



# Mapping the Unknown: Research Gaps in Parenting Leave Inequality Research in Europe

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## Editors

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## Executive Summary

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This report was produced within COST Action CA21150 “Parental Leave Policies and Social Sustainability (Sustainability@Leave)”, Working Group 2, and provides a systematic assessment of knowledge gaps in European research on parenting leave and social inequalities.

Parenting leave policies constitute a key pillar of social sustainability, with demonstrated relevance for gender equality, labour market participation, health, and child well-being. While European research on parenting leave has expanded significantly over recent decades, the available evidence remains fragmented and uneven. Drawing on a narrative review of more than 400 publications from 24 European countries, this report maps which dimensions of inequality have been most extensively studied and identifies where substantial blind spots persist across countries, social groups, and levels of analysis.

The review shows that research has focused predominantly on gender, particularly mothers’ employment trajectories and fathers’ take-up of leave. By contrast, other crucial dimensions of inequality, including health, disability, well-being, citizenship, ethnicity, non-standard employment, and diverse family forms, remain marginal in the literature. In addition, most studies implicitly centre on parents in stable, standard employment, resulting in limited evidence on the experiences of precarious workers, the self-employed, migrants, and low-income families. These biases restrict the capacity of current research to evaluate whether parenting leave policies reduce inequalities broadly or primarily benefit already advantaged groups.

The report makes a central contribution by systematically linking policy design features (eligibility rules, benefit levels, individualisation, flexibility) with policy outcomes (leave take-up and longer-term inequality effects) and by highlighting the need for more intersectional, multi-level, and comparative research. It demonstrates that although a gender lens remains central to parental leave policies, future research should adopt a broader perspective to examine how multiple inequalities intersect. Strengthening data infrastructures, improving the measurement of leave use, and integrating qualitative and quantitative approaches are essential for advancing policy-relevant evidence.

Policy recommendations emphasise the importance of inclusive parenting leave designs that accommodate diverse employment trajectories, ensure adequate income replacement, and support individual entitlements for both parents. The report also underlines the need for systematic monitoring of the EU Work–Life Balance Directive, not only in terms of legal compliance but with regard to its distributional effects across social groups and countries. By identifying where evidence is missing, this report provides a strategic agenda for future research aimed at improving the inequality-reducing potential of parenting leave policies in Europe.





## Key Messages

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- 1. Policy design matters, but effects are not automatic.**

Parenting leave influences inequalities primarily through behavioural responses shaped by incentives and constraints. Generous earnings-related benefits, individual and non-transferable entitlements, and flexible arrangements are consistently associated with higher paternal take-up and reduced gender inequalities. However, formal entitlements do not guarantee equal outcomes if workplace practices, household income structures, and gender norms constrain effective use.
- 2. Reducing gender inequality requires shifting from “formal equality” to “effective equality.”**

Many Member States offer formally gender-neutral rights, yet women remain the primary users and men often limit leave to minimum quotas. Policies should therefore be assessed by take-up patterns and consequences, not by statutory provisions alone. Monitoring frameworks should prioritise behavioural indicators of equality, including fathers’ take-up beyond minimum entitlements.
- 3. Eligibility & access to parenting leave are central to SDG 10, but remain the weakest link.**

The inequality-reducing potential of parenting leave is undermined where access is tied to standard, stable employment. Contribution requirements, employment history conditions, and exclusions of non-standard workers create structural gaps in protection that disproportionately affect low-income parents, migrants, and precarious workers. If parenting leave is to function as a tool for reduced inequalities, it must be designed and evaluated as a social right that reaches diverse employment trajectories.
- 4. Workplace practices can enable or block policy objectives.**

Employer behaviour and organisational cultures mediate between statutory entitlements and actual use. Ideal worker norms, limited managerial support, and sectoral staffing constraints often discourage fathers from taking leave and can reinforce gendered inequalities. Policy implementation should therefore be complemented by measures that increase organisational accountability, transparency, and support for leave use, including in smaller firms and precarious sectors.
- 5. Health & well-being effects underline the public-health relevance of inclusive leave schemes.**

Evidence suggests that paid and adequately compensated leave supports maternal and child health, while insufficient compensation and restrictive access can reinforce health inequalities. Parenting leave should therefore be considered not only as family and labour market policy but as an inequality-sensitive public health instrument, with benefits and risks distributed along socio-economic lines.
- 6. A stronger evidence base and monitoring are required to approximate sustainability goals.**

The report identifies substantial data gaps, including limited cross-national longitudinal data and insufficient differentiation of leave types in many datasets. To evaluate whether policies contribute to SDGs, Europe needs improved measurement and continuous monitoring of distributional outcomes, especially under the EU Work-Life Balance Directive. Monitoring should capture inequalities by gender, class, employment status, education, migration background, and family form, and track outcomes over time.



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# 1. Introduction

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Parenting leave, understood as an umbrella term encompassing all types of leave that enable parents to care for their children following birth, constitutes a central component of contemporary family policy frameworks (Dobrotić et al., 2022, p. 4; see also Meil et al., 2025). These policies comprise a range of statutory entitlements to maternity, paternity, and parental leave, for which binding minimum standards have recently been established across EU Member States. Parenting leave schemes vary considerably across countries in their design, encompassing family-shared or individual entitlements that may be transferable or non-transferable between parents. By providing paid time off and employment protection, parenting leave policies represent a crucial pillar of social security for parents with young children (Dobrotić et al., 2024).

Across Europe, parenting leave is widely recognised as a key policy instrument not only for supporting parents with a newborn, but also for addressing broader societal challenges, such as demographic change, through a forward-looking policy lens. A core objective of parenting leave schemes remains the reduction of inequalities between parents and non-parents or the mitigation of gender inequalities. By targeting the social dimensions of both economic and gendered disparities, parenting leave policies are closely aligned with several of the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

First, SDG 10 (Reduced Inequalities): paid parenting leave contributes to reducing disparities between parents and non-parents by providing income support and employment protection.

Second, SDG 8 (Decent Work and Economic Growth): promoting secure employment trajectories, adequate financial compensation, and flexible working conditions reflects key targets associated with this goal (European Social Fund Plus, 2022).

Third, SDG 5 (Gender Equality): measures aimed at redistributing unpaid care work and advancing gender equality in the labour market directly support progress towards this goal.

The Work–Life Balance Directive (European Union, 2019; Directive (EU) 2019/1158) constitutes a central policy intervention at the EU level designed to strengthen these dimensions of social sustainability. By establishing minimum standards for paternity, parental, and caregiver leave, guaranteeing individual and non-transferable entitlements for each parent, and promoting flexible working arrangements, the Directive seeks to reduce inequalities both within and across EU Member States.

Research confirms that parental leave policies, by providing paid time off and employment protection, constitute a crucial pillar of social security for parents of young children (Dobrotić et al., 2024). However, the extent to which parenting leave policies can reduce existing inequalities remains uneven. Significant cross-national differences persist across Europe in the institutional design, implementation, and accessibility of leave systems. These variations reflect deeper divergences in welfare state regimes, labour market structures, cultural gender norms, and levels of public investment in care infrastructure. Consequently, the effectiveness of parenting leave policies is closely shaped by the broader socio-institutional contexts in which they are embedded. Parenting leave entitlements range from maternity to paternity and parental leave and can take various forms, including family-shared or individual arrangements that may be transferable or non-transferable between parents. These entitlements may apply universally or be restricted to specific groups, for example depending on employment status or gender. Benefit levels during leave also vary substantially, from low flat-rate payments to earnings-related compensation that fully replaces prior income. At the same time, inequalities arise within countries,



manifesting in differential access to leave entitlements, variation in the generosity of leave duration and benefit levels, and persistent gendered patterns of leave take-up. Taken together, these cross-national and within-country disparities raise the central question of which specific design elements of parenting leave policies, including duration, benefit generosity, gender-exclusive entitlements, and eligibility criteria, are most effective in reducing social and gender inequalities.

Up to now, Empirical evidence demonstrates that well-compensated, non-transferable entitlements to parental leave encourages fathers to take leave, thereby alleviating women's care burden and advancing gender equality both at home and in the labour market (European Institute for Gender Equality, 2024). Parental leave provisions also facilitate mothers' return to paid employment while maintaining fathers' connection to the workforce, thus supporting more equitable labour market participation (ibid.). In practice, however, transferable leave is predominantly taken by mothers (Han, 2024), often reinforcing gendered professional disadvantages (Torres et al., 2024). While gender inequality has been the central focus of much research on parenting leave, other dimensions of inequality such as socioeconomic status also play a decisive role in shaping leave uptake. Social disparities may arise when eligibility is not universal or when benefit levels and leave durations differ across income or occupational groups. Recent studies have therefore increasingly examined the intersection of gender and social inequalities in parental leave use, highlighting how access and uptake are jointly shaped by gender, socio-economic position, and institutional design (Dobrotić & Blum, 2020; Picken & Janta, 2019; Jou et al., 2020; Nygård & Duvander, 2021).

Previous research provides valuable insights into how parenting leave policies can contribute to broader goals of social sustainability. However, further research is needed to better assess the effects of different parenting leave objectives and design features, as well as to examine the extent to which current studies have addressed all relevant dimensions of socially undesirable inequalities. To date, research on parenting leave has predominantly focused on employed parents, resulting in significant blind spots regarding the experiences of self-employed individuals, students, migrants, and unemployed parents (Dobrotić & Blum, 2020). Moreover, persistent disparities remain in the recognition and accommodation of diverse family forms, including lone-parent, adoptive, and same-sex families, within parenting leave policy frameworks, reflecting restrictive eligibility rules and heteronormative policy assumptions (Picken & Janta, 2019; Jou et al., 2020; Nygård & Duvander, 2021).

Determining which policy designs are most effective in reducing inequalities requires systematic and targeted research. This report therefore addresses the following central question: **Which inequalities have been most extensively studied in European research on parenting leave, and where do significant gaps in the evidence base remain?**

To address this question, the report synthesises existing research on paid parenting leave with a particular focus on inequalities and systematically identifies gaps in the evidence that are relevant for policy design and implementation. It first outlines key theoretical approaches linking parenting leave and inequality (Chapter 2), followed by a concise state-of-the-art overview of the literature examining inequalities in policy design, take-up, and accessibility (Chapter 3). The report then presents a narrative literature review (Baumeister & Leary, 1997) of empirical research from the past decade, highlighting key findings and policy-relevant evidence (Chapter 4). Finally, it identifies major gaps in current research (Chapter 5) and concludes with implications and recommendations for future policy-oriented research (Chapter 6).

The overall aim of the report is to identify underexplored dimensions of inequality embedded in contemporary European parenting leave policies and their patterns of use, and to inform future policy development by highlighting areas where evidence remains limited.



## 2. Parenting Leave Policies and Inequalities: Theoretical Perspectives

Sonja Blum, Thordis Reimer

### 2.1. Parenting leave policy and the welfare state

State family policies, including parenting leave policies, intervene directly in the distribution of resources, time, and risks across social groups and therefore play a central role in shaping social inequalities (Reimer, 2013). Motivated by constitutional, economic, and socio-political considerations, these policies aim to influence existing social and economic conditions and to mitigate socially undesirable inequalities within societies (Rürup & Gruescu, 2003). Parenting leave regulations constitute a core component of family policy regimes, as they safeguard employment continuity around childbirth and provide income support that enables parents to reduce or temporarily suspend labour market participation during periods of intensive caregiving. By partially compensating income loss and protecting job security, *paid* parenting leave entitlements help families manage both the direct and indirect costs associated with raising children (Thévenon, 2011; Budig et al., 2012) and thereby contribute to reducing inequalities between parents and non-parents. Beyond these protective and compensatory functions, parenting leave policies are also designed to shape broader societal outcomes, most notably gender equality. In this sense, parenting leave regulations serve both *immediate objectives* such as income protection, maternal and child health, and job security and *forward-looking goals* related to labour market participation and the gendered division of paid and unpaid work.

The effects of parenting leave policies on inequality are not automatic but depend on specific design features that shape the incentives and constraints faced by parents. From a causal perspective, parenting leave policy design shapes parental behaviour by modifying the opportunity costs of leave-taking, reallocating financial risks within households, and signalling normative expectations regarding caregiving (OECD, 2025). A central mechanism operates through the generosity of income replacement. Benefit levels below full wage replacement increase the financial costs associated with leave-taking and disproportionately discourage the higher-earning parent, most often the father, from making use of parental leave. As a consequence, mothers tend to take longer leave spells, reinforcing gendered patterns of labour market interruption and contributing to cumulative disadvantages in earnings, career progression, and pension entitlements over the life course (Budig et al., 2012; Gangl & Ziefle, 2015). In this way, insufficient benefit generosity provides a key causal pathway through which parental leave design contributes to persistent gender inequalities in both paid and unpaid work.

A second key design dimension concerns the extent to which parental leave entitlements are individualised and non-transferable. Policies that allocate leave to the household rather than to individuals tend to reinforce intra-household specialisation, as families rationally assign leave to the parent with lower earnings potential, consistent with economic theories of household decision-making (Becker, 1981; Datta Gupta et al., 2008). By contrast, non-transferable or “use-it-or-lose-it” entitlements for each parent increase fathers’ leave-taking by raising the opportunity costs of non-use and by signalling normative expectations regarding paternal caregiving (O’Brien & Moss, 2010; Duvander & Johansson, 2012). Empirical evidence from Nordic countries demonstrates that gender-equal and individualised leave entitlements are causally associated with a more balanced division of parental leave within couples and increased paternal involvement in childcare (Duvander et al., 2019). The case of Iceland, which introduced symmetrical and non-transferable leave quotas for mothers and fathers combined with earnings-related



benefits, illustrates how policy design can substantially alter leave-taking behaviour and reduce gender asymmetries in caregiving (Eydal & Gíslason, 2014).

At the supranational level, the EU Directive on Work–Life Balance (European Union, 2019; Directive (EU) 2019/1158) establishes binding minimum standards for parenting-related leave across all EU Member States. The Directive sets out requirements concerning employment rights and social protection for parents, with the overarching objective of promoting gender equality both in the labour market and within families. It introduces individual entitlements to paternity leave, parental leave, and carers' leave, and provides for flexible working arrangements aimed at facilitating a more equitable distribution of care responsibilities between women and men. The Directive reaffirms each parent's entitlement to at least four months of parental leave, as previously established under Directive 2010/18/EU (European Union, 2010), while strengthening its gender-equality dimension by requiring that at least two months of this leave be non-transferable for each parent. To enhance incentives for leave uptake, particularly among fathers, the Directive further requires that an adequate allowance be provided during the leave period, sufficient to ensure a "decent living standard" (European Union, 2019; Directive (EU) 2019/1158, Article 8). While Member States retain discretion with regard to national terminology and institutional arrangements, they were required to bring their legal frameworks into compliance with these minimum standards by August 2022.

Despite the existence of this common EU framework, substantial cross-national variation persists in the design of parenting leave schemes across Member States. From a causal standpoint, this variation is highly consequential, as it implies that parents across countries face markedly different incentive structures and constraints when deciding whether and how to take leave. Differences are evident in eligibility criteria, the generosity of benefits - both in terms of duration and income replacement rates- and the extent to which leave entitlements are individualised and reserved exclusively for each parent. Across countries, parenting leave may be unpaid, paid at a flat rate, or earnings-related, with important implications for the affordability of leave-taking and for gendered patterns of use. Similarly, the total duration of well-paid parenting leave ranges widely, from no paid leave in some countries to up to two years in others, such as Romania and Hungary. In addition, some countries allow parenting leave to be taken on a part-time basis, enabling parents to combine paid employment and caregiving simultaneously, while others restrict leave to full-time arrangements. These institutional differences shape not only the feasibility of leave-taking but also the distribution of leave between parents, particularly in dual-earner households.

To illustrate this diversity across Europe, Table 1 (see next pages) provides a comparative overview of key parenting leave policy design elements across selected European countries, focusing on the duration of leave, benefit levels, and the allocation of entitlements by gender. To enhance cross-national comparability, the table refers exclusively to different-sex parents (both citizens and employees on permanent contracts) of a first, single child who have been employed for at least one year prior to childbirth and for whom both parents and the child are in good health. While this approach cannot capture all country-specific contingencies, it enables a systematic comparison of core design features relevant for assessing differences.

The literature has extensively documented that such cross-national differences in parenting leave design are associated with a range of broader societal outcomes. More generous and accessible leave schemes have been linked to higher fertility rates (Thomas et al., 2022), lower infant mortality (Khan, 2020), and more gender-equal divisions of paid and unpaid work (Gornick & Meyers, 2003). These findings underscore the importance of policy design as a mediating mechanism through which parenting leave regulations translate into behavioural responses and, ultimately, into different inequality outcomes across countries.



**Table 1:** Parental leave policy design by country (EU, selected countries): duration, payments & entitlements for different-sex first-time couples

Country	Duration				Gender-related entitlements			Parenting leave benefits		
	Paid maternity leave (weeks)	Paid paternity leave (weeks)	Well-paid parental leave <sup>1</sup> (weeks)	Child age at maximum of well-paid leave period for the family (months)	Exclusive and non-transferable well-paid parental leave entitlements for fathers (weeks)	Sum of exclusive leave for fathers (weeks)	Parents may take well-paid parental leave part-time at the same time (yes/no)	Benefit level (% of former income) maternity leave   paternity leave   parental leave	Max. amount for parental leave benefit (yes/no)	Min. amount for parental leave benefit (yes/no)
Austria	16	≈ 4	≈ 61	24	≈ 9	≈ 13	✗	100%   flatrate   80% or flatrate <sup>2</sup>	✓	✓
Croatia	≈ 30	4	≈ 35	14	≈ 17,5	≈ 21,5	✓	100%   100%   100%	✓	✓
Cyprus	22	2	18	≈ 8,5	9	11	✗	72%   72%   72%	✗	✗
Denmark	14	2	28	≈ 8,5	9	11	✓	100%   100%   100%	✓	✗
Estonia	≈ 14	≈ 4	68	≈ 16,5	0	≈ 4	✓	100%   100%   100%	✓	✓
Finland	≈ 7	0	≈ 51	≈ 12	≈ 14	≈ 14	✗	32,5%-90%   N/A   40%-90%	✗	✓
France	16	4	≈ 52	≈ 14,3	0	4	✓	100%   100%   flatrate	flatrate	flatrate
Germany	14	0	≈ 61	14	≈9	≈ 9	✓	100%   N/A   65%-100%	✓	✓
Greece	17	2	0	≈ 2	0	2	N/A	100%   100%   flatrate	flatrate	flatrate
Hungary	24	2	24	24	0	2	✓	100%   100%   70%	✓	✓
Ireland	26	2	18	≈ 9,5	9	11	✓	flatrate   flatrate   flatrate	flatrate	flatrate
Spain	16	16	0	≈7	0	16	N/A	100%   100%   N/A	✗	✓
Sweden	2	≈2	56	≈16	≈13	≈15	✓	78%   78%   78%	✓	✓

Source: 21st International Review on Leave Policies and Related Research 2025

Note: This overview does not capture all details of country-specific policies. Differences may exist, for example regarding additional leave for multiple births or other special circumstances. Full table with all European countries available at the CA21150 website. More detailed information on parenting leave policies is available in the Country Reports of the International Network on Leave Policies & Research (<https://www.leavenetwork.org/annual-review-reports/country-reports/>). Comparative international analyses can be found in the 2025 Review (Dobrotić et al., 2025).

<sup>1</sup> Not considered: parental leave with benefits at a relatively low flatrate (minimum wage level or below)

<sup>2</sup> Childcare benefit



Importantly, statutory parental leave entitlements alone do not guarantee gender-equal outcomes. Legal rights must translate into actual take-up to affect inequalities. This distinction between formal entitlements and behavioural outcomes is reflected in comparative measurement frameworks: the Gender Equality Index developed by the European Institute for Gender Equality focuses on gender differences in the use of parental and care-related leave rather than on the mere existence of statutory entitlements (EIGE, 2023). This approach acknowledges that policy effects depend on how individuals respond to the incentives embedded in policy design.

Beyond economic considerations, employers and workplace culture constitute key determinants of fathers' take-up of parental leave. Organisational gender norms function as informal institutions (Acker, 1990) that signal whether paternal leave-taking is considered acceptable within the workplace. Empirical evidence shows that many fathers fear negative career consequences when taking parental leave beyond the non-transferable minimum, particularly in work environments characterised by ideal worker norms and limited managerial support (Bygren & Duvander, 2006; Haas & Hwang, 2008; Reimer, 2019). As a result, workplace cultures may undermine the effective use of formally gender-equal leave entitlements, thereby constraining the gender-equality potential of parenting leave policies.

Additional inequalities arising from differential access to parenting leave are discussed in the following chapter.

## **2.2. Inclusiveness and inequality dimensions in parenting leave policies**

Over recent years, inequalities have become increasingly central in research on parenting leave policies and the associated leave rights of parents. These inequalities manifest in multiple ways, including unequal access to leave entitlements and differential effects of leave schemes across social groups. Accordingly, two analytical perspectives can be distinguished: a policy design perspective, which focuses on how institutional arrangements structure access and rights, and a policy outcome perspective, which examines patterns of leave use and their social consequences. From both perspectives, inequalities related to parenting leave constitute a key concern.

First, from a *policy-design perspective*, there are existing inequalities when it comes to who is given access to leave rights. As Dobrotić and Blum (2020) have argued, research on leave policies focused for a relatively long time on the compensation dimension of these social rights (benefit scope), such as how long a certain benefit is being paid or the benefit level (e.g. replacement rates). Inequalities in access were first and foremost taken into account as related to gender, that is, individual leave rights of mothers and fathers, additional benefits for fathers to incentivize their leave take-up, and similar aspects.

Yet in addition to gender, there are many other aspects that speak about the inclusiveness of leave policies, that is, the "extent to which the rights are granted to all" (Blum & Dobrotić, 2021: 222). As outlined in Dobrotić and Blum (2020), from a social-rights perspective, we must ask about the entitlement principles of leave rights (who is granted access?) and about the eligibility criteria (under which conditions?). Citizenship and employment base different entitlement principles of leave rights, and they can be followed by more or less strict eligibility criteria. For example, through strict criteria around the types of employment or the duration of employment that qualify for parenting leave benefits, certain groups of parents are often excluded from eligibility (EIGE 2020). Particularly when we look beyond the OECD world and e.g. to Latin America (see e.g., Marzonetto & Franzoni, 2022; Son & Böger, 2021) it becomes evident why we need to look 'beyond benefit scope' when considering leave policies: Due to the high number of informal employment (in addition to often strict eligibility criteria, e.g. regarding a duration of previous employment), large numbers of parents can be excluded by law from benefit access, even if the benefits look generous on the surface. To put in concrete numbers, for Mexico for instance



maternity leave benefits are calculated to have covered only about 13 percent of the circa 1.9 million births in 2022 (Pérez, 2024).

Besides gender, citizenship and employment, other criteria limiting access to leave benefits may be based on family, or further personal characteristics (cf. Blum & Dobrotić, 2021). For example, Wong et al. (2019) showed comparatively for 34 OECD countries how households with same-sex parents have very unequal access to paid family leave (especially same-sex male couples). Kaufman et al. (2022) deepen this view through case studies of LGBTQ leave rights in six countries and show how policies restricting access for LGBTQ parents intersect with general policy restrictions, e.g. around gender and paths to parenthood.

Inequalities are also key in a *policy-outcome perspective* on leave policies. In the research looking at effects of leave policies for parents, and how different policy designs are followed by different socio-economic outcomes, the focus on inequalities has a more long-standing tradition. Yet also here, the focus on gender inequalities has been dominant, e.g. investigating how different leave policies or their reforms (embedded in more general welfare state and childcare regimes) relate to mothers' employment, fathers' involvement in childcare, the gendered division of housework, or social gender norms (see for overviews e.g. Schober & Büchau, 2022).

Related to leave policy design, inequalities become the centre of attention when it is about the take-up of leave rights. Even if general eligibility is given, actual take-up differs hugely, e.g. exhibiting next to gender also inequalities around socio-economic status, income levels, or education. Also, as already said above, the organisational level and more or less supportive workplace cultures play a role. Of course, access and policy design are strongly related to take-up inequalities: for example, as we find in some countries more accessible and generous leaves in the public sector than in the private sector, it is plausible that take-up rates are higher for public employees.

Not least, it needs to be noted that the intersectionality of the various inequalities around leave policies is important. These intersectional ties create unique challenges for different groups of parents. For example, immigrant families may face additional barriers in accessing parenting leave benefits due to language difficulties or unfamiliarity with the system. Research into family policy reform processes can shed light on how inequalities in policy design originate, e.g. as a result of the deservingness associated with different target groups (cf. Blum & Kuhlmann, 2025).

### 2.3. Parenting leave policies and inequalities in social science research

To summarise, parenting leave policy schemes are deeply embedded within broader welfare state frameworks. Constitutional arrangements, prevailing social values, and political objectives shape how such policies are designed, who is granted access to them, and how generous they are in terms of duration and financial compensation. From a theoretical perspective, reforms to parenting leave policies are commonly justified with reference to women's labour market participation, gender equality, and national fertility rates (Reimer, 2013). Against this background, leave policies are often conceptualised as socially sustainable when they avoid prolonged labour market detachment, promote a more balanced uptake of leave between mothers and fathers, and provide sufficient support to enable individuals to choose parenthood.

However, a theoretical focus on parenting leave as an instrument of gender equality alone is insufficient to capture its broader distributional implications. Parenting leave policies may reinforce or mitigate multiple forms of inequality within and between countries, thereby shaping wider prospects for social sustainability. From an analytical standpoint, it is therefore essential to examine how inequalities related to parenting leave are structured, which social groups are advantaged or disadvantaged by different policy designs, and how these inequalities translate into social and economic outcomes for families and



societies. Relevant dimensions extend beyond gender to include income, employment type, family status, educational attainment, and the intersections among these factors.

Moreover, parenting leave policies operate not only through formal legal provisions but also through organisational contexts and workplace cultures that may enable or constrain the effective use of leave entitlements. Theoretically, these meso-level factors mediate between policy design and individual behaviour and therefore constitute a critical component of any comprehensive analysis of inequality.

Taken together, these considerations suggest that a systematic examination of parenting leave policies must address inequalities from both a policy-design perspective, focusing on access, eligibility, and entitlement structures, and a policy-outcome perspective, focusing on patterns of leave take-up and their social consequences.

### 3. Parenting Leave Policies & Inequalities: State of the Art

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The following chapter provides a condensed overview of existing research on inequalities associated with parenting leave policies and their use, with the aim of synthesising the current state of knowledge on the topic. Drawing on the preceding theoretical considerations, the review is structured around three key themes: (3.1) parenting leave policies and gender, (3.2) the role of parenting leave policies in shaping health and well-being, and (3.3) parenting leave policies and inequalities related to citizenship, ethnicity.

#### 3.1 Parenting leave and gender<sup>1</sup>

Despite the formal availability of parenting leave to both parents in many European countries, women remain the primary users, while men account for only around one quarter of paid leave beneficiaries (European Institute for Gender Equality, 2023). This gender gap is not merely the result of individual preferences but emerges from the interaction of policy design, workplace practices, gender norms, and household-level economic considerations (Reimer, 2019). Because mothers are more likely to take extended leave, they disproportionately experience career interruptions that accumulate over the life course, contributing to persistent penalties in earnings and career advancement, commonly referred to as the motherhood penalty (Mandel & Semyonov, 2005; Duvander & Johansson, 2012; Samtleben et al., 2019). At the same time, the limited uptake of parenting leave by fathers points to complementary mechanisms on the male side of parenting leave use. Even in countries that espouse gender equality ideals and offer generous, father-specific leave entitlements, men's leave-taking remains modest. This raises a central analytical question: why do many fathers refrain from taking parenting leave altogether, and why do those who do typically limit the duration of their leave (Reimer, 2019; Schoppe-Sullivan & Fagan, 2022)?

The specific design of parenting leave policies plays a crucial mediating role in either mitigating or reinforcing these dynamics. Policies that primarily benefit mothers or that lack individual, non-transferable entitlements for fathers tend to reproduce traditional gender divisions of labour and constrain women's professional advancement (Ray et al., 2010; Duvander & Johansson, 2012). In Germany, for example, the introduction of bonus months for the second parent, commonly referred to as

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<sup>1</sup> With regard to the representation of gender inequalities, this subchapter focuses exclusively on differences between women and men; same-sex parents and queer identities are not included in the analysis. In this context, binary gender terms are employed as categories to capture systematic social inequalities between women and men.





“partner months”, was intended to encourage fathers’ participation in parenting leave. However, despite its formally gender-neutral framing, the policy design continues to reflect underlying “gendered assumptions” (Ray et al., 2010) about caregiving and breadwinning roles. Consequently, while many fathers now take some parental leave, the majority limit their uptake to the two bonus months. A similar dynamic was identified by Brandth and Kvande (2009) in Norway, where the father quota simultaneously establishes a legislative minimum and a norm-based maximum benchmark for paternal leave use. These patterns reflect an unwritten norm that both legitimises and constrains fathers’ leave-taking by defining what is considered appropriate paternal involvement (Trappe, 2013). In this sense, the quota performs a dual boundary-setting function (Brandth & Kvande, 2009), normalising short periods of leave-taking by fathers while limiting its potential to generate more far-reaching, gender-transformative change.

In contrast, in countries where exclusive parenting leave entitlements are more equally distributed between parents, such as Iceland, fathers’ participation rates are considerably higher (Eydal & Gíslason, 2014; Duvander & Johansson, 2012; Eydal et al., 2018). Iceland’s former “3+3+3” model, which allocated three months of leave to each parent alongside an additional three months to be used or shared at the parents’ discretion, resulted in near-universal uptake of parental leave among fathers. More recently, these entitlements have become even more gender-balanced: each parent is now entitled to six months of leave, of which only 1.5 months may be transferred to the partner. This case illustrates how policy designs based on symmetrical and largely non-transferable entitlements can effectively normalise paternal leave-taking and contribute to broader cultural shifts towards greater gender equality in caregiving.

Beyond the effects of specific parenting leave policy design elements, such as exclusive entitlements, on gender inequalities, research has also examined how employment conditions, family characteristics, and educational attainment shape gendered patterns of leave use. These factors are discussed in the following subchapters.

### 3.1.1 Parenting leave, work organizations and gender culture at the workplace

While employers across the EU are formally required to comply with statutory frameworks such as the 2019 European Directive on Work-Life Balance, research shows that their interpretations and implementations vary widely depending on sector, company size, corporate culture, labour market conditions, and recruitment challenges (Aunkofer et al., 2018; Valentova, Maas, & Koslowski, 2025; Lappegård, 2012).

Small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) often face greater challenges than large corporations in managing long absences, especially when dealing with skill shortages or recruitment difficulties (Aunkofer et al., 2018; Valentova et al., 2025). In such contexts, employers may seek to avoid prolonged absences by discouraging leave-taking or informally negotiating shorter or alternative forms of leave (Valentova et al., 2025). Some studies even document discriminatory hiring practices, such as the avoidance of women of childbearing age, thereby perpetuating gendered inequalities in recruitment and career progression (ibid., Fagnani & Math 2018). Even in the public sector, budgetary and staffing constraints can exert pressure on employees to shorten or forgo leave. Conversely, some large organizations offer enhanced parenting leave packages and reintegration programmes as part of talent retention and employer-branding strategies.

These findings resonate with broader scholarship emphasizing that workplaces serve as pivotal mediators between statutory entitlements and their actual utilization (Eriksson et al., 2022; Huppertz et al., 2019; Reimer, 2019). While formal policies may guarantee equal access to parenting leave, workplace-level structures, managerial attitudes, and organizational cultures crucially shape who feels entitled and able to use it (den Dulk et al., 2014; Hobson et al., 2014). Fathers, traditionally not perceived as primary users



of parenting leave within prevailing gender cultures, often face higher perceived or actual costs of taking leave than mothers. These include concerns about career slowdowns, reduced visibility, and informal stigmatization, resulting in what Koslowski (2011) terms the “either–or trap,” in which men are compelled to choose between professional commitment and family engagement.

Organizational culture plays a decisive role in this process. Formal, family-friendly policies and transparent norms tend to reduce perceived risks and encourage leave uptake (Haas et al., 2002), whereas male-normed or “greedy” work cultures that valorise total work devotion reproduce the ideal of the “unencumbered worker” (Acker, 1990; Murgia & Poggio, 2013). In such environments, fathers often refrain from taking leave for fear of signalling a lack of professional commitment (McKay & Doucet, 2010).

Recent research highlights that managerial support and peer behaviour can play a crucial role in fostering fathers’ “sense of entitlement” (Sen, 1999) to parenting leave. Building on Amartya Sen’s Capability Approach Hobson (2014) conceptualizes the sense of entitlement as a key capability shaping individuals’ real opportunities to achieve work-life balance. The design and framing of parenting leave entitlements (e.g. content, accessibility, social meanings attached to them) are embedded within broader institutional and organizational contexts that influence how individuals perceive their right to make use of such leave. Fathers who work in supportive, flexible, and egalitarian environments tend to develop a stronger sense of entitlement and are thus more likely to take parenting leave. Conversely, those embedded in unsupportive workplace cultures experience constrained agency and often internalize restrictive gender norms, which limit their perceived and actual choices despite formal rights to leave (ibid.). Hence, employer practices and workplace norms remain a critical interface through which formal entitlements are either enabled or constrained, ultimately reproducing or mitigating gendered inequalities in careers, income, and work-family balance.

Much of the existing literature has focused on fathers in stable, white-collar, or public-sector employment, while research on parenting leave use among blue-collar or working-class fathers remains comparatively limited. The available evidence nonetheless suggests that occupational class and employment conditions significantly shape fathers’ leave-taking behaviour. Fathers in manual, lower-status, or more precarious jobs are less likely to take parental leave and, when they do, tend to limit their leave to shorter durations (Bygren & Duvander, 2006; Trappe, 2013). Empirical studies indicate that these patterns are driven by heightened concerns about income loss, job security, and negative employer reactions, which are particularly salient in blue-collar occupations characterised by temporary contracts, limited organisational support, and strong ideal worker norms (Haas & Hwang, 2008; Petts et al., 2022). Moreover, male-dominated workplace cultures in manual sectors often reinforce traditional norms of masculinity, further discouraging fathers’ leave use (Brandth & Kvande, 2009). Overall, the limited literature points to distinct structural and normative barriers faced by blue-collar fathers, highlighting a persistent class dimension in inequalities of parenting leave take-up and underscoring the need for more systematic, class-sensitive research in this area.

In addition to these factors influencing the use of parenting leave entitlements, emerging forms of employment, such as the gig economy and other precarious or non-standard arrangements, pose further challenges to equitable access to parenting leave. Workers in these sectors often lack eligibility for statutory leave provisions, rendering them particularly vulnerable and reinforcing new divides in work–family reconciliation (James, 2024).

### **3.1.2 Parenting leave, socioeconomic status, relative income in couples, and gender**

Gendered patterns of parenting leave use initially emerge within the family, where decisions about leave-taking are negotiated at the household level and shaped by a specific decision matrix (Ellingsæter, 2009) that reflects economic considerations, norms, and constraints. Family characteristics play a central role in



this process (Almqvist, 2008; Lappegård, 2008; Romero-Balsas et al., 2013; Sundström & Duvander, 2002). In particular, fathers' decisions to take parenting leave are strongly influenced by household income arrangements and mothers' employment status. In dual-earner households, fathers are more likely to take leave when mothers have stable employment or when potential income losses are mitigated through high wage replacement rates (Duvander & Johansson, 2012). However, even under such favourable conditions, fathers' participation often remains limited to short, state-defined minimum periods, indicating that financial incentives alone are insufficient to overcome entrenched gender norms surrounding caregiving (Gornick, 2015).

These family-level dynamics are closely intertwined with labour market inequalities. Occupational position, income class, and employment security further condition both access to and use of parenting leave. Employees in higher-paid or managerial positions typically enjoy greater job security, flexibility, and a stronger perceived entitlement to take leave, whereas workers in lower-income or precarious employment face tighter financial constraints and heightened fears of negative career consequences (Escobedo, 2022; Kaufman, 2018). As a result, fathers in higher-status positions are more likely to take parenting leave without anticipating professional penalties, while those in lower-status or insecure jobs often refrain from leave-taking due to concerns about income loss or job stability.

Gendered occupational segregation reinforces these disparities and links individual leave-taking behaviour to broader structural inequalities. Women remain overrepresented in occupations that offer part-time work or flexible arrangements but are characterised by lower pay and limited career advancement opportunities, while men are more often employed in higher-paying positions with stronger norms of continuous presence (Grönlund & Öun, 2010). These structural patterns translate directly into gendered parenting leave use. When fathers take little or no leave, women assume a disproportionate share of unpaid caregiving, which in turn negatively affects their long-term earnings, career progression, and pension entitlements, while also limiting fathers' early involvement in childcare (Reimer, 2020).

Policy design plays a crucial mediating role in either mitigating or reinforcing these dynamics. Policies that primarily benefit mothers or that lack individual, non-transferable entitlements for fathers tend to reproduce traditional gender roles and constrain women's professional advancement (Ray et al., 2010; Duvander & Johansson, 2012). By contrast, policy designs that provide both parents with equitable, individual leave rights combined with high benefit replacement rates foster a shared sense of entitlement to caregiving and encourage a more balanced division of unpaid work, thereby promoting gender equality within both families and labour markets (Eydal & Gíslason, 2014; O'Brien, 2009).

Across all these levels, the relative earnings of partners consistently emerge as one of the most decisive factors shaping parenting leave decisions. The persistent gender wage gap means that, in most couples, mothers earn less than their partners and therefore become the primary users of parenting leave (Duvander, 2014; Guergoat-Larivière & Narcy, 2024; Fine-Davis, 2004; Shen & Am, 2025; Stertz & Wiese, 2024).

Yet economic considerations alone do not fully explain the observed patterns. Non-economic factors at the household level, such as mothers' intentions to return to paid work and maternal gatekeeping practices, also shape fathers' leave-taking behaviour (Reimer, 2019). While mothers' early re-entry into employment can facilitate fathers' uptake of parenting leave, maternal gatekeeping may discourage men from taking longer or repeated leave spells, thereby sustaining gendered divisions of care within households.



### 3.1.3 Educational differences by gender in leave take-up

There are pronounced educational differences in the use of parenting leave across Europe. Research consistently shows that higher educational attainment is associated with a greater likelihood of using parenting leave and with more egalitarian attitudes toward its use, particularly among men (Grunow & Evertsson, 2016; Reimer, 2020).

Among mothers, however, higher education is associated with a distinctive set of constraints. Highly educated women are often strongly attached to the labour market and oriented towards continuous employment and career progression, yet they are simultaneously subject to persistent normative expectations regarding intensive mothering and primary caregiving. As a result, they tend to take shorter parental leave spells than less educated mothers, largely in response to the higher opportunity costs and career penalties associated with extended absences in competitive, high-status occupations (Gangl & Ziefle, 2015; Mandel & Semyonov, 2005; Reimer, 2020). In this sense, education increases both women's labour market resources and the pressures they face in reconciling professional advancement with caregiving responsibilities.

In contrast, higher educational attainment among fathers is more consistently associated with increased use of parenting leave and, in some cases, with longer leave durations. This pattern reflects the link between education and more gender-egalitarian attitudes, as well as greater access to secure employment, higher income replacement during leave, and more supportive workplace environments (Duvander & Johansson, 2012; Grunow & Evertsson, 2016). Nevertheless, education alone does not eliminate gendered constraints. Even among highly educated men, leave-taking remains contingent on organisational cultures and professional norms that define acceptable levels of absence and commitment, particularly in male-dominated or high-responsibility positions (Williams, 2000; Haas & Hwang, 2008).

The literature further points to a persistent gendered framing of parenting leave that intersects with education. Maternity leave is often conceptualised as a temporary withdrawal from paid work, especially among highly educated women, whereas fathers' leave is more frequently framed as time spent with the child rather than as an interruption of employment (Petts & Knoester, 2018). This asymmetry reflects enduring cultural expectations surrounding motherhood, fatherhood, and paid work, and contributes to unequal experiences of leave across genders. Consequently, highly educated women tend to experience greater tension between career advancement and family responsibilities than men, despite their relatively favourable labour market positions (Eriksson et al., 2022).

Taken together, existing research suggests that education plays an ambivalent role in shaping parenting leave use. While higher educational attainment is associated with greater resources, more egalitarian attitudes, and increased paternal participation in leave-taking, it also amplifies the structural and cultural pressures that sustain gendered divisions of care. Education thus simultaneously facilitates progress towards gender equality and reproduces persistent inequalities in how mothers and fathers use, experience, and value parenting leave.

From a broader inequality perspective, education emerges as a central stratifying dimension in parenting leave use. By simultaneously structuring access to labour market resources and orientations toward gender equality, educational attainment shapes how parents perceive, negotiate, and utilise leave entitlements, thereby reproducing gendered patterns of care across social groups (Korpi et al., 2013; Evertsson, 2016).



## 3.2 Parenting leave and associated inequalities with regards to health and wellbeing

### 3.2.1 Parenting leave and health

In recent years, research has increasingly approached parenting leave policies from a health-inequality perspective, recognising their relevance not only for family policy but also for public health and social stratification. A central insight of this literature is that the health effects of parenting leave are not evenly distributed but are strongly shaped by policy design, particularly regarding payment, duration, and eligibility. Consequently, parenting leave policies may either mitigate or reinforce existing health inequalities, both across socio-economic groups and between countries with different leave schemes.

At the individual level, evidence on the relationship between maternity and parenting leave and maternal health is relatively consistent. While macro-level and cross-national studies often find weak or context-dependent associations, micro-level research shows that access to paid maternity leave is associated with improved maternal physical and mental health outcomes (Aitken et al., 2015). Paid leave supports maternal recovery from pregnancy and childbirth (Linden et al., 2020) and is linked to lower levels of stress-related and depressive symptoms (Heshmati et al., 2023; Ruhm, 2006). In contrast, unpaid or poorly compensated leave increases financial strain and psychological distress, disproportionately affecting mothers in lower-income or insecure employment and thereby reinforcing socio-economic health inequalities (Chatterji & Markowitz, 2005).

From an inequality perspective, the duration of leave represents a key mechanism through which health effects are distributed. Research suggests a non-linear relationship between leave length and maternal health, with moderate durations associated with the most favourable outcomes. Very short leave periods, often driven by economic necessity, undermine maternal recovery and disproportionately affect disadvantaged mothers. Conversely, excessively long periods of labour market withdrawal may also have adverse health consequences by increasing economic insecurity and social isolation. Evidence from Austria shows that extending parenting leave from 1.5 to 2.5 years can negatively affect maternal health, illustrating how overly long leave durations may reproduce inequalities by weakening women's labour market attachment and long-term economic security (Chuard, 2023).

Parenting leave policies also shape child health and health inequalities. Extended periods of paid leave are associated with longer breastfeeding duration, which is linked to better early-life health outcomes (Baker & Milligan, 2008). Early returns to work, particularly within the first six to twelve weeks postpartum, are associated with reduced breastfeeding duration and increased health risks for infants (Lou et al., 1994; Khanam et al., 2016; Huang et al., 2015). Since early returns to work are more common among mothers with lower incomes or insecure employment, these mechanisms contribute to the reproduction of health inequalities across socio-economic groups. Population-level studies further indicate that paid maternity leave is associated with lower infant mortality rates and improved infant health, particularly among disadvantaged populations (Rossin, 2011; Nandi et al., 2018).

Health inequalities are additionally shaped by gendered access to parenting leave. Fathers' use of leave has been shown to generate indirect health benefits for mothers and children, for example by supporting maternal recovery and reducing health risks associated with unequal caregiving burdens (Tanaka, 2005; Pizarro et al., 2024). However, access to paternity leave remains socially stratified, limiting its potential to reduce gendered and socio-economic health inequalities within families.

Taken together, the literature highlights that parenting leave policies function as a form of health-relevant social protection, but their inequality-reducing potential depends critically on design and accessibility. Paid, adequately compensated, and inclusive leave schemes are more likely to improve maternal and child health and to reduce socio-economic health disparities. By contrast, restrictive eligibility criteria, low



benefit levels, or excessive leave durations risk reproducing health inequalities across gender, class, and national contexts. From this perspective, parenting leave policies should be understood not only as instruments of family and labour market policy, but also as core components of inequality-sensitive public health policy.

### 3.2.2 Parenting leave and wellbeing

Compared with health outcomes, well-being as a dimension of inequality remains comparatively underexplored in research on parenting leave policies. This gap is notable given that parenting leave potentially affects multiple aspects of parents' lives beyond physical health and income. Conceptually, it is useful to distinguish between three dimensions of well-being: objective well-being, referring to measurable life conditions such as income security, employment stability, and health; subjective-affective well-being, encompassing emotional states such as stress, fatigue, happiness, or daily mood; and subjective-cognitive well-being, which captures evaluative judgements including life satisfaction, satisfaction with time use and relationships, and perceived work–family balance (Dolan, Peasgood, & White, 2008; OECD, 2013). Parenting leave policies can influence all three dimensions both directly, through design features such as duration, benefit levels, and flexibility, and indirectly, through workplace cultures and prevailing caregiving norms.

Empirical evidence on the causal effects of parenting leave on well-being remains limited. One of the few studies explicitly addressing this relationship finds that family-friendly practices, including parenting leave, are associated with improved work–family balance, time satisfaction, and overall quality of life (Goñi-Legaz & Ollo-López, 2016). However, these effects are gendered: women tend to benefit more strongly, particularly in terms of satisfaction with time use, reflecting their continued primary responsibility for caregiving. Systematic causal analyses linking specific policy design features, such as benefit generosity or the transferability of leave, to different dimensions of well-being are still scarce, limiting comparative and policy-relevant conclusions.

A broader body of literature examines related aspects of well-being that are indirectly linked to parenting leave, including job satisfaction, time pressure, relationship quality, and work–family enrichment. Studies show that increased paternal involvement in childcare is associated with higher job satisfaction and lower stress among fathers (Haas & Hwang, 2008; Petts & Knoester, 2019). These findings suggest that longer or more flexible parenting leave arrangements may enhance fathers' subjective well-being, provided that financial conditions and workplace cultures support leave-taking. At the same time, both mothers and fathers frequently report trade-offs associated with leave use, such as slower career progression, reduced earnings growth, or limited access to leadership positions, particularly in organisational contexts characterised by strong ideal worker norms (Mauerer & Schmidt, 2019; Williams, 2000).

From an inequality perspective, these trade-offs are unevenly distributed. Parents in secure, well-paid, and supportive employment contexts are more likely to experience the well-being benefits associated with parenting leave, while those in precarious or low-paid jobs face higher risks of financial strain, stress, and constrained agency. Moreover, gendered expectations continue to shape how well-being gains and losses are distributed within households, with women more often experiencing improvements in relational and time-related well-being at the cost of professional advancement, and men facing normative barriers to fully realising potential well-being benefits from leave.

Several studies further link parenting leave to broader dimensions of family well-being, including improved parental mental health, enhanced child development, and more stable family relationships (Heymann et al., 2017; Earle et al., 2023). These effects underscore that well-being outcomes extend beyond individual parents to the family level, reinforcing the relevance of parenting leave as a social policy instrument with long-term implications for inequality and human development.



Overall, existing research suggests that parenting leave policies hold considerable potential to enhance well-being, but that this potential is strongly mediated by gender, socio-economic position, and institutional context. The limited and uneven evidence base highlights the need for more systematic, comparative, and longitudinal research that explicitly addresses well-being as a multidimensional and inequality-sensitive outcome of parenting leave policy.

### **3.3 Parenting leave and inequalities related to citizenship or ethnicity**

While ethnic background should not affect the formal legal right to parenting leave entitlements, in practice it constitutes an important axis of inequality in the use of such entitlements. A range of interrelated mechanisms contributes to these disparities. Socio-economic position, labour market segmentation, and cultural expectations shape both access to and utilisation of parenting leave among immigrant and ethnic minority parents. Parents with immigrant backgrounds are disproportionately employed in lower-paid, temporary, or otherwise precarious jobs (OECD, 2019), which limits their capacity to take leave and often results in lower benefit levels during periods of absence from work. In addition, recently arrived immigrants may not meet contribution-based eligibility criteria, leading to partial or reduced entitlements compared with native-born parents (Duvander & Koslowski, 2023).

Inequalities are further reinforced by informational and administrative barriers. Limited language proficiency, restricted access to information, and complex bureaucratic procedures can impede parents from immigrant backgrounds in navigating parenting leave systems and fully exercising their rights (Duvander & Mussino, 2016; Kil et al., 2020; European Institute for Gender Equality, 2023). These structural constraints intersect with cultural norms regarding gendered caregiving responsibilities. In some contexts, expectations that mothers should assume primary caregiving roles contribute to longer leave durations among immigrant women. While this may support early childrearing, it can also reinforce traditional gender roles, weaken women's labour market attachment, and increase long-term risks of economic disadvantage and poverty (e.g. Andersson et al., 2019; Kaufman et al., 2022).

Empirical studies across several European countries consistently show that migrant and ethnic minority parents take parenting leave less frequently and for shorter durations than native-born parents, even after accounting for differences in employment status and eligibility (Mussino et al., 2016; Kil et al., 2020; Duvander et al., 2023). The persistence of residual gaps underscores that parenting leave inequalities cannot be explained by labour market factors alone but instead reflect the cumulative effects of cultural norms, informational barriers, and institutional design (Duvander & Mussino, 2016). Evidence further suggests that inclusive and well-designed leave policies can mitigate these inequalities. Eligibility rules that accommodate diverse employment trajectories, adequate benefit compensation, non-transferable entitlements for fathers, and accessible, multilingual information provision are associated with more equitable leave use and a fairer distribution of caregiving responsibilities across ethnically diverse parental populations (European Institute for Gender Equality, 2023; Goodman et al., 2022).

### **3.4. Summary of the state of the art on parenting leave and inequality**

To summarise, the literature reviewed in this chapter demonstrates that parenting leave policies are closely linked to persistent inequalities in both access to and use. Across countries, inequalities arise not only from differences in the institutional design of parenting leave schemes but also from broader structural and cultural contexts, including gender norms, labour market conditions, and the availability of childcare services. With regard to gender, women remain the primary users of parenting leave across Europe, reflecting the interaction of policy design, workplace practices, and household-level decision-making. Men's comparatively limited participation in leave-taking continues to sustain gendered divisions of unpaid care and contributes to long-term inequalities in employment, earnings, and career progression.



Research further shows that parenting leave policies shape health-related inequalities within and between countries, particularly for mothers and children. Paid, adequately compensated, and appropriately timed leave is associated with better maternal and child health outcomes, whereas unpaid, poorly compensated, or excessively long leave durations can exacerbate socio-economic and gender-based health inequalities. These effects are unevenly distributed across social groups and national contexts, highlighting the importance of policy design and accessibility for reducing health disparities.

Inequalities related to citizenship and ethnicity emerge more indirectly but are nonetheless substantial. Immigrant and ethnic minority parents often face constrained access to parenting leave due to labour market segmentation, contribution-based eligibility rules, informational and administrative barriers, and intersecting cultural norms. As a result, they tend to take shorter or less generously compensated leave than native-born parents, even where formal legal entitlements exist. These patterns illustrate how parenting leave policies may inadvertently reproduce broader inequalities linked to migration status and social stratification.

Taken together, the literature points to a clear causal chain through which parenting leave policies influence inequalities, primarily by shaping parental behaviour through the incentives and constraints they create. Generous earnings-related benefits, individualised and non-transferable entitlements, and flexible leave arrangements increase fathers' participation, reduce mothers' disproportionate caregiving burden, and mitigate long-term gender and health inequalities. Conversely, weakly compensated, poorly individualised, or restrictive schemes risk reproducing existing inequalities despite formally gender-neutral rights.

While existing research provides substantial evidence on gendered effects of parenting leave, other dimensions of inequality remain unevenly explored. To assess which forms of inequality have received the greatest scholarly attention and where significant research gaps persist, the following chapter reviews the parenting leave literature of the past two decades with a particular focus on the distribution of research across different inequality dimensions.

## 4. Narrative Literature Review: The Discussion of Inequalities in Parenting Leave Research

*Johanna Lammi-Taskula, Thordis Reimer*

Given the conceptual diversity and methodological heterogeneity of research on parenting leave and inequality, a narrative literature analysis was chosen. Rather than aiming at exhaustive coverage or statistical aggregation, this approach facilitates the synthesis of findings across diverse study designs and national contexts and enables a critical assessment of how different dimensions of inequality have been prioritised or neglected in existing research (Baumeister & Leary, 1997; Grant & Booth, 2009).

### 4.1 Literature database

For the selection of the underlying sample, members of CA21150 Working Group 2 acted as national representatives for their respective countries. They compiled lists of research publications and other relevant reports published in their countries over the past 20 years, between 2004 and 2023. The aim was to capture the varying prominence and evolution of parenting leave policy research across different national contexts and time periods. The sample is not designed to be representative. Instead, it seeks to offer an overview of the research landscape, including non-English studies that are often

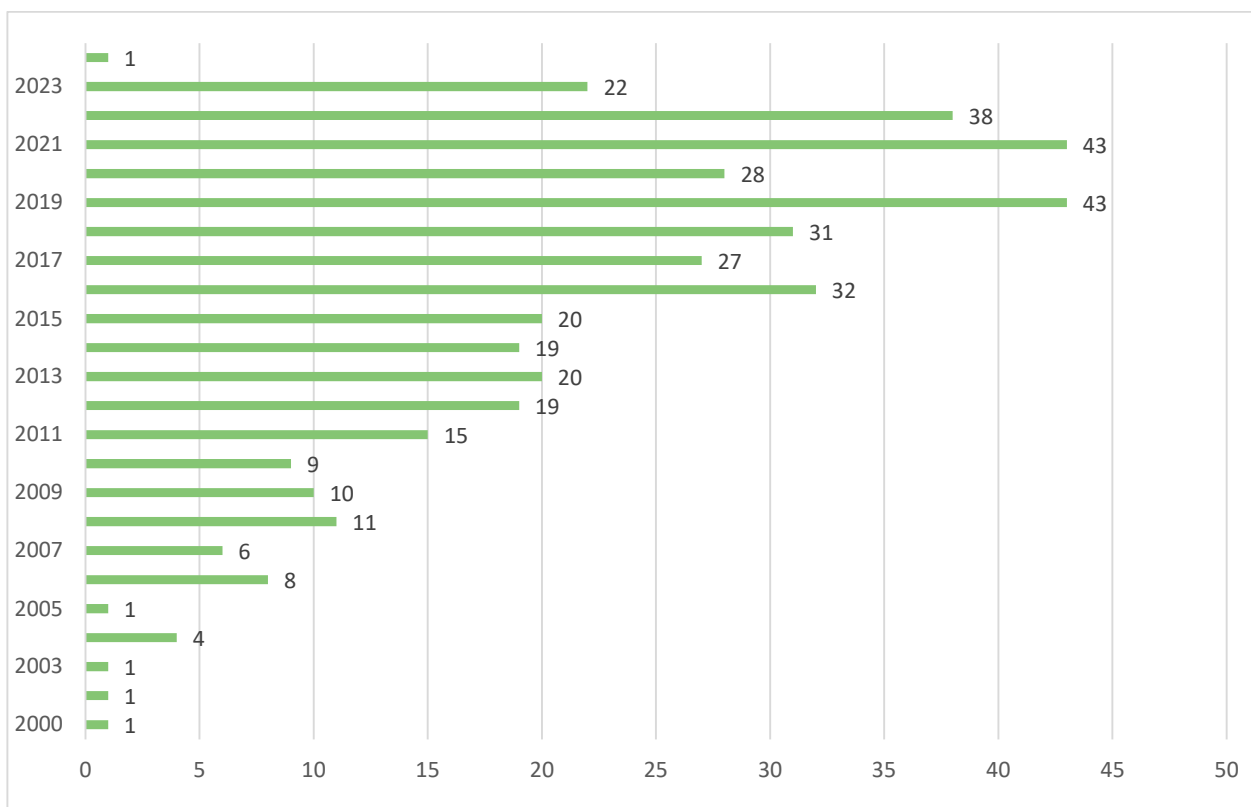


underrepresented in international and cross-country research contexts. This approach enables the identification of country-specific research focuses and thematic priorities.

A total of 410 publications from 24 countries were collected<sup>2</sup>. The collection includes publications from Austria, Belgium, Bosnia-Herzegovina, Bulgaria, Croatia, Cyprus, the Czech Republic, Estonia, Finland, France, Germany, Hungary, Iceland, Lithuania, the Netherlands, Norway, Poland, Portugal, Romania, Serbia, Spain, Sweden, Turkey, and the United Kingdom. For some countries, virtually all relevant publications were included, whereas for others such as Sweden, where extensive research on parenting leave exists, a selective sample of the most relevant studies was compiled. Some countries with substantial parenting leave research are not represented due to the unavailability of a national expert to contribute (e.g., Denmark). The largest number of publications comes from Spain (67), followed by Norway (37) and Finland (32), while the smallest numbers were reported for Turkey, France, and Cyprus, with two publications each (Figure 2).

Figure 2 presents an overview of how the publications in the literature sample are distributed over time. The sample includes only a small number of publications from the early 2000s, whereas around 70 percent were published after 2015.

**Fig. 1: Number of publications by year**



Source: Own data; sample of publication on parenting leave and inequalities; own calculations

The majority of publications stem from the social sciences, particularly sociology and social policy research. A smaller number represent the field of economics, while only a few originate from legal or management studies.

<sup>2</sup> You can find the full list of selected publications here: <https://sustainable-leave-policies.eu/category/publications/>



## 4.2 Analytical strategy

For each publication, the national representatives of this study provided detailed bibliographic information, including the publication title (in its original language), author(s), year of publication, academic discipline, and a web link to access the publication. They also supplied either the English-language abstract or, where unavailable, a brief English summary outlining the study’s research questions, data, methods, and findings.

To systematically examine which dimensions of inequality are represented in the collected body of literature, analytical categories were defined. Based on these categories, country representatives of the CA21150 Working Group 2 coded each publication according to several dimensions of inequality as well as the level of analysis with the note that multiple categorizations were allowed. Based on the extant literature as discussed in sections 2 and 3 of this report, the framework included ten dimensions of inequality: gender, age, health, disability, citizenship, education, employment, income, race/ethnicity, and culture/religion. Later also the dimension of wellbeing was added. In addition, to provide a comprehensive overview of existing research perspectives within the social sciences, the level of analysis was coded, distinguishing between five levels: statutory policy, collective agreements, work organizations, family relations, and the individual.

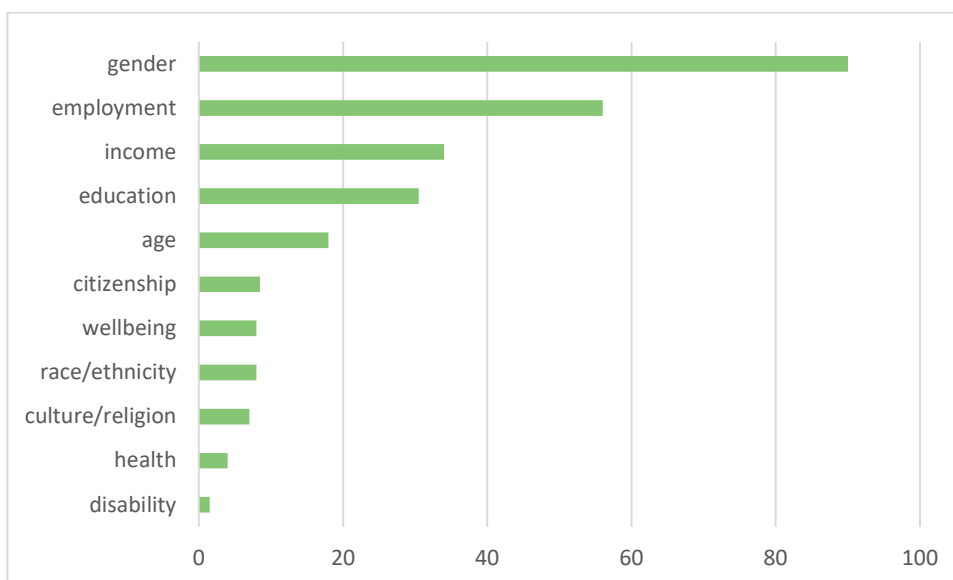
## 4.3 Results

In the following, the results of the analysis are presented - first for the dimensions of inequality, then for the levels of analysis in the publications examined.

### 4.3.1 Representation of different dimensions of inequality

The following overview presents the distributions and discusses key areas of focus to provide a more in-depth perspective on parenting leave research. The results are first presented in relation to the single analytical dimensions of inequality.

**Fig. 2: Dimensions of inequality in parenting leave research (in %)**



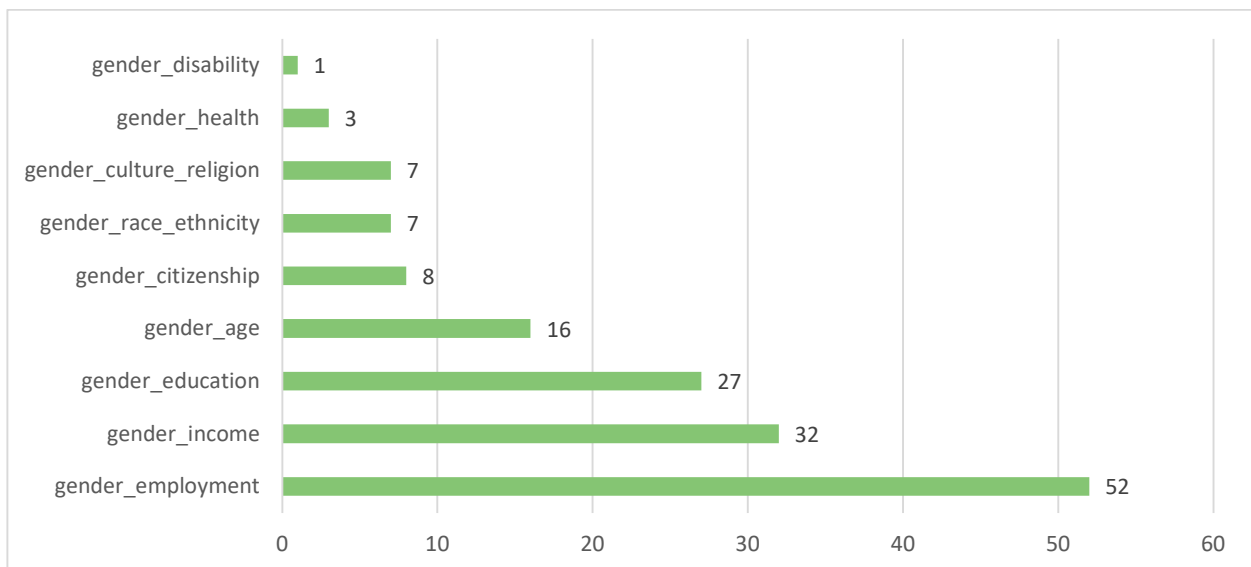
Source: Own data; sample of publication on parenting leave and inequalities; own calculations



Gender (in)equality constitutes the most frequently occurring dimension of inequality; only approximately 10 percent of the publications do not address this aspect (see Figure 3). More than half of the publications in the sample focus on employment-related inequalities, while around one third analyse income inequalities in the context of parenting leave. Educational inequalities are discussed in nearly one third of the publications, and age-related inequalities are examined in almost one fifth. Although these latter dimensions are less common than gender or employment, they still appear with notable regularity. Dimensions of inequality that are not typically addressed in the parenting leave literature include those related to citizenship, race or ethnicity, wellbeing and culture or religion, each of which appears in fewer than one in ten publications in our review. The most significant knowledge gap according to the literature sample, however, concerns health and disability: this dimension is examined in only a very small minority of studies (a few percent), indicating that it remains largely overlooked in current parenting leave research.

In research on parenting leave policies, their use, and their effects, different dimensions of inequality are often discussed together. The following table provides an overview of how these combined themes are distributed across the sample (Figure 4).

**Fig. 3: Combination of dimensions of inequality in parenting leave research (in %)**



Source: Own data; sample of publication on parenting leave and inequalities; own calculations

The most common combination of themes in the literature included in this review is gender and employment, which appears in more than half of the publications. These studies often examine the labour market positions and employment opportunities of women in relation to leave taken not only by mothers but also by their partners. For instance, a study on men’s leave-taking in Iceland (Thor Arnarson & Mitra, 2010) found that the father’s leave quota is associated with more favourable labour market outcomes for women: they are able to work longer hours and access higher-paying occupations with fewer career interruptions. Research has also addressed the subjective fears of both mothers and fathers concerning potential negative consequences of taking leave. A study of academic employees in the U.K. (Huppertz et al., 2019) revealed that mothers working in universities are often reluctant to take extended parenting leave due to fears of being left behind or pushed out of employment. Similarly, a German study (Samtleben et al., 2019) found that while concerns about professional repercussions and the lack of



workplace replacements often discourage fathers from taking leave, most fathers who did take leave did not perceive any negative impact on their professional advancement.

Other relatively common combinations include gender and income, as well as gender and education. The interaction between gender and income appears in about one-third of all publications. For instance, an analysis from Norway (Lappegård, 2008) shows that the greater mothers' contribution to the family income and the more equal their earnings are, the more likely fathers are to take parenting leave. Gender and education are examined together in roughly one in four publications. An example is the analysis by Geisler and Kreyenfeld (2018), which found that parents with higher levels of education benefited the most from a parenting leave reform in Germany, as the new benefits were linked to earnings. However, many fathers in this group also weighed their leave-taking decisions against potential losses in income and career advancement opportunities in the labour market (ibid.). An analysis of parental leave use in Finland (Salmi & Närvi 2017) pointed out the role of especially the mother's high education for sharing leave more equally with the father.

There are a few studies in the sample that analyse the interaction of gender inequality with citizenship, race, and ethnicity, but these combinations appear in fewer than one in ten publications. Research on gender and ethnicity or citizenship typically examines the take-up of parenting leave among immigrant parents. For example, Mussino and Duvander (2023) found that most newly arrived immigrant mothers in Sweden do not take any parenting leave, although there are significant differences depending on country of birth and reason for residence permit. In Norway, Ellingsæter et al. (2019) identified a gap in the take-up of the father's quota between eligible immigrant and native-born fathers. They discuss this gap being associated with weaker individual resources and ethnic labour market segregation, thus also addressing the dimension of employment.

As the least studied dimensions of inequalities in the literature on parenting leave are health and disability, there are also very few studies looking at these dimensions from the gender perspective. A study on fathers leave use in Sweden (Aldén et al. 2023) found some evidence of poor health among of the non-leave taking fathers but concluded that they are not very different in this regard from the total population of fathers. Some studies have addressed the combination of gender equality and fertility in analysis of the role of parenting leave for consequent childbearing. In comparative study on fathers' leave use and fertility in Sweden, Norway & Iceland (Duvander et al. 2017) found a positive association between fathers' leave use and birth of second child, but not third child.

Health and disability are the least studied dimensions of inequality in our sample of the literature on parenting leave, and only a few studies address these dimensions from a gender perspective. A study on fathers' leave use in Sweden (Aldén et al., 2023) found some evidence of poorer health among non-leave-taking fathers but concluded that they do not differ substantially in this regard from the general population of fathers.

#### **4.3.2 Representation of different levels of analysis**

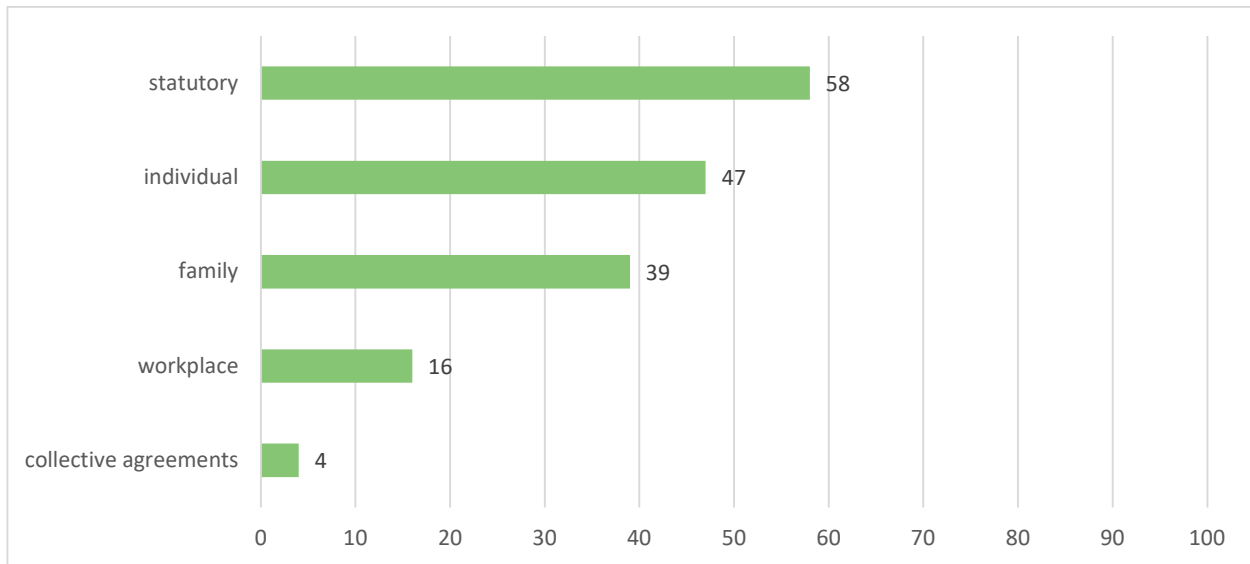
The following overview presents the results of the analysis of the literature sample with regard to the levels of analysis. Research on parenting leave has been conducted at both the level of statutory social policies (country level) and the level of leave use (individual level). In addition, the studies may focus on different countries, regions, organisations, or individual characteristics.

More than half of the studies in our sample analyses the structure and development of parenting leave schemes within one or across several countries on the statutory level (Figure 5). Almost as common is the individual level of analysis, which examines the determinants and consequences of leave-taking for mothers and/or fathers. The family level also represents a relatively frequent analytical perspective,



appearing in about two out of five publications. By contrast, the workplace level is less common, and collective agreements are addressed in only a small minority of studies. Notably, studies in this category rarely focus on the agreements themselves, but rather on workplace culture and related organisational practices.

**Fig. 4: Level of analysis in research on parenting leave and inequalities (in %)**



Source: Own data; sample of publication on parenting leave and inequalities; own calculations

We now take a closer look at how gender, as the most frequently studied dimension of inequality in our sample, is distributed across the various analytical levels. To provide deeper insights into the respective research questions, we also present selected findings from individual studies as illustrative examples.

Research conducted at the level of statutory leave policies also frequently addresses gender equality (93% of publications in the sample), most often focusing on a single country. For example, a study on gender wage inequality in the Czech Republic (Křížková et al., 2009) found that the introduction of legislative measures promoting gender equality had no significant effect on wage disparities, largely due to women’s childcare responsibilities and the limited legitimacy of the legal system. Studies on statutory parenting leave often also consider other dimensions or levels of inequality. For instance, a study examining ways to enhance the gender impacts of paid leave in Spain from a long-term perspective (Escobedo, 2022) highlights the importance of integrating broader social equity criteria. Similarly, a UK study (Kaufman, 2018) identifies policy restrictions and low statutory pay for paternity leave as key reasons for its limited uptake among fathers.

There are only a few studies focusing on collective agreements, i.e. legally binding contracts that go beyond statutory requirements to provide additional benefits, such as a full salary payment during leave, with specifics varying by industry and country. A study focusing on the Nordic countries (Kauhanen & Nyssölä, 2025) showed that while it is common for the statutory parenting leave benefits to be supplemented through collective agreements, there are large differences between industries in the payment of supplements, the duration of salary or supplement payments, and the conditions for receiving them. Also, there are gender differences in whether both parents receive enhanced benefits in the same way and for the same duration.



The studies analysing parenting leave at the individual level also show a strong emphasis on gender inequalities, appearing in 92% of publications in the sample. The focus is often on individual attitudes regarding family arrangements as determinants of leave-taking. For example, in Sweden, gender equality orientation has been found to be associated with fathers' parenting leave use, whereas family-oriented attitudes are linked to the length of mothers' leave (Duvander, 2014). Furthermore, in Finland, fathers' key motivations for taking leave include both the desire for a break from work and the wish to support the mother's career (Eerola et al., 2014).

Studies analysing parenting leave at the family level often focus on the gendered use of leave and its consequences for couples. For example, a comparative study in Sweden, Norway, and Iceland (Lappegård et al., 2020) found that couples in which the father takes parenting leave have a lower risk of union dissolution than those in which the father does not.

As cross-tabulations of the different combinations between the levels of analysis and the gender dimension indicate, gender equality is addressed in nearly all studies examining parenting leave at the workplace level. Here, the focus is often on the role of organisational factors in shaping fathers' decisions to take parenting leave. For instance, Eriksson et al. (2022) found that the workplace has a significant influence on fathers', but not mothers', decisions to take leave. When comparing fathers within the same workplace, the effect of education on leave length largely disappears, suggesting that workplace norms and structures exert a stronger influence on fathers than individual or couple-level factors (ibid.).

In summary, gender is a prominent dimension of inequality across all levels of analysis (statutory, individual, family, and workplace) and in both between- and within-country studies. Even in this well-researched area, questions remain regarding potential research gaps, particularly in terms of intersections with other dimensions of inequality such as race, ethnicity, citizenship, disability, and socioeconomic status.

## 5. Gaps in Parenting Leave Research

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Despite substantial progress in parenting leave research, particularly regarding gender, significant blind spots persist. Existing studies still predominantly focus on parents in stable, formal employment and on a comparatively narrow set of inequality dimensions. As a result, low-income families, non-standard workers, migrant parents, and diverse family forms remain underrepresented, and key mechanisms such as eligibility rules, employment precarity, workplace practices, and behavioural decision-making are insufficiently captured. Building on the analytical distinction between a policy-design perspective (access, eligibility, entitlement structures) and a policy-outcome perspective (take-up patterns and social consequences), this chapter highlights the gaps that most directly limit policy-relevant assessments of parenting leave design.

### 5.1 Which inequalities within and between countries remain insufficiently examined, despite being crucial for evaluating leave-policy design?

A first major gap concerns the limited capacity of existing research to assess inequality outcomes across countries in a way that enables robust policy learning. While cross-national scholarship documents large differences in leave duration, benefit generosity, eligibility rules, individualisation, and flexibility, we still lack integrated comparative evidence on how these institutional differences translate into inequality outcomes across multiple dimensions simultaneously. In practice, this means that knowledge on “what



works” often remains confined to single outcomes or single contexts, rather than identifying which combinations of design elements reduce inequalities under different welfare-state, labour-market, and childcare configurations.

Within countries, research has documented stratified patterns of leave take-up, but causal explanations remain uneven. Inequalities in access and use are rarely examined as multi-level processes in which household negotiations interact with workplace practices, eligibility structures, and broader gender norms. In other words, we often know that take-up differs by group, but less often why, and through which specific institutional mechanisms. This limits the ability of policy makers to anticipate whether reforms, such as strengthened non-transferable entitlements, produce broad-based progress or mainly benefit already advantaged groups.

Finally, children remain a comparatively underexplored inequality dimension in sociological and policy research on parenting leave. Differences in leave design may shape unequal opportunities in health, care, and early development, but these pathways are rarely addressed systematically as inequality mechanisms.

## **5.2 Which dimensions of inequalities are under-researched, and what does this imply for policy evaluation?**

The narrative review confirms that gender dominates the field, while other inequality dimensions are unevenly represented. Employment and income inequalities receive some attention, but disability, health, citizenship, race or ethnicity, cultural norms, and well-being are often marginal. This uneven coverage limits the evidence base for designing inclusive leave policies and for assessing whether policies reduce inequalities beyond gender. In particular, intersectional inequalities remain insufficiently analysed. Few studies examine how multiple disadvantages combine, such as gender with low income, precarious employment, migrant status, low education, or minority family forms. As a result, policy debates risk overestimating equity effects if reforms increase take-up among some fathers while leaving structural exclusion and stratified access largely intact.

Moreover, the literature remains biased towards parents in standard, stable employment. This reflects both historical research priorities and institutional assumptions in leave policy design. Yet, as labour markets become more heterogeneous, these blind spots have increasing policy relevance. Non-standard and precarious forms of work, including platform work, freelancing, informal employment, and fragmented contribution histories, pose direct challenges to eligibility and benefit adequacy. Without a stronger evidence base, it remains difficult to assess whether parenting leave policies support social sustainability or reproduce new divides in work-family reconciliation.

## **5.3 What role do datasets and data limitations play, and which data are missing?**

Data constraints are a central explanation for why key inequalities remain underexamined. Many datasets do not measure parenting leave with sufficient precision (e.g. Dobrotić & Arnalds, 2023). Leave is often captured only as paid absence from work and is sometimes combined with other forms of leave or care-related time off. This makes it difficult to distinguish between maternity, paternity, parental leave, and carers’ leave, and it limits the ability to evaluate specific policy elements such as transferability, individualisation, replacement rates, and flexible use.

Cross-nationally comparable longitudinal data remain particularly scarce. Administrative registers provide detailed information on benefit receipt and leave duration, but often lack variables on workplace culture, negotiation processes, informal constraints, or subjective experiences. Survey data can capture norms and household decision-making, but frequently suffer from measurement error in leave use and from limited comparability across countries. In addition, disadvantaged groups, including migrants, non-



standard workers, and informal workers, are often underrepresented or not captured in key datasets, constraining analyses of structural exclusion. These limitations make it difficult to trace cumulative disadvantage over the life course or to examine whether reforms reduce inequality trajectories over time.

#### 5.4 What explains the persistence of these research gaps?

Several factors contribute to the persistence of these blind spots. First, the field has been shaped by the availability of administrative data and by policy agendas that prioritised gender equality, especially mothers' employment and fathers' take-up. This focus has generated valuable evidence but also narrowed attention to groups most visible in standard employment data. Second, the institutional architecture of leave systems itself produces research bias: when eligibility is tied to standard employment, those outside it become harder to observe and are less likely to appear in policy evaluations. Third, disciplinary fragmentation reinforces partial perspectives. Economic analyses often prioritise measurable labour market outcomes; sociological research highlights norms and family practices; legal and policy studies focus on entitlement frameworks. Without integration, key mechanisms linking design, take-up, and inequality outcomes remain insufficiently explained. Finally, labour market change has outpaced both policy design and research measurement, leaving new employment forms and their implications for leave rights under-researched.

#### 5.5 What can be done to close policy-relevant research gaps?

Closing the gaps requires shifts in both research design and data infrastructure. Substantively, research must broaden beyond the standard employment model and systematically include low-income families, precarious workers, self-employed parents, platform workers, migrants, and diverse family forms. Studies should explicitly combine policy-design and policy-outcome perspectives, modelling how eligibility rules, replacement rates, individualisation, duration, flexibility, workplace practices, and childcare contexts jointly shape take-up and longer-term inequality outcomes. Intersectional approaches are essential to identify which policy reforms benefit which groups and to prevent the unintended reproduction of inequalities.

Methodologically, more mixed-method and multi-level designs are needed. Quantitative analyses should be complemented by qualitative research on household negotiations, workplace norms, and administrative barriers, especially for groups with constrained agency. Data improvements are equally critical: better measurement of leave types, duration, benefit levels, flexible use, and take-up by both parents, as well as better representation of migrants and non-standard workers, are necessary for policy-relevant evaluations. Finally, continuous monitoring of the EU Work-Life Balance Directive should assess not only legal compliance but distributional outcomes across social groups, sectors, and regions, to determine whether reforms reduce inequalities in practice.

## 6. Conclusions

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*Johanna Lammi-Taskula, Thordis Reimer*

The EU Work Life Balance Directive (European Union, 2019; Directive (EU) 2019/1158) represents a major policy commitment to advancing gender equality, labour market inclusion, and social sustainability across the European Union. By establishing individual and non-transferable entitlements to parenting related leave, strengthening minimum standards for income protection, and promoting flexible working arrangements, the Directive aims to address persistent inequalities in the distribution of paid and unpaid work. However, the evidence reviewed in this report indicates that the Directive's effectiveness cannot



be assessed solely on the basis of legal transposition. Instead, it critically depends on how parenting leave policies are designed, implemented, and taken up across different social groups, as well as on the availability of robust research and monitoring to capture these dynamics.

A central finding of this report is that existing research on parenting leave remains uneven in its coverage of inequality dimensions that are crucial for evaluating the Directive's impact. While gender inequalities have been extensively studied, other forms of inequality that are directly relevant to the Directive's objectives, such as those related to income, employment precarity, migration status, education, health, and well-being, are comparatively under researched. This imbalance limits current knowledge about whether the Directive reduces inequalities across social groups or whether it primarily benefits parents in stable and well-paid employment. As a result, important questions remain unanswered regarding who is effectively enabled to use parenting leave under the new EU framework and who remains excluded in practice.

The report further identifies significant gaps in comparative and longitudinal evidence. Despite the Directive's explicit aim to reduce disparities between Member States, there is limited research that systematically compares the distributional effects of different national implementation strategies. In particular, little is known about how variations in benefit generosity, eligibility criteria, and flexibility interact with labour market structures and welfare regimes to shape unequal outcomes over time. This lack of cross nationally comparable longitudinal data hampers the ability to assess whether observed changes in leave uptake reflect genuine behavioural shifts or short-term adaptations to policy reforms.

Data limitations constitute a major underlying cause of these research gaps. Many existing datasets do not distinguish sufficiently between different types of parenting leave, often capturing leave only as paid absence from work or aggregating it with other forms of care related leave. This makes it difficult to analyse the specific effects of individual and non-transferable entitlements introduced under the Directive. Moreover, key social characteristics such as migration background, employment insecurity, workplace characteristics, or informal care arrangements are frequently missing or inconsistently measured across countries. Therefore, the most vulnerable groups targeted by the Directive's social inclusion goals remain largely invisible in quantitative research.

Beyond data constraints, the report highlights structural and analytical blind spots in the existing research agenda. Much of the literature implicitly assumes standard fulltime employment as the norm and therefore fails to capture the growing heterogeneity of labour markets, including self-employment, platform work, and other non-standard arrangements. Similarly, the dominance of economically rational models of leave taking has limited attention to organisational cultures, social norms, and intra household negotiations that shape parents' real opportunities to use leave. These omissions are particularly problematic given the Directive's reliance on behavioural change, especially increased fathers' uptake of leave, as a key mechanism for reducing gender inequalities.

From a policy perspective, these research gaps have direct implications for the monitoring and evaluation of the Work Life Balance Directive. Current monitoring efforts primarily track formal compliance with minimum legal standards but provide little insight into the Directive's distributive outcomes. Without systematic and disaggregated data on leave uptake by gender, income, employment status, education, migration background, sector, and firm size, it is not possible to determine whether the Directive is achieving its equality objectives or whether it risks reproducing existing social divides. Strengthening EU level monitoring frameworks to include outcome-based indicators is therefore essential.



The findings of this report point to several priorities for future research and policy-oriented data collection. First, research must move beyond a narrow focus on gender to adopt an explicitly intersectional approach that captures how multiple inequalities intersect in shaping access to and use of parenting leave. Second, comparative and longitudinal studies are needed to assess how different national implementation choices under the Directive affect inequalities over time and across social groups. Third, data infrastructures at both national and EU levels should be improved to allow for the systematic measurement of parenting leave types, benefit levels, workplace conditions, and family circumstances. Finally, closer integration between policy monitoring and academic research is required to ensure that evidence generated under the Directive feeds back into policy learning and reform.

In conclusion, the EU Work Life Balance Directive provides an essential institutional framework for addressing inequalities in work family reconciliation, but its success depends on the capacity to identify, monitor, and address the inequalities that persist beneath formally equal rights. Closing the identified research and data gaps is therefore not merely an academic exercise, but a necessary condition for evidence-based policymaking. Only through improved monitoring, richer data, and a more inclusive research agenda can the Directive's potential to advance gender equality, social inclusion, and sustainable development across the European Union be fully realised.

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