

# **Employers' discrimination against fathers and mothers taking parental leave: Evidence from a discrete choice experiment**

## **1. Description of the research project**

The aim of this project is to study the impact of using the work-family reconciliation measures, introduced by the EU Work-Life Balance Directive, on workers' evaluation from a gender perspective. The EU Work-Life Balance Directive was introduced in Poland in May 2023 and granted fathers the right to nine weeks of non-transferable parental leave. In this project, we evaluate how the use of parental leave affects workers' hiring and pay opportunities. We also examine how managers perceive workers who use parental leaves and particularly how they evaluate workers' commitment to work and reliability. We adopt a gender perspective, expecting that the use of parental leaves may affect mothers' and fathers' work careers differently due to deeply rooted expectations toward men's and women's social roles. Our study is situated in Poland where research on the impact of parental leave use on workers' careers has been rare to date. Furthermore, the novelty of the project lies in its experimental design, which allows us to evaluate the causal effects of the use of parental leaves on workers' careers.

## **2. Literature review**

Although parental leaves present an advantageous prospect for fathers to enhance their involvement in family life, their use has been notably low. In 2021 in Poland, prior to the introduction of the EU directive, women used 97% of all benefit days paid for by the Social Insurance Institution (ZUS) for maternity, paternity and parental leave (Kurowska et al., 2022). Even though evidence suggests that the use of paternity leave (a two-week father-exclusive leave) has been increasing in recent years in Poland, only a small proportion of eligible fathers take it (Kurowska, 2019; Zajkowska, 2019).

The relatively low uptake of parental leaves by fathers has displayed variation across different EU nations, prompting an exploration of potential determinants influencing their parental leave, such as cultural norms and labour market consequences for those who choose to take leave (Castro-Garcia & Pazos-Moran, 2015). Existing literature suggests that taking parental leave can carry certain career penalties which go beyond career consequences resulting from human capital depreciation. For example, individuals taking parental leave often encounter perceptions of reduced agency and commitment to the workplace, which can diminish their prospects for career advancement (Petts et al., 2022; Coltrane et al., 2013; Rudman & Mescher, 2013). Career penalties may also result from deviating from the gender role norms with prescriptive and descriptive stereotypes that women's primary role is at home and men's at work (Cha,

2010). Notably, the stigmatisation of men taking parental leave may be more pronounced than that for women, while women who prioritise their careers over domestic roles also face heightened negative evaluations (Haines & Stroessner, 2019; Williams et al., 2016; Coleman & Franiuk, 2011; Coltrane et al., 2013). To date, there has been little research, however, that would allow for assessing the career consequences of parental leave use among men in comparison to women. Existing research was largely based on observational data and concentrated on Nordic countries, which are predecessors of this policy in Europe and are characterised by high gender equality (Rege & Solli, 2013; Evertsson, 2016). These findings may thus not apply to other social contexts and may be biased by unobservable characteristics of men who make use of parental leaves (e.g. men in less competitive jobs with flat career ladders where career breaks are related to lower career penalties). Few studies adopted an experimental design and investigated perceptions of parents who made use of parental leave (Coleman & Franiuk, 2011; Petts et al., 2022). These studies were, in turn, limited to the US context and their samples covered students or the general adult population instead of employers, which potentially compromises external validity (Hainmueller et al., 2015). The following study is conducted in Poland, a country characterised by relatively traditional gender role attitudes, where women continue to bear a greater share of childcare responsibilities than men (Matysiak & Węziak-Białowolska, 2016; European Commission, 2015). Akin to many post-Soviet countries, Poland has long ago endorsed a dual-earner family model (Zajkowska, 2019). However, caregiving responsibilities have predominantly remained within the private sphere and are primarily undertaken by women, resulting in a significant double burden experienced by many women (Magda et al., 2023; Martín-García & Solera, 2022; Zajkowska, 2019). Moreover, Poland demonstrates a strong work-centrality culture, with its workforce among the longest working hours in the EU and having a particularly poor work-life balance (OECD, 2023; OECD, 2022). It is thus highly likely that requesting parental leave can carry large career penalties in Poland and that these penalties are particularly strong for fathers.

**RQ1:** How does parental leave uptake and its length impact the hiring and pay opportunities of fathers and mothers as well as their commitment and reliability evaluation? Are men and women taking the same length of parental leave perceived differently by employers?

**RQ2:** Do managers evaluate workers who make use of parental leave entitlements more harshly than otherwise identical workers who experienced similarly long career breaks for other reasons?

**RQ3:** How do the hiring and pay opportunities of workers who request parental leave differ depending on the manager's and firm's characteristics?

### **3. Data and methods**

We use experimental research methods, which are perfect for determining deeply rooted attitudes and gender-related beliefs, and allow for the identification of the causal effect (Auspurg & Hinz, 2014). We conduct a survey experiment and precisely a paired conjoint with a forced answer. The respondents in our experiment are managers with supervisory responsibilities. We chose managers because they are the principal decision-makers when it comes to hiring and pay at work. The participants will be randomly assigned a set of workers' profiles which will include information on workers' gender, sector-specific work experience, performance evaluation, expected salary and experience of career breaks due to parental leave (for fathers: 0 / 2 / 6 months and for mothers: 6 / 12 / 18 months) or unemployment (6 months for fathers, and 6 months for mothers plus 6 months of maternity leave). All of the workers' characteristics are manipulated and fully randomised (i.e. the order in which they appear in the survey and their levels will be set randomly). The respondents choose which worker (out of two) they would like to hire and who deserves higher pay as well as which one they consider to be more committed, and reliable. The study incorporates a between-subject design as the participants will evaluate 3 pairs of workers' profiles. The data, which will be representative in terms of the employer's gender and the company's size, sector and region, is being collected online by an external research company.

### **4. Findings**

The data collection for this project is ongoing and no results can be presented at this stage. By the time of the conference, the data will have been collected and analysed and the final version of the article will be prepared.

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