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Parenting Leave Policies in Bulgaria and Inequalities

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Parenting Leaves in Bulgaria: Types of Leave and Design Elements

Focus on gender and social inequalities



Parenting Leave Policy in Bulgaria: recent conditions

- Bulgaria is among the European countries with the longest maternity leaves - 410 days (appr. 58.6 weeks) .
- **Maternity Leave – mother’s entitlement:**
 - The first 135 days are obligatory and divided into three periods:
 - **Pre-natal leave:** 45 calendar days before the expected birth.
 - **Post-natal leave:** 42 calendar days immediately after childbirth.
 - **Recovery leave:** 48 calendar days following the post-natal period, up to day 135 days.

Maternity leave

- During maternity leave, women receive **90% of their average monthly insurance income from the previous 12 months.**
- Parental leave is counted as work experience and it is not taxed.
- Maternity leave reserved exclusively for the mother, as they are intended to protect her health and recovery.
- The responsible institution for parenting leave **arrangements in Bulgaria** is the Ministry of Labour and Social Policy and the National Social Security Institute.

Maternity leave: flexibility in use

- Once the child reaches six months old (and until the 410th calendar day – app. 2nd birthday), with the agreement of the mother, the leave can be transferred to the father or one of the grandparents if they has been paying insurance for at least 12 months.
- The financial compensation for this period is 90 per cent of average monthly income that the father/grandparent received in the last 24 months preceding the birth of the child.
- The leave is inclusive also to self-employed and adoptive parents.

Maternity leave: who is eligible?

- Women living in Bulgaria with Bulgarian **citizenship** or those with foreign citizenship who have paid social insurance contributions in the last 12 months (regardless of the country where social insurance has been paid).
- Since 2018 the **adoptive parents** of a child up to the age of five are entitled to receive 365 days' paid leave equal to 90 per cent of their average gross monthly earnings or their average insurance income (from the 12 months preceding the adoption). If the adoptive parent does not use the leave and returns to full-time employment, they are entitled to receive 50 per cent financial compensation for the period of the leave.
- Special regulation for if the mother (adopter) is a **student** studying in full-time education. She has the right to receive the financial allowance through two instalments: at birth of the child and enrolment and after enrolment for the next semester. The allowance can be received until the child becomes one year old.
- The parental leave scheme does not apply to **same-sex couples** as they are not recognized in the legislation.



Maternity leave: who is not eligible?

- Maternity leave – who is **not eligible**?
- Mothers without paid social insurance contribution in the preceding 12 months before childbirth.
- In this case women can receive a monthly benefit until the child's first birthday to the value of BGN225 [115€]. The monthly benefit is dependent on means-testing, with the income per family member being less than certain threshold (e.g. BGN810 [414€] in 2024).
- The child should have all obligatory immunizations and medical check-ups.
- Payments are not taxed.
- Mainly targeting women for low resource households - most often from ethnic minorities.

Paternity Leave Policy in Bulgaria: recent conditions

- Paternity Leave – individual entitlement.
- Fifteen calendar days starting from the day when the new-born child is discharged from the hospital.
- Purpose – allowing the father to take care of the child immediately after birth while the mother is still recovering; its use cannot be postponed in time.
- The father has the right to use paternity leave if the mother and the father are married or live in a shared household.
- It is obligatory to take all the leave in one go. The leave is non-transferable.
- Condition: the father has paid social insurance contributions for at least 6 months. Compensation is 90% of the father's average insured income for the last 12 months.
- The same regulation applies for self-employed men.

Paternity Leave in Bulgaria

- Since 2022 a further two months of leave for fathers was introduced under certain conditions „Paternity leave for raising a child up to 8 years of age“.
- The condition is that father has paid social insurance contributions for at least 12 months. The same regulation applies for self-employed men.
- There is a fixed monthly benefit is 933BGN [477€] in 2024.
- The child does not attend kindergarten.
- It can be used at one time or in separate periods of time until the child becomes eight years old.
- Fathers are eligible if they have not already used two or more months of transferable leave.
- The new leave is non-transferable; its is counted as work experience.
- It is also available to self-employed and adoptive fathers.

Paternity leave: who is eligible?

- Men living in Bulgaria, with either Bulgarian or foreign **citizenship**, are eligible if they have paid social insurance against the risk of general illness and pregnancy over the last 6 months (regardless of the country where social insurance has been paid).
- Fathers in civil partnership or marriage.
- Available to self-employed men and adoptive fathers.



Parenting Leave Policy in Bulgaria: recent conditions

- **Paid parental Leave:**
- Paid parental leave in Bulgaria begins after 410th day (the 1st year after childbirth) until the child reaches two years of age.
- Parental leave is claimed by the mother, but can be fully transferred to the father or a grandparent if they are in employment/ have paid social insurance contributions for the preceding 12 months .
- The payment of the leave is arranged as a fixed monthly benefit determined annually by the State budget - BGN 780 [399€].
- The amount is universal to all beneficiaries and it is independent of their income.
- Payments are not taxed; parental leave is counted as work experience.
- It can be used by self-employed men and adoptive fathers.



Transferable period of parental leave

- Paid parental leave :
- If the mother (whether adoptive or biological) decides not to use the paid parental leave fully or in part after the 135th day (i.e. after the 6th month after childbirth), she is entitled to receive partial financial compensation for the remaining period of the leave set at **50 per cent** of the monthly benefit she would receive if taking leave.
- The same condition applies for self-employed mothers should they decide to start working before the end of the paid parental leave.

Transferable period of parental leave

- Paid parental leave can be transferred to the father/grandparent if they have paid social insurance for at least 12 months.
- In Bulgaria parental leave **cannot be used at the same time** by the mother and the father or one of the grandparents.
- Parental leave ends if the child is enrolled in a public childcare institution. The rationale for this is that the leave is given to the mother in order to ensure that she will provide permanent care for the child.



Parenting Leave Policy in Bulgaria – Summary of eligibility criteria

- **Who is eligible for paid parenting leaves in Bulgaria?**
- Employees and self-employed parents (due to conditions related to paid social insurance for 12 months)
- Non-citizens (should have official status and paid social insurance contributions for 12 months regardless of the country; **excludes refugees and asylum seekers**)
- In case of paternity leave and transfer of parenting leave marital or cohabiting partners living together; **not regulated for same-sex couple.**
- Parenting leave arrangements for **single parents** is not fully arranged.





Measuring policy outcomes



How to calculate uptake rates?

- Uptake Rates can be calculated on national /regional/ organizational level:
- Basic formulas:
- Uptake Rate (total) = $\frac{\text{Number of eligible employees who took parental leave for certain period}}{\text{Total number of eligible employees for this period}} \times 100$
- More informative if calculated by gender:
- Uptake Rate (female) = $\frac{\text{Women who took leave for certain period}}{\text{Total number of eligible women for certain period}} \times 100$
- Uptake Rate (male) = $\frac{\text{Men who took leave for certain period}}{\text{Total number of eligible men for certain period}} \times 100$

How to calculate uptake rates?

- Uptake Rates by length of the leave - Full vs. Partial entitlement:

- *Full Uptake Rate* (total or by gender) = $\frac{\text{Employees taking the full entitlement in certain period}}{\text{Total number of eligible persons for certain period}} \times 100$

- *Partial Uptake Rate* (total or by gender) = $\frac{\text{Employees taking any leave for certain period}}{\text{Total number of eligible persons in certain period}} \times 100$

- On organizational level:

- *Full Uptake Rate* (total or by gender) = $\frac{\text{Employees taking the full entitlement in certain period}}{\text{Total number of eligible employees in certain period}} \times 100$

- *Partial Uptake Rate* (total or by gender) = $\frac{\text{Employees taking any leave in certain period}}{\text{Total number of eligible employee in certain period}} \times 100$

What do we know about uptake rates?

- In the case of Bulgaria:
- Need for integration of different statistical data sources, e.g. administrative and vital statistics. Harmonization of the definitions and methodology across countries.
- Problems with the target population - requires data on national or organization level that include breakdowns by gender, eligibility, and/or type and length of the leave.
- Problems with the time period – annual rate.
- In Bulgaria on data on the annual number of users (total, male/female, financial compensations, and some other information) is collected and made publicly available by NSSI.
- On organizational level – there is no practice to collect data on PPL uptake among employees. There may be available as internal administrative information, but it is not collected for statistical/ analytical purposes.





Inequality-Reducing and Inequality-Generating Elements of Parental Leave Design in Bulgaria

Some results from the “Study on the Attitudes of Parents and Employers to Parental Leave in the Context of Social Inequalities and Social Sustainability”



Parenting Leave Policies in Bulgaria - Gender and Social Inequalities

- Research on PPL in Bulgaria is limited. There is ongoing study on PPL and social sustainability under the current COST action:
- Project “Parental Leave Policies and Practices in Bulgaria: A Study on the Attitudes of Parents and Employers to Parental Leave in the Context of Social Inequalities and Social Sustainability” (2024/26), funded by the Bulgarian National Science Fund (№ КП-06-КОСТ/6/21.05.2024). (Institute for Population and Human studies – BAS)
- The project includes an online survey with men and women who used parenting leave in last eight years, in-depth interviews with parents and in-depth interviews with employers/ representatives of big companies and state enterprises about the social programs focused on work-life balance and support of employees with children.

Table 1. Factors associated with mother's decision to interrupt or transfer parental leave due to an earlier return to work

	Model 1. Only mother worked before childbirth		Model 2. Only father worked before childbirth		Model 3. Net effect of parental employment before childbirth		Model 4. Interaction of parental employment status before childbirth	
transfer	Odds ratio	Sig.	Odds ratio	Sig.	Odds ratio	Sig.	Odds ratio	Sig.
Number of children								
1 child (ref.)	1		1		1		1	
2 children	0.70	**	0.70	**	0.69	**	0.68	**
3+ children	1.39		1.40		1.44		1.44	
Partnership status								
Married (ref.)	1		1		1		1	
In cohabitation	0.99		0.950		0.96		0.94	
Place of residence								
Big city (ref.)	1		1		1		1	
Small town/village	0.71	**	0.71	**	0.70	**	0.71	**
Material status of the family								
Good	1		1		1		1	
Average	0.69		0.67	*	0.68	*	0.68	*
Low	0.71	**	0.70	**	0.70	**	0.69	**
Mother's employment status at birth								
Employed (ref.)	1				1			
Not employed (in education, unemployed, econ. inactive)	1.28				1.15			
Father's employment status at birth								
Employed (ref.)			1		1			
Not employed (in education, unemployed, econ. inactive)			2.07	**	2.03	**		
Employment status of parents at birth								
Both parents worked (ref.)							1	
Only mother worked							2.59	**
Only father worked							1.37	
Both parents didn't work							0.77	
Woman's carrier orientations								
Not strong (ref.)	1		1		1		1	
Strong	3.23	***	3.34	***	3.31	***	3.38	***
Constant			0.55	***	0.56	***	0.56	***
N	923			921		916		916
Log likelihood	-541.86			-535.60		-533.63		-532.28
Pseudo R2	0.05			0.05		0.05		0.05

Source: Dimitrova, E., Kotzeva, T., Nenova, G. (forthcoming). Parental leave policies through the sustainability lens – Bulgarian parents' perspectives. In: Koslovski, A., A.-Z. Duvander, A. Douset (Eds). Parenting, Care, and Sustainability: Theoretical and Policy Perspectives.

Results

- ⑩ The transfer of the leave and women's earlier return to paid work is less likely among women two or more children; living on small residential places; from low income households; women with stronger career orientations are also more likely to transfer the leave.
- ⑩ There we see a pattern of **polarization** between high income HHs women and those from lower income HH.
- ⑩ In case the father is unemployed or economically inactive, the women is more likely to transfer the leave and return to paid job.

Table 2. Factors associated with women's intentions to return to paid work/starting a new job after the end of parental leave; perceived discrimination at workplace against mothers with young children; women's concerns about taking a leave for a sick child; employers' refusals of taking a leave for a sick child

1-Uncertain/discriminated/anxious/got refusals	Model 1. Uncertainty about returning to/starting a job after PL		Model 2. Discrimination at work place of women with small children		Model 3. Anxiety to use sick leave for sick child		Model 4. Employer's refusal to use parental leave	
	Odds ratio	Sig.	Odds ratio	Sig.	Odds ratio	Sig.	Odds ratio	Sig.
Covariates:								
Number of children								
1 child (ref.)	1		1		1		1	
2 children	0.79	*	0.95		0.99		0.73	**
3+ children	1.40		1.57		1.48		0.73	
Partnership status								
Married (ref.)	1		1		1		1	
In cohabitation	1.17		1.07		1.06		1.14	
No partner (separated, divorcer, widow)	1.08		1.24		1.68	*	1.33	
Place of residence								
Big city (ref.)	1		1		1		1	
Small town/village	1.11		0.94		0.87		0.89	
Mother's education								
Secondary or lower (ref.)	1		1		1		1	
University or college degree	0.68	**	1.04		0.90		0.62	**
Mother's employment status at birth								
Employed (ref.)	1		1		1		1	
Not employed (in education, unemployed, econ. inactive)	1.96	**	1.59	*	1.55	*	1.35	
Father's employment status at birth								
Employed (ref.)	1		1		1		1	
Not employed (in education, unemployed, econ. inactive)	0.84		1.50		0.53	**	1.20	
Monthly income of HH								
Below 3,500 BGN (ref.)	1		1		1		1	
Above 3,500 BGN	0.69	**	0.59	***	0.67	**	0.67	**
Constant	0.64	0.024	1.02	0.924	2.16	0.000	1.16	0.470
N	1235			1013		1121		872
Log likelihood	-711.17			-688.74		-719.58		-572.01
Pseudo R2	0.03			0.02		0.02		0.03

Source: Dimitrova, E., Kotzeva, T., Nenova, G. (forthcoming). Parental leave policies through the sustainability lens – Bulgarian parents' perspectives. In: Koslovski, A., A.-Z. Duvander, A. Douset (Eds). Parenting, Care, and Sustainability: Theoretical and Policy Perspectives.

Results

- ⑩ Highly educated women are more certain that they will start working again after the end of the parental leave.
- ⑩ Lowly educated women experience higher insecurity that they would start working again after the end of leave.
- ⑩ Discrimination at workplace due to care responsibilities is more likely to happen among lowly educated women.
- ⑩ Anxiety to use a leave for a sick child is less likely to be happen among women from high income households.
- ⑩ Single mothers have more concerns to take a leave for a sick child.

Table 3. Factors associated with (non)use of PPL by fathers during the first or the second year after birth of the child

	Model 1. Demographic and Socioeconomic Factors		Model 2. Demographic, Socioeconomic Factors & Values		Model 3. Demographic, Socioeconomic Factors & Values & Telework	
	Odds ratio	Sig.	Odds ratio	Sig.	Odds ratio	Sig.
1- PL uptake						
Number of children						
1 child (ref.)	1		1		1	
2+ children	0.67	*	0.65	**	0.66	*
Place of residence						
Big city (ref.)	1		1		1	
Small town/village	0.73		0.74		0.75	
Mother's education						
Secondary or lower (ref.)	1		1		1	
University or college degree	0.84		0.78		1.16	
Father's education						
Secondary or lower (ref.)	1		1		1	
University or college degree	0.83		0.84		0.81	
Mother's employment status at birth						
Employed (ref.)	1		1		1	
Not employed (in education, unemployed, econ. inactive)	1.31		1.16		1.16	
Net monthly income of the HH						
Below 3,500 BGN (ref.)	1		1		1	
Above 3,500 BGN	0.69	*	0.69	*	0.71	
Parental leave is for women						
No (ref.)			1		1	
Yes			0.24	***	0.26	***
Father works remotely during the PL						
No (ref.)					1	
Yes					1.99	**
Constant	1.01		1.50		1.36	
N		453		453		453
Log likelihood		-284.71		-268.59		-266.07
Pseudo R2		0.02		0.08		0.09

Sig: *** $p \leq 0.01$; ** $0.01 < p \leq 0.05$; * $0.05 < p \leq 0.10$

Source: Kotzeva, T., Dimitrova, E., Ilieva, K. (under review). Changing fatherhood: Social Differences in Parental Leave Uptake and Childcare Involvement among Bulgarian men. Social Inclusion. Special Issue on Involved Parenthood in Eastern European Countries.

Results

- ⑩ The results from the models about the factors associated with the use of parental leave by the fathers shows are the following:
- ⑩ Fathers with two or more children are less likely to use parental leave.
- ⑩ High income of HH is associated with lower likelihood of parental leave uptake by the fathers.
- ⑩ Men who agree that “Parental leave is more for women/mothers” are less likely to use parental leave.
- ⑩ Men who worked from home (telework) during the first or the second year after childbirth are more likely to use parental leave.

Factors associated with stereotypes/attitudes about father's use of PPL	"A man is as capable as a woman of caring for his baby/young child and building an emotional bond with them"				"It is very important for the development of a baby/small child that father spends as much time as possible with them"				"Men don't know how to take care of a baby or a small child"				"Families in which men use parental leave are more connected"			
	Model 1a. Net effects		Model 1b. Interaction between father's education and uptake of parental leave		Model 2a. Net effects		Model 2b. Interaction between father's education and uptake of parental leave		Model 3a. Net effects		Model 3b. Interaction between father's education and uptake of parental leave		Model 4a. Net effects		Model 4b. Interaction between father's education and uptake of parental leave	
	OR	Sig.	OR	Sig.	OR	Sig.	OR	Sig.	OR	Sig.	OR	Sig.	OR	Sig.	OR	Sig.
Age																
18-45 yrs (ref.)	1		1		1		1		1		1		1		1	
46+ yrs	1.37		1.37		1.37		1.37		1.12		1.12		1.32		1.32	
Number of children																
1 child (ref.)	1		1		1		1		1		1		1		1	
2+ children	0.66	**	0.66	**	0.58	**	0.58	**	0.99		0.99		0.65	**	0.65	**
Father's education																
Secondary or lower (ref.)	1				1				1				1			
University or college degree	1.24				1.14				1.23				1.65	**		
Place of residence																
Big city (ref.)	1		1		1		1		1		1		1		1	
Small town/village	1.15		1.15		0.69		0.69		0.64	*	0.64	*	1.2		1.21	
Net monthly income of the HH																
Below 1 790 Euro (ref.)	1		1		1		1		1		1		1		1	
Above 1 791 Euro	0.98		0.98		1.2		1.18		0.8		0.81		0.87		0.88	
Use of parental leave																
No (ref.)	1				1				1				1			
Yes	2.22	***			3	***			0.58	**			0.65	*		
Father's education*Use of parental leave																
Secondary or lower & not used parental leave (ref.)			1				1				1				1	
Secondary or lower & used parental leave			2.22	**			4.56	***			0.47	*			0.49	*
University or college degree & not used parental leave			1.24				1.61				1.02				1.3	
University or college degree & used parental leave			2.75	**			3.83	***			0.66				0.98	
Constant	0.59	**	0.59	*	1.71	**	1.41		0.48	**	0.53	**	0.85		0.98	
N	452		452		449		449		453		453		386		386	

Results

- ⑩ The main results show that regardless their education men who used paternity or paid parental leave are more likely to agree with the following statements:
- ⑩ "A man is as capable as a woman of caring for his baby/young child and building an emotional bond with them"
- ⑩ "It is very important for the development of a baby/small child that father spends as much time as possible with them"
- ⑩ "Families in which men use parental leave are more connected"

- ⑩ ... and to reject the statement that:
- ⑩ "Men don't know how to take care of a baby or a small child".



Final Discussion



Parenting Leave Policy in Bulgaria - Summary

- In Bulgaria parenting leave is long (until the child turns two years) but may have a negative effect of women's employment and career prospective, esp. for highly educated women.
- The uptake of 15-day paternity leave is relatively high among men but the new leave close to "father's quota" is still rarely used by fathers. The reasons are related to concerns about decrease of family income, lack of information, cultural stereotypes about men's role in the family, less family friendly work culture, esp. in the private sector.
- Flexibility in the use of parenting leave in Bulgaria is relatively well developed but practices of transferring the leave to the fathers are less frequent due to concerns about loss of income in the family (usually men's earnings are higher), social expectations that mother should be the primary care-giver for a very young child, stereotypes about men's caring capacities, more conservative work culture encouraging the role of the men as the main financial provider in the family; prevalence of small firms that cannot afford employees; longer absence from work, etc.



Parenting Leave Policy in Bulgaria - Summary

- The second year of parental leave is paid at a fixed amount which is quite low compared to the relatively generous compensation during the first year (maternity leave). It is also kept at the same level for several years not taking into account the changing economic situation, inflation and increasing prices in the country.
- This arrangement provokes a conflict between the cultural expectation that mother should stay at home as long as she can and care for the child (i.e. at least two years) and the low payment that she receives in the second year.
- Low payment in the second year causes financial problems in the family which affects negatively the uptake of parental leave by the father. This is a barrier for gender equality in the PPL scheme in the country since it conflates with the income decrease, traditional family culture and the 'new' social norms encouraging fathers' involvement on childcare by taking paternity/ parental leave.



Parenting Leave Policy in Bulgaria - Summary

- In terms of gender inequalities women and men, esp. with low education, from ethnic minority, unemployed and economically inactive parents are eligible only to low paid fixed rate benefits which is means tested based on the monthly household income for a particular time period. The amount of payment is insufficient for an appropriate care for a child but still due to the large share of population living in poverty in the country many women (mainly from Roma ethnicity) receive these payments.
- The flexibility of paid parenting leave scheme in the country is relatively well developed but there are limitations. Options for interruption or transfer of leave to the father or some of the grand-parents are available but it is less frequently used. Financial concerns and cultural stereotypes affect this practice as well as gender pay gap and the requirement for employment of the grand-parent.
- The leave scheme is not also inclusive with respect to same-sex couples and some groups of migrants (refugees and asylum-seekers).

Parenting Leave Policy in Bulgaria - Summary

- The length of paternity leave is quite short. It is 15 days that should be taken in the time immediately after the birth of the child in one go. However, the data show that many fathers use this option in order to support and help the mother in the first weeks after birth of the child.
- Currently some form of ‘father’s quota’ is available in the PPL scheme in the country: “Paternity leave for raising a child up to 8 years of age“. The new leave aims to encourage father’s parental leave uptake. However, this option is rarely used due to lack of information, financial concerns and cultural stereotypes.

Parenting Leave Policy in Bulgaria - Summary

- The work culture in the country also affects the uptake (esp. by fathers) and the flexibility in use (the transfer/interruption of the leave by the mothers). The low share of part-time jobs and options for telework/work from home, the instability of jobs, competitiveness esp. in the private sectors affects negatively work-life balance of women with young children and the leave uptake by the fathers.
- Practices of discrimination of working mothers with young children, fears and concerns to use leave for a sick child affects also the reconciliation of paid work and childcare among women. Women with stronger carrier orientations who want to continue working soon after child birth do not have options to do it since the flexibility in use/sharing in the PPL scheme is quite limited.



Parenting Leave Policy in Bulgaria - Summary

- The availability of formal childcare (crèches and kindergartens), esp. in the big cities, also affects the use of paid parental leave. In the big cities the places in kindergartens are limited which imposes the need for women to stay longer at home to care for the child.
- In the very small residential place formal childcare may not be available at all. The use of early childcare services (crèches) is limited in the country not only due to the lack of places but also due to cultural stereotypes that the women should care for the young child for long periods of time. Quality of services may also be a reason for low rates of use of crèches and well as unaffordability and high prices of informal child care.
- In the general public attitudes the parental leave period is undervalued since the caring role of the mother is taken for granted and paid work is more appreciated than “reproductive labour”.

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