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Leave policies and public systems of care for children under 3 years old and their families in the EU

In the process of family change towards a dual-earner and post-modern family model, we can observe a process of externalisation, formalisation and institutionalisation of early education and care. The process can be analysed in terms of commodification and defamiliarisation of child care by means of early education and care services and de-commodification and re-familiarisation of child care by means of parental leave arrangements.

Family and parental leave schemes have developed in the last decade across the European Union, under the umbrella of EC Directives and Gender Equality Action Plans. More recently children rights and perspectives are emerging in the European political agenda. However countries have developed these measures in different ways and to different extents. Comprehensive systems of child care support for families with children under 3 years in a few countries are based on an interplay between parenthood leave arrangements and child care services, and on a certain amount of choice for families.

Leave schemes and services can be viewed either as complementary or as alternative public measures when looking at the early years of parenting, when there are children under 3 years old in the family. The quality and availability of leave arrangements affect the demand for services, while the public provision and quality of child care services affect the use and duration of leaves. However situations differ very much according to the age of the infant and to the particular circumstances of his/her family. Public regulations and family preferences seem to favour options that allow home care by a parent for children under one year old. Afterwards solutions and preferences are more diversified.

While some countries are still bridging the basic gap between employment and motherhood in a minimum context of quality and security, in other countries fathers are the focus of attention, especially their use (or non use) of parental leave as a means to improve fathering, gender equality and family cohesion. It is useful to see the period from birth to 3 years as a whole. On the other hand it is also necessary to distinguish inside this period according to the age and development of the child. It has been shown how different regulations affect the continuity of care for children at this early age. Even if it is difficult to deal with information and data on parenthood leave arrangements, it would be useful to compare family policies across EU member states on the basis of a child benefit package for the under 3's, following its development over time, and in relation to the different pushes and pulls of the various policy areas affecting these measures.

Following this conceptual framework, an EU cross-national picture will be presented based on data and information shared within the International Expert Network on Leave Policies and Research and published in its annual reports.

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