focuses only on France but contains more detailed questions posed to a larger number of respondents. For each child, FamEmp asks each parent whether they took parenting leave and their reasons for taking or not taking leave. There is also a focus on fathers with questions about the timing of their leave use

Ariane Pailhé

(i.e., after birth or after the mother returns to work) and whether they took leave on a full- or part-time basis or at different points in time or all at once. FamEmp also uniquely surveys employers, asking whether employers top-up their employees' leave benefits, and links results with administrative data on employees' income, benefits and allowances.

Seaneen Sloan introduced Growing Up in Digital Europe (GUIDE), a new survey that aims to be the first cross nationally comparative cohort study on children's wellbeing[4]. Children are the focus of the survey, and GUIDE plans to follow two cohorts starting from nine-months and eight years of age – with the survey of the younger cohort starting in 2029. Because time

[4] *The GUIDE project, currently in its preparatory phase under the Horizon Europe programme, is building a cross-national cohort infrastructure to support future longitudinal analysis on the impact of parental leave on child well-being, with ESFRI Roadmap recognition for long-term implementation from 2027 to 2053.*

spent with parents are key contributors to child well-being, questions concerning parenting leave and its length will be included. The survey will interview the primary caregiver, assumed to be the mother, who will be asked questions concerning her partner as well.[5] Based on participation in this workshop, Seaneen Sloan said her team would consider adding questions about fathers' parental leave use. She noted that, for the older cohort starting at age eight, leave taken to care for a newborn sibling in the family may impact the survey's focus-child. They may therefore add questions about parents' leave use in the survey of the older cohort as well. With five countries currently committed to implementing the survey, she emphasised the critical need for funding of large-scale cross-national cohort surveys to ensure their successful and repeated implementation.

The child's perspective was also central to Dominic Richardson's work at the Learning for Well-Being Institute. He argued that the purpose of parental leave policy should be to help parents make good choices for their children, so that children can fulfil their potential. Dominic Richardson added that parenting leave reserved for fathers needs to be extended, after securing the mother's and child's health, and access to parenting leave thereafter should be equalised. Dividing parenting leave provisions in this way is also better for the child, who gains time with both parents. He argued that we are making promises to children through, for example, the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, and we need to take these promises seriously.

Despite the ongoing work of creating and refining surveys, existing cross-national surveys are yet unable to adequately capture leave take-up patterns, eligibility or intra-household leave sharing dynamics. There remains therefore an urgent need for dedicated, regularly repeated modules on parenting leave policy. However, enlarging data in existing European surveys can be difficult not only due to survey length limitations, but also the high cost of survey implementation. A lack of funds ultimately restricts the information needed, and the topic of parenting leave may not be sufficiently prioritised, requiring advocacy for change. In addition to changing or creating surveys, linking survey data to administrative data gathered in the EU member states would be another solution toward gaining a better understanding of how parenting leave provisions are used and their outcomes.

DEVELOPING POLICY INDICATORS

This session provided an overview of the different approaches to parenting leave policy indicators adopted by major international policy databases. Existing leave policy indicators can be broadly classified into quantitative measures of leave policy designs (i.e., the OECD Family Database, the ILO Care Policy Portal, EIGE's Gender Statistics Database, the Leave Network's data tables) and qualitative policy narratives and descriptions (i.e., MISSOC/Applica, the Leave

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[5] *Seaneen Sloan (GUIDE & University College Dublin) explained that the choice to interview only the mother rather than both parents is based on cost limitations and acknowledged that there may be an issue if the mother is replaced by the father as the primary caregiver during the study.*

Network's annual reviews, and detailed coding notes in the quantitative datasets, such as the OECD's Family Database).

The 2023 COST Action report on paid parenting leave data gaps identifies several challenges in developing quality comparative policy data. First, different countries have different ways of distinguishing types of parenting leave and setting eligibility requirements, payment levels and transferability of entitlements. This variation presents a challenge for consistently measuring provisions across countries, and the structure of existing datasets does not allow for systematic tracking of distinctions between, for example, transferable and non-transferable parental leave. Second, for the sake of comparability, social provisions are measured based on assumptions that may not work for all research questions. For example, measures are often grounded in a standard family model associated with mainly a heterosexual dual-earner couple with a healthy child. Other data sets define "well-paid" leave using a 66 percent wage replacement threshold, which can lead to misleading conclusions in contexts where such compensation remains inaccessible to low-income families. Finally, historical data is lacking, and low-income countries and countries outside of Western Europe are systematically underrepresented.

While workshop participants acknowledged the persistent conceptual, methodological and empirical challenges of collecting comparative policy indicators, they each shared new developments aimed at addressing five specific data needs. These were needs to (1) incorporate leave eligibility or coverage in indicators, (2) measure parenting leave policy take-up, (3) consider leave rights for diverse families, (4) measure temporal gaps between the end of leave policy entitlements and a child's access to state child care or education and (5) assess the adequacy of paid benefits to offset lost earnings during leave periods. This section of the report describes workshop participants' approaches to each of these needs, in turn, below.

Greet Vermeylen (team leader in the gender equality unit in the European Commission) explained that correctly identifying populations who are eligible to take parenting leave is crucial to monitoring implementation of the EU Work-Life Balance Directive. Laura Addati (ILO) explained how the ILO Care Policy Portal, which provides data on over 180 countries, uses a multi-source approach to measure eligibility and coverage related to parenting leave. The approach relies on direct data collection from national legislation, use of administrative and European survey data (i.e., Eurostat's LFS) and the development of an evolving set of indicators targeting inclusivity. The ILO estimates coverage under the law, based on statutory eligibility conditions, and potential coverage, based on contributory status. Thus, the ILO's Care Policy Portal and other ILO legal and statistical databases are designed to monitor both entitlement and actual coverage.

Greet Vermeylen, Maximilian Reichert, Laura Addati

Efforts are underway to further disaggregate these indicators by worker categories, including the self-employed and informally employed, as well as by gender and parental status. Yet, measuring these indicators have limitations, particularly regarding the translation of legal texts and the harmonization of eligibility conditions across countries.

The European Institute for Gender Equality (EIGE) has also been working to better understand who is and is not eligible for parenting leave. The EIGE has measured the proportion of parents aged 20–49, who are ineligible for parental leave due to labour market status, contract duration or other conditions. Davide Barbieri (EIGE) explained that their indicators are based on simulations using microdata from the Eurostat LFS and the EU Survey of Income and Living Conditions. Their approach

Davide Barbieri

focuses on policy design elements, such as employment status, contract type and contribution history. They additionally consider intersectional factors, such as migration status and economic sector, which further affect access.

The absence of high-quality and cross-national comparable indicators of parenting leave take-up was a common topic of the presentations and discussion during this session. Laura Addati (ILO) reported their efforts to fill this gap. The ILO distinguishes between legal (de jure) and effective (de facto) coverage in its indicators, providing tools to assess both statutory entitlements and the actual population benefiting from maternity, paternity and parental leave.

Greet Vermeylen (European Commission) explained that while the Commission is assessing the transposition of minimum EU standards at the national level, there remains a lack of harmonised methods for calculating leave uptake, particularly in cases where leave is taken in fractions over long periods. A working group of the Indicators Groups of the Social Protection Committee and the Employment Committee developed a guidance framework in cooperation, detailing how member states should calculate take-up rates using administrative data disaggregated by sex and age. The framework includes guidance on determining eligible populations, claimants and accounting for partial leave uptake. However, compliance to this guidance is voluntary. Member States will have to report on take-up rates when they report on the implementation of the Directive in 2027.

Alexandre Lloyd, Anna Karmann

The third main topic addressed the rights of diverse families. Laura Addati (ILO) and Alexandre Lloyd (OECD) introduced new measures of parenting leave rights for adoptive parents and same-sex couples, representing the first efforts to measure the leave rights of LGBTQ+ parents across countries. The OECD leave policy indicators are based on a set of assumptions, which are ofte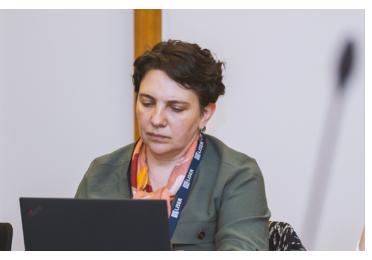n required for developing comparative measures of complex policies. Such assumptions include the legal recognition of parenthood through surrogacy and automatic co-parent recognition, meaning that the parent does not need to first legally adopt the child to access leave rights. The OECD does not yet measure leave provisions for informal co-parenting arrangements. The data on parental leave for same-sex and adoptive parents revealed significant gender disparities in access: male same-sex couples have access to paid parental leave in only three out of 38 OECD countries without adoption, whereas female same-sex couples are entitled to partner leave and parental leave in 18 countries without adoption. Both male same-sex and female same-sex couples have access to adoption leave in 27 OECD countries. These gender disparities largely result from differing access to reproductive technologies and from legal frameworks governing parental recognition in same-sex couples. The OECD additionally measures leave rights around adoption. The indicators assume a primary and secondary caregiver structure. While the model simplifies diverse caregiving realities, it ensures consistency with other OECD leave indicators.

In addition to leave policy indicators, workshop participants noted the need to assess gaps between the end of paid and/or job-protected leave periods and the age at which a child can access public early childhood education and care (ECEC). Such gaps between leave and childcare rights can create gendered care burdens and employment outcomes, even when countries comply with EU directives. Greet Vermeylen (European Commission) highlighted that this is an issue which is covered in the European Care Strategy and explained that in the Council Recommendation on Early Childhood Education and Care: Barcelona targets for 2030 Member States are encouraged to ensure that legal entitlement to ECEC follows the end of paid parental leave. The revised Barcelona targets now include indicators on both access to and the quality of ECEC and call for national childcare systems to be affordable, accessible and inclusive. However, the Commission's monitoring of these reforms remains constrained by data quality and national differences in legal definitions and entitlements. Approaching this need for data, Laura Addati (ILO) presented the ILO's "childcare policy gap" indicator, which calculates the average time between the end of statutory well-paid leave and the beginning of

universal statutory entitlements to childcare or education. Results show that cross-nationally the gap between leave and childcare rights is often over four years, illustrating the degree to which care responsibilities fall disproportionately on families—particularly mothers—when formal leave policy coverage ends.

Kateryna Bornukova

Finally, Kateryna Bornukova shared EUROMOD's use of microsimulation tools to estimate the income replacement rates of parenting leave provisions and assess whether households fall below the poverty line while on leave, offering a valuable perspective on policy adequacy.They use hypothetical households to estimate the extent to which maternity or parental leave benefits replace lost earnings. EUROMOD's simulations account for national tax systems, benefit entitlements and interaction effects, which are important for accurately measuring wage replacement rates. In Austria, for example, tax exemptions for parental leave benefits significantly raise the replacement rate, especially for higher earners. Estimations are, however, constrained by the lack of information on prior earnings and contribution histories in EU-SILC microdata, which provide the empirical basis for microsimulations.

Developing consistent terminologies and clear parameters when measuring leave provisions, however, remain issues. Francesca Liberati (MISSOC Secretariat/Applica) presented the structure and methodology of the MISSOC database, which provides regularly updated and detailed legal information on parenting leave provisions across EU and EFTA countries. She explained that although MISSOC does not generate standardised indicators, it includes comparative tables covering maternity, paternity and parental leave in terms of eligibility, duration, benefit levels and flexibility. Challenges arise from national differences in terminology and system design, but these are addressed through regular revisions of the reporting guidelines and the use of cross-references between tables to ensure consistency. A recent example concerned the reporting of parental benefit information in Sweden, which required clarification on how to classify integrated benefit schemes under MISSOC's comparative framework.

Overall, a main challenge associated with constructing cross-national comparative indicators is an absence of a broader platform to exchange information in a way that promotes complementarity in measurement and efforts. The current duplication and fragmentation of efforts calls for mechanisms that can promote joint indicator development and shared methodologies across institutions.

NEXT STEPS TOWARD BETTER DATA

Workshop participants represented reputable agencies and institutions that collect high-quality data. The strengths of the data were a highlight of the workshop and this report. It is clear that participants are collecting data that is representative of populations, longitudinal with repeated observations over time, comparative across countries and detailed in accounts of policy changes and their implications for everyday lives. However, participants also confirmed the data gaps identified in the 2023 EU COST Action report, '*Parenting leave policy data gaps: A comparative critical analysis*', and shared the ways in which their agencies and institutions were attempting to fill these gaps. For example, Statistics Netherlands is finding ways to identify cohabiting relationships, and the OECD is measuring leave provisions available to same-sex parents. New surveys and research efforts – such as the FamEmp survey and Growing Up In Digital Europe (GUIDE) – are emerging to focus on the child, family care and relationships.

Given that data gaps and limitations were readily acknowledged at the workshop, we also considered some next steps in filling these gaps. We thus circle-back to the questions posed at the start of this report:

To what extent do we use common terminology when discussing parenting leave policies?

Participants were open to using the suggested umbrella term 'parenting leaves' to cover all leaves related to caring for children or child-related leave. This term covers the maternity, paternity and parental leave schemes of the EU Work-Life Balance Directive and can be extended to emerging leave provisions, such as leave to care for sick children or for grandparents caring for their grandchildren. There has been strong support among participants to work towards a more inclusive terminology to include diverse family types, parents and guardians. While acknowledging the political dimension of more inclusive terms – within academia, policy circles and society alike – it was agreed that terms should reflect societal realities.

How can national statistical offices adapt to new data needs? How can they coordinate with government agencies tasked with monitoring progress toward EU equality goals?

Another area for improvement is the potential for coordination among the country-based agencies collecting administrative data. Specifically, the essential baseline indicator all participants agreed to is an annual take-up figure of the eligible population for each type of parenting leave provision. In other words, how many eligible parents are taking leave and for how long? The bare minimum of a simple annual total claimant figure for each leave type is still missing for some countries.

How do we introduce new questions in European surveys and improve administrative data access and aggregate outputs?

Collecting new data is a massive undertaking. Workshop participants offered some new ways forward, but new data – especially new data that is comparative and longitudinal – will require considerable investment. A key limitation noted by the participants is funding for new surveys and data enlargements. Survey data collection is costly, particularly surveys that need repeated implementation, and developing and pilot-testing new survey instruments can take years. Enlarging existing European survey data with targeted questions on parenting leave use requires absorbing finite time with survey respondents. Such data enlargements are possible but require strong justification and careful phrasing.

Which consultation mechanisms and institutions do we need to put in place to facilitate the collaboration of different stakeholders (e.g. policymakers, researchers, advocacy groups) when developing and standardising leave policy indicators?

All participants shared the view that exchanges like this expert workshop were crucial to ensure policy-makers, data agencies, civil society and academia know about each other's initiatives and learn from best practice. Better coordination among the institutions and researchers collecting policy indicators could also assure that new provisions and aspects of provisions are measured in a way that builds rather than replicates work. It was unclear, however, how such a forum would look. The Leave Network could be expanded for a broader forum of exchange or a consultative forum at the EU level could be organised. While countries provide compliance reports to the European Commission on the Work-Life Balance Directive, there could be regular communication channels for advocacy groups or academics to comment on recent policy changes to the Commission.

The ability to calculate leave take-up rates is a basic need for assessing progress on the EU Work-Life Balance Directive and its outcomes. However, at the time of writing of this report, the comprehensive data needed to calculate parenting leave take-up rates is sub-optimal or absent in most countries and unavailable in a cross-national comparative sense. As shown at this workshop, better coordination across the different data collection institutions and policy makers can support European and global initiatives to improve practice and go beyond filling this basic data gap. The ability to link administrative and survey data, harmonization of country-based administrative data and the addition of careful, select questions in existing surveys could move research beyond leave take-up toward broader questions about how to build sustainable work, encourage equality in parenting and promote societies centred on children's well-being.

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