Parental Leave and Gender Equality: Lessons from the European Union

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Abstract

This article describes the development of European Union parental leave policy and its impact on mothers’ and fathers’ access to parental leave in the individual nations that make up the union. Cross-national variations in parental leave policy are described and analyzed. Although the 15 countries belonging to the EU in 2002 are concerned about helping working parents reconcile employment and family responsibilities, so far, only one—Sweden—has begun to develop a parental leave policy likely to facilitate men’s and women’s sharing of responsibility for breadwinning and child care.

INTRODUCTION

By the beginning of the 21st century, over one-half (54%) of all women aged 15 to 64 who lived in the 15 societies affiliated with the European Union were employed for pay, a dramatic increase from one-quarter of a century earlier (Commission of the European Communities [CEC], 2001a). The increase in women’s labor force participation is related to several social and economic developments common throughout industrialized societies, including women’s ability to control their own fertility, expansion of opportunities for women in education and employment, and an increase in demand for labor in the service sector (United Nations, 2000).

The treaty that binds EU members clearly states: “The Community shall . . . promote throughout the Community equality between women and men.” Although women are at least 40% of the labor force in each EU member state, their status is still quite different from men’s. In 2000, one-third of employed women in EU worked part time (in contrast to 6% of employed men). There existed a persistent gender gap in pay, with women’s hourly wages averaging 86% of men’s. Like women in other industrialized societies, EU women find it difficult to break through glass ceilings to take positions of authority in work organizations (CEC, 2001a). Women’s traditional responsibility for children remains a significant barrier to employment opportunities. As long as women are the ones who reduce their work commitment and hours to accommodate the needs of

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young children, it is easy for employers to offer women less lucrative and responsible employment positions (Selmi, 2000).

Government policy could help reconcile employees’ work and family obligations. According to van Doorne-Huiskes, den Dulk, and Schippers (1999a), “In countries with a more extensive government policy regarding work-family arrangements, women have higher labor participation rates and the gender gap in wages is smaller.” Two types of government policy could help mothers combine employment with childrearing and redistribute care responsibilities between women and men, while keeping “children’s interests at the heart of public policy” (Wilkinson, 1997). The first is government-mandated paid parental leave from employment so that fathers and mothers can take time off from work to care for young children without jeopardizing their positions in the labor market. The second is government-guaranteed daycare places for children of employed parents aged 0-6, along with substantial support in helping parents pay for high-quality childcare (Kamerman, 2000).

Government-mandated paid parental leave and subsidized child care are policies that require a fundamental change in attitudes about gender, parenting, and work in industrialized societies, whereby both mothers and fathers are assumed to be responsible for the care of young children, and government and employers are held responsible for assisting parents in this extremely important task. Both changes provide parents substantial practical assistance in balancing work and family roles and at the same time represent a significant ideological shift whereby the demands of “social reproduction” are given at least equal weight to the demands of “production” (Leira, 1998).

Parental leave and child care are policies widely discussed in countries in the European Union, as effective strategies for increasing women’s labor market involvement, facilitating work-family reconciliation, and encouraging couples to have children (because the present low fertility rate threatens future economic productivity; van Doorne-Huiskes et al., 1999a). The European Union’s treaty guideline (No. 18) for work-family reconciliation sets the stage for the EU to promote parental leave and child care: “Member states . . . will design, implement and promote family-friendly policies, including affordable, accessible and high quality care services for children and other dependents, as well as parental and other leave schemes” (CEC, 2001b). Thus far, parental leave has received more legislative attention than childcare in nations associated with the European Union.

This article describes the development of EU parental leave policy and its effects on individual countries within the Union. It discusses how cross-national variations in parental leave policy both reflect and contribute to societal attitudes toward gender equality, in particular, equal employment opportunity for women and men’s active participation in childcare. Within the European Union, Sweden has the oldest, most generous and flexible parental leave program, aimed at both parents and
designed to promote equal sharing of breadwinning and childcare responsibilities (Haas, 1992). Consequently, the successes and problems associated with the Swedish program are considered for what can be learned about the development and effectiveness of parental leave policy.

DEFINITIONS AND SOURCES

Parental leave is gender-neutral, job-protected leave from employment designed to facilitate employed parents’ care of small children at home. In this article, the focus is on parental leave benefits guaranteed by international and national law. Parental leave benefits can also be granted by regional laws, collective bargaining agreements, and contractual agreements between employees and employers. Parental leave is distinct from other types of leave that working parents might take. Maternity leave grants women job-protected time off before and after childbirth; paternity leave offers new fathers a few days or weeks to be with the family after childbirth or adoption with job protection; family leave offers individuals some days off per year to deal with illnesses or accidents involving a close family member; childrearing leaves are job-protected leaves that typically last several years until a child is four or older, and are usually unpaid or paid at a low level.

Government-mandated parental leave has the potential of bringing about substantial change in employers’ treatment of working parents. Such legislation restricts the rights of the employer to dictate employment conditions by granting workers the privilege of remaining at home to care for children. Compulsory regulations can also affect working arrangements more indirectly through helping to create a new normative climate within work organizations (den Dulk, 1999). As organizations become more aware of parents’ needs, learn how to adapt to mandated leave, and discover the benefits leavetaking can have for employees’ personal development, the family responsibilities of all workers may receive more attention and organizations may choose to supplement the benefits offered by national legislation (den Dulk, 2001).

Information on the development of parental leave policy in the European Union comes from recently published research studies on social policy in Europe, unpublished research conducted by New Ways to Work (a nonprofit organization committed to changing British parental leave policy), personal experience observing and providing advice to groups developing parental policy in Sweden and the UK, and European Union reports and official statistics.

DEVELOPMENT OF EUROPEAN UNION POLICY REGARDING PARENTAL LEAVE

The 1957 Treaty of Rome established the European Economic Community (EEC). This treaty concerned six nations: Belgium, France, Germany, Italy,
Luxembourg, and The Netherlands. From the beginning, the EEC’s main goal was the creation of a common market achieved by increasing the mobility of goods, labor, capital, and services across national lines without harming member states’ economic competitiveness (Ostner, 2000). The 1957 Treaty mandated some workers’ rights, including equal pay for men and women doing equal work. At the time of the Treaty’s signing, one-third of women in EEC countries worked for pay and their wages averaged 45% of men’s (Murray, Neij, and Lindblom, 2000). According to Rees (1998), labor market concerns “took precedence over any particular gender equality agenda.”

In 1973, three more nations joined the EEC—Denmark, Ireland, and the United Kingdom. Equal employment opportunity for women became a more serious objective for EEC social policy in the 1970s, after a substantial increase in the numbers of women in the paid labor force took place (Hantrais, 2000). EEC directives prohibited sex discrimination in workers’ pay and treatment and encouraged member states to develop affirmative action initiatives to improve women’s situation in the labor market. According to Rossilli (2000), directives gave ideological support to women’s movements in member states, especially those in southern Europe, to pressure national governments for guarantees against sex discrimination. An Equal Opportunities Unit was established in 1976 under the office of Employment, Industrial Relations, and Social Affairs to study how equality legislation was enforced and to recommend new policies in EEC nations (Rees, 1998).

Greece, Portugal, and Spain joined the EEC in the 1980s, bringing the total number of member states to 12. In 1982, the Community set up an Advisory Committee on Equal Opportunities for Men and Women, made up of national experts, to work with the Equal Opportunities Unit (Rees, 1998). Subsequently, the Community developed two action programs “intended to redress the weak EC record of equality legislation” (Rossilli, 2000). These programs focused on strengthening individual women’s rights in the labor market through increasing women’s representation in specific occupations and training programs (Rees, 1998).

The first EEC proposal to mandate parental leave was introduced in 1983 to ensure that diverse national policies would not hinder European economic integration. At this point, the EEC still was not interested in developing social policy, therefore, equality concerns were not high on the legislative agenda (Ostner, 2000). The first parental leave proposal did not progress very far because it was seen as too radical, proposing leave rights to men as well as women (Lohkamp-Himmelhoften and Dienel, 2000). The United Kingdom is typically credited with blocking this first parental leave proposal (Rubery, Smith, Fagan, and Grimshaw, 1998).

The European Women’s Lobby was founded in 1990 by the EEC and the Committee on Women’s Rights of the European Parliament to keep up the momentum of legislative activity on behalf of women workers.
This Lobby helped facilitate two new “action programmes,” including a 1990 resolution to combat sexual harassment in the workplace and a 1992 recommendation on childcare, neither of which were binding on member states, but were designed to encourage them to take the status of women workers more seriously (Rossilli, 2000).

In response to the dramatic increase in the numbers of mothers in European labor forces, a new proposal for parental leave was drafted to help employed mothers and fathers reconcile work and family responsibilities. The parental leave directive (part of the first Social Policy Agreement) mandated leave for all male and female workers who had an employment contract or relationship as defined by law (Ostner, 2000). In late 1991, this agreement was included in the Maastricht treaty, signed by 11 of the 12 member governments. The UK refused to sign because it disapproved of policy that would support married mothers’ employment (Stratigaki, 2000). Because the UK did not sign the agreement, it was not bound by EU law to adopt a parental leave policy.

The Maastricht treaty covering parental leave broke new ground by being “the first binding EEC instrument primarily aimed at the reconciliation of occupational and family life” (Schmidt, 1997). It is recognized more for being the first agreement on any social policy issue under the new treaty than it is for its impact on member states’ national parental leave provisions (Hall, 1998). The directive lacked specifics, so it was followed by a 1994 “white paper,” directing member states to adopt a minimum of three months of unpaid parental leave, available up to the child’s second birthday, with guaranteed job reinstatement and continuous insurance coverage (Stratigaki, 2000).

In 1995, with the admission of Austria, Finland, and Sweden into the Community, the EEC became the European Community (the EC), made up of 15 nations under an umbrella body, the European Union (EU). During the same year, the EU established an Advisory Committee on Equality. According to Bergqvist and Jungar (2000), the committee was established because of pressure from Anita Gradin, the first EU Commissioner from Sweden. Two of the six committee members were from the new member states of Sweden and Finland, which already had legislation granting fathers’ rights to paid parental leave (Stratigaki, 2000).

In 1997, all 15 EU member states signed the Amsterdam Treaty on European Union, which included a social policy agreement with a specific directive on parental leave developed by the Advisory Committee on Equality. This agreement obligated all EU members (including the UK) to grant three months of unpaid parental leave to both men and women workers (with at least one year tenure with an employer) as an individual “nontransferable right,” available until biological or adopted children were eight years old (Lohkamp-Himmelhoften and Dienel, 2000). Parental leave rights are gender neutral so that “men should be encouraged to assume an equal share of family responsibilities” (Stratigaki, 2000). The directive requires member states to take necessary measures to
protect workers against dismissal on the ground of an application for, or the taking of, parental leave and to guarantee workers the right to return to the same job or to an equivalent or similar contract, on their return from parental leave. Member states should provide for the maintenance of entitlements to benefits during leave, such as sickness insurance.

It was left up to individual governments to decide if parental leave would be transferable from one parent to the other, if it could be taken part time, and whether it should be paid. Individual nations would also decide the length of notice to be given employers, the circumstances under which parental leave may be postponed by the employer, whether employees of small businesses could be exempt from leave rights, and whether to grant parents on leave entitlement to social security benefits. All member states except the UK were obligated to follow the parental directive by changing their national legislation within one year of the signing of the Amsterdam Treaty, i.e., by the end of 1998. The UK was granted a two-year compliance period (until the end of 1999), because it had not earlier developed parental leave legislation in response to EU directive.

Rossilli (2000) maintains that the parental leave directive in the Amsterdam Treaty did not challenge laws already in place in most member states or substantially improve EC parents’ access to parental leave. However, at the end of 1998, the EC began “infringement proceedings” against Italy, Luxembourg, and Portugal for failing to comply with the parental leave directive deadline (CEC, 1999). By 1999, these nations had parental legislation in place.

Since 1998, the EU has established new employment guidelines for its member states that include equal opportunities for women and men. All states are required to undertake “gender mainstreaming,” which involves analyzing the effects of any proposed new employment policy or program on women and men (CEC, 1999). Member states have agreed to increase women’s labor force participation rate to 60% by 2010. By the end of 2000, six states had already met this goal (including Denmark, Finland, The Netherlands, Portugal, Sweden, and the UK) and another was very close (Austria; Eurostat, 2001). National development of family-friendly policies such as parental leave is seen as an important way “equal opportunities” can be achieved (CEC, 2001b).

VARIATIONS IN EU MEMBER STATES’ PARENTAL LEAVE POLICY

Although the EU has become a formidable international organization with a strong commitment to maximizing the economic well being of its member states, it has not eliminated national sovereignty. Member states can react to EU directives “with ingenious strategies for evading and delaying,” or can take steps to establish themselves as worthy exceptions (Schunter-Kleeman, 1995). The European Union is said to have influence
“largely through reliance on soft law rather than binding legislation” (Hantrais, 2000). “European directives . . . tend to represent minimum standards and to provide only a broad framework within which each member state is required to implement national measures” (Lohkamp-Himmelhoften and Dienel, 2000). By 2000, this minimum standard involved 13 weeks of unpaid parental leave for male and female workers (distinct from paid maternity leave, paternity leave, and family care leave offered to workers to care for sick family members). In 2001, 14 of the 15 states offered at least 13 weeks of full-time leave; The Netherlands, however, offered only part-time leave (for six months; see Table One for specifics about each country’s current parental leave benefit.)

Going beyond the minimum standard, 9 of 15 EU nations have arranged for parents to take paid parental leave for the first child (although this pay can be at a low flat rate, e.g., in Austria). Paid leave lengths vary from three to 36 months. In five EU countries (Austria, Belgium, Denmark, Italy, and Sweden), there are special incentives for fathers to take leave, usually in the form of granting parental leave as an individual nontransferable entitlement or providing extra leave days to families where the father takes some leave.

Parental leave policies in EU nations can be analyzed from the perspective of “the caring dimension of welfare states” (Knijn and Kremer, 1997). According to Knijn and Kremer (1997), “modern welfare states have shaped the needs and rights of caregivers and care receivers . . . in ways that contribute to gender inequality in citizenship rights.” They describe four “dilemmas” of care in modern societies that can be addressed by social policy: whether care is regarded as a private versus public responsibility, whether care should be unpaid or paid, whether care contributes to dependence or independence of caregivers and care receivers, and the rights of care receivers versus caregivers. Daly and Lewis (2000) maintain that care should be considered as a form of labor, taking place within a “normative framework of obligation and responsibility,” with emotional and financial costs. They identify “certain tendencies around care in particular welfare states,” but do not present a typology of welfare states based on the caring dimension of government policy. One tendency is to collectivize care by providing tax-funded care programs (e.g., paid parental leave and subsidized public childcare). Another tendency is to privatize care, encouraging family members to take on care responsibilities without compensation or supporting and regulating care given by volunteers. Regardless of whether care is collectivized or privatized, thus far, women have been much more involved in giving care than men (Daly and Lewis, 2000).

A gender-neutral ideology of care has recently been developed by the American Economic Policy Institute (Appelbaum, Bailey, Berg, and Kalleberg, 2002). If “valued care” was the norm, employees would have control over their work schedules so they could take paid time off to care for family members, and taking leave would not jeopardize
job security, career opportunities, or long-term income. “Valued care” implies that care is a joint private-public responsibility, offering families financial compensation for parental leave and access to affordable, high-quality dependent-care services provided by individuals in well-paying jobs.

Government policy can influence the development of policy and ideology in support of “valued care.” The 15 nations in the EU can be divided into groups based on the extent to which government parental leave policy is likely to contribute to the ideal of “valued care.” Specifically, we can look at the extent to which government policy gives parents the opportunity to be released from work to care for young children, gives parents reasonable financial compensation while on leave along with job security and benefits, and strongly encourages fathers to take parental leave to help redistribute care responsibilities between women and men. This approach seems congruent with the work of Lewis (1997), who recommends evaluating “gender regimes,” in terms of the “two main questions for feminists concerning the provision of unpaid work: how to value it and how to share it more equally between men and women.”

Several welfare state typologies have previously been developed that examined variations in government support for economic equality, family support, and patriarchy (e.g., Anttonen and Sipila, 1996; Duncan, 1996; Fraser, 1994; Gauthier, 1996; Korpi, 2000; Mosedottir, 2000; Pfau-Effinger, 1999; and Rantalaiho, 1997). None appear to be a good fit for classifying European parental leave policies because none focuses squarely on the caring dimension of welfare states. Consequently, a new typology of care policy models is piloted here.

**Privatized (Noninterventionist) Care Model**

Four EU states fall into this category: Greece, Italy, Portugal, and Spain. Governments do not recognize or value “harmonization of paid work and care” (Knijn and Kremer, 1997). Care of young children is a privatized, not collectivized, responsibility, done primarily by mothers or extended family members. Social expectations call for men to be strongly oriented toward the labor market as family breadwinners, whereas women (even if they work for pay) are held responsible for home and care giving (Duncan, 2000). Cultural ideology strongly differentiates between private and public spheres; women and men are regarded as competent in only one sphere (family or work), complementing one another (Pfau-Effinger, 1999).

Parental leave has been available only since 1998 in response to EU directives (see Table One). Greece and Portugal offer the EU minimum: three months for each parent, unpaid. Greece allows employers of small businesses with less than 50 employees to deny leave to workers. Spain offers both parents a longer period of unpaid parental leave with a return to their job guaranteed (up to three years). However, this leave is still
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Country</th>
<th>Entitlement (effective date)</th>
<th>Leave Length</th>
<th>Father Incentive</th>
<th>Payment</th>
<th>Flexibility</th>
<th>Limits</th>
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<tr>
<td>Austria#</td>
<td>Family (1997)</td>
<td>18 months for parents to share until child is 2 years old</td>
<td>Additional 6 months if father takes 6 months leave</td>
<td>Paid at flat daily level of $15</td>
<td>Part-time leave can be taken</td>
<td>Can be transferred once between parents</td>
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<td>Belgium</td>
<td>Individual (nontransferable; 1998)</td>
<td>3 months for each parent until child is 4 years old</td>
<td>Family loses 3 month if father doesn’t take it</td>
<td>Paid at flat monthly rate of $435</td>
<td>Part-time leave can be taken</td>
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<td>Denmark</td>
<td>Family “parental leave” and Individual “child care leave” (1998)</td>
<td>14 weeks for parents to share until child is 1 year old and and 26 weeks for each parent until child is 8</td>
<td>Father gets extra 2 weeks</td>
<td>The 14 weeks is paid weekly at $327 and the 26 weeks is paid weekly at $208</td>
<td>Both can be taken part time</td>
<td>Employer can postpone the 26 weeks</td>
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<tr>
<td>Finland</td>
<td>Family “parental leave” (1985) and Family “care leave” (1998)</td>
<td>26 weeks for parents to share and 10 weeks for parents to share until child is 3 years old</td>
<td>The 26 weeks averages 66% of pay and the 10 weeks is paid at flat monthly rate of $217</td>
<td>Both can be taken only full time</td>
<td>Each leave can only be split into two blocks</td>
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<td>France</td>
<td>Family (1994)</td>
<td>36 months for parents to share until child is 3 years old</td>
<td>Unpaid for first child; flat monthly rate of $397 if two or more children</td>
<td>May be taken part time/parents can take simultaneously</td>
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<td>Entitlement (effective date)</td>
<td>Leave Length</td>
<td>Father Incentive</td>
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<td>Germany Family (2001)</td>
<td>2 years for parents to share until child is 3 years old and 1 year until child is 8 years old</td>
<td>Means-tested maximum monthly rate of $413</td>
<td>May be taken part time and at same time by both parents</td>
<td>Can be transferred between parents only three times</td>
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<td>Greece Individual (nontransferable; 1999)</td>
<td>3 months for each parent until child is 3.5 years old</td>
<td>Unpaid</td>
<td>Denied in businesses &lt;50 workers</td>
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<td>Ireland Individual (nontransferable; 1998)</td>
<td>14 weeks for each parent until child is 5 years old</td>
<td>Unpaid</td>
<td>Can be taken part time with consent of employer</td>
<td>Employer can postpone for “business reasons”</td>
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<td>Italy Family (2000)</td>
<td>10 months for parents to share until child is 8 years old</td>
<td>Family has 1 additional month if father takes at least 3 months leave</td>
<td>30% of earnings</td>
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<td>Luxenbourg Individual (1999)</td>
<td>6 months for each parent until child is 5 years old</td>
<td>Paid at flat rate of $1336 per month, tax free</td>
<td>May be taken part time</td>
<td>Must take in one block; employer can postpone if work would be “disrupted”</td>
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<td>Country</td>
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<td>Employer Options</td>
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<tr>
<td>Netherlands</td>
<td>Individual</td>
<td>6 months for each parent of reduced hours</td>
<td>Unpaid</td>
<td>Employer can postpone if replacement worker cannot be found</td>
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<td>Portugal</td>
<td>Individual</td>
<td>3 months for each parent until child is 6 years old</td>
<td>Unpaid</td>
<td>Can be taken part time or full time</td>
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<td>Spain</td>
<td>Individual and Maternity leave (can transfer to father)</td>
<td>Each parent can take up to 36 months until child is 4 years old and Mother can transfer 10 weeks of maternity leave to father</td>
<td>Parental leave is unpaid and Maternity leave is paid at 100% of earnings 360 days</td>
<td>No job protection after 1 year</td>
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<td>Sweden</td>
<td>Family (partly nontransferable, 2002)</td>
<td>450 days for parents to share until child is 8 years old</td>
<td>30 days reserved for each parent, lost if not taken</td>
<td>390 days paid at 80% wages; 90 days at flat daily rate of $13</td>
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<tr>
<td>United Kingdom</td>
<td>Individual (2000)</td>
<td>13 weeks for each parent until child is 5 years old</td>
<td>Unpaid</td>
<td>May be taken part time</td>
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*Sources: New Ways to Work (1998), Moss and Deven (1999), and research reports provided to the European Industrial Observatory (Cristovam, 1999; Feyereisen, 1999, 2001; Gaechter, 1999; Hall, 1999; Jorgersen, 2001; Schulten, 2000; Trentini, 1999). #Schattovits (2001) reports that parental leave is being replaced by a child care benefit in January of 2002, whereby parents have $488 per month to spend on childcare or to pay themselves to stay home until the child is 4 years old.*
unpaid, signifying that this time is not socially valued. Italy offers parents some financial compensation for taking leave (30% of earnings), but this amount is too low to be regarded as adequate compensation for giving care. There is some incentive for Italian fathers to take leave because families receive an extra month if the father takes a minimum of three months leave (see Table One). In general, governments following this care model do not promote or encourage fathers’ use of leave benefits. Virtually no fathers take leave under normal circumstances, partly because the leave is unpaid (Spain), not guaranteed in all types of companies (Greece), or not an individual nontransferable right of fathers (Italy; den Dulk, 1999; Fagnini, 1999; Valiente, 2000). Policymakers assume that an employee who takes leave has an employed spouse or other means of financial support. Because women on average earn less than men, this creates a financial incentive for leaves to be taken by mothers, reinforcing the idea that women are secondary earners (Rubery et al., 1998).

Three states (Greece, Italy, and Spain) have the lowest women’s overall labor force participation in the European Union (40%), and their unemployment rates double that of men’s (CEC, 2001b; Eurostat, 2001). These three nations also score the lowest of all EU states on a composite index measuring women’s equal employment opportunities (based on gender differences in employment rates, women’s share of higher job positions, the gender wage gap, the proportion of women with low incomes, and the male-female gap in unpaid time spent on caring for children and other persons; Plantenga and Hansen, 2001). Women in Portugal have a much higher employment rate (60%), apparently because of a fast-developing economy. In all four countries, the state has limited involvement in encouraging mothers’ labor force participation and does not accept responsibility for providing supports for working parents. The proportion of children under age 3 attending places in publicly funded services for children is very low (under 12%; CEC, 2001b; Plantenga and Hansen, 2001). Working mothers rely on extended family members for child care assistance (van Doorne-Huiskes et al., 1999a).

Family-Centered Care Model

Societies in this group include Austria, Belgium, France, Germany, and Luxembourg. Policymaking is shaped by a traditional religious heritage and/or a strong public commitment to the preservation of the traditional family (Rantalaiho, 1997). Women’s contribution to the economy is much more recognized than it is in the first group of states, but men are still held more responsible for family income provision (Lewis, 1992). According to Plantenga and Hansen (2001), these societies fall in the middle of EU states in terms of ensuring women’s equal employment opportunities. Women’s labor force participation rates are also in the middle range for EU: between 50% and 59% (CEC, 2001b).
Governments are actively concerned about family support, with an interest in raising birth rates back up above replacement levels. To promote fertility, the model for work-family reconciliation emphasizes making it possible for women to combine multiple roles by sequencing care work and paid employment or by working part time (van Doorne-Huiskes, 1999a). Public support for care giving is in line with the sequencing concept. It is assumed that mothers will stay home with children during their first few years of life. Parental leaves could be classified as “childrearing leaves” (see Table One). Four of the five nations (Austria, Belgium, France, and Germany) offer long job-protected leaves, around three years in length per child. Leave takers receive a low flat rate of compensation ($400–$500 per month), far from the equivalent of lost earnings, representing caregiving’s low status. Luxembourg offers a shorter leave (six months), with high compensation for parents on leave ($1336 per month), made possible by the Fund for Employment, whose coffers have been swelled by a new “social contribution” tax on fuel oils (Feyereisen, 1999).

Theoretically, leave can be taken by either parent, but restrictions often apply (e.g., in Austria it can be transferred between parents only once; in Luxembourg, the employer can deny leave if it will seriously disrupt work). There is some incentive in each state for fathers to take leave, either by offering more days of leave to families where the father takes some of the leave (an extra 60 days in Austria, and 90 days in Belgium), or by allowing fathers to take leave part time simultaneously with mothers (as happens in France, Germany, and Luxembourg). In reality, few fathers take leave, with estimates ranging about 2%. This low take-up rate is partly blamed on the low level of financial compensation offered parents in most of these states (Devan and Nuelant, 1999; European Commission, 1998; Pettinger, 1999; Rost, 1999; Thenner, 1999). Almost one-third of Luxembourg men in the Eurobarometer study reported themselves willing to take parental leave (European Commission, 1998). However, legislation is written so that a parent must take leave in a single block of time, which is often hard for male workers to arrange.

France is often cited as a European country that stands out in terms of support for mothers who wish to work outside the home and children’s well being (e.g., Fagnani, 1996). French mothers have had a high rate of participation in the labor market in comparison with mothers in the nearby country of the UK. Following World War II, France set up an impressive network of child care facilities that focus on children ages three and over to encourage women to enter the labor market and reduce the labor shortage. France had parental leave in place before the EU directive, unlike other countries in this category. By 2001, however, the French parental leave system has seemed to change to fit the family-centered care model. In her study of the French parental leave system, Fagnini (1999) discovered that mothers’ dominance of long parental leave contributed to
“a return to the traditional gender division of domestic work within the family . . . , mothers’ occupational downgrading upon return to work . . . , [and] gender discrimination in the labor force by reinforcing employers’ prejudices toward female workers.”

Market-Oriented Care Model

Ireland, The Netherlands, and the United Kingdom are EU nations that have held strong traditional values concerning the role of women and men and the importance of mothers devoting themselves to home and children (Duncan, 2000; Lewis, 1992; Pfau-Effinger, 1999). None of these societies had parental leave before the European Union imposed its directive, and none offered paid leave by 2001. Parental leave policies remain limited in scope: in Ireland and the UK, parents have the right to only 14 weeks, whereas The Netherlands allows only part-time leave. In Ireland and The Netherlands, employers can postpone leave if the employee absence is judged to seriously disrupt work. None of these societies have established any special incentives for fathers to take unpaid parental leave, and take-up by fathers is reported to be low (CEC, 2001b).

Lack of support for working parents is well established; less than 8% of children under age three are in publicly funded daycare places (Plantenga and Hansen, 2001). On an index evaluating women’s “equal opportunities,” The Netherlands’ and Ireland’s scores are close to those of the most traditional societies (Greece, Italy, and Spain). The UK does somewhat better, falling in the middle one-third of EU nations (Plantenga and Hansen, 2001).

What is distinctive about this group of nations is that their governments have recently come to value the contributions of women to the labor market, and instead of developing government policies to financially support working parents, each nation is intent on convincing employers to become more actively involved in helping employees combine work and family roles.

Ireland historically has been a society with a strong emphasis on separate roles for men and women. Until recently, it also had mass unemployment and a poor economy. As recently as 1997, only 43% of women with children under age 16 were employed (Moss and Devan, 1999). The Irish economy is now rapidly moving toward full employment, and suddenly there is concern about how to recruit and retain women workers and help employees manage work-life balance. Instead of developing state policies, the Irish government is looking for the private sector to become more involved in work-life reconciliation. In 1999, a program for “prosperity and fairness” was agreed upon, calling for companies to develop family-friendly policies such as flextime, job sharing, telecommuting, and parental leave. So far, family-friendly companies are mostly in the public sector or employ large workforces. Many medium- and small-sized firms still regard work family benefits as unnecessary costs
on business (Dobbins, 2000). To supply daycare, the Irish government is looking toward nonprofits and private sector institutions in local communities.

The Dutch government intends to reconcile work and family life by convincing mothers and fathers to work part time. The Netherlands already has the highest proportion of women working part time in the EU (60% in 2000), as well as the highest portion of men (15%; Grunnell, 2000b). In 2000, the lower house of Parliament passed the Part-Time Employment Act, giving employees the right to request a reduction in work hours (Dobbins, 2000). The Dutch government has been less interested than most EU societies in providing state-organized childcare (van Doorne-Huiskes et al. 1999a), and only 3% of children used any formal childcare arrangements (public or private) in 2001 (CEC, 2001b). A government proposal would make it a legal requirement for employers to subsidize one-third of employees’ childcare costs. One-half of all collective bargaining agreements presently provide for this (Grunnell, 2000a).

Until the early 1990s, only 40% of mothers of preschool-aged children in the UK were in the paid labor force (Korpi, 2000). This has now changed, with maternal employment rates steadily increasing to the same level of many other European societies (presently 61%; Moss and Devan, 1999). According to Lewis (1999), “the emphasis on individual responsibility for family, a neo-liberal approach to employment policy and reliance on market forces have... led to an emphasis on the business case for work-family arrangements.” Businesses are concerned about the costs of recruitment and retention of workers, and this concern has been used to coax companies to become more family friendly. One-third of children under age 3 are cared for in private and public childcare settings, and the government has set a goal of 1.6 million more private and public places by 2004 (CEC, 2001b). This has led so far to only modest development of on-site childcare, paid maternity leave, and paid paternity leave. In 2001, the government announced its intention to develop legislation to require employers to consider parents’ requests for flexible working arrangements (Hall, 2001).

Although the UK was the last EU member state to incorporate the EU parental leave directive in national legislation in 1999, some groups (e.g., Trades Union Congress) would like to catch up for lost time by pushing for paid leave, whereas others (e.g., Fathers Direct) would like to see special incentives for fathers to take parental leave. According to a 1996 European Commission survey, one-third of British men expressed willingness to take parental leave three years before the entitlement existed (Hall, 2001).

Portugal may soon fit the model of market-oriented care. Women’s high labor force participation has been facilitated by plentiful informal caregivers, involving domestic servants, grandparents, and other family members (Plantenga and Hansen, 2001). As these informal resources
decline, the government has declared “a better balance between work and family life is a right and a duty for both male and female workers, as well as a responsibility that society must undertake” (Cristovam, 2001). However, the focus is on drawing employers’ attention to work-family issues and fathers’ right to take parental leave (CEC, 2001b; Cristovam, 1999).

Valued Care Model

Three Scandinavian EU nations (Denmark, Finland, and Sweden) have come a long way toward the goal of integrating women into the labor market and in providing comprehensive support systems for working parents (Wilkinson, 1997). However, there are important differences between Scandinavian countries in their attitudes toward men’s participation in unpaid work and political support for gender equality (Ellingsaeter, 1998; Rantalaiho, 1997). Accordingly, Denmark and Finland will be discussed first, as nations on a trajectory of slow progress toward developing parental leave as an instrument to promote the “valued care” norm. Because Sweden has set a somewhat more radical course, it will be discussed in detail below.

Denmark’s rating for equal employment opportunities for women ties for first with Sweden’s (Plantenga and Hansen, 2001). Public funding of childcare is also well developed, with 48% of children ages 0 to 3 attending publicly funded services (Plantenga and Hansen, 2001). A high proportion of mothers of children aged 0 to 15 are in the labor force (80%; Moss and Devan, 1999). Working parents have access to two types of subsidized leaves: parental leave (a family entitlement of 14 weeks, 16 weeks if father takes at least two weeks), and child care leave (an individual entitlement of 26 weeks). Both leaves are paid, at about 60% of usual wages (Rostgaard, Christoffersen, and Weise, 1999). After 15 years of discussion, in 1999, Denmark gave fathers an incentive to take parental leave by offering families two extra weeks if couples shared leave. This has so far had little effect on fathers’ taking parental leave. Only 4% of Danish fathers take leave. Parents’ reasons for fathers’ little use of leave include economic costs (because compensation level is low and fathers usually earn more income than mothers) and employer resistance. Fathers feel they risk dismissal if they would ask to take leave and they sense it would be difficult for employers to find suitable substitute workers. Mothers’ lower attachment to paid work and lower status in the labor market as well as fathers’ lack of interest in taking leave have also been named as contributing factors for the dominance of maternal leave (Rostgaard et al., 1999). According to a 1996 survey, only 28% of Danish fathers would consider using parental leave (European Commission, 1998). In 2001, the government announced plans to launch a new educational campaign to convince men to take advantage of parental leave (CEC, 2001b).
Finland’s gender arrangement has been described as more traditional than Denmark’s. According to Bradley (1998), “the weaker strain of social democracy and strength of the agrarian center in Finland has resulted in a more traditional system of regulation of family relationships and is reflected in an antipathy to social engineering.” Women have been acknowledged as having the right to combine work and family, but there is little interest in a redistribution of responsibility between men and women for child care (Rantalaiho, 1997). In comparison with Denmark, women’s labor force participation rate is lower (72%), mothers’ employment rate is lower (70%), and a smaller proportion of children under age 3 are in publicly funded childcare (22%; CEC, 2001b; Moss and Devan, 1999). The compensation level for Finnish parental leave is higher than for all other EU nations except Sweden (averaging 66% of earnings), and a relatively high proportion of men (over 40%) in a 1996 survey said they would consider taking leave to look after a child (European Commission, 1998). However, by 1997, only 4% of Finnish fathers took leave, possibly because it is available only on a full-time basis, which can be difficult for men to arrange (Salmi and Lammi-Taskula, 1999). Salmi and Lammi-Taskula (1999) state “In present conditions, the net effect of parental and care leaves is to maintain the traditional gender pattern in families and in the labor market.”

SWEDEN

In societies modeling the value of “valued care,” the goal of work-family reconciliation would be an equal sharing by men and women of paid and unpaid work. The social importance of giving care would be officially recognized, and the division between private and public spheres of social life would be blurred. Both women and men would feel entitled to government support for reconciling work and family roles (Lewis and Smithson, 2001). Because men’s involvement in child care would be promoted, parental leave would be adequately paid, not transferable to mothers, and there would be financial incentives for fathers to take leave. Maximum flexibility in taking leave would be offered (e.g., it could be taken part time, it could be transferred several times between parents, and it could be taken anytime until the child reached school age) to encourage parents to negotiate a shared division of labor for childcare. High-quality publicly subsidized daycare would complement the parental leave program. Only one of the EU countries aspires to develop this radical model of gender relations, although it has not yet succeeded in reaching it—Sweden.

As early as 1968, Sweden set itself apart from other nations when policymakers began advocating a new gender model, where “Equality means that women and men have the same rights, obligations, and opportunities to have a job that gives them economic independence to care for home and children and to participate in political, union, and other activ-
ities in society” (Statistiska Centralbyrån, 1990, my translation). Sweden is recognized as being the first society where the “dual breadwinner” family is the norm (Bergqvist and Jungar, 2000; Mosesdottir, 2000). Alongside Sweden’s goal of gender equality is the value placed on children as a precious resource. According to Leira (1994), the Swedish government has “made considerable efforts to bridge the gap between the demands of the market for labor and the demands of children for care.”

To support gender equality and children’s well being, several significant policy developments have occurred. The first was the establishment in the early 1970s of an individualized taxation system so that women’s income earning does not drive household tax rates higher. (Within the EU, Denmark, Finland, and the UK also have this type of tax system; Plantenga and Hansen, 2001). The second significant development was equal employment opportunity legislation in the 1980s, which supported women’s entry into nontraditional occupations and equal pay for comparable work. (EU nations are increasingly involved in equal employment opportunity efforts because of EU directives, many developed by Swedes). The third significant development was the increase in the supply of heavily subsidized and high-quality public child care throughout the 1980s and 1990s, to the point that waiting lists have disappeared and the vast majority of all children ages 1 to 6 (74%) are in publicly subsidized child care (Statistiska Centralbyrån, 2001). (The supply of daycare for children under 12 months is small; policymakers want parents home during a child’s first year). In 2001, daycare fees were lowered to facilitate women’s employment and to encourage couples to have larger families. The maximum monthly fee is $137 for the first child, $92 for the second child, and $46 for a third (Swedish Institute, 1999).

The fourth important development in Sweden’s campaign to bring about gender equality concerns parental leave. Sweden was the first country to mandate paid parental leave for both mothers and fathers, in 1974. In contrast to other EU countries, the Swedish parental leave program, at the outset, encouraged fathers’ use of benefits through educational campaigns directed at prenatal centers, social insurance offices, and workplaces. Fathers were encouraged to take leave to develop relationships with young children and the nurturing aspects of their personalities (Haas, 1992).

Swedish feminists expressed concern that joining the EU would negatively impact Sweden’s efforts to bring about equality between women and men in the public spheres of employment and politics and in the private sphere of the home (Bergqvist and Jungar, 2000). By 1995, Sweden had progressed further than other EU states in developing policies and programs designed to increase women’s opportunities in the labor market and politics and men’s opportunities to participate actively in child care. This was reflected in the high labor force participation rate of Swedish mothers (75% of mothers with preschool-aged children) and greater involvement of men in family life (Haas and Hwang, 1999; Moss and
Devan, 1999). The 1994 referendum on joining the EU barely passed because 52% of Swedish women voted against it (Bergqvist and Jungar, 2000). To ensure recognition for Sweden’s perspective on gender equality, many Swedish female politicians became EU parliament members, to help Sweden “serve as a role model” (Bergqvist and Jungar, 2000).

Currently, Sweden has the most generous and flexible parental leave program in the EU. Parents are entitled to share 450 days of paid leave at the birth or adoption of a child. Thirteen months of this leave are paid at 80% of salary up to a certain income level (now $45,000), with the remaining three months paid at a low flat rate ($13 a day). Leave can be taken out in quarter-, half-, or full-time days, anytime before the child completes the first year of school. There are no restrictions in how often parents can take turns taking leave. Employers’ tax contributions pay for parental leave and all employers, regardless of company size or situation, must abide by the parental leave mandate. Fathers are more likely than mothers to take advantage of the flexibility offered in the program by taking leave on a part-time basis (Haas, 1992).

When it originated in 1974, the parental leave benefit system in Sweden was based on a “family” entitlement—the leave basically came with the child and parents were expected to negotiate who would take leave, how, and when. According to Bergqvist and Jungar (2000), “a completely individual and gender-neutral design would have given parents an independent right to a certain number of months of paid leave, which would not be transferable to the other party.” Swedish policymakers are slowly moving toward the nontransferable model, despite popular opinion supporting parents’ rights to decide between themselves how the leave will be distributed. To encourage more fathers to take leave, in 1995, two months of the leave became nontransferable individual rights: one month for the father and one month for the mother.

In a 1996 survey, 70% of Swedish men said they were willing to consider taking leave to stay home to care for a child. This was by far the highest proportion of any national group (European Commission, 1998). For children born in 1995, 70% of fathers actually have taken parental leave, for an average of two months (Näringsdepartementet, 1999). The shift to nontransferable (individual) rights to parental leave appears responsible for this increase.

Employers are now under more pressure to facilitate fathers’ leave-taking because families lose a significant amount of benefits if fathers do not take advantage of “pappa” months. Fathers’ routine absence from work while on parental leave has required companies to rethink the way work is organized, often to the benefit of the company (e.g., in encouraging cross-training, telecommuting, and helping parents keep in touch with work while on leave). As more fathers take leave, some companies have begun to recognize the “business case” for fathers taking leave. Fathers who return from taking leave are now often viewed as having greater potential as workers, especially at the management level, because
they are better able to handle stress, balance multiple responsibilities, develop interpersonal skills, and meet important new challenges. The benefits of fathers’ leave-taking have become so widely recognized by employers that many (e.g., Ericsson) now offer fathers additional economic incentives to take leave (Berg, 1999).

Parental leave has not resulted in the complete sharing of childcare among mothers and fathers in Sweden. A large (but declining) proportion of mothers of small children work part time to combine work and family roles. Although the majority of fathers take leave, fathers still take much less leave overall, with only 12% of all parental leave days taken (Näringsdepartementet, 1999). Swedish parents attribute fathers’ taking less leave to two main factors: economics and interpersonal politics. Parents report that men take less leave because of the gender gap in income: families suffer less economically if mothers rather than fathers stay home. In reality, fathers at all income levels take leave and the average family loses little income if the father takes leave because of tax breaks and the long-term economic benefits of mothers’ continuous participation in the labor force (Riksförsäkringsverket, 2000). Another important reason for unequal sharing of leave offered by parents is that mothers want to monopolize the leave. As long as Swedish women are concentrated in a narrow range of occupations and experience difficulties breaking through the glass ceilings of work organizations, it seems likely that some women will find staying home with pay a more attractive alternative than going to work. Couples are more likely to share leave when mothers have high education and high status positions in the labor force (Haas, 1992). Swedish policymakers continue to develop programs and strengthen legislation to guarantee women equal employment opportunity, although progress is slow. On the other hand, as long as women take parental leave more often and longer than men, gender-specific work conditions in the labor market will likely persist, and gender differences within the labor market will be reinforced (Widerberg, 1991). Recently, a Swedish parliamentary committee found that there was a need to strengthen employment protection for employees taking parental leave (Berg, 2001).

CONCLUSIONS

The availability of paid and flexible parental leave could set the stage for questioning gendered patterns of giving care and rendering less visible the dividing line between the public sphere of employment and the private sphere of family life (Liebert, 2001). In 1999, the 15 countries belonging to the European Union began to take seriously the needs of working parents to reconcile employment and family responsibilities by agreeing to a minimum standard for parental leave. Despite EU directives, parental leave policies are poorly developed in most member states, reflecting a low valuation of care and little interest in fathers’ more active
sharing of early childcare. Parental leave policy tends to reinforce the
traditional division of labor whereby men are families’ primary bread-
winners and women are children’s primary caregivers. Although the
European Union has set an ambitious course to bring about equal employ-
ment opportunity for women in its member states, it has been less inter-
ested in contesting the division of unpaid work in the home and in
promoting fathers’ care of young children (Rees, 1998; Schunter-Kleeman,
women’s integration into the labor market is still hampered by their
caring obligations and individual family circumstances.” Further
progress toward gender equality depends on EU challenging the tradi-
tional division of domestic labor prevalent in member states, which it
could do by reforming parental leave.

There is little sign that the European Union will dramatically reform
parental leave and chart a course for shared care in the near future.
Although the Fourth Action Program for gender equality for 1996–2000
stated: “The promotion of equality . . . is a question of promoting long-
lasting changes in parental roles, family structures, institutional practices,
the organization of work and time” (Sperling and Bretherton, 1999), the
newly adopted Fifth Action Program for gender equality for 2001–2005
makes no mention of reforming parental leave or encouraging a redistri-
bution of care responsibilities between women and men, although it does
call for removing tax disincentives to women’s employment, reducing the
gender wage gap, and improving women’s share of decision-making
positions in government and companies (Broughton, 2001). The EU and
member states publish annual updates on “gender perspectives,” to
report statistics and initiatives related to women’s position in labor force,
but these updates do not discuss men’s share of family work or take-up
of parental leave (Carley, 2001).

Activist women within EU continue to lobby for change. In its latest
position statement, the European Women’s Lobby (2001) calls for sub-
stantial reform in EU parent leave policy:

Parental leave regulations must ensure a generous and paid parental leave,
reaching much further than the existing Community directive. A more lengthy
and paid parental leave will stimulate parents to choose both labour market
activity and a certain period of care for children. To promote a shared respon-
sibility between women and men concerning the care for children, parental
leave regulations should include both maternity leave and paternity leave,
reserving a mandatory part of the parental leave for each parent.

Parental leave must be widely used by men to reduce the stigma parent-
hood now has on women’s employment opportunities. The experiences
of EU countries and especially Sweden suggest some conditions under
which parental leave would likely help to bring about a shared care model
of gender relations where men and women are both expected to be
actively involved in breadwinning and childcare:
• Parental leave should be a universal, individual nontransferable right of mothers and fathers, to encourage fathers to take leave and force all employers (regardless of firm size) to accommodate men who want to take leave.

• Parental leave must offer job protection, full benefits, and substantial pay as a symbol of its social value and to facilitate both parents’ taking it, regardless of income level.

• Parental leave should be flexibly administered so that parents can take turns taking leave and so leaves can be taken part time as well as full time.

• To facilitate fathers’ taking of parental leave, their rights must be actively promoted by substantial educational campaigns through prenatal care and social benefits delivery systems as well as work organizations.

• To reduce the negative impact of taking leave on parents’ employment opportunities, the “business case” for supporting parents’ rights to paid leave should be studied, articulated, and disseminated (see, e.g., Rapoport, Bailyn, Fletcher, and Pruitt, 2002).

• To promote solidarity between working parents and the rest of society, and to ensure the public’s support for parental leave, the benefits to society of parental leave programs should be studied and widely publicized. Parental leave shows promise of increasing fertility rates above replacement level, reducing troublesome low worker-to-retiree ratios. Children who are well cared for early in life and who have strong relationships with both parents are less likely to suffer problems that society will need to endure and pay for down the road. Parental leave programs can reduce unemployment and encourage workplace cross training. They can also set a precedent for reduction in work hours for all workers, helping individuals at all stages of the life cycle manage work-life balance.

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