EUROPEAN COOPERATION IN SCIENCE & TECHNOLOGY

FWF Austrian Science Fund

Sustainability@Leave | COST Action CA21150

Parental **Leave** Policies and Social **Sustainability**

Balancing Time and Money: Parenting Leave and Social Sustainability

24th ESPANET Annual Conference, 26th August 2026, 14:00-16:00

Stream 2 - Time-Related Social Policies in the World of Work and Care



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Overview

- Findings WG 2 - **PPL policies and social inequalities**, COST Action CA21150 Parental Leave Policies and Social Sustainability (Sustainability@Leave)
- National Austrian Findings – Research **Gender and Family in Motion. Parental Arrangements** (2021-2026, Department of Sociology, University of Vienna, FWF – Science Fund)
- **Time, Money and Gender : Empirical Evidence**
- **Discussion and Conclusions**: Paid and unpaid working time and gender – sociohistorical background: labor legislation / family policies, parents‘ practices and strategies in reconciling employment and unpaid work (Austrian example)

Social Sustainability@Leave

- **“parental leave-rich" and "parental leave-poor" countries** (McKay et al., 2016)
- **persistent gender and social inequalities in access to leave and childcare services, even in nations with established policies** (Lammi-Taskula et al. 2026).
- **Demand in time and money for identifying PPL opportunities and gaining access/ realizing claims** (ECEC; public or private childcare facilities, informal childcare; **@ identifying PPL opportunities: income-related variants/ men’s higher shares in uptake**, **see Austrian example**; Mauerer 2026 forthcoming) – **relevance of social and cultural capital**, identifying opportunities to claim PPL (McLean et al. 2017, Seibel and Yerkes 2025, Dobrotić and Uzunalioğlu 2026)

Report WG 2 Sustainability@Leave

Mapping the Unknown:
Research Gaps in Parenting Leave Inequality Research in Europe,
COST Action Parental Leave Policies and Social Sustainability (Sustainability@Leave),
DOI: https://doi.org/10.31235/osf.io/8kbsz_v2

- **investigates inequalities that emerge across gender, income, employment status & family contexts.**
- **identifies important gaps in current evidence, particularly regarding long-term outcomes and underrepresented groups.**



WG 2: Policy Brief, PLP and Social Inequalities



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PUBLICATIONS NEWS WG2

WG2 | Policy Brief on Parenting Leave Policies and Social Inequalities

Share

Parenting leave policies are a key tool for promoting gender equality, supporting families and reducing social inequalities across Europe. Yet their impact is not uniform. This policy brief shows that outcomes depend not only on formal entitlements, but on how policies are designed, accessed and used in practice.

Drawing on recent research, the policy brief highlights how inequalities emerge across gender, income, employment status and family contexts. It also identifies important gaps in current evidence, particularly regarding long-term outcomes and underrepresented groups.

By combining a clear overview of existing knowledge with forward-looking recommendations, the brief offers valuable insights for researchers, policymakers and anyone interested in more inclusive family

Manage consent

Austrian Context: Leaves and Part-Time Employment

- **Paternity leave (1 month after birth):** ~25% of all fathers (10/24)
- **Childcare benefit**: 15% of all fathers (on average, for at least 2 months)
    - ~ 1% of all fathers for 5+ months
- **Parental leave:** 24 available months, with 2 months earmarked for 2nd parent
- **Part-time rates:**
    - with 2-year-old child (after PL): fathers 9% / mothers 86%
    - overall: male 13% / female: 51%

Gender and Family in Motion. Parental arrangements

- **Gender and Family in Motion. Parental arrangements.** (Austrian Science Funding; Department of Sociology, University of Vienna, 03/2021-02/2026)
- **2021-2022: First empirical wave, 42 couple interviews,** each parent took a minimum of five months childcare benefits / paid parental leave claims
- **2023: Second empirical wave, 42 individual interviews, follow-up study,** (75% male and female interviewees from the sample 2021-2022; 25% participants from an earlier study 2013-2016: **longitudinal results** – career development; school-aged children, aging grand-parents)
- **QR: How do parents negotiate employment and childcare?**
- **How do they spend a regular/ an ideal day on PPL?**
- **Thematic focus on daily reports and experiences of the parent interviewed** (as a sole parent responsible during their childcare benefits uptake; ➔ visible impact of high women's shares in part-time work in Austria; report on a regular day – on averaged women reported wo hours more regarding a regular day on leave; fathers often identified their regular day as an ideal day).

Results / Importance of motives for sharing PL

Men's / couples' motives for dual leave uptake: Type I. led by realizing gender equity as a goal; **Type II.** spending time as a family/ development of father-child bonds; **Type III.** Supporting the (female) partner's (future) income gain, reconciling both parents' employment/career plans and unpaid work (childcare, family management/ responsibilities)

➔**Result:** differing views on sharing unpaid work & in balancing the impact of a '*patriarchal dividend*' (Connell 2010), both on a structural level and individual level (men's advantages in the labour market, not being seen as responsible parent who bears mental load; e.g. being addressed when a child falls ill; by contrast, being predominantly seen as a main (male) "family breadwinner" also on PL (effects of a normative gender order)

➔**Mental Load as a marker or identifier:** a smaller group of fathers reported mental load and emotional strains in childcare (e.g., matching the needs of two children) involves balancing children's needs and one's own needs; - length of days and nights spent on sole PL are decisive (see O'Brien and Wall 2017; Deutsch and Gaunt 2020)

Summary / Gender and Family in Motion

- **Men's attitude towards claiming PL on the sample analysed:** (self-)confidence regarding the implementation of labour legislation and family legislation in Austria and their transfer into practise, in dealing with claiming PL and childcare benefits.
- **Sample characterized by a dominance of hybrid masculinities** (Demetriou 2001; Bridges and Pascoe 2014, 2018) that involve a **(latent) continuation of hegemonic masculinity in a transformed form;** => oriented towards continuity and adaptability of hegemonic masculinity and current gender relations (consistent with the fact that men in Austria mainly utilize PPL for a maximum of 2-3 months and then usually pursue full-time employment; by contrast, caring masculinities try to establish alternative masculinities deviating from the previous hegemonic understanding.
- **long-term solutions in dually reconciling employment and childcare are often not up for debate or not seen as an option.**
- **Gainful employment remains central for (male) identity-building**, although the economic base for a nuclear family is often depending on two income providers.

Conclusion and Outlook

- **Austria example:** relatively generous leave benefits, however, gender differences regarding time in paid employment and unpaid care work minimize the success of current family benefits and regarding diminishing gender and social inequalities and a wider promotion of couples' dual long-term reconciliation of paid work and unpaid care work,
- tendency to perpetuate gender inequalities in reconciling employment and unpaid work after both parents' uptake of PPL, in correlation with women's high shares in part-time employment (socio-historical background, Mauerer 2018; Neyer 1997)
- **gender-neutral** family **policies** with the **freedom to choose between many different options**
- **Deeply rooted societal and cultural norms** regarding gender and parental roles are a **major barrier** to consider part-time employment or parental leave as viable options for fathers.

Conclusion and Outlook II

- **couples who emphasized mutual care both as parents and partners were highly successful in achieving gender equity in balancing employment, childcare, and family management**. => without explicit negotiations at the couple level, family management tended to remain a mother's responsibility (see also Alsarve and Glatz 2025; Alsarve 2024; Blair-Loy et al. 2015; Wattis et al. 2013).
- **successful strategies – such as a father's involvement in "project-managing" a child's school career or a clear division of domestic chores – emerged from explicit negotiations between parents regarding the sharing of responsibilities.**
- tendency among fathers to perceive unpaid tasks as 'work' or 'project management', during parental leave and beyond**. This framing of care-related tasks as 'work' or 'project management' suggests that traditional notions of productivity, efficiency, and employer loyalty are transposed into the domestic sphere** (Funder 2016).

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Thank you!

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