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## The role of employers in reducing the implementation gap in leave policies

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## **The Role of Employers in Reducing the Implementation Gap in Leave Policies**

**Discussion Paper**

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Lena Hipp, Charlotte Schlüter, Stefania Molina

### **The Role of Employers in Reducing the Implementation Gap in Leave Policies**

Discussion Paper SP I 2022–502

Wissenschaftszentrum Berlin für Sozialforschung (2022)

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Abstract

## **The Role of Employers in Reducing the Implementation Gap in Leave Policies**

by Lena Hipp, Charlotte Schlüter, Stefania Molina

Although parents in almost all rich democracies are entitled to some form of paid parenting leave, fathers in particular often do not take all the leave available to them. As employers play an important role in the implementation of parenting leave policies, this article investigates what workplace characteristics influence mothers' and fathers' uptake of their statutory leave entitlements. In Part 1, we combine data from the OECD and the European Labor Force Survey to estimate the size of the "implementation gap" between statutory leave entitlements and leave uptake for mothers and fathers, and compare the size of this gap across countries. In Parts 2 and 3, we review the literature on structural and cultural workplace factors that promote or hinder parenting leave uptake. We conclude the article with suggestions for further research and stress the need for reliable data on the uptake of parenting leave entitlements and research on non-European countries.

*Keywords: parenting/parental leave, policy implementation, workplace culture, gender equality*

### **Zusammenfassung**

Obwohl Eltern in fast allen westlichen Industrienationen Anspruch auf Auszeiten nach der Geburt eines Kindes haben, nehmen insbesondere Väter diese Möglichkeiten oftmals nicht oder zumindest nicht vollumfänglich wahr. Da Arbeitgeber\*innen eine wichtige Rolle bei der Implementierung von Elternzeitangeboten spielen, geht dieser Beitrag der Frage nach, welche Organisations- und Arbeitsplatzmerkmale die Inanspruchnahme von Elternzeit unter Müttern und Vätern beeinflussen. In Teil 1 des Beitrags kombinieren wir Daten der Europäischen Arbeitskräfteerhebung und der OECD, um das Ausmaß der „Implementierungslücke“ bei der Elternzeit von Müttern und Vätern ländervergleichend darzustellen. In Teil 2 und 3 fassen wir die Ergebnisse existierender Forschungsarbeiten zu strukturellen und kulturellen Faktoren zusammen, welche die Inanspruchnahme von Elternzeiten begünstigen oder verhindern. In unseren abschließenden Hinweisen zu bestehenden Forschungsdesideraten stellen wir die Notwendigkeit ländervergleichender Erhebungen zur Inanspruchnahme gesetzlicher Elternzeitangeboten sowie Forschung in nicht-europäischen Ländern heraus.

*Schlüsselwörter: Elternzeit, Politikumsetzung, Arbeitsplatzkultur, Geschlechtergleichstellung*

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## I. Introduction

Employers play a crucial role in determining whether new mothers and fathers are able to take time off to care for their children. In countries where no or very little paid leave is provided, employers decide whether to give their employees leave options as part of their benefit packages (e.g., for the United States, Engeman, 2012; Sawhill et al., 2019; for the United Kingdom, Koslowski & Kadar-Satat, 2019). In countries where new parents are entitled to paid leave by law, employers can facilitate or hinder the uptake of statutory leave (e.g., Samtleben et al., 2019). In addition to those instances where employer consent is required for the approval of leave requests, e.g., in Luxemburg (Zhelyazkova et al., 2020), both structural and informal employer characteristics affect whether mothers and fathers take advantage of the government-funded paid parenting leaves to which they are entitled and how much of the available leave they take.

Understanding the role of employers in the implementation of leave policies is vitally important given the unequal rates of leave uptake between fathers and mothers in many countries. Although a large majority of mothers take most of the paid leave available to them, uptake tends to be low among fathers and highly contingent on specific policy characteristics—above all, the level of wage replacement and individual entitlement (Castro-García & Pazos-Moran, 2016). Even in countries with progressive leave policies, very few fathers actually take all of the leave available to them. In Germany, for example, only around one third of fathers of newborn children take any parenting leave (BMFSFJ, 2018). In Sweden, where more fathers take leave in general, they still only take one quarter of the leave available to them (Duvander & Haas, 2018). These low rates of leave uptake among fathers are surprising in light of the overall rise in female labor force participation and the increasing number of fathers who want to be involved in child-rearing (e.g., Bernhardt et al., 2016 for Germany).

Sociologists have repeatedly shown that organizational structures shape gender inequalities in the workplace (e.g., Acker, 1990; Kmec, 2005; Tomaskovic-Devey & Avent-Holt, 2019). Both formal and informal organizational characteristics have been identified as contributing to the gendered uptake of parenting leaves. In a survey experiment, Pedulla and Thébaud (2015), for example, found that the vast majority of young men and women in the United States would opt for an egalitarian division of labor if public policies and workplace norms supported work-family reconciliation. Likewise, in a qualitative interview study, Gerson (2011) found that young men and women in the New York metropolitan area tended to envision an egalitarian division of paid and unpaid work – but that both men and women had doubts that this scenario was attainable.

This chapter therefore focuses on the role of workplace characteristics in the use and length of parenting leave. What keeps mothers and, to a much greater extent, fathers from

taking the statutory leave to which they are entitled? What organizational characteristics encourage or enable mothers and fathers to take leave, and what characteristics hinder or prevent them from doing so? To answer these questions, in Part 1 of this chapter, we seek to empirically assess variations in the gap between statutory leave entitlement and leave uptake across genders and countries by combining data from the OECD on the length of paid parenting leave with data from the European Labor Force Survey on men's and women's leave status. In Part 2, we attempt to explain these implementation gaps by reviewing various structural factors that hinder parents, in particular fathers, from taking the parenting leave to which they are legally entitled. The key structural factors relate to employees' employment stability, to organizational size, or and to workforce composition. In Part 3, we examine the cultural and normative determinants of leave uptake and highlight the importance of prevailing gender and "constant availability" norms and the role of peer and supervisor behavior. In the concluding Part 4, we outline directions for further research, such as the need for reliable data on the size of the implementation gap, research on non-European countries, and investigations of interactions between workplace characteristics and the design of parenting leave policies as well as individual and household factors.

## II. Cross-country variation in the implementation gap

Most wealthy democracies provide parents—or at least mothers—with some form of family leave after childbirth (Hegewisch & Gornick, 2011; OECD, 2018a). The level of support varies widely, however, in terms of both the length of leave and the level and amount of wage replacement, if any (OECD, 2018a; Ray et al., 2010). Leave policies also differ in whether they provide mothers and fathers with leave to use as a family or individually. In the former case, mothers and fathers are free to decide how to divide a total amount of leave between them, while in the latter case, each parent is entitled to a specific length of leave, and this leave may or may not be transferable from one parent to the other (Castro-García & Pazos-Moran, 2016; Koslowski, 2021). Together, these aspects of leave design affect how mothers and fathers make use of their legal entitlements (Castro-García & Pazos-Moran, 2016; Morgan & Zippel, 2003; Ray et al., 2010).

### 2.1 Policy design and leave uptake

The total length of job-protected leave available to couples varies greatly between countries (e.g., OECD Family Database 2018). It ranges from just 12 weeks in the United States (Kaufman et al., 2020) and 14 weeks in Switzerland to more than 300 weeks in France and Spain (Ray et al., 2010). Well-paid leave of medium duration has been shown to promote mothers' labor force participation and fathers' involvement in childcare and housework (e.g., for cross-country comparisons, Boeckmann et al., 2015; Boll et al., 2014; for evidence

on Germany, Bünning, 2015; Kluve & Tamm, 2013). Very long and poorly paid leave, by contrast, tends to harm women's employment outcomes (for Canada, Baker & Milligan, 2008; for cross-country comparisons, Boeckmann et al., 2015; Morgan & Zippel, 2003).

The amount of financial compensation parents receive also varies considerably between countries (Ray et al., 2010). While some countries provide parents with no (e.g., the United States) or very low financial compensation (e.g., the United Kingdom and Ireland), wage replacement rates are around 60 percent in the Czech Republic and as high as 100 percent in countries such as Austria, France, and Spain (Castro-García & Pazos-Moran, 2016; OECD, 2018a). Although father-specific leave tends to be paid at the same rate as mother-specific leave (ibid.), there are de facto differences in mothers' and fathers' wage replacement rates. These are due in some cases to income limits on wage replacement or the offsetting of the maternity allowance (i.e., a government benefit paid to pregnant women or new mothers) against the parental allowance.

Last but not least, wide cross-country variation can be found with regard to non-transferable leave entitlements for fathers (e.g., Koslowski, 2021). The Scandinavian welfare states were the first to introduce this form of individualized, non-transferable leave, and today, fathers in Norway and Sweden have almost half of the leave provided to couples reserved exclusively for them (four months and eight months, respectively). Other countries, by contrast, including Australia, the Slovak Republic, and Israel, do not provide any individualized, non-transferable leave to fathers (OECD, 2018a; Ray et al., 2010). Although a growing proportion of fathers take at least some leave when such regulations are in place (e.g., Björnberg, 2002; Duvander & Andersson, 2006, for Sweden), few fathers take more than the non-transferable share reserved for them, and women's transferable and non-transferable leave is considerably longer than men's in most countries (Castro-García & Pazos-Moran, 2016).

## 2.2 Leave uptake across countries

Given these substantial differences in policy design, it is not surprising that the extent to which mothers and fathers take parenting leave varies considerably between countries (Koslowski et al., 2020). This great variation in the design of leave policies, perhaps explains why there are no harmonized data to systematically assess mothers' and fathers' leave uptake between countries. To close this gap and to empirically assess differences between leave entitlements and uptake in a comparable manner across countries, we combined data from the OECD on mothers' and fathers' leave entitlements (OECD, 2018a) with data from the European Labor Force Survey (EU LFS) for the year 2018.

In a first step, we used the OECD indicator for parents' total statutory paid parenting leave to predict the proportion of mothers and fathers of young children (< 3 years) *who could be expected to be on leave if they took the entire length of leave available, assuming all employed*



*parents are eligible*<sup>1</sup>. To this end, we divided the total number of paid weeks available to mothers or reserved for fathers by 156 weeks (i.e., 3 years). For mothers' statutory leave entitlements, the OECD indicator includes maternity leave, the number of weeks of parental leave that are an individual entitlement, and the number of weeks that are a shared or family entitlement. The measure of the total statutory paid leave reserved for fathers covers paternity leave and the number of weeks of parental leave explicitly reserved for the second partner.

In a second step, we juxtapose the information about the predicted proportion of parents who could be on leave against the proportion of parents with children under 3 years of age *who reported being on leave* in the 2018 European Labor Force Survey. The estimates are based on weighted data on parents aged 20 to 55 years who were employed before they went on leave. That is, we excluded those who were previously not employed, who were in education, or who were self-employed.

Table 1.1 summarizes these estimates. The ordering of the countries in Table 1.1 is based on the total length of statutory parenting leave available to both mothers and fathers (less than 12 months, 12 or more months, and more than 24 months)<sup>2</sup>. The first column in the respective columns for mothers and fathers provides an overview on the proportion of mothers and fathers with children younger than 3 years who could be on leave if they took all the leave available to them. The second column displays the weighted proportion of mothers and fathers with children younger than 3 years who are on leave. The third column indicates whether more (+), fewer (-), or much fewer (--) parents are on leave than predicted or approximately the same (+/-) proportion of parents are on leave as predicted<sup>3</sup>. For some countries, no implementation gap could have been calculated due to a very small number of cases (see last column/N).

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<sup>1</sup> It is important to note here, that in most EU-countries not all employed parents are eligible for parenting leave. In 2017, 10% of women and 12% of men were employed but not eligible for parenting leave (EIGE, 2021). Ineligibility among the employed was especially high in countries that did not grant access to leave to the self-employed (e.g. UK, Spain, Netherlands) or countries that imposed restrictions, such as requiring employees to work a certain duration before the birth of a child to be eligible for parenting leave (ibid.).

<sup>2</sup> As we predict the proportion of parents on leave until the child has reached the age of three, the predicted proportion of mothers and fathers in countries with short leaves is considerably lower than in countries that provide parents with longer leaves.

<sup>3</sup> We might observe more parents than predicted on leave because mothers in particular may also take unpaid leave.

Table 1: An approximation of the gender-specific implementation gap in paid parental leave

Country	Mothers on leave				Fathers on leave			
	Predicted %	Observed %	Gap	N	Predicted %	Observed %	Gap	N
Total leave length < 1 year								
ES	10.3	7.6	-	116	2.7	1.4	-	22
NL	10.3	7.6	-	138	0.3			1
CY	11.5	9.4	-	65	1.3			4
MT	11.5	11.7	+	30	0.1			0
IE	16.7	18.7	+	569	1.3	0.7	-	20
PT	19.3	10.5	-	225	14.3	1.5	--	31
BE	20.7	8.1	--	78	12.4	.		7
GB	25.0	20.1	-	381	1.3	0.8	-	16
FR	26.9	9.0	--	756	17.9	0.6	--	91
GR	27.6	8.5	--	158	0.3	0.5	+	10
IT	30.6	14.4	--	821	0.5			9
DK	32.1	18.3	-	138	1.3	3.7	+	27
Total leave length ≥ 1 year								
PL	33.3	28.0	-	1299	1.3	0.2	--	14
SI	33.4	21.2	-	288	2.7	1.1	--	15
SE	35.7	21.0	-	88	9.2	8.8	-	35
HR	35.9	29.6	-	98	5.6			5
DE	37.2	27.1	-	2474	5.6	2.0	--	243
AT	38.5	42.1	+	1417	5.6	0.8	--	31
LT	39.7	41.6	+	427	2.6	2.6	+/-	24
CZ	40.6	28.9	-	107	0.6			0
LV	60.3	38.2	-	111	0.9			6
Total leave length > 2 years								
RO	69.7	30.5	--	282	3.4			7
BG	70.8	25.3	--	39	1.4			0
HU	100.0	2.6	--	40	0.6			0
FI	100.0	14.0	--	97	5.8	3.0	-	32
SK	100.0	21.9	--	129	0.0			6
EE	100.0	8.0	--	33	1.3			3

Source: OECD Family Database (2018) and EU LFS (2018), own calculations.

Note: The extent of the implementation gap is indicated by “-” if less than 50% of the predicted proportion of parents were on leave, by “--” if more than the predicted proportion of parents were on leave as, and by “+” if more parents than predicted were on leave; “+/-” indicates that there was no implementation gap on average. Countries are sorted by increasing length of paid leave available to mothers (maternity leave plus parental leave); values for those countries with very small sample sizes for fathers on leave (<10) are set to missing.

While our approximation is useful for cross-country comparisons, it is not without shortcomings. First of all, we can only compare a select number of European countries. Second, the actual uptake rates may underestimate the proportion of previously employed parents on leave. In addition to measurement error and small sample sizes, parents on leave who still work part-time are not captured in the EU LFS data (e.g., this is theoretically possible in Germany and Poland). In some countries, moreover, parents may take (part of) their paid leave after their children have turned 3 and are hence also not covered by our approximation (e.g., Italy, Sweden, Slovenia; see Koslowski et al., 2020). Fathers, moreover, are more likely to take leave during vacation seasons (e.g., Lott & Klenner, 2018; Neumann & Meuser, 2017) and are therefore not as likely as mothers to be captured by the survey when they take leave, as they might not participate in the survey during vacation seasons. Lastly, we need to acknowledge that the harmonized OECD data on the length of paid parenting leave that we use in our analyses misses important details on leave design that may be highly relevant to the implementation gap, such as the generosity of the benefit, but also within-country variation in eligibility.

The comparison between the predicted and the observed proportion of leave-takers shows that both mothers and fathers tend to take less paid leave than is available to/reserved for them on average (the exceptions are mothers in Austria, Ireland, Malta, and Ireland, and fathers in Denmark and Latvia). In the case of mothers, differences between the predicted and observed proportion are smaller in countries that grant short to medium periods of leave (we define short as less than 12 months, and medium as 1-2 years), such as Ireland, the Netherlands, Poland, and Spain, and tend to increase with the total leave length in countries such as Hungary, Estonia, and Finland, where leave lengths are above 2 years. Hence, although mothers tend to take at least some leave (see Koslowski et al., 2020), the data provided in Table 1 suggest that they do not use the full amount of leave available to them.

Table 1 also shows that fathers—despite the comparably short period of individual leave that is effectively reserved for them—are even less likely than mothers to take the (entire) leave. Exceptions are Denmark, Greece, Latvia, and Slovakia, where the proportion of fathers on leave is slightly higher than predicted. Implementation gaps are larger in countries that grant longer periods of individual leave to fathers (i.e., more than 20 weeks) such as France and Portugal. In countries with a medium length of leave reserved for fathers (around 9 weeks), such as Austria and Germany, the gap between the predicted and the observed proportion of fathers on leave is larger than in countries which only have very short leaves reserved for the second parent (i.e., less than 3 weeks), such as Ireland and the United Kingdom. Thus, although the implementation gap for fathers tends to be smaller in countries granting shorter individual parenting leave to men, it nevertheless persists.

Overall, we observe that, across countries, neither mothers nor fathers use the full amount of paid leave available to or reserved for them. Moreover, a significant proportion of fathers do not even use the relatively short, non-transferable leave to which they are legally entitled. There are several explanations for this. For one, parents may not make use of the entire leave available to them because they would prefer to enroll their child in daycare. Finland and Germany, for instance, offer affordable daycare for children starting in infancy (see OECD, 2018b, 2020), but even in these two countries, we observe considerable gaps between predicted and actual leave uptake for both mothers and fathers. Another explanation relates to the fact that leave payments in some countries tend to be relatively low—at least for parts of the leave and in particular when only flat-rate payments are provided or when ceiling caps are low. However, it needs to be noted that there are considerable differences between predicted and actual uptake in countries where wage replacement rates are high, such as Sweden, Estonia, and Spain (Koslowski et al., 2020). All of this indicates that policy design and individual-level characteristics alone cannot explain the differential leave uptake of mothers and fathers. In order to explain the persistence of the implementation gap across genders and countries, it is therefore necessary to take parents' work contexts into account.

### III. Structural reasons for the implementation gap

One explanation for why parents may not use the entire paid leave available relates to structural workplace constraints. Analytically, we can distinguish between organizational characteristics that affect employees' job security and those that accommodate work-family balance to understand variations in leave uptake between genders and countries.

#### 3.1 Job security: Permanent contracts and public-sector employment

Studies from different countries have found that higher job security increases the likelihood of fathers taking leave (Geisler & Kreyenfeld, 2011; Lapuerta et al., 2011; Reich, 2010), presumably because they do not fear losing their jobs as a consequence. Work on the US context, for instance, shows that both women and men are more likely to take leave under the Family and Medical Leave Act, which provides job protection during leave (e.g., Han et al., 2009). Likewise, studies on Germany and Spain report that fathers' uptake of parenting leave is higher when they have a permanent contract (Geisler & Kreyenfeld, 2011; Lapuerta et al., 2011; Reich, 2010). The empirical evidence on the association between employment stability and leave uptake for women is relatively limited, however, probably due to the sharp discrepancy in leave uptake between men and women. One exception is a

study on Spain, which found that mothers as well as fathers were more likely to make use of their legal leave entitlement when permanently employed (Lapuerta et al., 2011).

A second indicator of the relevance of job security for parents' likelihood of taking leave is the increased leave uptake by public sector employees. Research from various countries has found the employment in the civil service and in the health and education sectors is positively related to leave uptake (e.g., Escot et al., 2012; Geisler & Kreyenfeld, 2011; Lappegård, 2012 for Sweden; Lapuerta et al., 2011, for Spain; Naz, 2010, for Norway; Reich, 2010, for Germany; Whitehouse et al., 2007, for Australia). Again, the vast majority of studies in this context focus on fathers (see Lapuerta et al., 2011, for an exception), which is probably due to the fact that mothers usually take longer periods of leave than fathers (Castro-García & Pazos-Moran, 2016; Koslowski et al., 2020).

### 3.2 Firm size: Collective representation, work-family policies, and temporary substitutes

Firm size may theoretically increase fathers' leave uptake as well. Large organizations are more likely to be unionized or have works councils (Grund & Schmitt, 2011; Holst & Schupp, 2003), to have formalized work-family policies (Kotey & Slade, 2005; Reskin & McBrier, 2000), and to provide temporary substitutes for employees who go on leave (Samtleben et al., 2019). Empirically, however, no consistent relationship has been found between fathers' uptake of parenting leave and firm size. Studies on Sweden and Norway found no relationship between firm size and fathers' leave uptake (Bygren & Duvander, 2006; Lappegård, 2012), whereas studies on Australia (Whitehouse et al., 2007), Spain (Lapuerta et al., 2011), and Luxemburg (Zhelyazkova & Ritschard, 2018) report that fathers who worked in larger firms were more likely to take parenting leave. Likewise, in a study comparing nine European countries (van Breeschoten et al., 2019), firm size was positively associated with fathers' use of parenting leaves.

The results of studies investigating correlates of firm size—unionization and the availability of company-level work-family policies—do not necessarily fill in the gaps in the picture. First, although collective representation should help workers to request and receive the benefits to which they are legally entitled, there is only weak empirical evidence on the positive role of unions and work councils in leave uptake. While a study from Australia found unionized fathers to be more likely to take parenting leave than their non-unionized counterparts (Whitehouse et al., 2007), studies from the United States and Germany (Budd & Brey, 2003; Samtleben et al., 2019) found no significant effect of collective representation in the workplace on the frequency of men's and women's leave uptake, which may also be attributable to differences in workforce composition and occupational norms (see more on this point below). However, in the US context, union workers were found to be better informed about leave policies, were more likely to receive paid leave,

and enjoyed greater job security when taking leave (Budd & Brey, 2003). A potential explanation for these inconsistencies is offered by Haas and Hwang (2013), who compellingly argue that, in order to have a positive effect on fathers' leave uptake, unions must first realize that men also have caregiving responsibilities before addressing them in bargaining agreements. In the case of Sweden, however, most labor unions do not consider paternal leave uptake an important issue, and thus fail to actively promote parenting leave for fathers (*ibid.*).

Second, the availability of family-friendly workplace policies does not consistently relate to leave uptake across countries. Two studies on Sweden and Spain found a positive relationship between the institutionalization of family-friendly policies in the workplace and fathers' likelihood of taking leave (Bygren & Duvander, 2006; Escot et al., 2012). In a study from Germany, by contrast, the existence of work-family policies in the workplace did not have a significant effect on men's or women's use of parenting leave (Samtleben et al., 2019).

A third factor, formalized rules on the provision of temporary job substitutes for parents on leave, has been found to be positively related to parents' leave uptake. A quantitative study from Germany reports that in companies where official replacement regulations were in place and parents could be certain that someone would cover for them, both fathers and mothers were more likely to take (longer periods of) leave (Samtleben et al., 2019). This finding is supported by a number of qualitative studies illustrating that the lack of a temporary substitute tends to discourage fathers from taking leave due to their concerns about overburdening coworkers (e.g., Haas & Hwang, 2019 for Sweden; Kaufman, 2018 for UK; Lott & Klenner, 2018 for Germany).

### 3.3 Workforce composition

Workforce composition, which is closely related to differences in leave uptake by economic sector and to the availability of firm-level policies (Lapuerta, Baizán, and González 2011), should theoretically also explain variations in parents' leave uptake behavior. First, organizations are more likely to accommodate employees' childcare needs when large proportions of their workforce are perceived to have childcare responsibilities, which tends to be the case in female-dominated sectors. Second, when employees see their coworkers taking parenting leave, this should promote leave uptake among mothers and fathers (e.g., Dahl et al., 2014). The empirical evidence on workforce composition and leave uptake behavior, however, is not unequivocal. In a study on Norway, Naz (2010) found that fathers in female-dominated sectors make use of the transferable part of the parenting leave scheme more often than fathers in male-dominated sectors. Likewise, in a study on Japan, Mun and Brinton (2015) showed that in companies with a higher proportion of women in managerial positions, mothers took more of the parenting leave available to

them. In a cross-country comparison, by contrast, Anxo et al. (2007) report a negative relationship between men's parenting leave usage and the proportion of women in organizations. Again, other studies found that the workforce composition of the partner's workplace matters (Bygren & Duvander, 2006).

## IV. Cultural and normative reasons for the implementation gap

In addition to structural factors, informal rules and norms also contribute to the gendered implementation gap in leave uptake. Drawing on Acker's (1990) concept of gendered organizations, the following sections review the literature on normative and cultural factors that influence mothers' and fathers' leave uptake, in particular, the prevalence of the "ideal worker" norm (Blair-Loy, 2003; Williams, 2000) and traditional gender norms as well as support from peers and supervisors.

### 4.1 The "ideal worker" norm

Informal norms and expectations about what a "good" worker should or should not do appear to also affect the degree to which mothers and fathers make use of their legal leave entitlements. The "ideal worker" norm (Blair-Loy, 2003; Williams, 2000) is particularly useful in explaining why fathers—and to a lesser degree also mothers—hesitate to use the parenting leave to which they are entitled. The "ideal worker" norm refers to the widespread notion that "good" workers are those who devote themselves completely to their jobs, prioritize paid work over all other aspects of life, and work full-time without ever reducing their working hours. Although the ideal worker norm is inherently gendered due to the unequal distribution of paid and unpaid work between men and women, taking parenting leave constitutes a major violation of this norm for both genders.

There is little direct evidence, however, on the relationship between prevailing ideal worker norms and mothers' and fathers' leave uptake behavior. In a mixed-methods study, Samtleben et al. (2019) found that the strong prevalence of the ideal worker norm in Germany is associated with a higher probability of mothers and fathers suffering negative career effects upon taking leave. Furthermore, quantitative evidence from Sweden indicates that fathers are less likely to take (long periods of) leave when they work on teams in which long working hours prevail (Brandth & Kvande, 2002; Haas et al., 2002). As the expectation that workers should be available to work long hours is especially prevalent in upper-level and management positions (e.g., von Alemann et al., 2017, for Germany; see Williams et al., 2013, for a general discussion), it is not surprising that managers were found to be less likely than non-managers to take leave beyond their quota (Brandth & Kvande, 2002 for Sweden). Moreover, qualitative studies from Germany and Sweden illustrate that

fathers face the strong normative expectation that they will prioritize work over family and arrange their leave in ways that are minimally disruptive to the workplace (Aunkofer et al., 2018; Haas & Hwang, 2019; Lott & Klenner, 2018). Consequently, German fathers tend to limit themselves to the two months of leave that would otherwise be lost in order to meet their companies' needs and interests (Lott and Klenner 2018). In this kind of organizational culture, fathers' parenting leave is treated as a choice rather than a right to take care of one's child (e.g., Haas & Hwang, 2019; Neumann & Meuser, 2017).

## 4.2 Traditional beliefs about gender

The prevalence of traditional gender norms is another factor that is likely to influence mothers' and fathers' use of parenting leave. Gendered expectations about what parents ought to do should theoretically encourage mothers to take (longer periods of) leave and discourage fathers from doing so. Therefore, in contexts in which traditional gender norms prevail, mothers take longer periods of leave than they actually want to, whereas fathers may be reluctant to take parenting leave at all (Brandth & Kvande, 2002; Williams et al., 2013).

Qualitative studies on fathers have found that men who take parenting leave in organizations where traditional gender norms prevail tend to be mocked or criticized for not being "real men," which may discourage them from taking leave (Aunkofer et al., 2018, for Germany; Williams, 2010, on blue-collar men in the US). Quantitative studies, however, have produced mixed results. In a study conducted by Haas et al. (2002) in Sweden, a company's commitment to gender equality had a strong effect on men's likelihood of taking parenting leave. Samtleben et al. (2019), by contrast, found no significant relationship between the prevalence of traditional gender norms and fathers' use of parenting leave in Germany. In the same study, however, mothers who perceived their workplace to be more traditional in terms of gender norms took longer periods of leave on average than mothers working in more gender-egalitarian workplaces. Notably, mothers in workplaces with traditional gender norms were not only encouraged to take long periods of leave but were also more likely to report a negative career impact of parenting leave after returning to work (Samtleben et al., 2019).

## 4.3 Peer behavior and managerial support

Closely related to gender and ideal worker norms are the behaviors of supervisors and colleagues when it comes to parents' use of parenting leave. Mothers and fathers infer what is considered appropriate in a given workplace from the behavior of those around them and act on these inferences. Peer behaviors such as leave uptake by others in the organization or comments by coworkers or supervisors can either encourage or discourage



parents from taking (longer periods of) parenting leave. The behaviors and attitudes of supervisors and managers with regard to leave uptake also influence the degree to which parents make use of the leave to which they are legally entitled (Abendroth & den Dulk, 2011).

Qualitative work on fathers suggests that men who perceive parenting leave to be uncommon among other fathers in their organization are reluctant to take leave themselves (Haas & Hwang, 2019, for Sweden; Samtleben et al., 2019; Aunkofer et al., 2018, for Germany). Conversely, a quantitative study from Norway shows that fathers were significantly more likely to use parenting leave when a male co-worker had done so as well (Dahl et al., 2014). Importantly, this positive peer effect increased over time, suggesting that leave uptake becomes increasingly normal in organizations with each father who takes the leave to which he is entitled.

Further research points to the critical role of supervisor and manager support. According to qualitative studies from the United Kingdom, fathers tend to attribute great importance to support from their managers when negotiating parenting leave, and frequently cite anticipated negative reactions as a reason for refraining to take (extended) leave (Kaufman, 2018; Moran & Koslowski, 2019). Furthermore, a quantitative study by Thompson et al. (2015) shows that British fathers whose supervisors were very supportive tended to take longer leaves than those who received no support at all. However, quantitative studies from other European countries have found no statistically relevant relationship between perceptions of supervisor support and fathers' or mothers' use of parenting leave (Haas et al., 2002, for Sweden; Samtleben et al., 2019, for Germany; van Breeschoten et al., 2019, for nine European countries). Interestingly, however, supervisor support has been shown to play an important role in protecting employees, and specifically mothers, from potential negative career consequences of using family policies (see also Briscoe & Kellogg, 2011 for the US; Samtleben et al., 2019 for Germany). Thus, while it is not entirely clear to what extent manager support affects mothers' and fathers' decisions about parenting leave, the social support provided by managers as well as their own use of parenting leave can undoubtedly help to promote the general acceptance of parenting leave within organizations.

## V. Conclusion and suggestions

A growing body of literature on the relationship between organizational characteristics and parents', especially fathers', use of parenting leave entitlements clearly shows that workplace context matters. While researchers have established this fact for a number of countries, there are still no harmonized data available to assess the size of such implementation gaps across countries. In this chapter, we therefore sought to estimate the country-specific gaps between the *leave parents could take* and the *leave they do take* by

drawing on data from the OECD (OECD Family Database 2018) and the European Labor Force Survey (EULFS 2018). These analyses show that in many countries, mothers and in particular fathers do not take all the leave available to them. While parts of this implementation gap may be due to the fact that leave payments may be low, other parts may be related to both structural and cultural workplace constraints.

In a series of country-specific analyses and case studies, research has nonetheless identified that both structural factors as well as cultural and informal workplace characteristics play an important role in uptake of parenting leaves, particularly among fathers. Most of this research, however, has been conducted in Europe and especially the Nordic countries—presumably because statutory leave is an important component of family policy in these countries and because parenting leave are not (statutory) provided in many other parts of the world (e.g., the United States). In addition to the regional bias in the literature, there is also a lack of quantitative studies on the relationship between workplace characteristics and the use of parenting leaves. Future research should address these gaps. In addition to collecting data on mothers' and fathers' actual leave uptake, research should focus on interactions between firm-level characteristics that influence leave uptake and macro-level (e.g., policy design) as well as micro-level factors (e.g., household and couple characteristics).

Despite these gaps and shortcomings, the research discussed in this chapter offers several implications for researchers, policy makers, and organizational decision makers. Job security and accommodations for employees who take parenting leaves—in particular the availability of a temporary replacement to cover for them at work—encourages employees to make use of parenting leave. Moreover, organizational cultures that embrace gender equality and do not idealize norms of boundless availability encourage leave uptake, particularly among fathers. In light of skill shortages and changing gender norms, employers are well advised to shape their organizational cultures to support the use of parenting leave by both women and men, and to reflect this objective in their working time regimes and performance evaluation systems. In light of the potentially enduring consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic, the importance of these considerations may increase further in the future.

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