



Evaluating Parental Leave: Examination of Policy Impact on Gender Equality and Family Well-Being

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Abstract

This study examines paid parental leave policies across selected countries, including Sweden, Finland, Bulgaria, Iceland, Estonia, and Kazakhstan. By conducting a comparative analysis of key parameters such as duration, eligibility criteria, benefit levels, and specific provisions for mothers and fathers, the study identifies trends, disparities, and best practices within these frameworks. Results reveal that Nordic countries like Sweden and Finland offer extensive and inclusive parental leave provisions, which support gender equality and work-life balance. In contrast, countries such as Bulgaria and Kazakhstan exhibit more constrained policies characterized by shorter durations and lower benefits. The findings underscore the significance of robust parental leave policies in supporting working families, promoting gender equality, and enhancing societal well-being. This comparative study illustrates how the conditions of paid parental leave policies vary significantly due to the economic backgrounds and financial development of the selected regions. This analysis would help to identify best practices that could be adapted to various socio-economic contexts, fostering a more inclusive and equitable society. Future research should explore the long-term effects of these policies on workforce participation and child development outcomes.

Keywords: Paid Parental Leave, International Practice, Gender Equality, Children, Family, Kazakhstan, Governmental Support

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1. INTRODUCTION

Paid parental leave policies have become a point of discussion worldwide as societies recognize the importance of supporting families during critical life transitions. Ensuring adequate time off for new parents not only fosters healthier family dynamics but also contributes to broader societal well-being [1]. Paid parental leave policies typically encompass provisions for both mothers and fathers, acknowledging the shared responsibility of childcare and the importance of parental involvement in the early stages of a child's life. While maternity leave, granted exclusively to mothers, is a common feature worldwide, paternity leave, designated for fathers, varies significantly in availability and duration [2]. In many countries, maternal leave spans a longer duration compared to paternity leave, reflecting traditional gender roles and societal norms. However, there is a growing recognition of the need to promote gender equality in parental leave policies by providing equitable opportunities for both parents to participate in caregiving responsibilities.

Across the globe, countries have implemented diverse paid parental leave policies tailored to their socio-economic contexts and cultural values. Scandinavian nations, such as Sweden, Norway, and Iceland, are renowned for their progressive parental leave systems, offering generous benefits and flexible arrangements for both mothers and fathers [3]. These countries prioritize gender equality and parental involvement by providing extensive parental leave periods with a portion reserved specifically for fathers, encouraging their active participation in child-rearing. In contrast, some regions, particularly in the United States and the parts of Asia, have lagged behind in establishing comprehensive paid parental leave policies. The absence of federal mandates in the United States leaves parental leave largely at the discretion of employers, resulting in disparities in access and benefits. However, there have been initiatives at the state and corporate levels to improve parental leave provisions, connecting

with varying degrees of success.

Effective paid parental leave policies not only provide financial support but also protect parents from workplace discrimination and ensure job security during their leave period. Legal safeguards against discrimination based on pregnancy or parental status, coupled with guaranteed return-to-work rights, are essential components of inclusive parental leave policies [4]. Additionally, measures to promote a supportive work culture that values work-life balance and accommodates the needs of working parents contribute to the effectiveness of these policies.

The implementation of robust paid parental leave policies has far-reaching implications for citizen well-being, extending beyond the immediate benefits to parents and children. By alleviating financial stress and allowing parents to prioritize caregiving responsibilities without jeopardizing their livelihoods, paid parental leave fosters healthier family dynamics and strengthens social bonds [5]. Moreover, increased parental involvement in early childhood development positively influences children's cognitive and socio-emotional development, laying the foundation for their future success.

It should be stated that countries with well-developed parental leave policies often report higher levels of employee satisfaction, productivity, and retention, indicating a positive correlation between supportive workplace policies and overall societal well-being. Furthermore, equitable parental leave provisions contribute to narrowing gender gaps in the workforce, promoting women's participation in employment and leadership roles [6]. Paid parental leave policies are integral to fostering inclusive societies that prioritize the well-being of families. While progress has been made in many parts of the world, there remains a need for continued advocacy and policy reforms to ensure universal access to comprehensive parental leave benefits. By prioritizing the needs of parents and children, societies can create a more equitable and prosperous future for all citizens.

The article would like to delve into the international landscape of paid parental leave policies, exploring the conditions for mothers and fathers, examining existing policies across the globe, highlighting countries with exemplary frameworks, and assessing the impact of these policies on citizens' well-being.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Historical Evolution of Parental Leave Policies

Parental leave policies have evolved significantly over the past century, reflecting changing societal norms, economic conditions, and gender roles. The concept of providing time off from work to care for newborns or newly adopted children emerged in the early 20th century, initially driven by maternal and child health concerns. However, it was not until the latter half of the century that parental leave policies began to gain traction to support working families and promote gender equality in the workforce [7].

The first legislative efforts to establish parental leave provisions can be traced back to European countries in the 1970s and 1980s, with Sweden pioneering the implementation of a gender-neutral parental leave scheme in 1974. This groundbreaking policy granted both mothers and fathers the right to take time off work following the birth or adoption of a child, with a portion of leave reserved exclusively for fathers to encourage their participation in childcare responsibilities. Other Nordic countries soon followed suit, adopting similar parental leave models characterized by generous benefits and flexible arrangements [8].

In the ensuing decades, the proliferation of parental leave policies spread across Europe and beyond, driven by a growing recognition of the importance of work-life balance, gender equality, and child well-being. Legislative initiatives at the national and supranational levels, such as the European Union's directives

on parental leave, further catalyzed the adoption of parental leave provisions in member states [9].

The late 20th and early 21st centuries have witnessed a diversification of parental leave policies, with countries experimenting with various models, including paid leave, unpaid leave, and combinations thereof [10]. While some nations prioritized extending leave durations and enhancing benefit levels, others focused on promoting greater flexibility and inclusivity in eligibility criteria to accommodate diverse family structures and caregiving arrangements [11].

Overall, the historical evolution of parental leave policies reflects a broader shift towards recognizing the importance of supporting working parents, promoting gender equality, and facilitating work-family balance in contemporary societies.

2.2 Theoretical Frameworks of Parental Leave Policies

The development and implementation of parental leave policies are underpinned by various theoretical frameworks and concepts that highlight the multifaceted nature of this issue and its significance in promoting societal well-being. It is possible to emphasize several vital perspectives, shaping the discourse surrounding parental leave policies.

First, gender equality is a central paradigm of parental leave policies, aiming to address traditional gender roles and stereotypes by promoting the equitable distribution of caregiving responsibilities between men and women. By providing parental leave benefits to both mothers and fathers, these policies seek to challenge gender norms and foster more excellent gender balance in both the household and the workforce. Gender equality perspectives emphasize the importance of parental leave in empowering women economically, enabling their participation in the labor market, and reducing gender disparities in employment and career advancement [12].

Second, the concept of work-family balance

underscores the need for policies that effectively support individuals in managing their work and family responsibilities. Parental leave policies play a crucial role in facilitating this balance by providing employees with the time and flexibility to care for their children without sacrificing their careers or financial security. Work-family balance perspectives advocate for policies that recognize the interdependence of work and family life and promote supportive work environments that accommodate employees' caregiving needs [13].

Third, parental leave policies are viewed as a form of social protection that safeguards the well-being of families and children by providing financial support during critical life transitions. From a social protection perspective, parental leave is seen as essential for promoting social cohesion, reducing poverty, and mitigating the social and economic risks associated with childbirth and child-rearing. These policies are grounded in social justice and solidarity principles, aiming to ensure that all families have access to adequate support regardless of their socio-economic status [12, p.5].

Fourth, human rights perspectives emphasize the rights of parents and children to a healthy and supportive family environment, as enshrined in international human rights instruments. Parental leave policies are viewed as instrumental in fulfilling these rights by enabling parents to provide care and nurturing to their children without facing discrimination or financial hardship. Human rights frameworks advocate for parental leave policies that are inclusive, non-discriminatory, and responsive to the diverse needs of families, recognizing parental leave as a fundamental human right rather than a discretionary benefit [14].

In summary, theoretical frameworks such as gender equality, work-family balance, social protection, and human rights perspectives provide valuable insights into the rationale, objectives, and principles that underpin parental leave policies, highlighting their significance in promoting equality, well-being,

and social justice for families and children.

2.3 Overview of Parental Leave Policies in Different Countries

Paid parental leave policies vary significantly across countries and regions, reflecting differences in socio-economic contexts, cultural norms, and policy priorities. Critical factors of comparison include duration, eligibility criteria, benefit levels, and provisions for mothers and fathers.

First, from the side of duration, Scandinavian countries such as Sweden, Norway, and Iceland are known for offering some of the most extended parental leave durations globally. In Sweden, parents are entitled to up to 480 days of paid leave per child, with 90 days reserved exclusively for each parent. Similarly, Norway provides up to 49 weeks of parental leave at full salary or 59 weeks at 80% salary, with a portion designated for each parent. In contrast, countries like the United States typically offer shorter leave durations, with the federal Family and Medical Leave Act (FMLA) providing up to 12 weeks of unpaid leave for eligible employees [15].

Second, eligibility criteria for parental leave vary widely across countries. In many European nations, parental leave benefits are available to all employed parents, including part-time and self-employed individuals, with minimal qualifying conditions. However, in countries with less comprehensive systems, eligibility may be contingent on factors such as employment status, earnings, and length of service [16].

Third, benefit levels also vary considerably, ranging from complete salary replacement to partial or flat-rate payments. Nordic countries typically offer generous benefits, with some providing nearly 100% wage replacement during parental leave periods. In contrast, countries like the United States often offer lower benefit levels or no paid leave at all, leaving many families financially vulnerable during periods of parental leave [17].

Fourth, many countries have implemented

policies encouraging fathers' parental leave uptake, aiming to promote gender equality in caregiving responsibilities. In Sweden, for example, a portion of parental leave is reserved exclusively for fathers, incentivizing their participation in childcare. Similarly, Iceland has introduced a “use it or lose it” policy, granting additional leave to families where both parents share caregiving responsibilities [18].

While there is considerable variation in paid parental leave policies across countries, there is a growing recognition of the importance of supporting working families and promoting gender equality through comprehensive and inclusive parental leave provisions. Countries with more progressive policies tend to prioritize longer durations, broader eligibility criteria, higher benefit levels, and requirements that encourage fathers' involvement in childcare.

3. METHODOLOGY

Selection of Countries

The selection of countries for comparison was based on a combination of factors, including geographical diversity, socio-economic indicators, and the availability of comprehensive parental leave policies. Sweden and Finland were chosen for their reputation as leaders in parental leave provisions, particularly in the Nordic region. Bulgaria was included to represent an Eastern European country with emerging parental leave policies. Iceland was selected for its innovative approach to parental leave, including initiatives to promote gender equality. Estonia, known for its progressive social policies, was also included in the analysis. Kazakhstan, as a Central Asian representative, provides insights into parental leave policies in a different cultural and economic context.

Data Collection

Data on parental leave policies for each selected country were gathered from official

government sources, legislative documents, international organizations such as the International Labour Organization (ILO), and reliable academic publications. Information was collected on critical parameters, including duration, eligibility criteria, benefit levels, and provisions for mothers and fathers.

A comparative framework was developed to facilitate the systematic analysis of parental leave policies across the selected countries. This framework included categories such as duration of parental leave, eligibility criteria (employment status, length of service), benefit levels (wage replacement rates), and provisions for mothers and fathers (earmarked leave for fathers, incentives for shared caregiving).

Data Analysis

Quantitative and qualitative data analysis methods were employed to compare parental leave policies among the selected countries. Quantitative analysis involves summarizing key policy parameters to identify patterns, trends, and variations across countries. Qualitative analysis focused on identifying policy innovations, best practices, and areas for improvement based on a deeper examination of policy documents and contextual factors.

4. ANALYSIS AND RESULTS

The following comparative analysis examines parental leave policies across Sweden, Finland, Bulgaria, Iceland, Estonia, and Kazakhstan. By evaluating key parameters such as duration, eligibility criteria, benefit levels, and provisions for mothers and fathers, this study aims to understand the development and inclusivity of parental leave frameworks in these diverse countries. Through this comparative lens, it is possible to identify trends, disparities, and best practices in parental leave policies, shedding light on the varying approaches to supporting working families and promoting gender equality globally. It is possible to compare parental

leave policies across Sweden, Finland, Bulgaria, Iceland, Estonia, and Kazakhstan based on some categories. First, this is the duration of parental leave. Sweden offers up to 480 days of parental leave per child, with 90 days reserved exclusively for each parent. This generous duration allows for flexible distribution of leave between both parents. Finland provides a total of 164 weekdays of

parental leave, which can be shared between both parents. Additionally, families are entitled to an extended partial care allowance until the child reaches the age of 3. Bulgaria offers relatively shorter parental leave duration than Nordic countries, with mothers entitled to 410 days and fathers to 15 days of leave (see Table 1 below).

TABLE 1. Comparison of parental leave policies in different countries

Country	Duration of parental leave	Eligibility criteria (to all employed parents)	Benefit levels	Provisions for mothers and fathers
Sweden	Up to 480 days	minimal conditions	80%-100% of salary, capped	Earmarked leave for fathers, incentivizing shared caregiving
Finland	164 weekdays	no minimal conditions	70%-75% of salary, capped	Shared parental leave between both parents, promoting equality
Bulgaria	Mothers: 410 days Fathers: 15 days	no minimal conditions	Flat-rate benefit	Limited leave for fathers, the potential impact on caregiving involvement
Iceland	Five months each parent	no minimal conditions	80%-100% of salary, capped	Dedicated leave portions for each parent, encouraging shared caregiving
Estonia	1.5 years	no minimal conditions	Flat-rate benefit, varying	Flexible distribution between parents, promoting shared caregiving
Kazakhstan	Mothers: 70 days Fathers: shorter duration	no minimal conditions	Flat-rate benefit	Limited leave for fathers compared to mothers, the potential impact on caregiving involvement
<i>Note:</i> compiled by author based on [18,19,20,21,22,23]				

Based on Table 1 above, this generous duration allows for flexible leave distribution between both parents. However, additional unpaid leave options are available. Iceland offers one of the most progressive parental leave policies globally, with each parent entitled to 5 months of leave, which can be shared or transferred between parents. Additionally, parents can opt for an additional two months of leave. Estonia provides 1.5 years of parental leave per child, with a portion reserved for each parent. Parents can also take extended leave until the child turns 3, receiving

a partial benefit. Kazakhstan offers 70 calendar days of paid parental leave, with additional unpaid leave options available. The duration of leave is shorter compared to other countries in the comparison.

Second, this is the available eligibility criteria. Parental leave benefits in Sweden are available to all employed parents, including part-time and self-employed individuals, with minimal qualifying conditions. Parental leave in Finland is available to all employed parents, and benefits are not contingent on length of service or income level. Parental leave benefits

in Bulgaria are available to employed mothers and fathers, with no minimum length of service requirement. However, fathers' entitlement to leave is limited to 15 days. Parental leave benefits in Iceland are available to all employed parents, including self-employed individuals, with no minimum length of service requirement. Parental leave benefits in Estonia are available to all employed parents, with no minimum length of service requirement. Self-employed individuals are also eligible. Parental leave benefits in Kazakhstan are available to employed mothers, with no minimum length of service requirement. Fathers are entitled to paternity leave, but the duration is shorter than mothers.

Third, there are benefit levels. In Sweden, parental leave benefits typically range from 80% to 100% of the parent's salary, up to a capped amount. In Finland, parental leave benefits are usually paid at around 70-75% of the parent's earnings, up to a capped amount. Parental leave benefits in Bulgaria are typically paid at a flat rate, equivalent to a percentage of the parent's salary. In Iceland, parental leave benefits are usually paid at around 80-100% of the parent's salary, up to a capped amount. Parental leave benefits in Estonia are typically paid at a flat rate, with variations depending on the length of leave taken. Parental leave benefits in Kazakhstan are usually paid at a flat rate, equivalent to a percentage of the parent's salary.

Fourth, there are provisions for mothers and fathers. Sweden encourages fathers' participation in caregiving by reserving a portion of parental leave exclusively for fathers, incentivizing their involvement in childcare. In Finland, parental leave can be shared between both parents, promoting shared caregiving responsibilities. While both parents are entitled to parental leave in Bulgaria, fathers' entitlement to leave is limited to 15 days, potentially impacting their involvement in caregiving. Iceland promotes gender equality in parental leave uptake by offering each parent a dedicated portion of leave, encouraging shared caregiving responsibilities. Estonia allows for flexible distribution of

parental leave between both parents, promoting shared caregiving responsibilities and gender equality. Kazakhstan provides parental leave for both mothers and fathers, but the duration of leave for fathers is shorter compared to mothers, potentially impacting their involvement in caregiving.

Generally, parental leave policies across Sweden, Finland, Bulgaria, Iceland, Estonia, and Kazakhstan vary in duration, eligibility criteria, benefit levels, and provisions for mothers and fathers. While Nordic countries like Sweden and Iceland offer generous and inclusive parental leave provisions, countries like Bulgaria and Kazakhstan have more limited policies with shorter durations and lower benefit levels. Overall, policies that promote gender equality, shared caregiving responsibilities, and financial support for parents tend to be associated with better-developed parental leave frameworks.

Furthermore, the analysis suggests that countries with more parental leave policies tend to have higher workforce participation rates among mothers and improved child developmental outcomes. This correlation underscores the potential long-term benefits of investing in robust parental leave systems, including improved economic stability and reduced gender disparities in employment. In addition, it is possible to analyze composite indexes such as the gender equality index (GEI) of each of the countries mentioned above. It is possible to highlight some significant findings for each of the analyzed countries.

First, the Swedish indicators suggest a potential advantage in female labor force participation and a significant advantage in female educational attainment.

Second, Finland has a slight advantage in female labor force participation and a more significant advantage in female educational attainment than Sweden.

Third, Bulgaria has a lower female labor force participation score than Sweden and Finland.

Fourth, Iceland consistently ranks as the most gender-equal country globally, according

to the World Economic Forum's Global Gender Gap Report.

See Table 2 below.

TABLE 2. Simplified gender equality sub-index results for different countries (based on labor force participation (LFP) and wage gap (WG))

Country	Data	Normalization	Weighting	Aggregation
Sweden	Female LFP: 80% Male LFP: 85% Gender wage gap: 15%	LFP score: $(80/85)*100 = 94.1$ WG score: $(1-0.15)*100 = 85$	Equal (50% each)	Overall score: $(0.5*94.1)+(0.5*85) = 89.55$
Finland	Female LFP: 74.3% Male LFP: 73.2% Female tertiary education: 73.1% Male tertiary education: 66.4%	LFP score: $(74.3/73.2)*100 = 101.5$ Education score: $(73.1/66.4)*100 = 109.9$	Equal (50% each)	Overall score: $(0.5*101.5)+(0.5*109.9) = 105.7$
Bulgaria	Female LFP: 56.1% Male LFP: 71.2% Gender wage gap: 13.2%	LFP score: $(56.1/71.2)*100 = 78.7$ Wage gap score: $(1-0.132)*100 = 86.8$	Equal (50% each)	Overall score: $(0.5*78.7) + (0.5*86.6) = 82.8$
Iceland	Female LFP: 83.7% Male LFP: 81.3% Female tertiary education: 76.7% Male tertiary education: 73.7%	LFP score: $(83.7/81.3)*100 = 102.9$ Education score: $(76.7/73.7)*100 = 104.1$	Equal (50% each)	Overall score: $(0.5*102.9) + (0.5*104.1) = 103.5$
Estonia	Female LFP: 74.3% Male: 73.2% Gender wage gap: 17.3%	LFP score: $(74.3/73.2)*100 = 101.5$ Gap score: $(1-0.173)*100 = 82.7$	Equal (50% each)	Overall score: $(0.5*101.5) + (0.5*82.7) = 92.1$
Kazakhstan	Female LFP: 58.2% Male LFP: 74.2% Female tertiary education: 58.9% Male tertiary education: 56.7%	LFP score: $(58.2/74.2)*100 = 78.4$ Education score: $(58.9/56.7)*100 = 103.9$	Equal (50% each)	Overall score: $(0.5*78.4) + (0.5*103.9) = 91.2$
<i>Note:</i> compiled by author based on [24,25,26]				

Considering the outcomes from Table 2 above, it is possible to highlight some significant findings for each of the analyzed countries. Its index suggests a close parity in both labor force participation and educational attainment between genders in Iceland. Fifth, Estonia has a slightly higher female labor force participation. However, a noticeable gender pay gap exists, leading to a lower score in the wage gap component. Finally, Kazakhstan has

a lower score in female labor force participation compared with other studied countries. Still, a slightly higher female educational attainment rate is a positive sign for gender strategies' effectiveness.

5. CONCLUSIONS

This study comprehensively examines paid parental leave policies across selected

countries, including Sweden, Finland, Bulgaria, Iceland, Estonia, and Kazakhstan. Generous Leave Durations and Benefit Levels:

a) Sweden, Finland, Iceland, and Estonia:

These countries offer extensive parental leave durations, often exceeding a year, with benefits designed to replace a significant portion of the salary. This approach ensures that taking leave does not lead to substantial financial hardship, encouraging both parents to take advantage of the policy.

b) Kazakhstan: In comparison, the leave duration in Kazakhstan is notably shorter, with benefits that replace a smaller fraction of the usual income. This discrepancy can dissuade families, especially fathers, from taking leave, reinforcing traditional gender roles, and limiting parental involvement in early childcare.

Inclusive Eligibility Criteria:

a) Nordic Model: Characterized by inclusive eligibility criteria, these policies ensure that nearly all working parents, regardless of their employment type or history, can access parental leave benefits. This inclusivity supports non-traditional workers and promotes equal opportunities for all parents to bond with their children.

b) Kazakhstan: The eligibility criteria are more restrictive, potentially excluding a significant portion of the workforce. Such limitations can exacerbate inequalities, especially among vulnerable groups, and reduce the overall effectiveness of the policy in supporting family well-being.

The comparison underscores the importance of robust parental leave policies in promoting gender equality, supporting working families, and nurturing a more inclusive and equitable society. The stark differences in parental leave policies between countries like Sweden, Finland, Iceland, Estonia, and Kazakhstan highlight the varying degrees of support provided to working families and underscore the profound implications these policies have on gender equality, economic vitality, and societal health. As nations strive to create more inclusive and equitable societies, developing and

implementing comprehensive, gender-neutral parental leave policies should be a priority, offering valuable lessons from the Nordic model for countries worldwide.

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