

Do European parental leave policies support an equal gender division of labour? Developing an EGDL-indicator

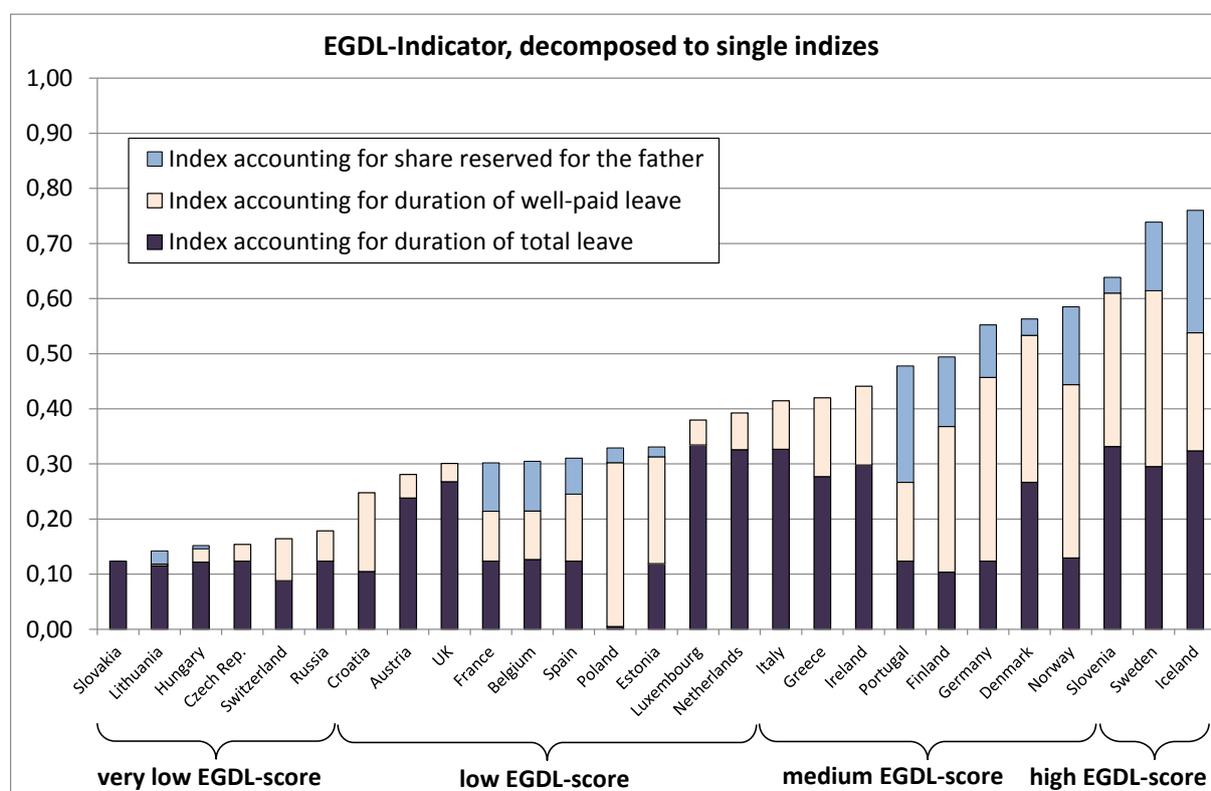
By Helene Dearing (Vienna University of Economics and Business, Institute for Social Policy)

helene.dearing@wu.ac.at

This article contributes to the literature systematically assessing the contributions of parental leave policies towards gender equality. It compares parental leave policies from 27 European countries regarding their support of an equal gender division of labour using recent policy data on a national level. The analyses aims for a comprehensive approach towards the concept of the gender division of labour and therefore accounts for the impact of parental leave on both spheres of work - paid employment and unpaid family work - as complementary elements. It first relies on recent empirical evidence that suggests several insights about the effect of parental leave on mothers' employment and fathers' engagement in unpaid family work. An "Equal Gender Division of Labour"-indicator (EGDL-indicator) is then composed out of the three most crucial parental leave instruments that are identified to influence the gender division of labour: the duration of total leave, the provision of payments and some months of leave are based on an individual and non-transferable entitlement (and are therefore "reserved" for the father). However, in contrast to previous studies, the EGDL-indicator explicitly accounts for recent results from empirical literature about the particular shape of the relation between leave instruments and the gender division of labour. Several studies do not only find a positive effect from the overall duration of leave, but also suggest that this effect diminishes with the duration of leave, indicating an inverted U-shape relation between the duration of leave and mothers' employment participation. In addition, recent empirical literature suggest some conflicting results from the provision of payments on mothers' employment and on fathers' participation in unpaid family work. The proposed EGDL-indicator explicitly accounts for this non-linearity and the competing dynamics in the relation between singular parental leave instruments and the gender division of labour.

Results of the EGDL-indicator show that there is a remarkable difference in European leave policies regarding their support of an equal gender division of labour. It is possible to identify four groups of national leave policies with high, moderate, low and very-low support for gender equality in the division of labour, as can be seen in the figure above. There is a group of three countries that score highly on the EGDL-indicator (above 0.6) including Slovenia, Sweden and Iceland. All of these countries allot a moderate duration of total and well-paid leave that ensures that mothers do not withdraw from the labour market for very long periods, while also providing incentives for fathers to take leave. In addition, all of these countries reserve some of the well-paid leave for fathers. Iceland scores especially well on the EGDL-indicator, which mainly can be attributed to the relatively high share of leave (i.e., 0.3) that is reserved for the father. There is a second group of countries that score medium values of the EGDL-indicator (between 0.4 and 0.6), comprising Italy, Greece, Ireland, Portugal, Finland, Germany, Denmark and Norway. Several of these countries reserve at least some share of well-paid leave for fathers. A third group of countries scores low on the EGDL-indicator (between 0.2 and 0.39), encompassing Croatia, Austria, the United Kingdom, France, Belgium, Spain, Poland, Estonia, Luxembourg, and the Netherlands. Some of these countries have short "fathers

only” leave periods encouraging fathers to take leave, such France or Belgium with about a tenth of well-paid leave that is reserved for fathers. However, in addition, they all provide a very long period of total leave, encouraging extended employment interruption of mothers after birth, resulting in an overall low score of the EGDL-indicator. A fourth group of countries scores very low on the EGDL-indicator, encompassing Slovakia, Lithuania, Hungary, the Czech Republic, Switzerland, and Russia. Except Lithuania and Hungary, none of these countries provides any “fathers only” leave. These countries mainly score low because of poor performance when it comes to the provision of well-paid leave. Index values accounting for the duration of well-paid leave, however, are low for different reasons. Slovakia, Russia and Switzerland score low on the index due very short provision of well-paid leave and therefore no incentives for fathers to take leave. By contrast, the Czech Republic, Hungary and Lithuania score low on the index due to very long provision of well-paid leave and, therefore, for encouraging women to withdraw from the labour market for very long periods.



An overall assessment for European parental leave schemes can be derived suggesting shorter durations of total leave and longer durations of well-paid leave and leave reserved for fathers. Finally, the article wants to contribute to a better linkage between two distinct, but overlapping strands of literature. On the one hand, literature rooted in feminist welfare state theory that systematically assesses parental leave policies regarding their support towards gender equality sometime falls short in the recognition of recent empirical results and bases their analysis mainly on theoretical considerations. On the other hand, empirical literature statistically studying the impact of leave policies on the gender division of labour sometimes falls short in their adoption of indicators for micro-macro analysis. Therefore, not only the rationale behind the EGDL-indicator is based solely on empirical results from recent studies, but also the final indicator aims at an easy adoption for empirical studies accounting for the respect parental leave scheme of a country within a micro-macro approach.