



Policy Brief

Why Does Paid Parenting Leave Terminology Matter?

Implications for Policy Design, Monitoring and Comparative Research

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Executive Summary

Paid parenting leave (PPL) policies have become a central pillar of contemporary welfare states, supporting gender equality, labour market participation, child well-being, and long-term social sustainability. As these policies have expanded in scope, duration and objectives, however, the terminology used to describe them has evolved unevenly across countries, international organisations, databases and academic research.

This Policy Brief argues that **terminology is not merely a semantic or technical issue**, but a core element of governance and knowledge production. The concepts used to name, classify and aggregate parenting leave entitlements shape how policies are designed, monitored, evaluated and compared. Inconsistent terminology weakens cross-national comparability, obscures policy effects and undermines evidence-based policymaking.

Drawing on a comprehensive review of international regulations, comparative databases, national terminologies and academic research, the brief demonstrates that traditional distinctions between maternity, paternity and parental leave no longer adequately capture the diversity and complexity of contemporary leave systems. While diversity in national terminology is both inevitable and normatively meaningful, the absence of a harmonised comparative framework has become a major obstacle to effective monitoring, policy learning and research synthesis.

The brief concludes that **harmonisation of terminology at national level is neither feasible nor desirable**, but that **harmonised terminology for comparative and monitoring purposes is essential**. It proposes the systematic use of an umbrella concept of parenting leave, disaggregated by entitlement type, while always retaining national legal terms and contextual specificity.

Policy Context: Why Terminology Has Become a Policy Issue

Paid leave for parents of young children has undergone profound transformation over the past century. Initially introduced as maternity protection aimed at safeguarding maternal and infant health, leave policies have gradually expanded to include fathers, recognise shared caregiving responsibilities and promote work–life balance and gender equality.

This expansion has been accompanied by growing institutional and legal complexity. Many countries now combine multiple leave entitlements that differ in eligibility, duration, payment level, transferability and policy rationale. In parallel, new forms of leave, such as carers' leave or leave related to children's illness, have emerged alongside more established arrangements.

As a result, the terminology used to describe parental leave policies has diversified considerably. In some countries, traditional terms have been retained despite substantial policy redesign, while in others new labels have been introduced to signal shifts towards gender neutrality or shared caregiving. In yet other countries, new and traditional terminologies coexist or overlap. These terminological developments reflect broader societal debates about gender roles, care, and employment.

At international level, this diversity has become increasingly consequential. International organisations are expected to set minimum standards, monitor policy implementation, enable cross-national comparison and support policy learning. All of these functions depend critically on clear, transparent and comparable terminology.





| How International Organisations Use and Shape Leave Terminology

International organisations use parenting leave terminology for two distinct but interrelated purposes: regulatory norm-setting and statistical monitoring. Each purpose places different demands on terminology and involves different trade-offs.

| Regulatory and norm-setting functions

Organisations such as the International Labour Organization (ILO) and the European Union (EU) develop conventions, directives and recommendations that establish minimum standards for different types of leave. These legal instruments require precise terminology to define eligibility, duration, payment and policy objectives.

Historically, this has resulted in relatively stable categories, most notably maternity leave, paternity leave and parental leave, each linked to a specific policy rationale. While this clarity is essential for legal implementation, regulatory terminology often struggles to keep pace with policy innovation. New forms of leave tend to be incorporated incrementally and sometimes ambiguously.

Moreover, regulatory frameworks continue to prioritise the rights of employed parents, while children's perspectives and longer-term care needs remain only partially addressed. This creates gaps between evolving policy objectives and the terminology used to articulate them.

| Statistical monitoring and comparative databases

At the same time, international organisations operate large comparative databases designed to monitor policy developments and outcomes across countries. These databases necessarily simplify complex national systems in order to produce comparable indicators.

To achieve comparability, databases increasingly rely on:

- umbrella terms aggregating multiple leave types,
- standardised assumptions about eligibility and benefit levels,
- model families used to estimate entitlements.

While this approach facilitates international comparison, it also introduces tensions between legal precision and statistical abstraction. Differences in how leave types are classified, aggregated or labelled across databases lead to inconsistencies that complicate monitoring, evaluation and policy interpretation.

| Where Do Terminological Inconsistencies Create Problems?

Terminological inconsistencies become particularly consequential where national policies, comparative research and international monitoring intersect. While differences in terminology are often rooted in legitimate historical, legal and normative contexts, they can generate significant analytical and governance challenges when policies are compared, evaluated or monitored across countries. The following sections illustrate how such inconsistencies create problems at three key levels: national policy design and reform, comparative research, and the monitoring of policy implementation.





| National Policy Design and Reform

At the national level, terminology is not merely descriptive but constitutive of policy frameworks, reflecting historical trajectories, legal traditions, and political priorities, many of which have been shaped by the third ILO Convention on Maternity Protection. As a result, formally similar entitlements may be labelled in divergent ways across countries, while identical terms can mask substantial differences in underlying policy design, normative assumptions, and gendered expectations. This diversity is legitimate and often normatively meaningful. However, when national terminology is translated or mapped onto international categories without sufficient contextualisation, misunderstandings arise. Apparent similarities or differences between countries may reflect terminological choices rather than substantive policy characteristics.

| Comparative Research

Comparative research on parenting leave policies relies heavily on secondary data and classifications produced by international organisations. Terminology choices shape research design in systematic ways.

Studies that employ broad umbrella terms often privilege aggregate indicators such as total leave duration or overall generosity, thereby obscuring important distinctions between different types of leave. Whether maternity and paternity leave are subsumed under parental leave or treated as separate categories varies across studies and is rarely made explicit. In contrast, analyses of gendered patterns of leave use tend to rely on gender-specific classifications. These divergent and often implicit categorisation choices are not merely technical; they fundamentally shape measurement strategies, comparability across studies, and the interpretation of empirical results.

| Monitoring Policy Implementation

Terminological inconsistencies pose particular challenges in the context of international commitments, where monitoring relies on consistent indicators across countries. Differences between national legislation, administrative data and international databases make it difficult to assess compliance, take-up and policy effects in a coherent and transparent manner.

| Consequences for Monitoring, Evaluation and Policy Learning

The absence of consistent comparative terminology has cumulative effects that extend beyond technical measurement issues and directly affect governance. In practice, three interrelated consequences can be identified:

| Reduced comparability

Inconsistent classification of leave types produces apparent cross-national differences that reflect terminology rather than policy substance.

| Weakened evidence base

Evaluations relying on misaligned categories risk underestimating or overstating policy effects, particularly regarding gender equality and leave take-up.

| Limited policy learning

Policymakers struggle to identify transferable lessons when policies appear incomparable due to terminological inconsistencies rather than genuine design differences. Taken together, these



consequences undermine the capacity of international organisations to support evidence-based policymaking and mutual learning.

| How Terminology Shapes Research and Research Findings

Beyond its implications for policy design and monitoring, parenting leave terminology has profound consequences for academic research and the production of evidence used in policymaking. Terminology does not merely describe existing policies; it actively shapes how parenting leave is conceptualised, measured and compared.

Comparative research relies heavily on secondary sources, international databases and translated national legislation. In this context, terminological choices define the object of analysis. Studies adopting broad umbrella terms, most commonly *parental leave*, tend to focus on aggregate indicators such as total leave duration or macro-level effects. By contrast, research examining distribution between parents or gender equality outcomes typically relies on gender-specific categories such as maternity leave, paternity leave or father-only entitlements.

These choices are not neutral. They determine which dimensions of leave policies become visible and which remain obscured. Undifferentiated categories may conceal crucial variation in non-transferable entitlements or eligibility rules, while narrow categories may understate the role of shared or family-based entitlements.

The COST report shows that **explicit reflection on terminological choices remains limited**. Many studies do not specify how national leave schemes are mapped onto analytical categories or how alternative terminological decisions might affect results. Consequently, differences in research findings may reflect classification choices rather than substantive policy differences.

These challenges are rooted in historical and institutional dynamics. Parenting leave terminology has evolved unevenly across countries, shaped by welfare state traditions, gender norms and policy trajectories. Translation into English often obscures legal and conceptual nuance.

International organisations and databases have developed their own terminological frameworks to enable comparison. While indispensable, these frameworks involve abstraction and aggregation that are not always critically examined by researchers. Disciplinary traditions further reinforce fragmentation, as legal, economic and sociological approaches rely on different terminological conventions.

The cumulative effect is a research landscape in which findings are difficult to reconcile, replicate or translate into policy advice. Apparent inconsistencies in evidence may reflect terminological divergence rather than genuine policy effects. This weakens the credibility and usefulness of research-based guidance for policymakers and international organisations.

| Is Harmonised Terminology Possible – and at What Level?

This analysis highlights the importance of distinguishing between levels of harmonisation. Harmonising terminology at national level is neither feasible nor desirable. National terms carry legal meaning, cultural context and political significance that should be preserved. By contrast, harmonisation at the comparative level is both feasible and necessary. The aim is not to replace national terminology, but to overlay it with a transparent analytical framework that enables comparison while retaining contextual nuance.





A harmonised comparative framework should be adopted, based on an umbrella concept of parenting leave that encompasses all leave entitlements related to the care of young children, with particular attention to both the duration of leave and the level of payment. For analytical and monitoring purposes, this umbrella should be systematically disaggregated into:

- mother-only leave,
- father-only leave,
- family or shared leave,
- total parenting leave entitlement.

National legal terms should always be reported alongside translated and comparative categories.

| For Policymakers

Policymakers should require transparency regarding how national leave policies are classified in international monitoring. New policy instruments should be accompanied by explicit terminological definitions aligned with comparative frameworks.

| For Researchers

Researchers should:

- document how national leave entitlements are classified,
- clarify analytical focus (aggregate vs. gender-specific),
- reflect on how alternative terminological choices may affect findings.

Greater conceptual transparency would substantially strengthen the robustness and policy relevance of research on paid parenting leave.

| Concluding Remarks

Terminology is not a neutral descriptive device. In the field of paid parenting leave, it shapes governance, research and policy advice. Investing in clearer, more transparent and harmonised comparative terminology is therefore a prerequisite for effective policymaking, robust evidence and meaningful international policy learning.



Key Terminology Issues in Parenting Leave Research

National Leave Terminology

- | National legal concepts
- | Historically embedded categories
- | Gendered and gender-neutral terms

Reflects legal traditions, welfare state legacies and normative assumptions.

Distortion points: **translation, aggregation, re-labelling**



International Organisations (EU | ILO | OECD)

- | Regulatory role: minimum standards, Conventions & Directives, legal definitions

- | Monitoring role: comparative databases, indicators and benchmarks

International organisations translate national diversity into comparable categories.

Distortion points: **Legal precision vs. statistical abstraction**



Comparative Research & Data Structure

- | More or less detail in parenting leave terminology
- | Harmonised indicators according to different criteria
- | Aggregated and disaggregated measures

Terminology decisions determines what becomes measurable and comparable.

Distortion points: **Implicit classification choices**



Research Findings

Assessments of:

- | Policy generosity
- | Gender equality outcomes
- | Leave take-up

Findings may reflect terminological choices as much as policy substance.

Distortion points: **Interpretive slippage**



Policy Interpretation & Advice

- | Policy evaluation
- | Reform recommendations
- | Monitoring of EU and ILO commitments

Policy advice is shaped by how evidence has been produced.

Distortion points: **Data infrastructure & research focus**



Reducing Distortions at International Level

- ⊗ Use parenting leave as a harmonised comparative umbrella term, systematically disaggregate into mother-only, father-only, shared/family and total parenting leave
- ⊗ Always report national legal terms alongside comparative categories
- ⊗ Make classification and aggregation choices explicit in research and monitoring

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