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# Assessing gender equality in childcare leave policies and in the labour market: A comparative analysis across 21 countries

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## Abstract

This manuscript compares gender equality in childcare leave policies across 21 countries and examines its relationship with gender equality in the labour market. To assess gender equality in childcare leave in each country, the duration gap and the uptake gap between genders in childcare leave are examined, and these two gaps are combined using Z-scores to measure the overall level of gender equality in childcare leave. Subsequently, the relationship between overall gender equality in childcare leave and labour market outcomes, such as gender employment and wage gaps, is explored. The results indicate that gender equality in childcare leave is generally highest in Scandinavian countries, moderate in Continental European countries, and mostly low in Eastern European countries. Furthermore, the degree of gender equality in childcare leave is negatively correlated with the gender employment gap, whereas no clear relationship is found with the gender wage gap.

**Keywords:** Parental leave; Childcare leave; Gender equality

## Introduction

Childcare leave is frequently considered one of the key measures for defamilisation. Defamilisation has been developed as a normative concept and an analytical category. Since Esping-Andersen's (1990) seminal typology of welfare regimes, critiques have emerged regarding its oversight of gender considerations (Lewis, 1992; O'Connor, 1993; Orloff, 1993; Sainsbury, 1999). Scholars emphasising this perspective have frequently highlighted defamilisation (Korpi, 2000; Bamba, 2004). Ruth Lister (1994, p. 37) conceptualised defamilisation as the extent to which "individual adults can uphold a socially acceptable standard of living, independently of family relationships." This definition aimed to question the existence of a male breadwinner model which identified both normatively and in labour market terms, where men earned money by working outside the home and women handled housekeeping and child-rearing responsibilities, thus highlighting women's reliance on men or marriage for what was defined as an acceptable standard of living.

To promote defamilisation, women's emancipation through their participation in the labour market is essential (Knijn and Ostner, 2002). This provides them with access to their own income, as well as to welfare through the labour market, establishing their independence from men. This is why the comparative social policy literature frequently identifies women's participation in the labour market as a key condition or outcome of defamilisation (e.g. Chau et al., 2017). In this context, childcare leave is often viewed as a key defamilisation measure, because it enables parents, particularly mothers, to stay

connected to the labour market instead of permanently leaving their jobs to care for children. Consequently, maternity or parental leave has been a primary variable in many studies assessing the degree of defamilisation and categorising countries accordingly (Bambra, 2004, 2007; Chau et al., 2017), with countries offering longer and more compensated maternal leave often considered more defamilised.

However, the assumption that generous childcare leave equates to high defamilisation levels is debatable, especially when it is predominantly taken by mothers. Despite the fact that childcare leave gradually expands to fathers and one could suggest that it has become more gender-neutral, it is important to note that mothers and fathers still have different durations of childcare leave and that mothers are primary users of parental leave in most countries across the globe. Consequently, childcare leave may inadvertently reinforce mothers' primary caregiving roles. Moreover, prolonged leave, exceeding 1 year, tends to decrease women's re-entry into the workforce compared to shorter leave (Piketty, 2005; Lequien, 2012; Canaan, 2019), and it is argued that generous maternity leave policies may dissuade employers from hiring women (Huebener et al., 2021; Ginja et al., 2020), potentially undermining defamilisation efforts. Some scholars question the suitability of maternity leave as a defamilisation measure, citing empirical evidence that does not guarantee labour market attachment (Cho, 2014) or considering it a familisation measure – in contrast to childcare services as a defamilisation measure – that confines childcare to the domestic sphere, particularly for women (Michoń, 2008).

Nonetheless, research indicates that introducing paid short-term childcare leave or extending leave duration up to 1 year has a positive impact on female employment and wages (Gregg et al., 2007; Baker and Milligan, 2008; Kluve and Tamm, 2013; Bana et al., 2020). Additionally, paternity leave is associated with higher female employment rates and earnings (Druehl et al., 2019; Huerta et al., 2014; Noland et al., 2016; Omidakhsh et al., 2020; Wray, 2020; Bacheron, 2021). When considering these facts collectively, it appears that gender equality in leave policies may play a significant role in ensuring that parental leave functions as an effective defamilisation measure. This is attributed to the equal provision of, and uptake by, both fathers and mothers, which can prevent mothers from taking excessive leave, promote shared childcare responsibilities, and reduce gender-based employer biases. Consequently, this minimises the adverse effects of gender-unequal childcare leave and enhances its potential for fostering positive defamilisation outcomes.

This manuscript aims to examine gender equality in childcare leave across 21 countries and its relationship with gender equality in the labour market, contributing to existing knowledge from previous comparative studies that have evaluated and classified the gender equality of childcare leave policies. The manuscript's structure consists of a review of literature, an explanation of research methods, the measurement of gender equality in childcare leave across 21 countries, and an analysis of the relationship between gender equality in childcare leave policies and gender equality in the labour market.

## Literature review

Various comparative studies have investigated childcare leave, with some focusing on defamilisation. Critiquing Esping-Andersen's (1990) categorisation of welfare regimes – Liberal, Conservative, and Social Democratic regimes, which are based on decommodification and stratification – as being gender-blind, many studies have classified welfare states based on defamilisation, often with childcare leave as a primary criterion. For instance, Bambra (2004) developed a defamilisation index using factors such as the relative female labour participation rate, maternity leave compensation, the duration of compensated maternity leave and the average female wage. Bambra (2007) further refined this approach, creating a five-fold typology based on similar criteria. Chau et al. (2017) assessed countries based on the duration of well-paid maternity leave, leave targeted at fathers, and extended parental leave. Chau et al. (2017) assessed care-focused defamilisation and women's economic defamilisation and their relationship with women's participation in the labour market, using maternity leave compensation levels and duration as variables to assess women's economic defamilisation. Additionally, there is also research focusing on childcare leave itself (Moss and Deven, 2006; Lambert, 2008; Dearing, 2016; Otto et al., 2021), with a

particular focus on its generosity. The findings suggest that Social Democratic countries typically offer generous parental leave, with some Conservative countries also exhibiting generous policies. Notably, many Eastern European countries demonstrate high levels of leave generosity, particularly in terms of duration. On the other hand, the familialistic characteristics of Southern Europe and the entrenched gender role stereotypes in East Asia have led to less generous childcare leave policies.

In addition to the overall generosity of leave, various studies also examine the equality between leave for fathers and mothers. Gornick and Meyers (2008) examined the gender equality of societies in terms of employment and caregiving, focusing on working hour regulations, early childhood education and care, and paid family leave provisions. They assessed the generosity of paid leave policies in six countries, as well as the strength of gender-egalitarian policy design, using a six-point “gender equality scale.” This scale considered factors such as whether fathers had non-transferable leave rights and the level of wage replacement rates. The three Nordic countries of Sweden, Norway, and Denmark scored between 5 and 6 points, demonstrating a high degree of equality. Finland scored lower (4 points) due to the absence of “daddy days,” placing it alongside Belgium, which has low wage replacement rates. France, which lacks incentives for fathers, scored only 1 point.

Ray et al. (2010) measured the generosity and gender equality of parental leave in 21 countries using a 15-point index, based on factors such as the proportion of leave available to fathers and the wage replacement rate. Sweden ranked highest for gender equality with 14 points, followed by Finland, Greece, and Norway with 12 points. Belgium scored 11 points, and France, Italy, Portugal and Spain each scored 10 points. In contrast, Switzerland, Australia, Japan, and New Zealand exhibited low equality. Ciccia and Verloo (2012) categorised childcare leave in 30 European countries based on criteria including the distribution of rights between parents and a comparison of the full-time equivalent leave of mothers and fathers. No countries met the universal caregiver model, which advocates for equal responsibility between genders in both formal employment and informal caregiving, with generous compensation and duration, as well as reserved time and other incentives for fathers to take childcare leave. Finland, Iceland, and Sweden were classified as the “limited caregiver model” – similar to the universal caregiver model, but with a limited duration. One-third of the countries were classified as following the male breadwinner ideal model, in which childcare leave maintains a traditional division of gender roles, with unpaid or low compensation and only a few days of father-specific leave.

Carmen Castro-García and Maria Pazos-Moran (2016) analysed data from 21 European countries between 2008 and 2010, creating the Parental Leave Equality Index (PLEI). This index reflects the tendency for fathers to take leave only when it is non-transferable and offers high wage replacement. According to this classification, Iceland, Norway, Portugal, and Sweden were categorised as countries promoting co-responsibility, offering long, non-transferable, and high-wage-replacement leave. France, Belgium, Spain, Denmark, Poland, Finland, Germany, and Slovenia were seen as treating fathers as “incidental collaborators,” with shorter leave periods or lower wage replacement rates. Hungary, the Netherlands, Greece, and Austria had either extremely short or no leave for fathers, reinforcing gender inequality.

Feldman and Gran (2016) included parity between mothers’ and fathers’ childcare leave as one of the variables when comparing paternity leave in 44 countries. Their analysis revealed that in most countries parental leave is the same for both mothers and fathers, but paternity leave and maternity leave often differ. Only Iceland, Norway, and South Africa were cited as countries where fathers and mothers had exactly the same leave. In total, they categorised 13 countries, including Finland, Iceland, Norway, Sweden, France, South Korea, and the UK. Fifteen countries, such as Belgium, the Netherlands, Denmark, Australia, and Canada, were classified as midrange countries, while 16 countries, including the US, Ireland, Germany, Austria and the Czech Republic, were classified as non-equity countries. Their findings exhibit few similarities with Esping-Andersen’s (1990) clustering, although many social democratic countries share the characteristic of high equity.

Dobrotic and Blum (2020) analysed the gender dimensions of parental leave, categorising them into four types: (1) Gendered access – leave primarily designated as a mother’s right; (2) Gender-neutral access – Fully transferable rights between parents; (3) Gender-sensitive access – Family rights with a non-

transferable portion for one parent, comprising no more than one-third of the total leave period; (4) Degendered access – Fully non-transferable leave rights for each parent. As of 2017, Hungary was classified as gendered, while Estonia and Slovenia, and the Czech Republic were considered gender-neutral. Austria, Norway, and Denmark were categorised as gender-sensitive, and Iceland, Portugal, Italy, and France were classified as degendered countries.

Numerous studies have explored the relationship between childcare leave and women's participation in the labour market. The findings indicate that the availability of maternal leave is associated with a higher female employment rate, with the impact varying based on leave duration. For instance, much research demonstrates that introducing paid, short-term childcare leave or extending leave duration up to 1 year increases women's employment rates and their likelihood of returning to their previous employers after childbirth (Ruhm, 1998; Gregg et al., 2007; Kluve and Tamm, 2013; Bana et al., 2020). However, longer leaves exceeding 12 months have been associated with negative effects on mothers' return to work and wages compared to shorter leave (Piketty, 2005; Ejrnæs and Kunze, 2013; Mullerova, 2017). On the other hand, paternity leave has been shown to have positive effects on gender equality in labour market outcomes and societal attitudes towards women's work. Research indicates that paternal leave policies increase women's employment rates, enhance fathers' involvement in childcare, and promote gender equality in society (Bacheron, 2021; Druedahl et al., 2019; Omidakhsh et al., 2020; Noland et al., 2016; Huerta et al., 2014).

### Research question

While various studies have been conducted on the equality of childcare leave, their emphasis often lies in institutional design. However, it is also important to consider how the leave system is practically implemented and used. This is especially true considering that in many countries, the institutional aspect is intended to be gender-equal, but the actual uptake is concentrated among women. Therefore, this study includes leave uptake as one of the variables measuring gender equality in the leave system, alongside institutional design. Furthermore, whether parental leave effectively functions as a means of defamilisation is closely related to whether parental leave promotes women's participation in the labour market. Although there has been abundant research on the impact of childcare leave on the labour market, there is limited knowledge about the relationship between gender equality in parental leave and labour market outcomes. Therefore, this study also examines the relationship between gender equality in parental leave and gender equality in the labour market, including women's participation in the labour market. The research questions addressed in this study are as follows.

- How gender-equal are parental leave policies across various countries, particularly when considering both institutional design and actual usage?
- Do the levels of gender equality in parental leave across countries follow patterns based on welfare regimes or regions?
- What is the relationship between gender equality in parental leave and gender equality in the labour market?

### Methods

This research comprises three main components. First, the level of gender equality in childcare leave policies in each country will be measured. This will involve assessing the gender gaps in childcare leave, specifically the duration and uptake gaps. Secondly, the level of gender equality in the labour market will be measured, focusing on the employment gap and the wage gap between genders. Finally, the relationship between gender equality in childcare leave and gender equality in the labour market will be examined. Data from the OECD Family Database and International Network on Leave Policies and Research will be used to measure gender equality in childcare leave, while data from OECD statistics will

be used to measure gender equality in the labour market. The analysis will use data from 2018, the latest year offering comprehensive leave uptake data for a sufficient number of countries.

A total of 21 countries, for which leave uptake data are available, will be analysed. This sample includes countries from diverse regions and welfare regime types, providing a comprehensive basis for comparative analysis. For instance, Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Norway, and Sweden are Scandinavian countries, classified as Social Democratic countries by Esping-Andersen (1990). Austria, Belgium, France, Germany, and Luxembourg are Continental European countries, often categorised as Conservative welfare regimes. Australia, Canada and New Zealand are English-speaking countries classified as Liberal welfare regimes by Esping-Andersen (1990). The sample also includes Southern European countries such as Italy and Portugal, Eastern European countries such as the Czech Republic, Estonia, Lithuania, and Poland, and East Asian countries such as Japan and Korea. At each stage of the analysis, both individual country-level and group-level trends will be examined.

This study will primarily focus on paid childcare leave, as it is considered more significant than unpaid leave in terms of social rights. It is necessary to clarify the definitions of terms used in leave policy before examining and analysing it since several terms are often used interchangeably to describe childcare-related leave. In this manuscript, each term is defined as follows, primarily based on the definition of Blum et al. (2023). Maternity leave refers to a mother's exclusive leave available before, during and immediately after childbirth. Paternity leave refers to a father's exclusive leave, usually available after the birth of a child, to care for their partner and newborn child. Parental leave refers to a longer period of leave available after the end of maternity or paternity leave to care for a young child. Childcare leave is used as an umbrella term encompassing maternity, paternity and parental leave.

## *Gender equality in childcare leave*

### *Duration gap*

In terms of the design of the leave policy, the gap between the duration of paid mothers' and fathers' leave will be examined. There are other institutional characteristics that influence gender equality in childcare leave, but many of them are designed to promote more equitable leave usage. For example, non-transferable leave for fathers and high wage replacement rates for leave are frequently identified in previous studies as indicators of gender equality, as they tend to encourage fathers to take leave. In this study, these aspects are measured using actual uptake gaps rather than institutional factors. Even if leave benefits offer high wage replacement rates, they cannot be considered genuinely gender-equal if this does not lead to gender-equal usage in practice. Assessing whether these institutional characteristics achieve their purpose offers a more accurate measure of actual gender equality. In contrast, the duration of leave carries implications beyond whether mothers and fathers take leave. If a policy grants mothers significantly longer childcare leave than fathers, this implies an underlying assumption in the policy framework that mothers, not fathers, are the primary caregivers.

Given that parental leave is available for both parents and can be shared in most countries<sup>1</sup> (ILO, 2014), the main difference in the leave duration available to mothers and fathers lies in the design of paternity and maternity leave. However, in some countries, parental leave is designated as an exclusive right for each parent, or portions are allocated as a father's quota to encourage fathers' uptake. In these cases, mothers' and fathers' exclusive parental leave will be included in the difference. As such, the analysis will focus on the duration of leave specifically allocated to mothers and fathers.

When comparing mother-specific and father-specific childcare leave, there are two considerations. Firstly, only the duration of paid mother-specific leave available after childbirth will be considered, as leave designated for use before childbirth supports the health of the pregnant woman and foetus rather than childcare. In 12 out of 21 countries, a portion of leave is specifically designated for prenatal care and will therefore be excluded when calculating the duration of mother-specific leave. Although most of the

<sup>1</sup>Only in a few countries, such as Guinea, Jordan and Kuwait, is parental leave exclusively a mothers' right. In Bulgaria and Chile, although parental leave is mothers' right, fathers can use a portion of that when mothers agree.

remaining countries allow flexibility in maternity leave usage, enabling part of it to be taken before childbirth, the entire duration will be counted as mothers can choose to use all of it after childbirth.

Secondly, when calculating the gap between mother-specific and father-specific leave duration, only differences exceeding six weeks will be considered as a duration gap. This is because maternity leave after childbirth allows mothers not only to care for the child but also to recover, a necessity not applicable to fathers. Therefore, some differences in the duration of leave between mothers and fathers can be considered reasonable, at least, on medical grounds. Although there is no fixed recovery period, the first postpartum check-up typically occurs around six weeks after childbirth (Baghirzada et al., 2018) and the postpartum period is generally considered to conclude by then. Therefore, a difference of up to six weeks between paternity and maternity leave can be regarded as a recovery period from childbirth. Consequently, the duration gap is calculated as follows.

$$\text{Duration Gap} = (\text{Mother} - \text{specific leave duration available after childbirth}) \\ - (\text{Father} - \text{specific leave}) - 6 \text{ weeks}$$

### *Uptake gap*

Regarding the operation of the leave system, the gap in the use of parental leave between men and women will be examined, considering that parental leave is sharable between parents but mothers remain primary users in many countries. To calculate this, the difference between the male share of employment and the male share of parental leave uptake will be measured. Since parental leave entitlement is frequently linked to employment if parental leave is taken equally by both genders, the male share of parental leave would be similar to the male share of employment, making the gap nearly zero. This means that the larger the difference between the two figures, the greater the disparity in parental leave usage. This is to reflect the fact that when two countries have the same level of male share of parental leave recipients, those with a higher male share of employment actually have more unequal parental leave usage between genders. Although company-level policies exist in addition to legislated policy measures, they are typically provided as additional benefits on top of statutory leave. Therefore, focusing primarily on legislated policy measures can still yield meaningful insights.

$$\text{Uptake Gap} = \text{Male share of employment} - \text{Male share of parental leave recipients}$$

$$*\text{Male share of employment} = (\text{Number of male employees}) / (\text{Total number of employees})$$

$$\text{Male share of parental leave recipients} = (\text{Number of males taking parental leave}) / \\ (\text{Total number of parental leave recipients})$$

### *Overall level of gender equality in childcare leave*

To calculate the overall level of gender equality in childcare leave in each country, the duration gap and uptake gap will be combined using the Z-score. Evaluating the gender equality of leave policies based only on the difference in leave duration between men and women is insufficient, as the practical implementation of the policy is crucial. On the one hand, the uptake gap is an effective measure of whether a leave policy is being equitably implemented. However, even if the uptake between genders is similar, if mothers are granted significantly longer leave than fathers, it suggests that the country still views mothers as the primary caregivers. Therefore, assessing both aspects together would be an appropriate approach to measuring the overall gender equality of leave policies.

Both values of each country are transformed to Z-score using mean and standard deviation<sup>2</sup> – Z1 for duration gap and Z2 for uptake gap – and combined. Using the Z-score minimises the bias caused by

<sup>2</sup> $Z - \text{score} = \frac{\text{observed value} - \text{mean of the sample}}{\text{standard deviation of sample}}$



different means and standard deviations of various variables. When combining the two variables, Z2 (uptake gap) is multiplied by two to give it greater weight.<sup>3</sup> This adjustment is made because, even if the leave scheme is perfectly equal in design, if only one gender uses it, its effect on defamilisation would be similar to that of a perfectly unequal leave. Therefore, the actual uptake is considered more important than institutional design, especially in the context of defamilisation and the impact of childcare leave on the labour market. Nevertheless, given that Z1 and Z2 represent the institutional and practical aspects of leave policies, respectively, and that both aspects need to be balanced to evaluate overall gender equality, it would seem inappropriate to assign three or four times the weight to Z2. Therefore, a weight of two will be assigned to Z2. Additionally, the score is reversed (multiplied by  $-1$ ) so that the aggregated score represents the degree of gender equality, rather than inequality, as shown below.

$$\text{Overall Level of Gender Equality in Leave (Aggregated Z - score)} = \\ (Z - \text{score of DurationGap} + 2 \times Z - \text{score of UptakeGap}) \times (-1)$$

### *Relationship between gender equality in childcare leave and gender equality in the labour market*

Gender equality in the labour market will be measured using two variables. The first variable is the employment gap between genders. Women's employment is considered an important outcome of defamilisation measures, as it enables them to achieve economic independence and access social welfare. Since various factors, such as economic status, can influence employment, the gap in employment rates between males and females will be examined to mitigate the impact of these factors. In most countries, women are more likely to work part-time than men, often due to the gendered distribution of domestic labour and chores. In addition, a higher share of part-time work is attributed to career breaks due to childbirth and caregiving responsibilities, which often make it harder for women to secure stable full-time employment, leaving them with marginal part-time job opportunities (Fagan et al., 2014).

Given that part-time work offers limited economic independence and access to welfare benefits compared to full-time employment, full-time work can be considered to provide higher defamilisation than part-time work, unless it is more equally shared between genders. For women the ability to access full-time work enables them, through commodification, to establish their own (and in full-time mode) individual social insurance record and become less dependent on their husbands. This is why some researchers use the gender gap in full-time employment rates as a variable to measure the level of defamilisation (Chau et al., 2017). However, focusing solely on full-time employment may not capture the full picture, as part-time work also plays a role, providing partial economic independence and access to welfare. Therefore, I will use the full-time equivalent (FTE) employment gap, which calculates part-time work as a proportion of full-time work based on working hours.

The second variable used to measure gender equality in the labour market is the gender wage gap. It can be considered as a variable for assessing the qualitative aspect of gender equality in the labour market, whereas the FTE employment gap serves as a quantitative measure. The OECD's median gender wage gap data will be used for this analysis. Finally, the relationship between the aggregate Z-score and these two labour market gender equality variables will be examined. The correlation between them will be analysed, with a detailed group analysis carried out.

## **Results**

### *Gender equality in childcare leave*

#### *Duration gap between genders*

The average duration of mother-specific leave available after childbirth in 21 countries is 23.2 weeks (Table 1), ranging from 8.0 weeks (Lithuania) to 64.9 weeks (South Korea). In contrast, the average

<sup>3</sup>Although multiplying the second variable does not cause a fundamental difference in the results, it was done to emphasise the importance of actual take-up in assessing gender equality in leave policies.

**Table 1.** Duration gap between mother-specific leave and father-specific leave) (2018)

Country	Duration of paid mother-specific leave <sup>1</sup> (week) (A)	Duration of paid father-specific leave (week) (B)	Gap (week) (A – B)	Adjusted gap <sup>2</sup> (week)
Australia	18.0	2.0	16.0	10.0
Austria	16.7	8.7	8.0	2.0
Belgium	32.3	19.3	13.0	7.0
Canada	21.0	0.0	21.0	15.0
Czech Rep	22.0	1.0	21.0	15.0
Denmark	14.0	2.0	12.0	6.0
Estonia	15.7	2.0	13.7	7.7
Finland	13.2	9.0	4.2	0.0
France	39.0	28.0	11.0	5.0
Germany	16.7	8.7	8.0	2.0
Iceland	13.0	13.0	0.0	0.0
Italy	17.7	0.8	16.9	10.9
Japan	52.0	52.0	0.0	0.0
Korea	64.9	52.6	12.3	6.3
Lithuania	8.0	4.0	4.0	0.0
Luxembourg	38.0	28.0	10.0	4.0
New Zealand	18.0	0.0	18.0	12.0
Norway	10.0	10.0	0.0	0.0
Poland	20.0	2.0	18.0	12.0
Portugal	23.3	22.3	1.0	0.0
Sweden	12.9	14.3	–1.4	0.0
Mean	23.2	13.3	9.8	5.5

Source: OECD Family Database (2023) and International Network on Leave Policies & Research (2018).

<sup>1</sup>The duration of leave designated for use before childbirth was excluded. (Below is the breakdown of the mother-specific leave duration that can only be used before childbirth in each country: Austria 8.0 weeks, the Czech Republic 6.0 weeks, Denmark 4.0 weeks, Estonia 4.3 weeks, Finland 4.3 weeks, France 3.0 weeks, Germany 6.0 weeks, Italy 4.0 weeks, Japan 6.0 weeks, Lithuania 10.0 weeks, Luxembourg 8.0 weeks, and Norway 3.0 weeks.)

<sup>2</sup> The gap of 6 weeks or less is considered as no gap, taking the postpartum period into account, and the gap below zero is adjusted to zero to prevent the misleading perception that fathers have longer leave than mothers.

duration of paid father-specific leave is shorter, at 13.3 weeks. Canada and New Zealand do not provide any paid father-specific leave. The Czech Republic (1.0 week), Australia, Denmark, Estonia, and Poland (2.0 weeks) offer only a few weeks of father-specific leave. In contrast, Korea (52.6 weeks) and Japan (52.0 weeks), where parental leave is allocated as an individual right rather than shared between parents, offer the longest periods of paid leave exclusively available to fathers. The average gap between the duration of paid mother-specific and father-specific leave is 9.8 weeks. When calculating the duration required for mothers to recover from childbirth, excluding six weeks from this gap reduces the average gap to 5.5 weeks.



Among the analysed countries, the largest adjusted duration gap between mother-specific and father-specific leave is found in Canada and the Czech Republic, with an adjusted difference of 15.0 weeks. In these countries, mothers are entitled to 22.0 or 21.0 weeks of leave, while fathers have only 1.0 week of leave or no leave at all. New Zealand (12.0 weeks), Poland (12.0 weeks) and Italy (10.9 weeks) also display relatively large gaps between the durations of mother-specific and father-specific leave. On the other hand, Sweden offers longer father-specific leave (14.3 weeks) than mother-specific leave (12.9 weeks). Iceland, Japan and Norway also stand out with no gap between mother's and father's exclusive leave. Portugal also shows a minimal gap, with 23.3 weeks of mother-specific leave and 22.3 weeks of father-specific leave, resulting in no adjusted gap. Finland (0.0 week) and Lithuania (0.0 week) also exhibit no adjusted gaps, and Austria (2.0 weeks) and Germany (2.0 weeks) have relatively small adjusted gaps.

### *Uptake gap between genders*

The uptake of parental leave varies significantly between mothers and fathers across many countries (Table 2). On average, across the 21 countries, the male share of parental leave recipients is 21.8 per cent, with a considerable variation among countries. In Luxembourg (49.2 per cent), Sweden (45.9 per cent), Denmark (45.5 per cent), Iceland (45.2 per cent) and Portugal (44.8 per cent), fathers' uptake of parental leave is nearly equal to that of mothers. In contrast, countries such as Australia (0.5 per cent), New Zealand (1.0 per cent), Poland (1.1 per cent), the Czech Republic (1.8 per cent), Austria (3.9 per cent), France (4.4 per cent) and Japan (5.1 per cent) have low shares of fathers taking up parental leave. The male share of employment in these countries ranges from 49.4 per cent in Lithuania (the only country where the male share is lower than the female share of employment) to 57.3 per cent in Korea. The average gap between the male share of employment and parental leave uptake is 31.6 per cent, ranging from 4.5 per cent (Luxembourg) to 54.0 per cent (Poland).

### *Aggregated gender equality in childcare leave*

To assess the overall level of gender equality in childcare leave policies, the two variables – duration gap and uptake gap – were combined using the Z-score. As explained earlier, the second variable (Z2, the Z-score of uptake gap) was doubled when combined to account for the importance of actual take-up of childcare leave. Additionally, the score was reversed by multiplying by  $-1$  so that a higher aggregated Z-score indicates greater gender equality in childcare leave. The aggregate Z-score ranges from  $-4.3$  to  $3.9$  across the 21 countries. As shown in Table 3, Portugal (3.9) exhibits the highest gender equality in childcare leave policy, followed by Sweden (3.9), Iceland (3.6), Luxembourg (3.3), and Norway (3.1). Conversely, the Czech Republic ( $-4.3$ ) demonstrates the lowest gender equality in childcare leave policy, followed by Poland ( $-3.8$ ), New Zealand ( $-3.6$ ), Australia ( $-3.2$ ), Canada ( $-2.3$ ), and Italy ( $-1.8$ ).

When analysing countries based on their welfare regimes or regions, distinct patterns emerge (Figure 1). Scandinavian countries generally demonstrate high levels of gender equality in their leave policies, with Sweden having the second-highest score (3.9) and Iceland the third-highest score (3.6), comprising five of the top seven countries. Continental European countries tend to show moderate levels of equality in childcare leave. Except for Luxembourg with the exceptionally high score (3.3), Continental European countries range from  $-1.7$  (France) to  $0.9$  (Germany). Southern European countries display mixed results, with Portugal having the highest level of equality (3.9) and Italy having a relatively low level of equality ( $-1.8$ ). East Asian countries exhibit slightly low levels of equality in their childcare leave policies, with Japan having  $-1.1$  and Korea having  $-1.2$ . English-speaking countries show low levels of equality, ranking third (New Zealand,  $-3.1$ ), fourth (Australia,  $-2.8$ ) and fifth (Canada,  $-2.3$ ) from the bottom. Eastern European countries generally exhibit the lowest levels of equality, with the Czech Republic ranking the lowest ( $-4.0$ ), Poland ranked the second lowest ( $-3.8$ ), and Estonia ( $-1.9$ ) also showing a low level of score, while Lithuania (0.6) demonstrates a higher level of equality compared to the other Eastern European countries.

**Table 2.** The gap of parental leave take-up by gender (2018)

Country	Male share of parental leave recipients (%) (A)	Male share of employment (15–64 (%) (B) <sup>2</sup>	Gap (%) (B – A)
Australia	0.5 <sup>1</sup>	53.1	52.6
Austria	3.9	53.1	49.2
Belgium	31.1	53.2	22.1
Canada	16.8	52.6	35.8
Czech Rep	1.8	55.7	53.8
Denmark	45.5	53.0	7.5
Estonia	10.2	51.5	41.3
Finland	29.5	51.8	22.3
France	4.4 <sup>1</sup>	51.7	47.3
Germany	23.7	53.4	29.8
Iceland	45.2	53.9	8.7
Italy	19.6	57.9	38.4
Japan	5.1	55.8	50.7
Korea	16.3	57.3	41.0
Lithuania	23.7	49.4	25.7
Luxembourg	49.2	53.7	4.5
New Zealand	1.0 <sup>1</sup>	53.0	52.0
Norway	39.5	52.9	13.4
Poland	1.1	55.1	54.0
Portugal	44.8	51.1	6.3
Sweden	45.9	52.3	6.5
Mean	21.8	53.4	31.6

Source: OECD family database (2023).

<sup>1</sup> Male share of leave recipient data: data for Australia and New Zealand are from 2017, and data for France is from 2016.

<sup>2</sup> A more accurate measurement could be achieved if the male share of employment were defined specifically for the population eligible for parental leave. However, due to the lack of available data and the arbitrary nature of restricting the age range, the share for the entire population aged 15–64 is used instead.

## Gender equality in the labour market

### FTE employment gap between genders

In every country, the female full-time equivalent (FTE) employment rate is lower than that of males. The average gender gap in the FTE employment rate of 19 countries, excluding Canada and Japan where the data are not available, is 18.3 per cent, with a male FTE employment rate of 76.3 per cent and a female FTE employment rate of 57.9 per cent (Table 4). Lithuania (5.8 per cent) shows the smallest gap, followed by Sweden (9.7 per cent), Estonia (11.2 per cent), Finland (11.5 per cent), Denmark (13.6 per cent) and Portugal (14.0 per cent). The largest gap is displayed in Italy (28.0 per cent), which has the lowest level in both male (68.2 per cent) and female (a particularly low level at 40.2 per cent) FTE employment. Korea

**Table 3.** Gender equality in childcare leave policies (2018)

Country	Duration gap Between genders (week)	Z-score (Z1)	Uptake gap between genders (%p)	Z-score (Z2)	Aggregated Z-score (Z1 + 2 × Z2) × (−1)
Portugal	0.0	−1.1	6.3	−1.4	3.9
Sweden	0.0	−1.1	6.5	−1.4	3.9
Iceland	0.0	−1.1	8.7	−1.3	3.6
Luxembourg	4.0	−0.3	4.5	−1.5	3.3
Norway	0.0	−1.1	13.4	−1.0	3.1
Denmark	6.0	0.1	7.5	−1.3	2.6
Finland	0.0	−1.1	22.3	−0.5	2.1
Lithuania	0.0	−1.1	25.7	−0.3	1.7
Germany	2.0	−0.7	29.8	−0.1	0.9
Belgium	7.0	0.3	22.1	−0.5	0.8
Japan	0.0	−1.1	50.7	1.1	−1.1
Korea	6.3	0.2	41.0	0.5	−1.2
Austria	2.0	−0.7	49.2	1.0	−1.3
Estonia	7.7	0.4	41.3	0.5	−1.2
France	5.0	−0.1	47.3	0.9	−1.7
Italy	10.9	1.1	38.4	0.4	−1.8
Canada	15.0	1.8	35.8	0.2	−2.3
Australia	10.0	0.9	52.6	1.2	−3.2
New Zealand	12.0	1.3	52.0	1.1	−3.6
Poland	12.0	1.3	54.0	1.3	−3.8
Czech Rep	15.0	1.8	53.8	1.2	−4.3
Mean	5.5		31.6		
Standard deviation	5.2		17.8		

Source: OECD family database, OECD Stats (2023) and International Network on Leave Policies & Research (2018).

(26.6 per cent) and New Zealand (26.3 per cent) have the second and third largest gaps. Both countries have significantly higher male FTE employment, exceeding 80.0 per cent, while the female FTE employment rate remains low, at around 60.0 per cent.

### *Wage gap between genders*

On average, women's wages are 13.5 per cent lower than those of men in 20 countries, excluding Luxembourg where the data are not available. Belgium shows the smallest wage gap, with a difference of only 3.4 per cent, and Denmark (4.9 per cent), Norway (5.1 per cent), Italy (5.7 per cent), and New Zealand (7.9 per cent) also exhibit a relatively slight gap. Korea has the largest wage gap, with a substantial difference of 34.1 per cent, followed by Japan (23.5 per cent), Estonia (22.7 per cent) and Canada (18.5 per cent).

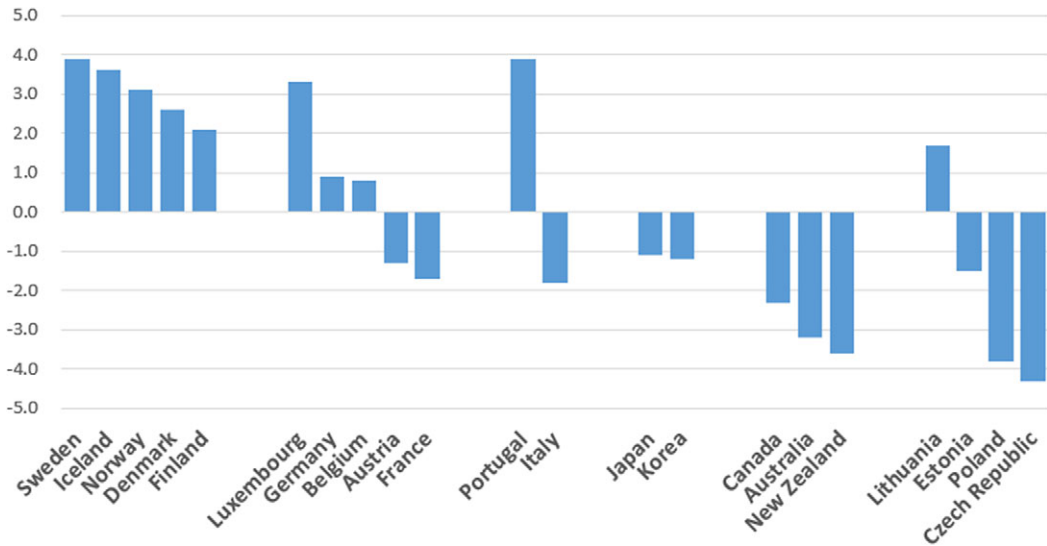


Figure 1. Gender equality in defamilisation policies (the aggregated Z-score, 2018).

When examining the gender gaps in FTE employment rate and wages together, as depicted in Figure 2, Scandinavian countries generally exhibit relatively low levels in both gaps, although there are some exceptions such as Iceland, with a larger employment gap and a moderate wage gap, and Finland with a relatively high wage gap. Continental European countries commonly have moderate or high wage gaps ranging from 10.0 to 20.0 per cent, and a moderate FTE employment gap ranging from 15.0 to 25.0, except for Belgium with the lowest wage gap. English-speaking countries generally have a high employment gap of around 25.0 per cent and a low or moderate wage gap of approximately 10.0 per cent. In the Southern European countries, Portugal shows a low employment gap and moderate wage gap, while Italy has a high employment gap and a low wage gap. In Eastern European countries, the Czech Republic and Poland exhibit moderate or slightly high levels of gaps in both employment and wage. In contrast, Estonia has a high wage gap but low employment gap, while Lithuania has a moderate wage gap and the lowest employment gap. It is notable that Korea exhibits significant gaps both in FTE employment, and prominently, in the wage gap, with the latter exceeding 30 per cent.

### *Relationship between gender equality in childcare leave policies and gender equality in the labour market*

#### *Gender equality in childcare leave and employment gap*

Figure 3 illustrates a negative correlation between the aggregated Z-score for gender equality in childcare leave policies and the gender FTE employment rate gap (Pearson's correlation coefficient =  $-0.584$ ,  $p$ -value  $< 0.01$ ). It is evident that Scandinavian countries generally exhibit relatively high levels of equality in childcare leave and a low gender employment gap. In contrast, English-speaking countries tend to have relatively low levels of equality in childcare leave and a high gender employment gap. Other groups do not consistently show the same pattern, but most countries with a high Z-score tend to have a low FTE employment gap, while those with a low Z-score tend to exhibit a high FTE employment gap.

#### *Gender equality in childcare leave and wage gap*

Figure 4 identifies no significant correlation between the aggregated Z-score and the gender wage gap (Pearson's correlation coefficient =  $-0.271$ ,  $p$ -value  $> 0.05$ ). Poland, France, Lithuania and Portugal consistently display a low or moderate level of the gender wage gap, despite the Z-scores of these

**Table 4.** Gender equality in the labour market by country (2018)

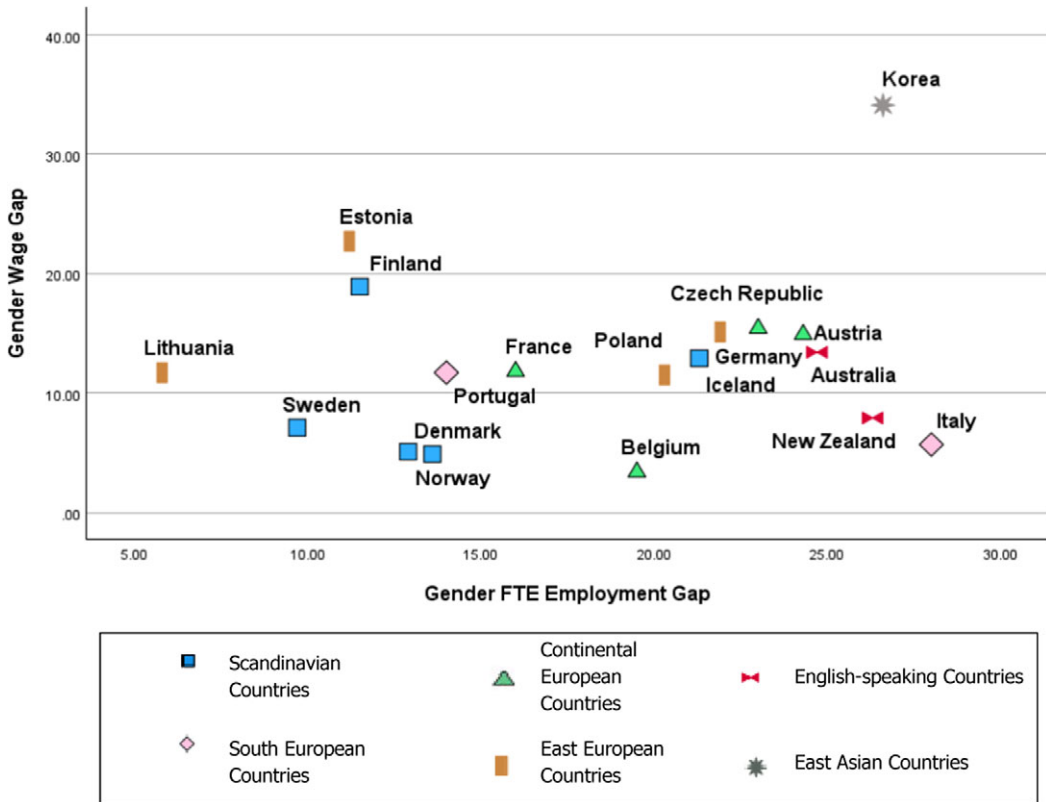
Country	The gap of full-time equivalent employment rate (15–64) (%)			Wage gap (median, %)
	Male FTE Employment rate (A)	Female FTE Employment rate (B)	Gap (A-B)	
Australia	78.0	53.3	24.7	13.4
Austria	78.7	54.4	24.3	14.9
Belgium	69.1	49.6	19.5	3.4
Canada	–	–	–	18.5
Czech Rep	85.3	63.4	21.9	15.1
Denmark	68.4	54.8	13.6	4.9
Estonia	77.4	66.2	11.2	22.7
Finland	71.4	59.9	11.5	18.9
France	68.7	52.7	16.0	11.8
Germany	77.7	54.7	23.0	15.4
Iceland	92.1	70.8	21.3	12.9
Italy	68.2	40.2	28.0	5.7
Japan	–	–	–	23.5
Korea	84.7	58.1	26.6	34.1
Lithuania	72.3	66.5	5.8	11.7
Luxembourg	70.8	53.2	17.6	–
New Zealand	86.4	60.1	26.3	7.9
Norway	70.3	57.4	12.9	5.1
Poland	77.7	57.4	20.3	11.5
Portugal	76.2	62.2	14.0	11.7
Sweden	75.4	65.7	9.7	7.1
Mean	76.3	57.9	18.3	13.5

Source: OECD stat.

countries spanning a notably wide range, from –3.8 (Poland) to 3.9 (Portugal). Similarly, the Czech Republic, Austria, and Germany consistently exhibit a slightly higher gender wage gap, despite having varying *Z*-scores ranging from –4.3 (the Czech Republic) to 0.9 (Germany).

## Discussion

When examining the findings concerning gender equality in childcare leave, distinct patterns emerge across regions or welfare regime clusters proposed by Esping-Andersen (1990). Scandinavian countries consistently rank high in gender equality in leave policies, while English-speaking countries tend to score lower. This contrasts with the findings of Feldman and Gran (2016), which showed few similarities to



**Figure 2.** Gender equality in the labour market by country (2018).  
Source: OECD stat.

Esping-Andersen's classification. Although the results of this study generally align with those of Ray et al. (2010), Castro-García and Pazos-Moran (2016) and Dobrotic and Blum (2020), differences remain in the ranking of individual countries. This discrepancy arises because their analysis focused primarily on institutional aspects, whereas this study accounts for both institutional gaps and actual usage differences. For instance, countries such as Estonia, Poland, and Korea were classified as equitable in Feldman and Gran's (2016) study owing to their generous paternal leave policies. However, in this study, they are evaluated as having low equality due to their high uptake gap between genders as well as significant duration gap. Similarly, France and Italy show lower gender equality in leave policy in this study than in Ray et al. (2010) and Dobrotic and Blum (2020). Although it is challenging to directly compare the findings with the results of Ciccia and Verloo (2012) due to differences in the evaluation or classification scheme between this study and theirs, the findings show many similarities. Countries classified under the limited caregiver model, such as Finland, Iceland and Sweden, exhibit high levels of gender equality in leave policies in this study. In contrast, countries classified as the male breadwinner model such as the Czech Republic, Estonia, Poland, Austria, and France, show lower levels of gender equality in leave policies in this study as well.

It is notable that Portugal ranked as the country with the highest gender equality in leave policies in this study, given that Scandinavian countries typically rank the highest, and all the late welfare states, apart from Portugal, have yet to attain gender equality in terms of parental leave uptake, despite making strides in institutional aspects. It suggests the need to consider the historical reasons behind Portugal's lower employment gender gaps (see Tavora, 2012) and to examine its leave policies, particularly the 2009 reform. In this reform, the previous maternity leave was replaced by "initial parental leave." As before,



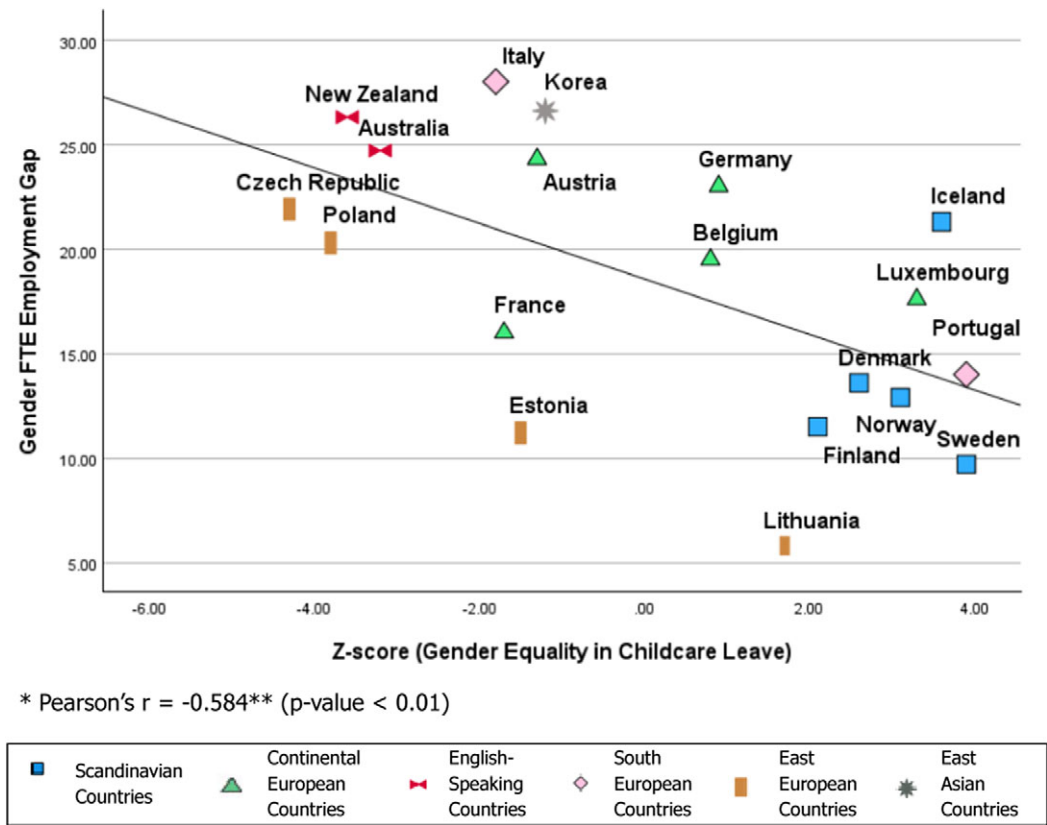


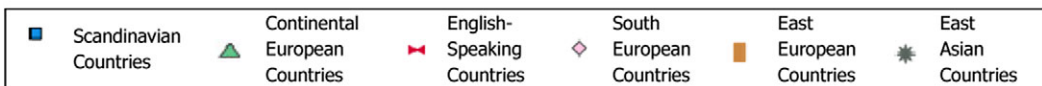
Figure 3. Gender equality in childcare leave and gender full-time equivalent employment gap (2018). \*Pearson's  $r = -0.584^{**}$  ( $p$ -value  $< 0.01$ ). Source: OECD Family Database, OECD stat and International Network on Leave Policies & Research.

parents could take 120 calendar days with 100 per cent compensation or leave of 150 calendar days with 80 per cent compensation. The leave could be shared by the father and mother, and if both parents shared more than 30 days each, they could receive an additional 30 days of leave, which was a crucial part of the reform (Wall et al., 2019). This reform has been evaluated as promoting men's utilization and gender equality in the leave system (Wall, 2010). The number of fathers using leave significantly increased after the reform. For instance, before the reform in 2009, although maternity leave could already be shared with fathers, only 596 fathers utilised it in 2008. However, the number surged to 17,066 in 2010, immediately after the reform and has steadily increased since, reaching 32,282 fathers utilising the initial parental leave in 2022 (Leitão et al., 2023). This exemplifies the case where the institutional design of parental leave can impact the actual uptake.

The negative correlation between gender equality in childcare leave and the gender FTE employment rate gap suggests several possibilities. Firstly, a more equal leave system may lead to greater gender equality in the labour market, as fathers' uptake of parental leave facilitates mothers' return to work and prevents employers from favouring one gender. Secondly, a gender-equal culture may influence both the leave system and the labour market simultaneously. For example, higher gender-equal attitudes can positively influence parental leave uptake and female employment. However, even in this case, it is difficult to assert that the causal relationship is unidirectional. Omidakhsh et al. (2020) found that alterations in national paternal leave policies influenced attitudes towards women's employment status, leading to a greater gender-equal direction. This suggests that not only does a gender-equal perspective



\* Pearson's  $r = -0.271$  ( $p$ -value  $> 0.05$ )



**Figure 4.** Gender equality in childcare leave and gender wage gap (2018). \*Pearson's  $r = -0.271$  ( $p$ -value  $> 0.05$ ).  
Source: OECD family database, OECD stat and International Network on Leave Policies & Research.

influence leave policies, but leave policies can also shape gender-equal perspectives, potentially leading to more equality in the labour market.

Therefore, these findings suggest that achieving gender equality in childcare leave policies may contribute to advancing greater gender equality in the labour market. In many countries, although parental leave is designed to have minimal gender differences, uptake remains concentrated among women. This underscores the importance of reducing the gap in leave uptake. The case of Portugal highlights that institutional incentives can effectively promote equality in leave uptake. Previous studies have also identified other strategies, such as implementing quotas for fathers' leave or increasing compensation levels, as effective means to promote greater gender equality in childcare leave uptake (O'Brien, 2009; Duvander and Johansson, 2012; Ekberg et al., 2013; Jurado-Guerrero and Muñoz-Comet, 2020). Various policy efforts are needed to encourage fathers to take parental leave.

Unlike the gender employment gap, the gender wage gap did not exhibit a correlation with gender equality in childcare leave. Several possible explanations can be considered for this, all of which stem from the fact that the gender wage gap is influenced by a more complex interplay of factors. Firstly, occupational and industrial differences between genders, which account for a significant portion of the gender wage gap (Blau and Kahn, 2017), may limit the extent to which egalitarian leave can have an impact. Alternatively, the determinants of the gender wage gap may be so multifaceted that a correlation could only emerge once other variables are controlled for. Furthermore, given that most countries have only recently begun to see a more gender-equal uptake of parental leave, it may take longer for its effects to become evident. Therefore, a more in-depth and comprehensive investigation would be valuable in further analysing the relationship between these two variables.

## Conclusion

This study aimed to examine the extent of gender equality in childcare leave policies in various countries and analyse its relationship with equality in labour market outcomes. Unlike most previous studies that mainly focused on institutional aspects, this study included not only the institutional gap but also the take-up gap as variables to measure the gender equality of leave policies, considering the significance of practical implementation and usage of the leave system. The results of measuring gender equality in leave policies across 21 countries show that the gap between genders in the institutional aspect between countries is relatively small whereas the gap between genders in actual uptake displays significant variation within countries. Some countries that do not exhibit a significant duration gap in childcare leave still display a large uptake gap, such as Austria, Korea, France and Japan. The aggregated Z-score, which combines gender equality in both aspects, largely exhibits patterns similar to the country groups proposed by Esping-Andersen (1990). Scandinavian countries display a high level of gender equality in childcare leave policies, while English-speaking countries show a low level. However, compared to the moderate level observed in Continental European countries, Southern European countries show a different pattern, even though there is no consistent trend within them. It seems that later studies (Ferrera, 1996; Hantrais, 2004), which recognise Southern European countries as having distinct characteristics, are more consistent with the findings of this study than Esping-Andersen's (1990) classification of Southern Europe as part of the Conservative regime. Additionally, East Asian countries show a slightly low Z-score, and East European countries generally display the lowest level of gender equality.

It is found that the aggregated Z-score has a negative correlation with the gender FTE employment gap. Scandinavian countries generally exhibit relatively high levels of equality in childcare leave policies and low gender employment gaps. In contrast, English-speaking countries tend to have low levels of equality in childcare leave policies and high gender employment gaps. The others do not display the same direction within groups, but most countries that have a high Z-score tend to show a low FTE employment gap while those with a low Z-score tend to exhibit a high FTE employment gap. On the other hand, there is no significant relationship between the aggregated Z-score and the gender wage gap. These findings add an implication to previous literature that gender equality in leave policies may play a crucial role in ensuring that childcare leave functions as an effective measure to promote gender equality in the labour market.

This study has some limitations. Various factors affect labour market performance. Therefore, research controlling for other factors that may influence gender equality in the labour market (e.g. childcare services and related benefits, policies related to elderly care or labour market policies, educational attainment, legal protections against pay discrimination) is needed to accurately measure the relationship between gender equality in childcare leave policies and labour market outcomes. In addition, when comparing parental leave uptake between genders, the proportion of men among recipients is utilised in this study. However, it is known that fathers are likely to take shorter parental leave than mothers, even when both parents share the leave (Blum et al., 2023). Therefore, the share of leave days taken by fathers out of the total leave days taken by both genders would be a more precise way to measure gender equality in leave uptake. Currently, data on the share of uptake periods by gender remain limited. The use of the additive index for measuring gender equality in childcare leave is not without challenges, and caution is required when interpreting the results. Given the frequent changes in childcare leave policies and the variations in fathers' uptake levels across countries, the effects of gender equality in childcare leave should be monitored and evaluated over time.

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