

Belgian family policy from a comparative perspective: Does it support fertility and gender equity?

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Abstract

The aim of this article is to compare the Belgian family policy to policies in other countries within the so-called conservative welfare state regime group, namely, France, Germany and the Netherlands, and to the policy applied in one country that has adopted a social-democratic model, i.e., Sweden. Based on previous studies, we aim to identify strengths and weaknesses according to two criteria: efficacy in promoting fertility and promoting gender equity, the latter being understood as mothers' involvement in the labour market and fathers' involvement in care. We maintain that the Belgian family policy presents several features that have the potential to positively affect fertility. Such positive features mainly pertain to family allowances and birth premiums, together with enrolment rates for children under three years of age (albeit with worrisome, low public spending on childcare). However, other aspects of the Belgian policy are more critical for gender equity. Such aspects include the remuneration of parental leave and time credit, a lack of radical reforms to support fathers' involvement, and regional disparities in several family policy measures. Counterintuitively, short durations for maternity leave and parental leave might also negatively affect gender equity.

Keywords: family policies, fertility, gender equity, Belgium, conservative welfare state regime

Mots-clés: politiques familiales, fécondité, équité de genre, Belgique, régime d'état providence conservateur

1. Introduction

Belgium, similar to Germany, France and the Netherlands, is characterized as a welfare state of the type that Esping-Andersen called *corporatist-conservative* (“conservative” in this study; Esping-Andersen, 1990, 1999; Esping-Andersen and Palier, 2008). Esping-Andersen (1999) classified countries according to two features: (a) the level of decommodification, i.e., the

degree to which social services are provided as a right and without reference to the market and (b) the universalism of social policies (Esping-Andersen, 1999; Arts and Gelissen, 2002). The conservative regime attributed to Belgium is characterized by modest decommodification. Here, the principal and original aim of social policies is the maintenance of income related to occupational status (corporatist solidarity) through partial compensation of the costs of having children, including for wealthier families (Esping-Andersen, 1999; Thévenon, 2011). As a result, cash transfers and tax benefits play an important role in family policy. It has also been argued that in the past, this regime was under the influence of the Catholic Church, restraining women's labour market participation while preserving the traditional family, and that some of these traits may have endured into the present (Esping-Andersen, 1990; Morel, 2007).

In their degrees of policy decommodification and universalism, countries adopting the conservative welfare state appear in an intermediate position relative to those using the *liberal model* and *social-democratic model*. The former is followed in countries such as the U.S., Australia, and, to a lesser extent, Ireland and the United Kingdom. Here, private services are encouraged, and social coverage concerns only the most disadvantaged people. In the social-democratic model typical of Nordic countries, the state carries out many functions of care traditionally performed by the family with a strong decommodification of services and universal policies favouring equality among citizens (Esping-Andersen and Palier, 2008). Other welfare state models include those of the Southern and Eastern European countries; they are generally characterized by relatively low public spending on the family, with the exception of Hungary.

In this study, we will focus on Belgium and its family policy following a descriptive approach. Our *first aim* is to identify the main characteristics of Belgian family policy from a comparative perspective. Belgian family policy is a special case and one that, to our knowledge, has not been given sufficient attention from a comparative perspective. For example, despite Belgium's similarities with the other countries in the conservative group, the mothers' rapid return to work after maternity leave is more clearly encouraged here. Another feature of Belgian family policy is the reduction of work time according to the formula of 1/5 or 1/10. Our *second aim* is to identify the strengths and weaknesses of Belgian family policy according to two criteria: efficacy in supporting fertility and gender equity. We will compare Belgium to other conservative countries: Germany, France and the Netherlands. We will also take into account Sweden, whose welfare model is often cited as an example of policy that effectively supports fertility and gender equity (Andersson, 2020).

Its comparative and comprehensive analysis is one of the unique contributions of this paper. Another unique feature is that, unlike most previous comparative studies, this study considers the role of time credit policies and work time reduction. In addition, other studies on family policies have rarely considered measures that compensate for time reduction and limit the pension gender gap (for the latter see Saraceno and Keck, 2011). Accounting for Belgian regional differences is another novelty of the paper. Indeed, recently, Belgian regions have acquired more autonomy with respect to family policies. In this study, we will mainly focus on Wallonia and Flanders, the two largest regions. We will speak of the French-speaking region when considering Wallonia together with the Brussels region (for example, in the section on childcare, where we present official data aggregated for Wallonia and Brussels). We will refer to Flanders and the Dutch-speaking region interchangeably.

In the following section, while responding to some of the main criticisms of Esping-Andersen's classification, we explain our choice for comparing the five countries we have included in the current study. Next, we present our data and methodological approach. After presenting trends in public spending in the five countries at stake, we briefly consider family allowances and birth premiums. In the following sections, policy measures designed to balance work activity with family life, such as those related to childcare provision, leave, and work time reduction, are discussed in greater detail. For each type of policy, we present the countries' main characteristics. We conclude by summarizing the strengths and weaknesses of Belgian family policy in supporting fertility and gender equity.

2. Esping-Andersen's conservative group: Is it still a useful category?

To conduct our analysis, some of the main criticisms of Esping-Andersen's classification must be taken into consideration. We will see that despite these criticisms, including Belgium in the conservative group, together with France, Germany and the Netherlands, and considering Sweden for comparison helps to achieve the objectives presented in the introduction.

A first criticism concerns the classification of the Netherlands (Arts and Gelissen, 2002). This country was originally assigned to the social-democratic regime by Esping-Andersen (1990), while other authors have classified it as liberal (Korpi and Palme, 1998). However, most authors have classified the Netherlands in the conservative regime (for a review, see Arts and Gelissen, 2002). Esping-Andersen 1999's classification also moved the Netherlands from the social-democratic regime (Esping-Andersen, 1990) to the conservative regime. Esping-Andersen's

typologies are ideal types, and the assignment of a country to a certain typology depends on its degree of similarity to the ideal type. The difficulty of classifying the Netherlands lies in its middle position. Because of the degree of universality of its policies—especially with reference to pensions—high replacement rates and high tax rates, the Netherlands might be classified as social-democratic (De Beer et al., 2001). Nevertheless, compared to those in other social-democratic countries, women's employment rates are lower (De Beer et al., 2001), especially their full-time employment rates. Thus, given the aim of our study to ascertain the effect of family policies on gender equity, assigning the Netherlands to the conservative regime group seems to be justified based on the similarities of the gender system in the countries included in this group.

A second and related criticism of Esping-Andersen's classification concerns the omission of the gender and family dimensions (Orloff, 1993; Saraceno and Keck, 2011; Ciccia and Sainsbury, 2018). This criticism refers to the 1990 version of Esping-Andersen's classification. For a more accurate classification of countries, Orloff (1993) proposes additional dimensions of the welfare state: (a) the extent to which a state promotes or discourages women's labour force participation, (b) the extent to which a state satisfies an individual's needs in its substitution of the family (the degree of defamilialisation), and (c) the extent to which policies transfer part of the unpaid work to men. The second point is considered in the 1999 version of Esping-Andersen's work (1999) together with most of Orloff's (1993) suggestion. In particular, Esping-Andersen's degree of familialism is based on indicators measuring family's responsibilities: the percentage of the elderly living with adult children, the percentage of unemployed youth living with adult parents, and the number of women's weekly hours of unpaid work.

However, according to Leitner (2003), Esping-Andersen's indicators do not capture all the nuances of familialism in childcare. Leitner (2003) takes childcare services provision as an indicator of defamilialisation and leave policies as an indicator of familialism and classifies countries according to four typologies of welfare regimes. Under *implicit familialism*, limited family policies are proposed as alternatives to family solidarity. *Explicit familialism* is characterized by policies that favour family care, such as parental leave. Among other countries, Germany and the Netherlands are classified by Leitner under this group. *Defamilialism* refers to a welfare regime mainly characterised by childcare services. In the *optional familialism* regime, both childcare services and leave policies are available, allowing the family to choose between taking care of its members and/or using services. Leitner (2003) classifies Belgium,

France and Sweden as adopting optional familialism, supporting our strategy to include Sweden in our comparative analysis.

To account for the gender dimension of welfare states, an alternative classification by Leitner (2003) that considers the gender dimension through the following indicators is proposed: (a) the fact that parental leave is an individual right, which prevents fathers' rights from being transferred to mothers; (b) the level of the remuneration rate, as fathers are more likely to take leave with higher remuneration; and (c) the duration of parental leave, as a parental leave that lasts longer than one year can make women's position in the labour market more difficult. According to these features, only Sweden's regime is classified as a *degendered familialism*. France and Germany are classified by Leitner as adopting *gendered familialism* because of their long leaves that may create difficulties in returning to work. According to Leitner, Belgium follows the degendered familialism by considering parental leave an individual right and by adopting relatively short leaves; however, contrary to Sweden, remuneration rates are low in Belgium, devaluing care and discouraging fathers' uptake. Thus, Leitner defines Belgium as a *mixed case*. The Netherlands is not considered in Leitner's analysis because of the absence of parental leave remuneration there, which still persists.

A third criticism of Esping-Andersen's typology is made by Ciccia and Bleijenbergh, who criticise Esping-Andersen's negative view of care as a burden to women's economic independence and propose a classification of welfare regimes accounting for both the individual right to work and the individual right to care (Ciccia and Bleijenbergh, 2014; Ciccia and Sainsbury, 2018; a similar, more detailed analysis is conducted by Saraceno and Keck in 2011). To ascertain to what extent the right to work and the right to care are features of welfare regimes, Ciccia and Bleijenbergh (2014) consider, as indicators, the policies referring to childcare and parental leave and identify six regimes. In the *male-breadwinner model* identified by Ciccia and Bleijenbergh (2014), childcare services are scarce. Among other countries, Germany is included in this group. The *one-and-a-half breadwinner model* includes the Netherlands. Here, childcare services have limited open hours, and women are encouraged to work part-time. The *caregiver parity model* is also based on gendered family roles, but the unpaid family work is recognized through long and well-paid leaves, although childcare services are limited. According to Ciccia and Bleijenbergh, this model includes some Nordic countries, such as Norway and Finland, and some Eastern European countries. The other two following typologies are variants of the universal breadwinner (or dual earner) model. The *unsupported universal breadwinner model* is based on full-time childcare, although it is limited,

and, according to Ciccia and Bleijenbergh, includes countries like France. According to these authors, Belgium resembles this unsupported universal breadwinner model, but it cannot be classified as such because, compared to France, Belgium is characterised by higher “effective childcare coverage” (an index considering to what extent parents of children below the age of 3 receive support either from formal childcare or leave entitlements). The *supported universal breadwinner model*’s main features are high maternal employment and high-quality childcare. The model includes countries such as Sweden. Finally, the *universal caregiver model* is an ideal type aiming to promote equal engagement of men and women in paid and unpaid labour. Paid work and care are both considered valuable activities and care is considered a shared responsibility among the family, state, and employers. In this model, the reduction of working hours of both mothers’ and fathers’ is required to care for children. No country has adopted this regime, although, according to Ciccia and Bleijenbergh (2014), the Netherlands and Sweden are among the countries that are close to it. On one side, the Netherlands fails to achieve this model because of its privatisation of childcare. On the other side, Sweden does not fully align with the model because of its limited recognition of parents’ right to spend time to care for their children (Ciccia and Bleijenbergh, 2014).

A fourth criticism of Esping-Andersen’s typology is the need to account for the evolution of social policies. This could challenge the grouping of countries inside the conservative regime. For example, in the early 1970s, several reforms aimed to expand childcare services in Belgium (Leitner, 2014). According to Neyer (2013) and Leitner (2014), the good coverage of formal childcare in Belgium and France distinguishes these countries from other countries in the conservative group. In Germany, the 2007 family policy reform introduced a father’s quota in parental leave and a relatively high remuneration rate, supporting men’s involvement in family work, a singularity within the conservative group.

The second, third, and fourth criticisms presented above stress the heterogeneity that exists within the conservative group. Nevertheless, we posit that other processes of convergence are also underway, justifying our choice to consider the conservative group. Some of the aspects showing this convergence are summarized below. (a) Concerning childcare services, currently, in Germany, childcare enrolment rates for those aged 0-3 remain more limited than in other countries of the conservative group, but these services have expanded since the 2005 new legislation; indeed, since 2013, children older than 1 have had the right to childcare services (Ciccia and Bleijenbergh, 2014; Fleckenstein, 2011; see also section 4.4 below). In the Netherlands, childcare services have considerably expanded since 1990 (although since 2005,

these services have been provided by private organizations, Ciccio and Bleijenbergh, 2014; see also section 4.4 below). (b) In France, since 2014, parental leave has been an individual right with six months of nontransferable parental leave available for each parent (Collombet, 2016; see also section 4.5 below and Appendix 3). Finally, (c) France, Belgium and the Netherlands have recently expanded the duration of their paternity leaves (see section 4.5).

These evolutions challenge previous classifications by Leitner. Leitner (2003) classified Germany in the gender familialism typology; however, through its 2007 family reforms and new features of parental leave policy, Germany has come closer the Swedish degendered familialism model. Similarly, with the individualisation of leave entitlement in 2014, Leitner's classification of France in the unsupported universal male-bread-winner model is no longer appropriate.

In other terms, these changes in policies have made the countries included in Esping-Andersen's conservative welfare regime more similar to those included in Leitner's (2003) optional familialism (Leitner, 2014), where both childcare services and parental leave are available. From a gender perspective, we observe that these countries now also more closely resemble Leitner's mixed cases, situated between degendered familialism and gendered familialism because of the new features of their parental leave policies. In addition, following Ciccio and Bleijenbergh's classification (2014), Esping-Andersen's conservative countries are on the path to supported universal familialism, characterised by high maternal employment and high-quality childcare, which are typical of Sweden.

Given these ongoing processes, we think that these elements justify the comparison of these countries to find current similarities and divergences. Finally, the proximity of Sweden to the "caregiver model" ideal type (Ciccio and Bleijenbergh, 2014) justifies the inclusion of this country in our comparative study.

3. Data and methodological approach

With respect to our first aim, i.e., to identify characteristics of Belgian family policy from a comparative perspective, we mainly use data from the OECD Family database, the MISSOC database and national sources. Our indicators refer to public spending on family benefits, family allowances, birth premiums, formal childcare, leave policies, and work time reduction policies.

With respect to the second aim of our study—to identify the strengths and weaknesses of the Belgian family policy according to its efficacy in supporting fertility and gender equity—in the

concluding section of this article, we discuss family policy measures in Belgium in light of previous literature and assess the efficacy of the policy in supporting fertility and gender equity, which we understand here as mothers' employment and fathers' involvement in childcare.

For clarification, at least three approaches have been applied in previous studies to measure the efficacy of a policy. The *first* approach consists in measuring the effect of a single policy measure or a limited set of policies on the outcome of interest. Several micro- and macrolevel studies have adopted statistical approaches (quasi-experimental approaches and fixed effects models that account for unobserved heterogeneity, etc.) to determine the causal relation between specific policy measures and fertility or gender equity. Previous studies following this approach will be presented below. A *second* approach consists in quantifying a welfare system, determining clusters and relating them to the outcome of interest (see, for example, Thévenon, 2008; Saraceno and Keck, 2011; Lohmann and Zagel, 2016). Saraceno and Keck (2011), for instance, conduct a systematic comparison of European countries to clarify the gender dimension of family policies. A similar approach is adopted by Lohmann and Zagel (2016), while Thévenon's (2008) clusters aim to determine the effect of a welfare system on fertility. However, according to Neyer (2013, p.34), "(m)erely quantifying welfare-state measures have proved to be of limited potential in capturing essential characteristics of the welfare state and in explaining current or long-term cross-national differences in fertility outcomes". Moreover, in this second approach, because of the large number of countries considered, the authors are able to build a general framework, but their studies are inevitably lacking in detail. Saraceno and Keck (2011) state that their study is intended as a basis for future in-depth analyses on a smaller number of countries.

Following a *third* approach and considering Saraceno's and Keck's suggestion, we aim to provide a comparative analysis of family policies in a limited number of countries – those in the conservative group and Sweden. The limitation on the number of countries is appropriate for performing a detailed comparison of family policy measures together with recommendations at the national level – particularly, at the level of Belgium.

4. Family policies in Belgium: a comprehensive and comparative approach

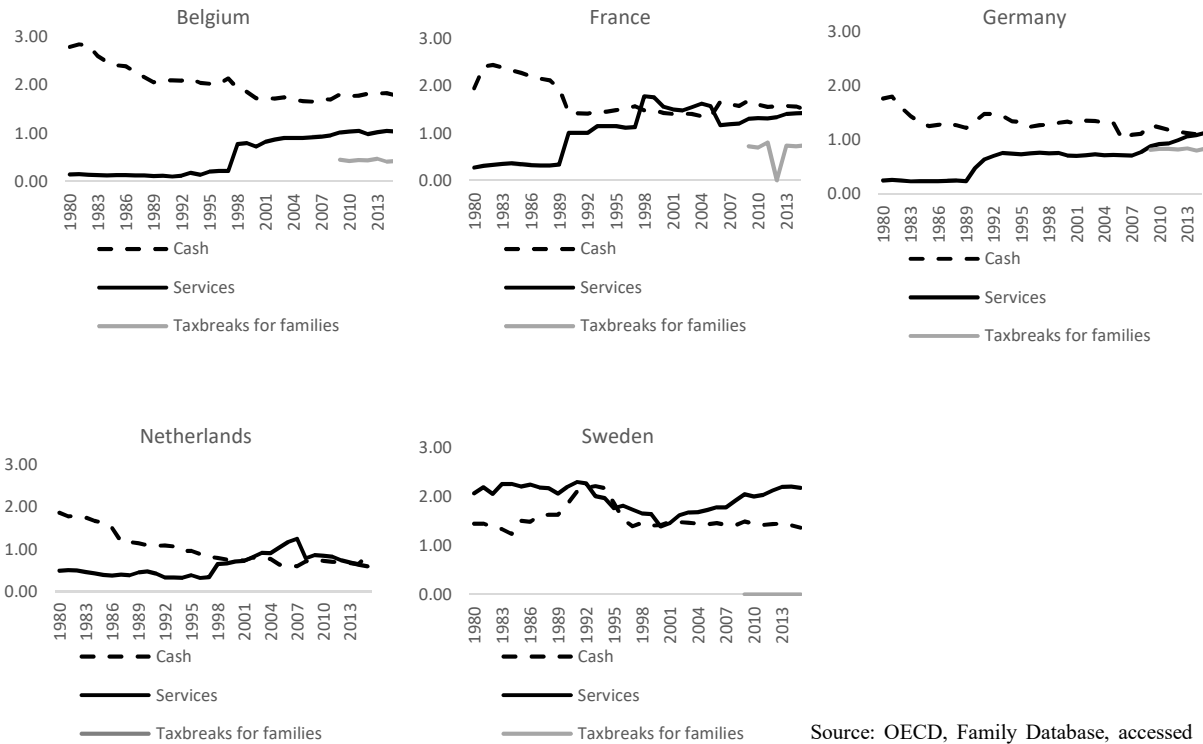
4.1 Public spending on family benefits

We start by characterising the five countries according to the amount of public spending for family benefits in each. In conservative countries, public spending on family benefits is above the 2015 OECD mean. It constituted 3.7% of the gross domestic product (GDP) in France, 3.2% in Belgium, and 3.1% in Germany in 2015. In the same year, it was 3.5% in Sweden (OECD Family Database, accessed on 3 October 2022). The Netherlands represents an exception in the conservative group, as family benefits constituted only 1.7% of the GDP in 2015.

Figure 1 shows that, compared to support in Sweden, a more sizeable share of family support in Belgium, France and Germany takes the form of tax benefits and/or cash transfers. The share of cash transfers is especially high in Belgium (1.7), while in France, spending on services is higher than that in other conservative countries (1.5) (OECD Family Database, accessed on 3 October 2022). During the '90s, public spending on services began to increase: first in France and Germany and then in Belgium. The Netherlands is an exception in the conservative group: after the economic crisis of 2008, spending on services began to decline. Sweden presents several distinctive features: public spending on services is generally higher than spending on cash transfers and higher than that in conservative countries, reaching approximately 2% of the GDP. Interestingly, in the conservative group, the trends are towards the convergence of public spending on cash transfers and services, while in Sweden, spending on services has overtaken spending on cash transfers. Another distinctive feature of the conservative group is the use of tax breaks.

Note that the category “services” presented in Figure 1 is a broad one. It includes the direct financing or subsidisation of childcare and preprimary education facilities, public childcare support through payments to parents, public spending on assistance for young people and residential facilities, and public spending on family services, including centre-based facilities and home help services for families in need (Adema and Fron, 2019). More detailed information regarding the direct financing or subsidisation of childcare and preprimary education is presented in section 5.

Figure 1 - Public spending on family benefits in the form of cash, services and tax measures, in % of GDP, 1980-2015



Source: OECD, Family Database, accessed on 3 October 2022

4.2 Family allowances and horizontal equity

Family allowances are child-related cash transfers to families whose purpose is to offset the costs of raising children. In Belgium, the history of family allowances dates back to 1915, when allowances were spontaneously offered by some employers to their employees. The recent history of family allowances stems from the 6th state reform. On 11 October 2011, an important political agreement was reached to transfer new powers from the federal level to the federated entities. Family allowances represent the majority of the resources transferred to the federated entities (Bisciari and Van Meensel, 2012). In this respect, a law dated 4 April 2014 (*loi générale relative aux allocations familiales, LGAF*) modified the previous law from 19 December 1939 (Flohimont and Neven, 2015). As a consequence, since 1 January 2019, each region of Belgium has had its own system of family allowances (*allocations familiales* in French or *Groeipakket* in Dutch), with its own disbursement amounts and rules (Parentia, accessed on 5 July 2019).

For 2010, the main features of the family benefits in the conservative countries and Sweden are presented in Appendix 1. These include family allowances and “refundable” or “nonwastable” tax credits. The latter are paid in cash when the tax to be paid is not high enough for a fiscal

advantage to apply. This benefit is available in countries such as Germany. After Germany, Belgium and Sweden present the most generous universal family allowances.

In general, the conservative countries and Sweden exhibit the principle of horizontal equity (Chesnais, 1996), with family allowances paid for all children. In other words, the right to a family allowance generally does not depend on income. Note that horizontal equity implies a transfer from childless persons to families, while vertical equity focuses on redistribution from higher-income families to poorer households.

As stated above, since 2019, each Belgian region has had its own family allowance system. The following rules apply to children born after 2019 in Flanders and children born after 2020 in Wallonia. In Flanders, in 2019, the basic family allowance was 163.2 euros per month. In Wallonia, it was 155 euros per month for children aged 0-17 and 165 euros for children aged 18-24 years. Supplements were available in both regions according to income and starting with the third child. Thus, the same principles have applied in the two regions, where elements of horizontal and vertical equity are seen as well as more generous benefits starting with the third child. Allowances have been slightly more generous in Flanders, although Wallonia accounts for the greater costs associated with the increasing age of the child (Parentia, accessed on 5 July 2019; FAMIFED, accessed on 5 July 2019).

4.3 The birth premium: a purely universal measure

The birth premium is another cash transfer to a family and takes the form of a one-time bonus that parents receive upon the birth of a child. The aim is to compensate parents for the costs incurred as a result of the birth. This is the only family policy that is purely universal, as all parents receive the same amount, without any evaluation of income. Since the amount does not vary with income, we could say that the aim is purely demographic (van Nimwegen, 2011). Other terms may be used to define birth premiums, such as baby bonuses, birth allowances or birth grants. This article mainly uses the terms birth premium (*prime à la naissance* in French) or baby bonus.

In Belgium, the history of birth premiums dates back to 1926, when the state offered allowances to its civil servants and a baby bonus was also granted (Jamin et al., 2005). Together with family allowances, the 6th state reform has redefined competences for the birth premium. Since 1 January 2019, each region has had its own scheme for birth premiums (amounts, rules, payment

cycle, etc.; Parentia, accessed on 5 July 2019; FAMIFED Agence fédérale pour les allocations familiales, accessed on 5 July 2019).

In Flanders, parents receive an amount (*startbedrag* in Dutch) of 1,122 euros for each child born after 1 January 2019 (these figures refer to the year 2019). There is no difference between the first child and the subsequent children. This system is new: previously, parents received an amount of 1,272.52 euros for each first child born before 31 December 2018 and received 957.42 euros for subsequent children. In Wallonia, for children born after 1 January 2020, parents receive a birth premium of 1,100 euros. Finally, in the Brussels-Capital Region, a new model came into force in 2020, under which the birth premium is 1,100 euros for the first child and 500 euros for subsequent children. There may be supplements depending on the family's situation, such as difficult economic circumstances, or the child's situation, such as the presence of a disability. With the exception of these specific cases, the amount is not generally associated with income (Parentia, accessed on 5 July 2019).

The other countries considered for this study have different systems or no birth premium at all. In France, the 1939 family code abolished the allowance for the first child and replaced it with the birth premium (McCleary, 1941). Since 2004, the premium has been paid conditional on income. In the Netherlands, no birth premium is paid to parents. Similarly, no premium exists in Germany or Sweden (Mutual Information System Protection (MISSOC), 2018, accessed on 4 July 2019), albeit in these two countries, the remuneration of parental leave is much more generous than that in Belgium (see section 4.5).

4.4. Childcare and preschools: catching up with Sweden

Other family policy measures support parents' work–family balance. Among these, formal childcare facilities (centre-based services or family-based services) generally serve children aged 0 to 2, while preschool or preprimary education provides educational content and traditional care for children aged 3 to 5.

The Belgian enrolment rate of children under 3 years old is higher than the OECD average and equalled 56.1% in 2017 (OECD Family Database, accessed on 3 October 2022). These data are based on the OECD analysis of the EU-SILC survey and refer to children using centre-based services (*crèches* or nurseries or day care centres, both public and private) and family-based provisions (family day care and care services provided by professional childminders).

The Eurydice figures, also based on the Eurostat EU-SILC survey but considering only centre-based childcare, show an enrolment rate of 52.9% for Belgium (Table 1, Motiejunaite-Schulmeister et al., 2019). Despite the importance of childminders in countries of the conservative group, especially in France (Motiejunaite-Schulmeister et al., 2019), the Eurydice data on centre-based childcare are particularly suitable for comparison because of the consistency in the definition of formal childcare across countries.

Table 1 - Enrolment rates and average weekly hours in centre-based childcare among 0-3-year-olds (2017)

Country	enrolment rate 0-3 years old	average weekly hours
Belgium	52.9	31.1
France	50.5	31.1
Germany	30.3	32
Netherlands	61.6	16.7
Sweden	52.7	31.8

Source: Motiejunaite-Schulmeister et al., 2019.

Belgium, Sweden and France present similar enrolment rates in centre-based childcare at approximately 50% (Table 1). Also similar among these countries are the average weekly hours at approximately 31 (Table 1). In the Netherlands, the enrolment rate is much higher, 61.6%. However, the relatively high Dutch enrolment rate is associated with a low number of hours per week: on average, 16.7 hours in 2017. The other exception is Germany, where the enrolment rate for centre-based childcare among those 0-3 years old is relatively low and equal to 30.3 %, while the average number of weekly hours is similar to that in other countries, at 32%.

Concerning regional disparities within countries, significant differences exist between West and East Germany. In 2018, the percentage of children under 3 years old enrolled in childcare reached 29.4% in West Germany and 51.5% in East Germany (Statistisches Bundesamt, 2019, accessed on 4 July 2019). Differences between Belgian regions are smaller but still substantial. In 2019, the enrolment rate for children under 3 years old was 48% in the French-speaking region (ONE, 2019) and 55% in the Dutch-speaking region (Kind en Gezin, 2019). Heterogeneity between provinces is greater in the former region, with percentages fluctuating between 39.6% in Brussels, 46.3% in Hainaut, and 63.3% in Walloon Brabant. The gap between provinces is less pronounced in Flanders, with an enrolment rate for 0-3-year-olds ranging from 51.3% in Antwerp to 63.3% in West Flanders (Kind en Gezin, 2019; ONE, 2019).

Regarding the evolution of enrolment rates, a comparison of the OECD data for the years 2010

and 2017 indicates that Belgium shows the greatest increase of 17%, followed by France and Germany at 8.4% and 10.4%, respectively. Figures for Sweden appear high but stable (OECD Family Database, accessed on 3 October 2022; data are not available for the Netherlands for before 2017). In other words, in the last decade, France and Belgium caught up to Sweden.

An interesting feature of childcare is the guarantee of a place. In Sweden, a universal legal entitlement to publicly subsidized childcare starts when the child is 1 year old. Similarly, and as already mentioned, since 2013, in Germany, legal entitlement has also been set to start at 1 year old. In Belgium, the legal entitlement begins at 2.5 years old. In France, the legal entitlement starts at 3 years old, while in the Netherlands, there is no legal entitlement (Motiejunaite-Schulmeister et al., 2019).

A further characteristic of childcare is free access. In Belgium, access to preschool for children aged 2.5 years old until 6 years old is free of charge during open hours and during the school day (Vandenbroeck et al., 2016). In France and Sweden, childcare is free from age 3. In the Netherlands, preschool is free from age 4. In Germany, there is no regulation at the country level. For example, Berlin and Hamburg offer childcare free of charge for all children, while North Rhine-Westphalia and Thuringia offer free childcare for all children during the year preceding primary education (Motiejunaite-Schulmeister et al., 2019).

Concerning the average monthly fees (in purchasing parity standards, PPS) of childcare facilities for children under 3 years old, these are between 0 and 110 euros PPS in Sweden, between 121 and 274 euros PPS in France, 258 euros PPS in the Dutch-speaking region of Belgium, and 511 euros PPS in the Netherlands (Motiejunaite-Schulmeister et al., 2019).

Despite the relatively high enrolment rates, two weaknesses can be observed in the childcare services policy of some conservative countries. The first weakness concerns disparities in access to childcare by socioeconomic status. In 2017, differences between the enrolment rates of the richest (3rd tertile) and poorest (1st tertile) households are particularly significant in the conservative group: a 45.1% difference in France, 34.5% difference in the Netherlands, and 33.4% difference in Belgium. In Belgium and the Netherlands, the differences in enrolment rates are still relatively high when comparing moderate incomes (2nd tertile) with the highest incomes (3rd tertile). Note that in Sweden there is almost no difference between enrolment rates according to the household's disposable income (OECD, Family Database, accessed on 3 October 2022).

The socioeconomic differences in access to childcare could be related to legal entitlement to a

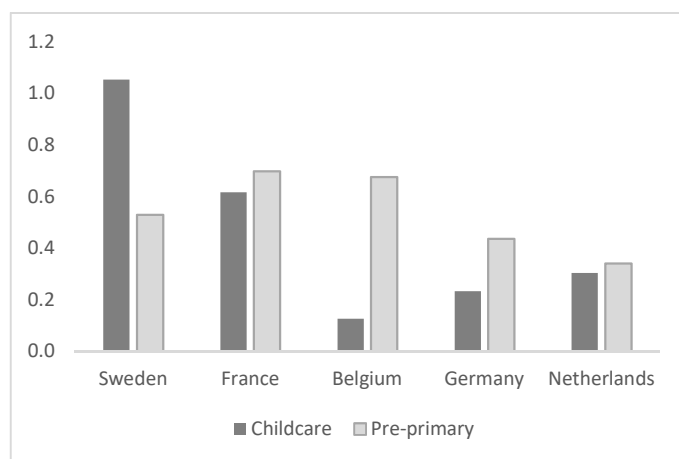
place or affordability for families. A recent study demonstrates that, in Belgium, non-European migrant-native mothers are less likely to use formal childcare because of their lower employment opportunities (Biegel et al., 2021). Differences in access according to the socioeconomic status of families may be also related to geographic disparities (Vandenbroeck, 2020). Van Lancker and Vandenbroeck (2019), cited in Vandenbroeck (2020), demonstrate that, over the last decade, the Dutch-speaking region mainly invested in new childcare places where women's employment increased and less in areas characterised by lower average incomes. ONE's data (2019) presented above show that the problem of heterogeneity across provinces is even more accentuated in the French-speaking region of Belgium. Geographic disparities in the availability of childcare might also be a consequence of the marketization of childcare, as in the case of the Netherlands since 2005 (as already mentioned in section 2), where providers increase in more affluent urban areas and decrease in rural and poor urban areas (Noailly et al., 2007 cited by Vandenbroeck, 2020; Ciccio and Bleijenbergh, 2014).

Some policies have been implemented to reduce the gap in enrolment rates. In France, a new poverty plan was applied in 2019 (Motiejunaite-Schulmeister et al., 2019). In this country, a bonus to support social diversity is given to childcare services to compensate the lower financial entries related to the shorter time spent in childcare by children whose mothers are not working. Moreover, a territory bonus helps the poorest municipalities reduce costs per child in their childcare facilities. The enrolment of children in one-parent families and with a parent looking for a job is also guaranteed (Ministère des solidarités et de la santé, accessed on 22 November 2021). In the Netherlands, higher investments are planned for disadvantaged children, mainly to improve the quality and intensity of childcare use (Motiejunaite-Schulmeister et al., 2019).

A second weakness, especially characterising Belgium, is low public expenditure in childcare. If Sweden devotes the largest proportion of GDP to childcare at approximately 1%, this proportion is 0.6% in France, 0.3% in the Netherlands, 0.2% in Germany, and 0.1% in Belgium (Figure 2). How can we explain the low expenditures on childcare in some countries? In the Netherlands, in line with the fact that the majority of women work part-time, childcare facilities have fewer opening hours, which could affect public expenditure as well. In Germany, the lower public spending on childcare is likely correlated with the lower enrolment rate. The public expenditures in Belgium are particularly low, and this does not seem to be justified by the enrolment, hours, legal entitlement, or monthly fee characteristics presented above. This could be related to a significant proportion (more than 10%) of the private self-financing sector being dedicated to childcare provision for children under the age of 3 both in the French and Dutch-

speaking regions (Motiejunaite-Schulmeister et al., 2019). This pattern is also observed in the Netherlands. In France and Germany, this share is of minor importance, while in Sweden, childcare for those less than 3 years old is public or private but publicly subsidized (Motiejunaite-Schulmeister et al., 2019). Another factor that might affect public expenditure is the cost of the staff as determined by education level: in Belgium and the Netherlands, early preschool teachers do not need a bachelor's degree, while in France and Germany, the bachelor's level is required (Motiejunaite-Schulmeister et al., 2019). Finally, in Belgium, for 2018-2019, the child-to-staff ratio for children in their first two years is particularly high in formal childcare services at 7 in the French-speaking region and 9 in the Dutch-speaking region. The ratio is between 4 and 8 in Germany, 5 in France, and 3 in the Netherlands (Motiejunaite-Schulmeister et al., 2019). In Sweden, where no top-level regulations on child/staff ratios exist, the average number of children per staff in unitary settings aged 1-6 (förskola) was 5.1 in the autumn of 2017 (Skolverket Statistics cited by Motiejunaite-Schulmeister et al., 2019). In the Dutch-speaking region of Belgium, childminders are allowed to care for a maximum of 8 children under the age of three, while the ratio in the French-speaking region of Belgium and in other countries of the conservative group is between 4 and 5 children maximum per childminder (Motiejunaite-Schulmeister et al., 2019, years 2018-2019).

Figure 2 - Public spending on childcare and preprimary education as a % of GDP, 2017



Source: OECD, Family Database, accessed on 3 October 2022.

4.5 Leave policies to improve gender equity

As in the case of childcare services, leave policies help parents to balance work and family. In

this study, we maintain that leave policies, especially parental leave, are the weak link in Belgian family policy. This weakness is shared with France and the Netherlands, while Sweden and, more recently, Germany have implemented policies characterized by long leaves with good remuneration. In the following paragraphs, we present in more detail each individual instrument by country.

Maternity leave

Maternity leave (*congé de maternité* in French, *Mutterschaftsurlaub* in German, *Zwangerschapsverlof* in Dutch, *Mammaledighet* in Swedish) is defined by the OECD (2017) as an “employment-protected leave of absence for employed women at around the time of childbirth, or adoption in some countries.” Maternity leave is an individual right and is generally well paid: most OECD countries pay more than 50% of previous wages (OECD, 2017).

In Belgium, as in other conservative countries, maternity leave is mandatory. Belgian maternity leave has a duration close to that in the other conservative countries, approximately 15 weeks on average. However, the remuneration is lower, corresponding to approximately 70% of the gross salary, whereas in the other countries, it is 100% or close to 100%. In France, the duration of maternity leave is 16 weeks for the first and second child and 24 weeks starting with the third child. In Germany, the duration is 14 weeks, but only eight postnatal weeks are mandatory. In the Netherlands, the duration of maternity leave is 16 weeks, and it is compulsory to offer leave at least four weeks before and six weeks after birth (Den Dulk and Yerkes, 2020). In Sweden, maternity leave lasts 14 weeks. The obligation includes two weeks before or after delivery (MISSOC, 2018, accessed on 4 July 2019) (see Appendix 3).

Paternity leave

The corresponding leave policy measure for fathers is called paternity leave. According to the OECD (2017), paternity leave is an “employment-protected leave of absence for employed fathers at or in the first few months after childbirth.” As with maternity leave, paternity leave is an individual right and cannot be transferred to the mother. In general, periods of paternity leave are much shorter than those for maternity leave. Workers on paternity leave often continue to receive full wage payments.

Paternity leave (*congé de paternité* in French, *Vaderschapsverlof* in Dutch, *Vaterschaftsurlaub* in German) appeared in Belgium in 1961, well before it was instituted in France (2002) or in the Netherlands (2001) (see Appendix 3). On 1 January 2021, Belgian paternity leave increased from 10 to 15 days, and on 1 January 2023, it will increase to 20 days. This measure follows policy in the Netherlands, where in 2020, paternity leave was extended from 5 days to a maximum of five weeks (five times the number of working hours per week). On 1 July 2021, paternity leave increased from 14 to 28 days in France.

In Germany, there is no statutory entitlement (OECD, 2017). However, since the 2007 reform fathers have been allowed to take relatively long and well-remunerated parental leave (see next paragraph). Similarly, in Sweden, parental leave is generous for fathers (see next paragraph).

In Belgium, paternity leave can be taken intermittently (over a period of 4 months after delivery) (ONEM, Employment National Office, accessed on 4 July 2019). Since 30 July 2011, fathers who take paternity leave have been protected against dismissal (Math and Meilland, 2004; ONEM, accessed on 4 July 2019). The introduction of job protection for fathers on paternity leave occurred later than in other countries: 2002 in France, 2001 in the Netherlands, and 1980 in Sweden. For both paternity and maternal leave, Belgium was a forerunner in the introduction of a leave policy but a laggard in granting job protection (see Appendix 3).

Regarding remuneration for paternity leave in Belgium, the employer pays the first three days, and the remaining days are covered by insurance. The remuneration is equal to 100% of the father's salary for the first three days and 82% thereafter, up to a ceiling (OECD Family Database, accessed on 3 October 2022). We can see differences in leave remuneration between countries (Table 2). At present, paternity leave remuneration is 100% of earnings in France up to a ceiling and 70% in the Netherlands, also up to a ceiling (Den Dulk and Yerkes, 2020; Motiejunaite-Schulmeister et al., 2019).

Parental leave

Parental leave (*Congé parental* in French, *Elternzeit* in German, *Ouderschapsverlof* in Dutch and *Föräldraledighet* in Swedish) is defined by the OECD (2017) as a period of employment-protected leave for parents that is often supplementary to maternity and paternity leave. Entitlement to the parental leave period is generally an individual right and cannot be transferred to the other parent. This has been the case in Belgium since 1998 (OECD, 2017, see Appendix 3).

The duration of Belgian parental leave is four months per parent (Table 2 and Appendix 3). The leave must begin before the child is 12 years old. In France, for parents with one child, parental leave is 12 months. Either parent can receive a payment for six months, and the remaining six months are reserved for the other parent. For parents with two or three children, parental leave is paid until the child is 3 years old. One parent can be paid for a maximum period of 24 months, and the remaining months are reserved for the other parent (Boyer and Fagnani, 2018; OECD, Family Database, accessed on 3 October 2022). In Germany, for children born after 30 June 2015, a maximum of 12 paid months from the initiation of parental leave can be taken until the child reaches the age of eight. Normally, the duration is 10 months, but an extension to 12 months is possible if both parents take at least two months (“bonus” paid weeks mentioned above). In other words, equal arrangements are rewarded with extra months of paid parental leave (Axelsson, 2018). The duration of parental leave in the Netherlands is equal to 26 times the number of working hours per week per parent and per child for employed parents. The child must be under 8 years old (European Commission, 2018; accessed on 4 July 2019; MISSOC, 2018, accessed on 4 July 2019). In Sweden, parents have the right to 480 days of paid leave, with 90 days reserved for each parent. The remaining days can be transferred from one parent to another with informed consent (Ray et al., 2010). Parental leave must be used before the child turns 12.

With respect to users of parental leave (or recipients of parental leave benefits), in Sweden, the share of fathers was approximately 45% in 2016 (OECD, Family Database, accessed on 3 October 2022). In Germany, the parental leave benefit was taken by 38.8% of fathers in 2016 (Schober et al., 2020). However, variation between German regions is substantial: from 28.5% in Saarland to 49.1% in Saxony (Schober et al., 2020). According to Boyer and Fagnani, (2020), no information is available about parental leave uptake in France, while the OECD indicates for the year 2016 a 4.4% share of father recipients of CLCA (*complément de libre choix d'activité*, which in 2017 became PreParE, or the *prestation partagée d'éducation de l'enfant*). In France, the CLCA is paid to the parent who wants to stay home to care for children, and the amount is close to that of parental leave.

The OECD has not published recent data for Belgium. However, OECD data from 2013 showed that the share of fathers taking parental leave was approximately 25%. The difference compared to Sweden and Germany is likely to be related to the remuneration rate of the leave, which approaches 80% of previous earnings in Sweden and 67% in Germany, while in Belgium, a flat rate corresponding to less than 800 euros per month is applied (Appendix 2).

Other data sources for Belgium show that of all users in 2012, 29% were men. This percentage increased to 30% in 2015 and to 32% in 2017 (Institut pour l'égalité des femmes et des hommes, 2018). Fathers in Flanders are more likely to use parental leave (approximately 30% of users) than those in Wallonia (approximately 25%) and Brussels (approximately 20%).

Regarding the flexibility of parental leave, Belgian parental leave can be full-time with a total cessation of activities; 1/2 time, corresponding to 50% of the number of hours of full-time employment; and 1/5 time, where the working parent continues to work 80% of the number of hours of full-time employment (ONEM, accessed on 4 July 2019). Since 2019, parental leave of 1/10 time has also been possible (ONEM, accessed on 4 July 2019). In Germany, parental leave can be part-time and spread over 20(+4) months (Bundesamt für Migration und Flüchtlinge, 2015, accessed on 4 July 2019; OECD, 2017). In Sweden, parents may take full-time, part-time, quarter-time or one-eighth-time paid leave, with the duration of the leave being extended accordingly. Parents can take leave in a single continuous period or in several blocks of time. Moreover, both parents can take up to 30 days of paid leave at the same time until the child reaches one year of age. These days are called “double days” (Duvander and Haas, 2018; OECD, 2017). Part-time parental leave is also an option in Germany and the Netherlands (Den Dulk and Yerkes 2020; Schober et al., 2020)

In Belgium, the most frequently chosen formula is the 1/5 reduction of working time (ONEM accessed on 1 March 2021). In 2020, the 1/5 formula was chosen by 70% of men, especially in Wallonia, where they represented 76% compared to 69% in Flanders and 66% in the Brussels region. In the Brussels region, men were more likely to choose the full-time formula (13%) than in Flanders (8%) and Wallonia (4%; ONEM accessed on 1 March 2021). The 1/5 reduction of working time was chosen by 56% of Belgian women. As observed for men, women in Wallonia were more likely to adopt the 1/5 reduction formula: 63% of them did in Wallonia, compared to 56% in Flanders and 50% in the Brussels region. Similar to men, women living in Brussels were more likely to prefer full-time parental leave (26%) than those in Flanders (14%) and Wallonia (8%; ONEM accessed on 1 March 2021). Only 1% of men and 4% of women mix full- and part-time leave (Mortelmans and Fusulier, 2020).

Regarding the duration of the uptake of parental leave, to our knowledge, data are not available for Belgium. For Sweden, available data for 2016 show 131.1 days of parental leave for men compared to 333.9 for women (OECD, Family Database, accessed on 3 October 2022). In Germany, the 2016 average duration of parental leave is 3.4 months for men and 13.4 months for women (Schober et al., 2020). For 75% of German fathers, the maximum duration of

parental leave is two months – corresponding to their individual entitlement – compared to 0.8% for mothers. A parental leave duration between 10 and 12 months concerned only 6.4% of men compared to 72.7% of women (Schober et al., 2020). According to Den Dulk and Yerkes (2020), in the Netherlands, the 2017 average duration of parental leave was 19 months for men compared to 14 months for women. This long duration reflects the possibility to take part-time parental leave. On average, the parental leave was 9 hours per week for women and 8 hours per week for men (Den Dulk and Yerkes, 2020).

Table 2 - Leave policy characteristics

		Belgium	France	Germany	Netherlands	Sweden
Maternity leave	Remuneration	First month at 82% of daily wage (without ceiling). Remaining weeks: 75% of daily wage (maximum 135 euros/day).	100% of net earnings with a maximum daily benefit of 83.58 euros.	100 % of daily wage (no ceiling), plus a maternity benefit: uninsured female employees and nonworking uninsured spouses or daughters of insured individuals can receive maternity benefits equivalent to sickness benefits.	100% of daily wage (maximum 211.42 euros/day).	Maternity leave is not paid in Sweden, but mothers can benefit from a long and well-remunerated parental leave.
	Duration	15 weeks	First or second child: 16 weeks; third or higher: 24 weeks.	14 weeks	16 weeks	90 days
Paternity leave	Remuneration	3 days at 100% of earnings paid by the employer. The remaining days at 82% of earnings paid by insurance (with ceiling).	100% of net earnings (with ceiling).	No statutory entitlement (but parental leave policy encourages fathers' uptake)	70%	77.6% of earnings (with ceiling).
	Duration	15 days	28 days starting in July 2021	/	5 weeks	10 days
Parental leave	Remuneration	See Appendix 2	See Appendix 2	See Appendix 2	No remuneration.	See Appendix 2
	Duration	4 months for each parent.	Until the child is 3 years old. The duration of paid leave is shorter. For parents with only one child: any one parent can receive the payment for a maximum of 6 months only. For parents with two or more children: any one parent can receive the payment for a	The duration of the leave is up to 3 years and can be used until the child is 8 years old. However, the duration of paid leave is shorter: 10 months after maternity leave. If both parents request at least 2 months of benefits, the duration is extended by 2 months (10 +2 option)	Parental leave lasts 26 times the number of working hours per week per parent and per child.	480 days, with 90 days reserved for each parent

			maximum of 24 months only.			
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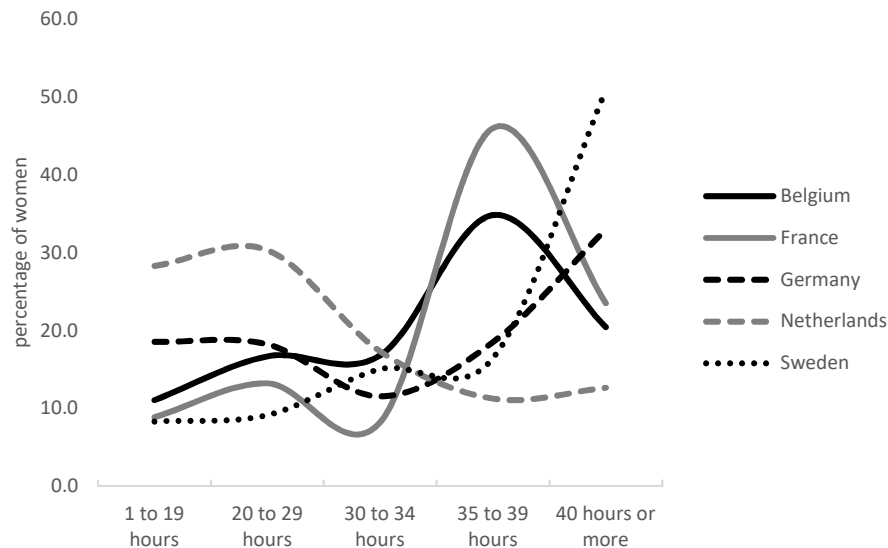
Source: Our elaboration from different sources: ONEM; MISSOC, OECD Family Database, accessed on 3 October 2022. Den Dulk. and Yerkes. (2020); Motiejunaite-Schulmeister et al., 2019; Schober et al., 2020.

4.6 Work time reduction to balance work and family

Part-time work is an additional strategy to reconcile work and family that is especially used by women. Part-time work is defined by the OECD as working less than 30 hours per week (OECD, Family Database, accessed on 3 October 2022). If we apply this definition, the Netherlands has, in Europe, the highest percentage of women employed part-time, 58.6% in 2017 (Figure 3). In Belgium, 27.8% of women are engaged in part-time work, and in Germany, 36.8%. The lowest percentages of women employed part-time are observed in Sweden, at 17.5%, and in France, at 22.1% (2017, Figure 3). The low level of part-time work in Sweden could be the effect of the long and well-remunerated parental leave offered there (see Appendices 2 and 3), which, combined with good childcare enrolment, allows women to continue working full-time after becoming mothers.

This definition of part-time may lead to underestimation of the percentage of women reducing their work time in Belgium, as the 20% work time reduction, which has been possible since 2002 within the framework of the leave policy and time credit (see below), is not included. Although part-time work is not a main strategy in Belgium as it is in the Netherlands and Germany, the use of a 1/5 time reduction appears to be a unique feature of Belgian family policy within the conservative group.

Figure 3 – Employed women grouped by their usual weekly working hours, 2017



Source: OECD, Family Database, accessed on 3 October 2022.

The time credit policy

In Belgium, time credit constitutes another family policy measure promoting the reconciliation of paid work and family life. Since 2002, time credits have allowed workers in the private sector to completely or partially interrupt their work while receiving a flat rate payment from the ONEM (for a complete history of this measure, see Merla and Deven, 2019). This is a national policy applying to Brussels, Wallonia, and Flanders. A similar scheme, the “career break”, applies in the public sector. There are specific reasons established in the policy for limiting or interrupting work: to care for a family member with a severe illness, to care for a child less than 21 years old with a handicap, to attend professional training, and end of career. Another reason is to care for a child under 8 years old, for which a maximum duration of time credit of 51 months (with variations according to the collective agreement of the sector of activity) is allowed. The duration of time credit is the same for the total, part-time or 1/5 formulas.

The Belgian time credit grants the right to a flat rate payment from the ONEM. For example, a worker in the private sector who stays with the same employer for at least five years and who completely interrupts his/her work will receive a net amount of 535.20 euros (indexed amount on the 1st of September, 2018; ONEM, accessed on 4 July 2019). It has been observed that payments for time credit based on the part-time formula diminished between 2016 and 2017 (Institut pour l’égalité des hommes et des femmes, 2018). In Flanders, in specific situations, an additional premium (*aanmoedigingspremie*) is paid.

The percentage of men among users of the time credit to care for a family member more than doubled between 2008 and 2017, from 6% to 15% (Institut pour l'égalité des hommes et des femmes, 2018, on the basis of ONEM data). As we observed for parental leave, the 1/5 time reduction is the preferred formula of time credit (although in this specific case, the available statistics do not allow us to distinguish the type of time credit, such as care provision, end of career or another type).

In Germany, in January 2012, an instrument similar to time credit, Familienpflegezeit (family caring time) for employees, was introduced. However, this is an optional provision that is available if covered by an individual contract or collective agreement. It allows employees who need to care for a dependent relative to reduce their working time to a minimum of 15 hours per week for up to two years. The reduction in income is less than the reduction in hours, but employees have to repay the difference by receiving the same amount of reduced earnings for an equivalent period after returning to full-time employment (Blum et al., 2016).

In the Netherlands, short-term leave and unpaid long-term leave are available but only in case of the illness of a family member or friend (Den Dulk and Yerkes, 2020).

The impact of time reduction on pension

In Belgium, the time credit period is considered when calculating the amount of future pension income (as with parental leave). The precondition is to receive an ONEM benefit for time credit. However, the impact on the pension amount differs with respect to whether there was a total interruption or partial reduction of work time (Federal Service for Pension (SFPD), accessed on 4 July 2019). In the case of partial reduction, the pension amount is calculated on the basis of the *fictive mean yearly salary* of the previous year. With total interruption of work, the pension amount is calculated on the basis of the *fictive yearly limited salary*. On 1 September 2018, this fixed amount was 24,730.99 euros per year. Therefore, partial time reduction rather than full interruption is encouraged by the pension calculation. Before 1996, the approach was different, and a partial reduction of work time during the time credit period was not taken into account when calculating the pension if the worker was 50 years old or younger.

Similar rules apply in the case of work time reduction outside the time credit policy. If an employee works less than 1/3 of full-time and receives the minimum income benefit, the pension is calculated on the basis of the *fictive normal salary*. If the worker works at least 1/3 of the full-time schedule without an income allowance, the pension income is calculated on the

basis of the *fictive limited salary* (SFPD, accessed on 4 July 2019). Note that in Belgium, a minimum income benefit (*allocation de garantie de revenus*) is paid to guarantee a total income at least equal to the unemployment benefit.

Regarding the impact on workers' pension, it is interesting to compare Belgium to the Netherlands, where time reduction is a main strategy used to reconcile workers' career and family life (see above), and to Sweden. In these countries, basic pension requires a minimum number of years of residence. For older individuals, the Dutch policy compensates for work time reduction during one's earlier career by allowing a basic pension income corresponding to approximately 25% of average earnings. A basic pension system of more than 20% of average earnings is also applied in Sweden (Kim and Rizzi, 2019).

6. Concluding discussion: Does Belgian policy support fertility and gender equity?

In this study, we performed a descriptive and comparative study of Belgian family policies. This study's unique contribution lies in its comprehensive approach to family policies in a limited number of countries and in a focus on the Belgian case. Most comparative studies on a large number of countries inevitably lack details about policy features (Saraceno and Keck, 2011), and they are less conducive to producing recommendations at the national level.

The Belgian family policy presents several strengths in comparison to the policy that exists in other conservative countries. As in other conservative countries, Belgium's family allowances and birth premium are relatively generous. Enrolment rates for children under the age of three compete with the Swedish rates. Maternity and paternity leave policies, implemented to protect the maternity period and encourage fathers' involvement in the perinatal period, were instituted earlier than in other countries. In several developed countries, some of these policy measures – and, in particular, enrolment rates and leave – have proven to have a positive effect on fertility (Del Boca, 2002; Adsera, 2004; Duvander and Andersson, 2006; Rindfuss et al., 2007; Baizán, 2009; Hilgeman and Butts, 2009; Kalwij, 2010; Rindfuss et al., 2010; Luci and Thévenon, 2011; Bauernschuster et al., 2016; Raute, 2018). This positive effect has also been shown in the case of Belgium (Klüsener, et al., 2013; Wood, 2019; Wood and Neels, 2019a).

However, some weaknesses in the Belgian family policy are also apparent, mainly with reference to the objective to improve gender equity, here defined as maternal employment and fathers' involvement in childcare. These weaknesses concern (1) the relatively low level of spending on formal childcare, (2) the duration of maternity leave, (3) the remuneration of

parental leave, (4) the lack of radical reforms to support fathers' involvement, and (5) social and regional disparities in access to some family policy measures.

First, in comparison to Sweden, but also in comparison to the other conservative countries, Belgian grants cash family benefits that represent the highest share of GDP, while expenditures for childcare services correspond to the lowest share of GDP among these countries. It has been shown that cash benefits can positively affect the tempo or quantum of fertility (Ermisch, 1988; Barmby and Cigno, 1990; Del Boca et al., 2008; Backman and Ferrarini, 2010; Thévenon and Gauthier, 2011; Luci and Thévenon, 2011; 2013). Cash benefits have also a recognized role in reducing child poverty (e.g., Bradshaw, 2013; Van Mechelen and Bradshaw, 2013), thus representing an unavailable part of the family policies package. The effect of cash benefits on female labour force participation appears to be more controversial, as some authors have stressed that child benefits can discourage maternal employment or encourage part-time versus full-time employment (Laroque and Salanié, 2003; Buddelmeyer et al., 2004; Del Boca et al., 2008); however, recent studies have shown that the labour participation of single mothers is unaffected or even increases (Koebel and Schirle, 2016; Baker et al. 2021). Moreover, our analysis also shows that in Belgium, expenditures for childcare services are the lowest in the considered group of countries and that this low level translates into relatively poor-quality childcare, particularly with reference to the child-to-staff ratio. Moreover, Belgium's low expenditure on childcare services could explain their uneven distribution across provinces and the unequal access experienced across social groups.

Second, Belgian maternity leave is well-remunerated, but it is relatively short. It might appear counterintuitive to point to the brevity of leave as a shortcoming. In fact, some previous research stressed that short leave periods prevent women's exit from the labour market (for a review, see Ciccia and Verloo, 2012). However, it has been shown that the relation between well-remunerated parental leave and female employment is characterized by an inverted U-shaped relation with moderate duration parental leaves (approximately one year) having the most positive effect on women's employment (Dearing, 2016). Moreover, Gehringer and Klasen (2017) show that well-designed parental leave policies in terms of duration and remuneration favour full-time women's employment instead of part-time employment more than other family policy measures. Concerning fertility, recent studies have also shown a positive effect of leave duration on fertility once childcare provision is controlled for (Luci and Thévenon, 2013).

Third, a four-month parental leave in addition to maternity leave is available in Belgium, but leave remuneration takes the form of a flat rate and is likely to discourage parents' uptake.

Consequently, work time reduction might become a preferable strategy to combine work and family after motherhood. Although the part-time option is not as popular in Belgium as in the Netherlands or Germany, work time reduction is an appreciated and common strategy. In particular, parental leave and time credit allow parents to reduce their work time in a flexible manner. The formula of 1/5 parental leave is particularly appreciated by men. However, women remain the ones who reduce their work time more often. In other words, short maternity leaves associated with poorly-remunerated parental leave make women's choice of part-time work more likely during the parental leave period. This choice can set in also after the end of the parental leave, lasting in the long run.

Because of the brevity of maternity leave, the flat rate remuneration accompanying parental leave, and the legal entitlement to childcare beginning at 2.5 years old, we observe in Belgium a childcare gap of 2.2 years. This indicates the period of time a child is not covered by either adequately paid childcare leave or a guaranteed place in formal childcare (Motiejunaite-Schulmeister et al., 2019). In France, the childcare gap is almost three years (2.7), and it is even longer in the Netherlands (4.7 years). However, no childcare gap is observed in Germany or in Sweden, indicating that formal childcare provision measures dovetail with childcare leave (Motiejunaite-Schulmeister et al., 2019). The childcare gap overlap period is crucial for parents seeking a balance between care and work among the different options: working full-time, working part-time, or exiting the labour market.

When women are compelled to interrupt or reduce their work time, this has several consequences. Women's work time reduction may impair their employment prospects and earnings, increase occupational segregation, and decrease women's satisfaction (Connolly and Gregory, 2008; Durbin and Tomlinson, 2010; Manning and Petrongolo, 2008; Berger, 2013; Joseph et al., 2013). Because of their lower earnings, women may be more vulnerable in the case of divorce. Moreover, in the long term, work time reduction may affect pension income (Kim and Rizzi, 2019). The Belgian family policy system takes women's work time reduction into account when calculating the pension amount in the case of leave and time credit use. However, within the time credit framework, when a parent has a full interruption of work, the fictive limited salary instead of the fictive normal salary is applied for the pension calculation. The same penalization occurs when a woman reduces her work time outside the time credit system.

Fourth, although conservative countries are no longer centred on the male breadwinner model, radical reform favouring fathers' involvement in the family is lacking in most countries in this

group. This is in line with Morel's observation (2007) that the 1997 European Employment Strategy aimed to raise gender equality and support fertility while a decade later, only the female employment aim has been pursued by conservative countries. Fertility under the replacement level and men's still-limited involvement in care require more focused policies in most conservative welfare states (and in several other countries in Europe). Interestingly, it has been observed that the two phenomena are related, with gender equity supporting fertility (Goldscheider et al., 2015). Thus, fathers' involvement should be considered a priority in the coming decades.

With the introduction in 2019 of the 1/10 parental leave, the share of Belgian men using this formula is likely to become notable. However, further policy measures are needed to substantially increase the care role of fathers, in particular, improvements in the remuneration of parental leave. Regarding Belgian paternity leave, we have shown that, recently, its duration has increased: on 1 January 2021, it increased from 10 to 15 days, and on 1 January 2023, it will increase to 20 days. Similar measures have recently been adopted in the Netherlands and in France. These measures undoubtedly represent progress towards greater gender equity: since paternity leave is well remunerated, it represents a real opportunity for fathers to be involved in family care. Nevertheless, as previously presented, in Belgium, paternity leave can be taken only in the first four months after birth, when the mother is on maternity leave. In this sense, it is a less flexible measure than parental leave, which can be taken until the child's 12th birthday.

In our group of countries, only Sweden and, more recently, Germany have more consistently adopted policies with the aim of improving gender equity. In particular, in Sweden, relatively long (approximately 16 months) and well-remunerated leaves favour women's full-time work (as they do not need to shift to part-time work to compensate for the childcare gap), encourage men's involvement, and support fertility (Spiess and Wrohlich 2008; Kalwij, 2010; Duvander et al. 2010; Duvander and Andersson, 2006; Raute, 2018; Duvander et al., 2019).

Finally, we showed important social inequality in access to childcare in Belgium, especially in comparison to Germany and Sweden. As previously stated, one explanation for this finding could be the lower employment opportunities of non-European migrant-native mothers (Biegel et al., 2021). Another explanation could be the large disparities in inter-province childcare, with a greater childcare gap in regions characterized by lower female employment rates (Van Lancker and Vandenbroeck, 2019). We found that the French-speaking region in Belgium is especially affected by such inter-province disparities. Moreover, it must be noted that childcare quality, in particular the child-to-staff ratio, is poorer in the Dutch-speaking region, and this

feature discriminates against women who cannot afford better quality childcare. Still concerning regional disparities within Belgium, Dutch-speaking fathers are more egalitarian than Belgian fathers in Wallonia, as reflected in their parental leave uptake.

An agenda for Belgian policy makers seems to emerge from these observations. Policymakers should be able to balance several objectives in relation to one another, e.g., generous child benefits for the lowest income or traditional groups should ideally be combined with relatively long leaves of roughly one year characterized by earning-related payment, and with the availability of good quality childcare services accessible across different social groups. Previous studies have shown that this combination would effectively support fertility and gender equity. Moreover, Backman and Ferrarini (2010) show that both cash benefits and policies aiming to balance work and family are part of an equilibrated family policy package regarding different mechanisms of poverty reduction.

Overall, both the right to work and the right to care should be guaranteed with further steps towards the universal caregiver model, which is the ideal type of welfare regimes proposed by Ciccia and Bleijenbergh (2014, see section 2). In other terms, for family policies to make full-time work a viable strategy for dual-earner couples with children, following the Swedish model, other strategies for parents should also be made available. Particularly, in the universal caregiver model, both paid work and care are valuable activities, and gendered policies of time reduction for both men and women are encouraged (Nedelsky, forthcoming; Ciccia and Bleijenbergh, 2014). In this respect, the Netherlands is an uncomplete and unbalanced version of the universal caregiver model, as flexibility and reduced working time concern women in particular; moreover, the lack of remunerated parental leaves and the privatisation of childcare services indicate that care work is less valued than paid work.

Regional and social disparities inside Belgium should also be tackled. Inter-province childcare enrolment rates need to be improved in the French-speaking region, especially in those provinces with a lower female employment rate, to increase mothers' employment opportunities (Nollenberg and Rodriguez-Planas, 2015). At the same time, the child-to-staff ratio needs to be reduced in the Dutch-speaking region. Moreover, fathers' uptake of parental leave in Wallonia needs to be improved.

Future research might compare countries with respect to the efficacy of their policy measures on fertility and gender equity by considering other characteristics of these policies (eligibility, leaves for sick children, breastfeeding leaves, etc.) and of households (parents' education,

occupation, and origin, multiple births, adopted children, and same-sex parents). Some of these policy features may affect social equity as well. For example, in Belgium, the employment-based eligibility criterion for parental leave is likely to exclude parents who are younger, less educated or with a migrant background (Marynissen et al. 2021). In the coming years, researchers should also use microdata to clarify how recent changes in paternity leave impact fertility and gender equity.

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Appendix 1 – Family benefits in conservative countries and Sweden, 2010 (annualized)

	Maximum benefit for one child aged 3-12		Benefit amount per additional child varies with		Upper age limit for children (student)	Means test	Observations
	National currency	% of average wage	Age of child	Number of children			
	[1]	[2]	[3]	[4]	[5]	[6]	[7]
Belgium	1,266	3	+/-	+/-	17 (24)	No	For the unemployed, family benefits are increased in the 7th month of unemployment.
France	747	2	+	+	19	No	Family allowance: zero benefit for first child. For 2 children (under age 11), the amount per child is 747 euros (2% of AW).
Germany	2,208	5	0	+	18 (25)	No	<i>The kindergeld</i> is a nonwastable tax credit in the form of a monthly tax refund (<i>supplementary child allowance</i> if there is no tax liability).
	1,680	5	--	--	--	Yes	<i>The supplementary child allowance (kinderzuschlag)</i> is paid to parents to prevent them from having to apply for unemployment benefit II/social welfare benefits solely for the maintenance of their children.
Netherlands	1,114	2	+	-	17	No	Universal child benefit.
	1,242	3	+	-	17	Family taxable income.	The benefit is withdrawn at a rate of 7.6% when the family's yearly taxable income exceeds 28,897 euros.
Sweden	12,600 (approximately 1,200 euro)	3	0	+	15 (19)	No	--

Source: OECD, Family Database, accessed on 3 October 2022.

Notes: "+": increases, "-": decreases, "0": remains the same, "+/-": increases or decreases (some countries give higher rates to the youngest and oldest age groups).

Appendix 2 - The remuneration of parental leave

The Belgian worker receives leave remuneration (*allocation d'interruption* in French) from the National Employment Office (ONEM, accessed on 4 July 2019). This is a low flat-rate replacement benefit. The remuneration corresponds to 750.33 euros per month net of taxes (834.90 euros before taxes, ONEM, accessed on 4 July 2019). Several remuneration options exist: a total cessation of professional activities, a reduction to part-time work, and a reduction of working time by $\frac{1}{5}$.

In France, the PreParE is paid to all parents by the local CAFs (Caisse des allocations familiales) and is income related. The basic benefit is 391 euros per month when work activities are interrupted; 253 euros per month if the parent works less than half of full-time hours; and 146 euros per month if the parent works 50 to 80% of full-time hours (Boyer and Fagnani, 2018). A supplementary means-tested allowance, the “Allocation de base”, is paid to lower-income parents, increasing the benefit to 576, 438 or 331 euros according to the time schedule already mentioned. Furthermore, for parents with a single child, the PreParE is paid for six months maximum per parent after the end of maternity leave.

In Germany, the remuneration is paid by the Federal Ministry for Family Affairs, Senior Citizens, Women and Youth (Reimer, Erler and Blum, 2018). For births since 1 July 2015, the parental allowance is available in two variants: a) as a basic parental allowance corresponding to the former parental allowance scheme and b) as a “Plus” parental allowance (“ElterngeldPlus” in German) allowing parents to take part-time leave. The parental allowance is paid at a level of 67% of last year's net income with a minimum of 300 euros/month and a maximum of 1800 euros/month (Reimer, Erler and Blum, 2018).

In Sweden, parental leave is paid by the Public Health Service (MISSOC, 2018, accessed on 4 July 2019). The first 195 days are paid at 77.6% of income (maximum SEK 967/day = 94.18 euros), and the remaining 45 days are paid as a flat rate of 180 SEK/day (= 17.53 euros) (Duvander and Löfgren, 2020).

To summarize, the German remuneration system is similar to the Swedish one, since it has an income quota. By contrast, the remuneration is a flat rate in Belgium and France.

In the Netherlands, there is no remuneration for parental leave (Den Dulk and Yerkes, 2020).

Appendix 3 – A synoptic table of leave policies in the five countries and their milestones

Maternity leave

Period and EU Directives	BE	FR	DE	NL	SE
1900-1930	13/12/1889 (law): Article 5 of the law on Women's and Children's Labour legislated four weeks leave for working mothers giving birth.	1909: Eight weeks of unpaid maternity leave (OECD, 2019). 1913: First law on paid maternity leave (Henneck, 2003). 1928: Payments were generalized for all civil servants. At 100% of earnings for two months. Leave still unpaid for women working in the private sector.	1878: Pregnant women cannot work in the 3 weeks before birth. 1903 and 1911: Leave period to 6 weeks. Paid leave of 2 weeks before delivery. 1924: Job protection during maternity leave.	1889: Four weeks for pregnant women. 1919: Women cannot work for at least eight weeks after childbirth. Of these, two weeks can be used before birth.	1901: 4 weeks of unpaid maternity leave.
1930-1950					1937: 3 weeks of unpaid maternity leave (six weeks before and six weeks after birth). Job protection. 1939: Maternity leave of 4.5 months. 12 weeks postnatal. 1945: Unpaid maternity leave of 6 months.
1950-1990	24/10/1967 (law): Article 8 of Royal Decree no. 40 on Women's labour introduced job protection during maternity leave. 8 postnatal weeks mandatory. 1969: Total job-protected maternity leave was increased to 14 weeks. One	1966: Job protection for the 12 weeks following childbirth. 1969: Maternity leave of 14 weeks (of which 6 were prenatal weeks). Payment at 50% of earnings. 1/1/1971 (law 1970): Maternity	1/1/1968: 14 weeks of mandatory maternity leave (Mutterschutzgesetz), of which 6 weeks are prenatal. A sickness insurance benefit was paid by the social security system at a flat rate approximately equal to the average salary for	1966: 12 weeks of paid maternity leave. 1969: Maternity leave paid at 100% of earnings. 1/8/1976 (Act of May 6th): Job protection. 2/3/1990 (Law 22/2/1990): 16 weeks of maternity	1955: 3-6 months paid, but only if nine months of employment before the birth. 1963: Paid maternity leave of 6 months (180 days), paid at 80% of earnings. 1/1/1974: Parental leave replaced maternity leave.

	month paid by the employer at 100% of earnings, followed by a social security allowance 22/12/1989 (law): 30 days paid at 82% of the previous wage and from the 31st day at 75%. 29/12/1990 (law): Maternity leave is extended by one week to be taken before birth (for a total of 7 prenatal and 8 postnatal weeks).	leave payments increased to 90% of earnings (OECD, 2019). 1/10/1978 (law): Maternity leave was extended to 16 weeks, of which 6 weeks were prenatal. 26/07/1985: From the third child, the entitlement became 26 weeks of leave (8 weeks prenatal).	female workers. Employers were required to supplement this benefit to reach the full salary. 1/1/1979: Additional four months of extended leave. In this period, monthly payment depended on the average salary during the three months prior to the start of maternity leave.	leave at 100% replacement rate. Of these, 4 prenatal weeks are mandatory.	
1990-2010	9/7/2004 (law): 6 weeks prenatal and 9 weeks postnatal.		20/6/2002: (Out of 14 weeks) only 8 postnatal weeks are mandatory.		1994/1995: 2 mandatory weeks of maternity leave.
1992: Pregnancy Directive 92/85/EEC					
2010 to the present					

Paternity leave

Period	BE	FR	DE	NL	SE
1950-1990	23/11/1961 (Royal Decree): two days of paternity leave paid by the employer. 28/8/1963 (Royal Decree): paternity leave increased by one day.				1/1/1980: 10 days paid at 90% of earlier income. The leave was called “Leave and benefit in relation to childbirth” and is gender neutral.
1990-2010	1/7/2002: Paternity leave was increased to ten days. Three days mandatory paid at 100% of earnings. Then, at 82% with a ceiling.	1/1/2002 (law no. 2001-1246, 21st of December 2001): Maximum of 3 days of paternal birth leave and 11 consecutive days of paternity leave, for a total of 14 days. This leave was job-protected and fully paid.		1/12/2001: 2 days of paternity leave, fully paid and job-protected.	

2010 to the present	1/1/2021: Paternity leave was increased to 15 days. They will become 20 days in 2023.	2013: Paternity leave) renamed Leave for looking after a child in order to adopt a gender-neutral perspective on family”. 1.7.2020: Paternity leave was increased to 28 days.		1/2015: Paternity leave extended to five days. The first two days paid by the employer at 100% of earnings. In 2020 , paternity leave was extended to a maximum of five weeks (70% pay).	
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Parental leave

Period and EU Directives	BE	FR	DE	NL	SE
1950-1990 1986: Council directive 86/378/EEC on the implementation of the principle of equal treatment for men and women in occupational social security schemes.		13/7/1977: Unpaid and job protected parental leave for a maximum of 2 years (one year of social security contributions). Fathers could use this leave only if the mother declined her right. 5/1/1984 (law on 4/1/1984): Fathers eligible for parental leave. 1/1/1985: Parental leave payment (Allocation Parentale d'Education, APE) for parents with three or more children, with the youngest child under 3 years old. Flat rate. For both parents but family-based entitlement (one benefit per family only). Partial payment for part-time work. 30/12/1986 (law on 29/12/1986): Parental leave for a maximum of 3 years.	1/1/1986: 8 months of paid parental leave (Erziehungsgeld). Parents can work up to 15 hours per week. 1/1/1988: Paid employment-protected parental leave extended up to 10 months. 1/7/1989: Paid parental leave extended up to 13 months. Parents could now work up to 19 hours per week. 1/7/1990: Paid parental leave extended up to 16 months.		1/1/1974: Maternity leave replaced by 6 months (180 days) of job-protected parental leave. Of these, up to 60 days are prenatal. 1/1/1975: 7 months (equal to 30 weeks or 210 days). 1/6/1978: 9 months (equal to 39 weeks or 270 days) paid at 90% of the salary until child was 18 months old. 1/7/1980: 12 months (or 360 days), of which 9 months were fully paid and 3 months were paid at a flat rate. 1989: 15 months (or 450 days).

1990-2010 1996: Council Directive 96/34/EC: minimum individual right for each parent.	29/10/1997 (law): A three-month, job-protected parental leave scheme was introduced (NATLEX). The scheme applied to the private sector, and it was paid at a flat rate. 2009: Parents who work in the private sector could take parental leave until the child's 12th birthday. Public sector since 2010.	1994: The parental leave payment (APE) made available also to parents with a second child under 3 years old. Eligibility criteria for receiving a benefit payment were more restrictive for parents with only two children than for parents with three or more children. 1/1/2004: New payment system called Complément de libre choix d'activité (CLCA), paid also in the case of the first child for six months after maternity leave. Flat-rate payment (APE, EUR513 per month in 2005) paid to families whose income was below a threshold. 1/7/2006: One year period of leave option for parents with a third child (Complément optionel de libre choix d'activité, COLCA). Flat rate payment at higher rate than CLCA. 2014: CLCA for first child extended to up to 12 months, with 6 months maximum for each parent. For second child, each parent can take 2 years and half maximum (= 6 months minimum for each parent).	1/1/1992: Job-protected parental leave of 34 months. Payment still only for 16 months. 1/1/1993: Paid parental leave extended from 16 to 22 months. 1/1/2001: DM900 per month for 10 months or DM600 per month for 22 months. These benefits were income-tested. Parents could work up to 30 hours per week. Paid leave could be used until child's second birthday. The third year of leave may be used until the child was 8 years old. 1/1/2007: New earnings-related parental leave benefit with floor and ceiling (Elterngeld, or "parental money"). The payment became at 67% of the parent's average earnings during the 12 months preceding childbirth. Duration 10 + 2 months to favour fathers' uptake. 2009: Grandparents can take leave to care for their grandchildren if the child's parents are younger than 18 years or if they are still in school.	1/1/1991: 26 weeks part-time (50%) unpaid job-protected parental leave. Individual right. Up to child's 4th birthday. 1/7/1997: Employees may request to spread leave over more than 26 weeks or take up more hours per week. Until the child's 8th birthday.	1/1/1994: Childcare allowance for parents who stop fully or partially working to look after a child aged 0-3. Parental benefit reduced to 360 days. 90 days paid at flat rate are abolished. 1/1/1995: Abolition of childcare allowance. Reintroduction of 90 days. Individualization of paternal leave. Each parent can benefit of half leave. Paid at 80% of earlier income. Months are transferable to the other parent, except one month (daddy or mummy month, paid at 90%). 1/1/1996: Parental leave paid at 75 percent and mummy and daddy months at 85%. 1/1/1997: Mother and father months at 75%. 1/1/1998: Payment at 80% with ceiling for mother and father months and for 300 days of parental leave. The remaining 3 months at a flat rate. 1/1/2002: 480 days of parental benefit and 90 days at a flat rate. 2 months reserved for each parent.

		1/1/2015: CLCA and CLOCA replaced by PreParE (Prestation partagée d'éducation de l'enfant). For second child, each parent can take 2 years maximum.			2008: Municipal child-raising allowance (vårdnadsbidrag) reintroduced. 7/2008: Introduction of the “gender equality bonus” as a tax credit to parents who share the leave equally.
2010 to the present 2010: Parental Leave Directive 2010/18/EU aimed at the better protection of the position of the employee taking parental leave and aimed at encouraging fathers' uptake of parental leave.	2012: Implementation of European Directive 2010/18/EU with a fourth month of parental leave.		2011: Long-term unemployed no longer eligible for parental benefits, but social assistance payments. The replacement rate was reduced to 65% if the net monthly income exceeds €1200. 1/2012: New optional Familienpflegezeit (family caring time): work time reduction to a minimum of 15 hours to care for a dependent relative up to 2 years. Reduction of income less than reduction of hours, but the difference is repaid after returning full-time. 7/2015: New ElterngeldPlus programme, which allows parents to spread their leave to 24 (+4) months but with the monthly leave benefit halved.	8/2011: Wetswourstel modernisering regelingen voor verlof en arbeidstijden (Law on modernizing leave arrangements and working times). More flexibility in uptake and extension of entitlement to employees starting a job. 2012: After parental leave, it is possible to ask the employer for a change in working hours for a maximum period of one year.	1/1/2012: Gender equality bonus now paid in the form of tax-free income. Introduction of “double-days”: parents may be at home together on leave for up to 30 days during their child's first year. 1/1/2016: Parent's quota extended to three months per parent. 1/2/2016: Municipal child-raising allowance (vårdnadsbidrag) abolished.

Source: Main source OCDE Family Database, accessed on 3 October, 2022, PF2_5_Trends_in_leave_entitlements_around_childbirth_annex.pdf, last updated 26/10/2017; Motiejunaite-Schulmeister et al., 2019; Koslowski, Blum, Dobrotić, Kaufman and Moss (2020, 2021); official national sources.