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## Reducing the Motherhood Penalty in Greece: Lessons from Norway

*Manos MATSAGANIS ; Tone FLØTTEN ;  
Chrysa PAPALEXATOU ; Daphne NICOLITSAS & Bjorn DAPI*

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# Reducing the Motherhood Penalty in Greece: Lessons from Norway

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HELLENIC FOUNDATION FOR EUROPEAN & FOREIGN POLICY (ELIAMEP)  
49 Vasilissis Sofias Ave., 10676, Athens, Greece  
Tel.: +30 210 7257 110 | Fax: +30 210 7257 114 | [www.eliamep.gr](http://www.eliamep.gr) | [eliamep@eliamep.gr](mailto:eliamep@eliamep.gr)

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## **Manos MATSAGANIS**

Head, Greek and European Economy Programme, ELIAMEP;  
A. G. Leventis Foundation Senior Research Fellow;  
Professor, Polytechnic University, Milan

## **Tone FLØTTEN**

Senior Researcher, FAFO Institute for Labour and Social Research, Oslo

## **Chrysa PAPALEXATOU**

Research Fellow, Greek and European Economy Programme, ELIAMEP;  
European Institute, London School of Economics

## **Daphne NICOLITSAS**

Research Associate, Greek and European Economy Programme, ELIAMEP;  
Assistant Professor, University of Crete

## **Bjorn DAPI**

Researcher, FAFO Institute for Labour and Social Research, Oslo

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## Abstract

This paper draws on the emerging literature that has established that the employment rates and the earnings of men and women start to diverge once they have children, with women's labour market performance deteriorating, while that of men's left unaffected or even improving. This phenomenon has been dubbed *the motherhood penalty* (or *the child penalty*). The size of the penalty is affected by the choices parents make as regards employment and childcare, which in turn are affected by gender norms, instilled in women and men early in life, but also by public policies aiming to establish a better work-life balance and help working mothers and fathers combine bringing up a child with pursuing a career. The paper reviews cultural norms and institutional arrangements as potential determinants of mothers' employment in two polar cases: Greece (where female employment is low, and child penalties large) compared to Norway (where female employment is high, and child penalties are virtually non-existent). The paper concludes with a list of policy recommendations, inspired by our understanding of the gradual emergence of family-friendly work-life policies in Norway, and informed by our awareness of constraints facing policy makers in Greece.

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## 1. Introduction

Low female employment resembles an underused asset, which is why raising it is a prerequisite for higher living standards at personal and national level. In several countries in Europe and beyond, the scope for raising total employment by mobilising inactive women is considerable. In Greece, the female employment rate has risen significantly over the last four decades, from 35.8% in 1981 to 59.9% in 2024 (in the 20-64 age group)<sup>1</sup>. Institutional reforms (e.g. in family law), and the favourable economic conditions created by Greece's accession to the European Union, both in the early 1980s, greatly facilitated women's labour market participation in the country. Still, female employment in Greece is the second lowest in the EU (above Italy), and lags far behind the EU average (70.8% in 2024). Also, the gender employment gap, although narrower than in the past, is as large as 18.8 percentage points, compared to 10.0 in the EU. In Norway, the female employment rate in the 20-64 age group was 77.4% in 2024, and the gender employment gap 5.1 percentage points<sup>2</sup>.

Employed women differ from their male counterparts in terms of pay. In 2018 (latest year for which detailed data are available<sup>3</sup>), the unadjusted gender pay gap, defined as the percentage difference between women's and men's mean gross hourly earnings, was lower in Greece (10.7%) than in the EU as a whole (14.4%). In Norway, the unadjusted gender pay gap was 13.2%.

However, in a context of low female employment, high-skilled women tend to self-select into work, while lower-skilled are less likely to be in employment. As a result of that, in Greece employed women have on average more productive characteristics, and work in better-paying segments of the labour market, than employed men. Taking such differences into account, that is comparing wages of women and men with similar characteristics, raised the *adjusted* gender pay gap to 11.7% in 2018. In contrast, in the EU as a whole, adjusting for characteristics lowered the gender pay gap to 11.3%. In Norway, the adjusted gender pay gap was 8.4% (Pérez-Julián and Leythienne 2023).

Note that the adjustment, based on firm-level data, accounts for differences in demographics (age, region of residence) and productive potential of individual workers (education, work experience, occupation, sector of economic activity, firm size, type of contract, working schedule), but does not consider marital status or household composition, including the presence and number of children.

The omission is crucial. An emerging literature<sup>4</sup> has established that employment rates and earnings levels of men and women start to diverge once they have children, with women's labour market performance deteriorating, while that of men's being unaffected, or even somewhat improving. This phenomenon has been dubbed *the child penalty*, applying to employment probabilities, hours of work, wage rates, and

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<sup>1</sup> Data from EIStat (Labour Force Survey annual time series since 1981).

<sup>2</sup> Data from Eurostat (Employment and activity by sex and age - annual data).

<sup>3</sup> Estimates of the gender pay gap rely on data from the 2018 Structure of Earnings Survey, conducted every four years. Data from the 2022 wave had not been released at the time of writing (March 2025).

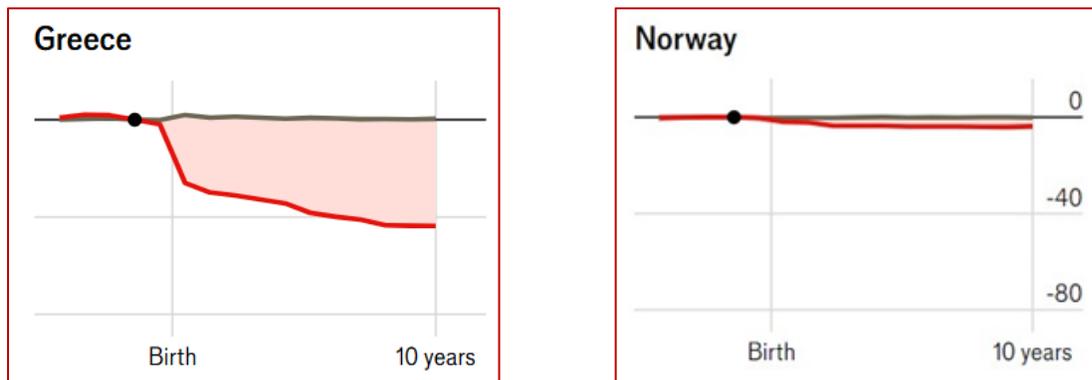
<sup>4</sup> To cite a few landmark studies: Anderson et al. (2002), Blau & Kahn (2013), Blau & Kahn (2017), Goldin (2006), Goldin (2014), Goldin (2024), Goldin et al. (2022), Kleven, Landais, Posch, Steinhauer & Zweimüller (2019), Kleven, Landais & Leite-Mariante (2024).

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annual earnings. Furthermore, the proportion of the gender gap in employment and earnings that can be explained by the child penalty has increased from 40% in 1980 to 80% 2013 (Kleven, Landais & Søgaaard 2019). In view of that, individual careers should be observed over time in order to identify the points at which changes in individual circumstances result in gender gaps in employment and pay, a method known as *event study approach*.

As it turns out, in Greece there seems to be no child penalty for men, while women's employment decreases by as much as 37.9% when the first child arrives. This is in line with the experience of other South European countries, such as Spain (38.2%), or Italy (32.9%). In contrast, the child penalty is significantly lower in Denmark (14.1%) and Sweden (8.9%), while it is negligible in Norway (3.3%)<sup>5</sup> (Kleven, Landais & Leite-Mariante 2024, pp. 55-57). This is shown in Figure 1 below.

Figure 1: The child penalty in Greece and Norway



Source: *The Economist* "How motherhood costs careers" (30 January 2024), based on results from Kleven, Landais & Leite-Mariante (2024).

The evidence suggests that the child penalty is primarily associated with a reduction in mothers' employment, either in terms of numbers employed or of hours of work, rather than with a reduction in earnings (per hour) of those who continue to work:

*"The precise facts about the size of the penalty and how much of the total difference in earnings by gender it accounts for depend on the country, the years of the data, and the estimation procedure. But the weight of the evidence is that the earnings of women plummet with the event of a birth and do not recover. Furthermore, most of the change comes from a reduction in hours of work or in participation, rather than*

<sup>5</sup> Note that there are exceptions to the rule: the child penalty is lower in Portugal (15.5%), than in Iceland (19.9%), while it is higher in Finland (42.6%) than anywhere in South Europe. See Kleven, Landais & Leite-Mariante (2024, pp. 55-57).

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from a reduction in earnings per hour, although that factor contributes somewhat.” (Goldin 2024, pp. 1530-1531).

What explains the child penalty? It is worth quoting at some length a recent study by Andresen & Nix (2022), who summarized the “five common explanations for the child penalty” as follows:

*“First, only women can give birth, and generally only the woman gives birth breastfeeds. Giving birth is a major health shock that can have consequences for productivity and earnings. While most health shocks from pregnancy and birth are concentrated in the 6 months after birth, some have longer-term consequences. Time spent with the child while breastfeeding and time at home with the child while recovering from giving birth may also cause the birth mother to spend more time with and grow more attached to the child and make her the default caregiver, with long-term earnings consequences. Second, households may specialize after birth since women often make less than their husbands and thus may have a comparative advantage in household work. Third, women may enjoy spending time with children more than men. Fourth, couples may default to traditional gender norms when deciding who should bear the costs of child-rearing. Fifth, employers may discriminate against mothers.” (Andresen & Nix 2022, pp. 972-973).*

Rather ingeniously, the authors set out to disentangle these explanations, and to identify the relative weight of alternative drivers of the child penalty, by comparing the labour market trajectories of three types of parents: heterosexual, adopting, and same-sex couples. Their results provide evidence against the first two of the five explanations for the child penalty. On the one hand, the strong similarity of child penalties for adopting and heterosexual couples (around 20% to 25%), compared to the lower (10%) and far more equally shared child penalties of mothers in same-sex couples, “demonstrate that maternal health shocks related to childbirth and pregnancy are unlikely to be driving the child penalty, although the short-term differences between mothers in same-sex couples suggest a potentially small role for the costs of birth in the first 2 years” (Andresen & Nix 2022, p. 974). Moreover, they find little evidence in support of the hypothesis that mothers and fathers may have a comparative advantage in household work and in the labour market respectively<sup>6</sup>. That leaves differences between mothers and fathers in preferences for childcare, traditional gender norms, and discrimination by employers, as the main explanations, although their data did not allow them to distinguish between those three factors (Andresen & Nix 2022, p. 974).

The motherhood penalty is likely to be larger when the child needs greater attention: a recent study of parents’ choices as regards work and care based on data in Norway showed that caring for children with disabilities has a negative effect on mothers’ labour market participation, working hours and labour income (Wondemu et al. 2022).

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<sup>6</sup> The notion that women specialise in (unpaid) care work, and men in (paid) market work, was first formulated by Becker (1985) in his theory of “the sexual division of labor”. Note that, analogously to David Ricardo’s classical theory, for women to have a comparative advantage in housework they do not have to be more efficient at it than men: the theory holds if, relative to men, women are less inefficient at housework than they are at market work. Needless to add, there is very little evidence in support of either of these assertions.

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Furthermore, external demands for parental involvement may reinforce gender bias: a field study found that schools in the US tend to call the mother more often than the father for school-related requests, even when the father has signalled his availability (Buzard et al. 2024).

To assess the significance of cultural norms as potential determinants of mothers' employment in Greece in comparison to Norway, the next section draws on opinion survey data. This is then followed by an analysis of the institutional arrangements that facilitate work-life balance in the two countries. After a brief discussion of the joint role of norms and institutions in shaping parents' choices as regards paid work and childcare, the paper concludes with a summary of the main findings and a short list of policy recommendations.

## 2. Cultural norms

The channels through which gender norms, instilled in women and men early in life, affect parents' choices as regards employment and childcare are well established. Women whose mother did not work, or in societies where working mothers are frowned upon, are more likely to abstain from the labour market and engage in unpaid care once they have children (Kleven, Landais, Posch, Steinhauer & Zweimüller 2019). Notably, the same transition mechanism does not seem to operate in the case of men: in their study of Denmark, Kleven, Landais & Sjøgaard (2019) find that child penalties are transmitted through generations from parents to daughters but not to sons.

Opinion surveys provide evidence on the strength or weakness of such norms in society.

A recent Eurobarometer survey<sup>7</sup> on gender stereotypes found that in Greece traditional norms remain well entrenched. As many as 70% of respondents in Greece “totally agreed” or “tended to agree” with the statement: “All in all, family life suffers when the mother has a full-time job”. In the EU as a whole, 51% did<sup>8</sup>. Still, traditional norms seem to be on the retreat. The share of respondents agreeing with the same statement 10 years earlier had been 75% in Greece and 60% in the EU as a whole<sup>9</sup>.

Eurobarometer surveys do not extend to Norway. Nonetheless, when (in 2008) respondents in Norway were asked to respond to a comparable statement (“A child of preschool age is likely to be negatively affected if the mother is in paid employment”), 60% strongly disagreed while another 20% disagreed (Kitterød & Teigen 2021).

Another question in the 2024 Eurobarometer survey directly tackled the difficulty of reconciling work and family responsibilities, and the dilemma that couples face when they have to choose. In Greece, 48% of respondents thought that “women should give priority to their family responsibilities over their career” (compared to 34% in the EU as a whole)<sup>10</sup>.

In contrast, in a 2019 survey conducted in Norway, 73% of respondents strongly agreed that “women have the same need for a professional career as men”, while another 17% partly agreed (Kitterød & Teigen 2021).

Participants to the 2024 Eurobarometer survey were also asked to state whether they agreed or disagreed with the following statement: “If the father’s pay is lower than that of the mother, he is the one who should give up work to look after the children, if a family decides one parent has to do so”. In Greece, 40% “totally agreed” or “tended to agree” with this statement; in the EU as a whole, 51% did<sup>11</sup>. Again, the influence of traditional norms seems to have grown weaker over time: in a previous Eurobarometer

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<sup>7</sup> Special Eurobarometer 545: Gender stereotypes (fieldwork: January-February 2024).

<sup>8</sup> Special Eurobarometer 545, question QD4.1.

<sup>9</sup> Special Eurobarometer 428: Gender equality (fieldwork: November-December 2014).

<sup>10</sup> Special Eurobarometer 545, question QD5.1.

<sup>11</sup> Special Eurobarometer 545, question QD4.4.

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survey<sup>12</sup>, conducted in 2009, the share of those agreeing with the same statement in Greece and in the EU as a whole had been 23% and 48% respectively.

In the same survey, women in Greece were significantly more likely to agree that, if the mother earned more, and if the couple decided that one of them should give up work to look after the children, it should be the father: the share of women vs men agreeing with the statement was 46% vs 34%. On the contrary, in the EU as a whole, there was little difference in responses: 51% for women vs 50% for men. In Greece, the share agreeing was greatest (57%) among women aged 25-39, and lowest among men of the same age group (29%)<sup>13</sup>.

On the other hand, attitudes to parental leave appear to be a lot more relaxed, both in Greece and the EU as a whole. In Greece, a large majority of respondents (84%) agreed that “taking parental leave is enriching for a father”<sup>14</sup>, while an equally large majority disagreed that “men taking parental leave show a lack of ambition for their career”<sup>15</sup> (82%). That was actually higher than the EU average (81% and 77% respectively).

Unlike Eurobarometer, other surveys provide direct evidence on both countries. Data from the World Values Survey and the European Values Survey, jointly conducted in 2017-2022<sup>16</sup>, revealed that clear majorities in both countries disagreed that “pre-school children suffer when their mother works”. Nonetheless, opposition to that view was stronger in Norway, where 74% of respondents “disagreed” or “strongly disagreed” with the statement, than in Greece, where 59% did. Furthermore, the share of those disagreeing strongly was significantly higher in Norway (54%) than it was in Greece (13%)<sup>17</sup>.

On a related point, in Norway 83% of respondents “strongly disagreed” and a further 9% “disagreed” with the view that men should be hired ahead of women if jobs are scarce. Responses in Greece were more evenly balanced: only 14% “strongly disagreed”, and another 28% “disagreed”, compared to 24% who said they “agreed”, and 13% who “strongly disagreed”. Interestingly, as many as 19% of respondents in Greece neither agreed nor disagreed that men should have more right to a job than women if jobs are scarce, while only 4% were uncertain about that in Norway<sup>18</sup>.

The European Social Survey also covers both countries. Round 11, conducted in 2023/2024<sup>19</sup>, included the following question: “Is it bad or good for family life if equal numbers of women and men are in paid work?” In Norway, 44% of respondents thought it was “very good” (6 on a scale from 0 to 6), and another 27% that it was “fairly good” (5 on a scale from 0 to 6), if equal numbers of women and men worked; in Greece, the corresponding shares were 23% and 17% respectively. The total share of those taking a negative view

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<sup>12</sup> Special Eurobarometer 326: Gender equality (fieldwork: September-October 2009).

<sup>13</sup> Men aged 55+ also had the same agreement rate (29%) as men aged 25-39. See Special Eurobarometer 545 Country factsheet: Greece.

<sup>14</sup> Special Eurobarometer 545, question QD4.2.

<sup>15</sup> Special Eurobarometer 545, question QD4.4.

<sup>16</sup> EVS/WVS (2022) European Values Study and World Values Survey: Joint EVS/WVS 2017-2022 Dataset. GESIS Data Archive, Cologne. ZA7505. Dataset Version 5.0.0.

<sup>17</sup> EVS/WVS (2022), question D061.

<sup>18</sup> EVS/WVS (2022), question C001.

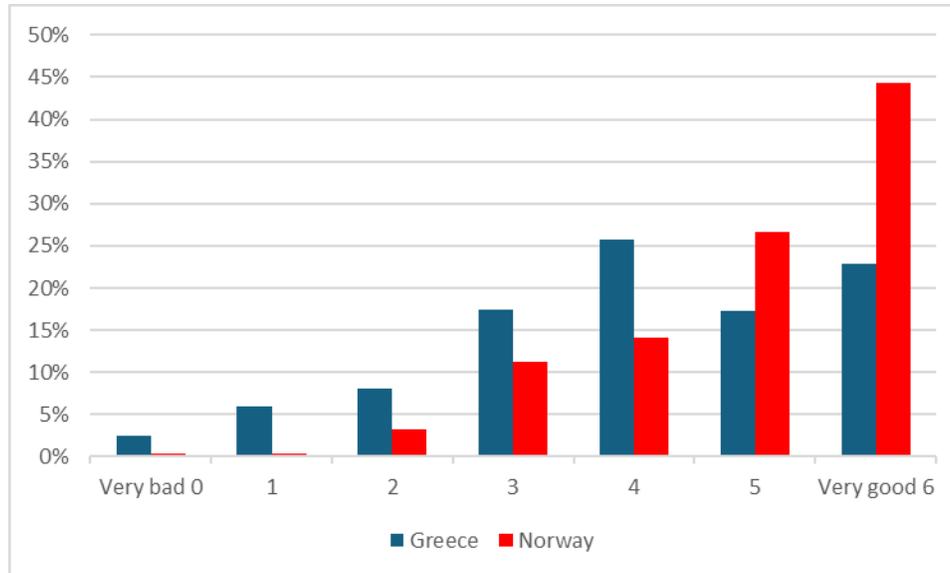
<sup>19</sup> ESS Round 11: European Social Survey European Research Infrastructure (ESS ERIC) (2024) ESS11 - integrated file, edition 2.0. Norwegian Agency for Shared Services in Education and Research.

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of employment rate parity between men and women (0 or 1 or 2 on a scale from 0 to 6) was 3% in Norway vs. 17% in Greece<sup>20</sup>.

The distribution of responses to that question in the two countries is shown in Figure 2 below.

**Figure 2: Bad or good for family life if equal numbers of women and men are in paid work**



*Source: ESS11 (2023/2024).*

<sup>20</sup> ESS11 (2023/2024), question *eqwrkbg*.

### 3. Institutional arrangements

In this section we review how work-life balance policies in the two countries help working mothers and fathers combine bringing up a child with pursuing a career.

#### 3.1. The EU Work-Life Balance Directive

Governments in Europe and beyond now accept that public policy ought to facilitate the reconciliation of work and care responsibilities<sup>21</sup>. Indeed, “work-life balance” features as Principle 9 of the European Pillar of Social Rights, jointly proclaimed by the European Parliament, the European Council on behalf of all Member States, and the European Commission, at the Gothenburg Summit in November 2017. Principle 9 reads as follows:

*“Parents and people with caring responsibilities have the right to suitable leave, flexible working arrangements and access to care services. Women and men shall have equal access to special leaves of absence in order to fulfil their caring responsibilities and be encouraged to use them in a balanced way.”*

Following the proclamation of the European Pillar of Social Rights, the European Commission worked on a Work-Life Balance Directive as one of the actions to further implement the Pillar principles. The Directive proposal was adopted in June 2019<sup>22</sup>; Member States had three years to implement the new Directive in national law. The new rules were not intended to replace but rather to supplement the rights established under a past Directive<sup>23</sup>, according to which female workers had the right to a minimum of 14 weeks of maternity leave, of which at least two being compulsory, compensated at least at the national sick pay level. The new rules came into force in August 2022. The key provisions of the new Directive were:

- *Paternity leave*: Working fathers are entitled to at least 10 working days of paternity leave around the time of birth of the child. Paternity leave must be compensated at least at the level of sick pay.
- *Parental leave*: Each parent is entitled to at least four months of parental leave, of which two months is paid and non-transferable. Parents can request to take their leave in a flexible form, either full-time, part-time, or in segments.

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<sup>21</sup> For a summary of paternity leave entitlements in Europe, and in other advanced economies, see Notre Europe (2022) and OECD (2024) respectively. For a comparative analysis, see Adema et al. (2020).

<sup>22</sup> Directive (EU) 2019/1158 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 20 June 2019 on work-life balance for parents and carers and repealing Council Directive 2010/18/EU. Official Journal of the European Union L 188/79 of 12 July 2019.

<sup>23</sup> Council Directive 92/85/EEC of 19 October 1992 on the introduction of measures to encourage improvements in the safety and health at work of pregnant workers and workers who have recently given birth or are breastfeeding.

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- *Carers' leave*: All workers providing personal care or support to a relative or person living in the same household have the right to at least five working days of carers' leave per year.
- *Flexible working arrangements*: All working parents with children of up to at least eight years old and all carers have the right to request reduced working hours, flexible working hours, and flexibility in the place of work.

As seen shortly, the 2022 Work-Life Balance Directive has resulted in new legislation in Greece, aimed to bring national law in line with European law, extending social rights and introducing new ones.

### 3.2. Parental leave

Economic theory (see for instance Boeri & van Ours 2021) predicts that mandatory parental leave will have a positive effect on the labour supply of mothers at the extensive margin (i.e. it will result in more mothers being employed), though it may have a negative effect at the intensive margin (i.e. it may cause working mothers to reduce their hours of work).

Specifically, the birth of a child affects the preferences of parents for market work:

*"Suppose that childbirth increases, at least temporarily, the opportunity cost of market work for mothers. This will result in an increase in the reservation wage of women. In the initial weeks after childbirth, this reservation wage may then be higher than the wage offered by the job held by the mother. As the child ages, however, the reservation wage is bound to decline, since the time spent by the mother with the child is more valuable when children are younger. Thus, at some date or age of the child, the mother will be willing to go back to work in her initial position, as her reservation wage falls below the market wage." (Boeri & van Ours 2021, p. 185)*

The availability of parental leave changes the calculus:

*"If the parental leave is long enough, then the mother will take the leave [...] and then go back to her original job. If instead the parental leave is not sufficiently long or is not offered at all, then the mother will quit her old job. New jobs obtained immediately after maternity periods are typically paid less than the old jobs. Then the mother will resume working later, if there is no mandatory parental leave. Thus, quite paradoxically, mothers may spend more time not working without parental leave than with it." (Boeri & van Ours 2021, pp. 185-186)*

Moreover, parental leave increases the value of a job for women, further boosting female labour supply:

*"It is plausible that at some stage women consider the option to take parental leave well before actually having a child. This creates an additional labor supply-enhancing mechanism: mandatory parental leave increases the value of a job for women, as when accepting a job offer, she anticipates that there will be higher utility gains after childbirth. Hence, the labor supply of women, at least measured in terms of headcounts rather than hours per worker, is enhanced by mandatory parental leave." (Boeri & van Ours 2021, p. 186)*

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More broadly, parental leave prevents the loss of human capital:

*“This longer period outside work may also hamper career advancement of women and induce a deterioration of the skills of mothers before they return to work (Rønsen & Sundström 2002). This explains why employers typically offer parental leave even when they are not legally compelled to do so. Yet the leave offered by employers is likely to be too short for those mothers who have stronger preferences for staying with their children. Government intervention can prolong the leave, preventing losses of human capital for these women. Indeed, governments face a different trade-off than individual employers do. Private benefits of parental leave are generally lower than social benefits. For governments, the loss of human capital associated with inadequate parental leave is more important than for the firms involved.” (Boeri & van Ours 2021, p. 186)*

Nonetheless, whether parental leave induces mothers to spend more time working than they would do in the absence of parental leave (formally: whether the positive effects at the extensive margin are stronger than the negative ones at the intensive margin) remains uncertain:

*“Parental leave potentially has complex effects on labor supply. On the one hand, it is an entitlement that one can only qualify for by having a job in the first place. And, by giving workers the right to their job back after taking the leave, the entitlement raises the job prospects of those who have left the labor force after the birth of a child. These effects suggest that parental leave would increase women’s labor force participation rate. On the other hand, parental leave mandates may encourage women to stay out of the labor force longer than they otherwise would. In addition, such mandates may raise the expected cost of employing women of childbearing age, thus potentially lowering their wages and possibly deterring employers from hiring them. Thus, parental leave has theoretically ambiguous effects on women’s labor supply.” (Blau & Kahn 2013, p. 252)*

Ambiguity at a theoretical level opens the issue to empirical analysis of the factors at play in a specific place and time. Recent research of the effects of parental leave legislation on female employment and earnings in high-income countries has found that the positive and negative effects may offset each other: Olivetti & Petrongolo (2017, p. 228) found “little compelling evidence that extended parental leave rights have an overall positive effect on female outcomes”, while Kleven, Landais, Posch, Steinhauer & Zweimüller (2024 p. 125) concluded that parental leave “has a negative effect on gender gaps in the short run but a precisely estimated zero effect in the long run.”

The findings of a very recently published study (Bailey et al. 2025) reinforce the scepticism. From July 2004, California’s Paid Family Leave Act offered mothers six weeks of partially paid leave to bond with a newborn. The results suggest that the law had no overall effect on mothers’ labour outcomes, while it appears to have actually reduced employment and earnings for first-time mothers.

It is important to note that in the studies reviewed above parental leave often translates to maternity leave alone. Therefore, it is hardly surprising that the long-run effects on gender employment gaps are not found to be large. Evidence from Norway, Sweden and Denmark suggests that when paternity leave is generous, and cannot be transferred to the mother, child penalties are much lower and gender employment gaps much narrower (Kleven, Landais & Leite-Mariante 2024; Ellingsæter 2024).

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Furthermore, while it is possible that maternity leave policies may reinforce traditional gender roles, unintentionally hindering progress towards closing the gender gaps in employment and earnings, labour demand responses are often crucial. Depending on policy design, maternity leave may be costly for employers. In view of that, employers may react to maternity leave entitlements by hiring fewer female employees if perceived to be likely to have a child at some point in the future.

In fact, recent EU legislation on paternity leave, following longer-standing practice in Nordic and other European countries<sup>24</sup>, may be viewed as an attempt to neutralise possible discriminatory responses of employers:

*“As mandatory parental leave is costly for employers, it is likely to have negative effects on the demand for women (Ruhm 1998). It is precisely to avoid the negative effects of mandatory parental leave on employment and wages of women that more and more countries are introducing mandated or incentivized paternity leave. The purpose of these schemes is to reduce asymmetries between men and women in terms of labor costs in the perceptions of employers, avoiding preferential treatment for men in hiring policies.” (Boeri & van Ours 2021, p. 187)*

There is evidence that mandatory non-transferable paternity leave leads to better labour market outcomes for mothers. The introduction in 2006 of a “daddy quota” in Quebec, Canada (offering the choice of five weeks leave at 70% of earnings or three weeks leave at 75% of earnings), not only raised take up of paternity leave by fathers<sup>25</sup>, but also substantially increased mothers’ employment as well. As a result of the “daddy quota”:

*“Quebec mothers exposed to the policy are 7% more likely to participate in the labor force, 5-6% more likely to work full-time and 4-5% less likely to work part-time.” (Dunatchik & Özcan 2019)*

As the example of Quebec Parental Insurance Plan demonstrates, paternity leave is more likely to be effectively taken up when it cannot be transferred to the mother. In fact, making the fathers’ quota of parental leave available on a “use-it-or-lose-it” basis caused the average number of days of leave in Iceland to rise from 39 in 2001 to 103 in 2008 (Moss 2014).

Also, demand for paternity leave increases with the rate of earnings replacement (Shand 2018). The share of fathers taking up paternity leave in Estonia rose from 14% of eligible fathers in 2007 to 50% in 2008 after paternity leave benefit was raised to 100% of previous earnings (Addati et al. 2014).

As shown below, non-transferrable paternity leave has a long-established tradition in Norway, and has been recently legislated in Greece, while maternity leave in both countries is more generous than in the US.

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<sup>24</sup> Typically, paternity leave entitlements are rather modest at first, but are subsequently made more generous. For instance, in Spain, a non-transferable paternity leave (13 days at full pay), introduced in 2007, was extended to 4 weeks in 2017, 5 weeks in 2018, 8 weeks in 2019, 12 weeks in 2020, and to 16 weeks in 2021 (equal to the duration of maternity leave). See de Quinto et al. (2021).

<sup>25</sup> Patnaik (2019) estimated that exposure to the policy increased take up by 53 percentage points and increased leave duration by 3 weeks on average.

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### 3.2.1. Parental leave in Norway<sup>26</sup>

Parental leave in Norway, regulated under the National Insurance (*Folketrygdløven*) Act §14, comes in two combinations of duration and pay:

- 49 weeks at full pay, or
- 59 weeks at 80% of full pay.

Parental leave is divided between mothers and fathers (or co-parents in same-sex couples) according to the following rules:

- Mothers must take 3 weeks of leave before the expected due date, and at least 6 weeks after birth, unless they receive a medical clearance that they can return to work earlier.
- Fathers or co-parents are entitled to a quota of at least 15 weeks (if using the full-pay option) or 19 weeks (if using the 80% pay option). This is a “use-it-or-lose-it” portion of the leave. If the father or co-parent does not take this leave, the main rule is that it cannot be transferred to the mother.

The rest of the leave (18-26 weeks, depending on the duration-pay combination chosen) can be shared between mother and the father or co-parent as they like. Under certain circumstances<sup>27</sup>, the mother can take the father or co-parent quota. Since 2014, over 60% of fathers have taken the full paternity quota or more, even though the father or co-parent quota has been extended several times between. Of those who became fathers in the year 2020, 50% took exactly the paternity quota, while 17% took a longer leave (Evensen et al. 2023; Arnesen 2024)<sup>28</sup>.

In addition to this, the father or co-parent is entitled to 2 weeks of leave to assist the mother giving birth. If the parents do not live together, another person assisting the mother may apply for this leave. Many employees have a collectively agreed right to full pay during these two weeks.

Furthermore, parents can choose to take leave part-time while working part-time, allowing them to extend their total time at home. Leave can also be postponed or spread over a longer period if agreed upon with the employer.

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<sup>26</sup> Note that the information on all Norwegian policies provided in this paper – on parental leave, flexible working arrangements, carer’s leave, childcare provision, and child benefits – is based on material gathered from official websites (including [www.nav.no](http://www.nav.no), [www.arbeidstilsynet.no](http://www.arbeidstilsynet.no), [www.regjeringen.no](http://www.regjeringen.no), [www.pbl.no](http://www.pbl.no), [www.lovdatabase.no](http://www.lovdatabase.no), [www.ssb.no](http://www.ssb.no), [www.skatteetaten.no](http://www.skatteetaten.no), and [www.udir.no](http://www.udir.no)).

<sup>27</sup> If the father or co-parent is unable to take care of the child due to a certified medical condition, or has not earned enough or worked long enough to be eligible for parental benefit, or is unemployed or a full-time student, or has declined to take parental leave, is absent or unknown, or the parents are separated shortly before or right after birth, and the child lives with the mother.

<sup>28</sup> In neighbouring Sweden, men’s use of gender-neutral parental leave rose from 6% in the mid-1980s to 25% in the mid-2010s, while men’s share of care leave fluctuated between 32% and 40% since its introduction (Boye et al. 2015).

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Parental leave benefits are based on parents' income prior to the leave period. The calculation varies according to employment status. In the case of employees, freelancers and self-employed, parental leave benefit is equal to the average earnings of the parent over the last 3 calendar months before the leave. In the case of social assistance or unemployment benefit recipients, parental leave benefit is equal to the value of the social benefit received. In addition, specific rules apply to fishermen, and those enlisted in military service.

To be entitled to parental leave benefit, parents must fulfil three criteria:

- must be a member of the National Insurance scheme;
- must have had an income (from work, social benefits or military service) for at least 6 of the last 10 months prior to the start of parental leave;
- must have earned at least 50% of the National Insurance basic amount<sup>29</sup>.

The Labour and Welfare Administration (*NAV*) bears the cost of the parental leave up to an income level of 6 times the basic amount<sup>30</sup>. Some high earners are covered by a collective agreement, with employers paying the difference between parental leave benefit (capped at 6 times the National Insurance basic amount) and actual earnings. For example, this is the case of public sector workers. Others receive less-than-full compensation for lost earnings in excess of 6 times the basic amount.

Parental leave in Norway comes with strong legal protections. In the case of employees, parents have a right to return to the same position as prior to parental leave. If this is not possible, they must be offered an equivalent position with similar terms. Parents on leave are protected against dismissal: employers cannot terminate their contract due to parental leave. If an employee is dismissed during or shortly after parental leave, the employer must prove that the termination is unrelated to the leave. Moreover, seniority and benefits are maintained during parental leave. Pregnant employees also have legal protections, including the right to pregnancy-related leave before birth.

Job protection in Norway is universal: employees in private firms enjoy the same job protection rights as public sector workers, while part-time employees enjoy the same rights as full-time employees. There are two partial exceptions to that: self-employed workers, and temporary employees. In the latter case, while parents on temporary contracts have the same right to parental leave as all other employees, parental leave does not automatically extend the contract. If the contract was set to expire during parental leave, the employer is not obliged to renew it. If non-renewal is due to discrimination related to pregnancy or parental leave, which is illegal, the parent can file a complaint with the Equality and Anti-Discrimination Ombudsman.

Parents not entitled to parental leave benefits (for instance, students and others expecting a child not having worked at least 6 of the last 10 months) can choose to apply for a lump-sum grant, usually paid to the mother. In 2024, the lump sum grant was set at 92,648 NOK (€7,769) per child.

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<sup>29</sup> The National Insurance basic amount (*Grunnbeløpet*) was set at 124,028 NOK (€10,400) on 1 May 2024.

<sup>30</sup> Currently, 744,168 NOK (€62,400).

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### 3.2.2. Parental leave in Greece

Parental leave entitlements in Greece differ by occupational group.

Public sector employees are entitled to 5 months of standard maternity leave. Its duration is longer in the case of large families (by 2 months for each child after the third), and in that of multiple births (by 1 month for each child after the first). While on standard maternity leave, mothers working in the public sector are entitled to full pay.

Private sector employees are entitled to 4 months of standard maternity leave. Earnings are replaced in full (up to a cap of €2,374 per month) according to the following rule:

- The Social Insurance Agency (*ΕΦΚΑ*) pays maternity leave benefit at 50% of reference earnings (i.e. the presumptive earnings of the insurance class to which the employee is placed) for 4 months; to qualify for maternity benefit, the employee is required to have a contribution record of at least 200 days over the last 2 years.
- The employer pays the equivalent of 30 days of full earnings (15 days in the case of employees who have been with the firm for less than one year); the employer is allowed to deduct maternity leave benefit (paid by *ΕΦΚΑ*) from the amount paid to the employee.
- The Public Employment Service (*ΔΥΠΑ*) pays supplementary maternity benefit equal to the difference between earnings lost and maternity benefit paid; to qualify for supplementary maternity benefit (paid by *ΔΥΠΑ*), the employee is required to have already been in receipt of maternity benefit (paid by *ΕΦΚΑ*).

Self-employed workers are not entitled to maternity leave as such, nor are they required to prove that they refrain from working to qualify for maternity benefit. Own-account workers and liberal professionals are entitled to 4 months of maternity benefit, at €150 and €200 a month respectively. A maternity allowance, paid as a lump sum, is also available for farmers (€487). Lastly, mothers who can prove that they work regularly, but without insurance coverage, living in households with a monthly income below €587, may be eligible for maternity benefit equal to €440, paid in two instalments.

In addition, a special maternity protection leave, paid at a lower rate, is available for working mothers. In November 2022, its duration was set at 9 months in the case of private sector employees. In April 2024, coverage was extended to farmers and the self-employed (for children born after 24 September 2023), also for a period of 9 months. Special maternity protection leave is unpaid, as far as employers are concerned. Earnings replacement is provided by a flat benefit, at the statutory minimum wage rate (currently €830 per month), paid by the Public Employment Service (*ΔΥΠΑ*). Mothers are allowed to transfer up to 7 (out of a total of 9) months of special maternity protection leave to fathers. Anecdotal evidence suggests this happens rarely, if ever.

Lastly, since June 2021, working fathers are entitled to 14 days of paid leave (for children born after 19 June 2021), on full pay, paid for by the employer. Paternity leave is available to all employees (though not

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for the self-employed); eligibility is not conditional on the contributory record of the worker concerned, nor on his marital or family status. Take up is believed to be low, although no data are available.

### 3.3. Flexible working arrangements

Working mothers wishing to combine career and family commitments may come up against several obstacles, some subtle. Goldin (2014) has found that in the US labour market, in sectors such as law or finance, pay rises non-linearly with working time, so that shorter work schedules are paid disproportionately less. When this is the case, opting for part-time employment or more generally fewer hours of work carries a hefty penalty in terms of pay, actively discouraging the time flexibility that working mothers prize after the arrival of a child. Faced with lower potential earnings, female workers in law or finance, particularly those with higher-earning spouses, often choose to give up working when they become mothers.

In those professions, when they give birth, working women are perceived by employers to signal that they are on the “mommy track,” prioritising flexible or reduced work hours over career advancement. Employers’ views of working mothers as less committed to the job, in turn, cause them to be passed over for promotion, becoming a self-fulfilling prophecy (Ty Wilde *et al.*, 2010).

On the contrary, working time flexibility is less penalizing in other professions. In the US, hourly pay for pharmacists varies less with the length of the working day, as a result of which “female pharmacists with children often work part-time and remain in the labor force rather than exiting” (Goldin 2014, p. 1117).

More generally:

*“There are many occupations and sectors that have moved in the direction of less costly flexibility. Firms in many sectors, including healthcare, retail sales, banking, brokerage, and real estate, are making their employees better substitutes for each other and trying to convince their clients of that. When clients perceive there is a greater degree of substitutability among workers, a more linear payment schedule emerges.” (Goldin 2014, p. 1117)*

In contrast to the US, both Norway and Greece offer different institutional and cultural frameworks worth exploring.

#### 3.3.1. Flexible working arrangements in Norway

All employees in Norway, including parents, are entitled to flexible working arrangements if that does not cause significant inconvenience to the employer. Parents may for instance adjust working hours as needed during the day or week. Such flexible working arrangements can help ease time pressure related to dropping off and picking up children at/from daycare or school. Alternatively, parents may work more during certain periods, and take time off later in the year.

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In certain situations, parents also have a right to reduced working hours to look after a small child. It is important to stress that employers cannot deny flexible working hours or part-time, unless they have a good and concrete reason for doing so.

As of today, there is no general statutory right to work from home. Nevertheless, remote work is often practiced, in agreement with employers.

Working mothers with a working day schedule of 7 hours or more are entitled to a break of up to 1 hour per day on full pay to breastfeed their child, until the child is one year old. Many employees have extended rights to breastfeeding breaks (typically, two hours per day, until the child is two years old). Furthermore, breastfeeding mothers are entitled to workplace accommodations (such as protection from harmful substances) and, if necessary, reassignment if the work poses a risk to the child, or to the mother's milk production.

Employers also have a general obligation to facilitate the working environment for pregnant workers, so that neither the mother nor the foetus are exposed to health risks. This may involve exempting pregnant employees from heavy and hazardous duties, adjusting work tasks or reducing working hours. If adaptation or reassignment is not possible, and the work poses a risk to the foetus, the pregnant employee has the right to a temporary leave of absence. Pregnant employees in hazardous jobs receive the associated pregnancy leave benefit from the Labour and Welfare Administration (NAV), which provides income security during the period when the employee is unable to perform her regular work.

### 3.3.2. Flexible working arrangements in Greece

Working parents in Greece are entitled to shorter working schedules. In the public sector, they may work 2 hours a day less if the child is aged 0-2, or 1 hour a day less if the child is aged 2-4, for a period from the end of maternity leave to the child's fourth birthday (or longer in the case of single parents, disabled children, and large families). In the private sector, the working time reduction is 1 hour a day for 30 months, or 2 hours a day for 12 months followed by 1 hour for a further 6 months.

In accordance with the 2019 EU Work-Life Balance Directive, since June 2021 parents with a child aged 12 or below have the right to request flexible working arrangements, including work from home, provided they have been with the same employer for at least 6 months. Employers are required by law to consider the request and accept it or explain why they reject it within 1 month.

Anecdotal evidence suggests that employers in most small and medium-sized firms are extremely reluctant to concede employees flexible working arrangements. Larger firms tend to be more open to their employees' requests for flexible working arrangements.

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### 3.4. Carer's leave

This is often difficult to distinguish from maternity or paternity leave. Carer's leave is taken here to imply an entitlement to leave of absence for the care of a child beyond the immediate period after birth. Carer's leave is typically available over a longer time span, e.g. until the child is aged 8 (as is the case in Greece) or aged 12 (as is the case in Norway). Also, carer's leave may interact with flexible working arrangements, if parents are allowed to convert one entitlement into another.

#### 3.4.1. Carer's leave in Norway

Working parents in Norway have each a right to paid leave of absence up to 10 days each year to care of a child in need of medical attention, or if the child's caretaker is ill. If the parent takes care of more than two children, the right is extended to 15 days. Single parents have a right to twice the length, i.e. respectively 20 and 30 days of paid leave. The right applies until the child turns 12, unless the child has chronic or long-term illness or a disability. If this is the case, and the illness/disability leads to a significantly higher risk of absence from work to take care of the child, the right applies until the end of the year in which the child turns 18. To be entitled to care benefits from the employer, the child's illness must be documented with either self-certification (for short absences, of up to three days), or a medical certificate (for longer absences). Both permanent and temporary employees are entitled to carer's leave.

Carer's leave benefit is paid by employers, if the employment relation has lasted for at least 4 weeks. The benefit level is calculated in the same way as parental benefit (i.e. full compensation up to 6 times the basic amount, with some high earners being covered by collective agreements covering the excess amount). Employers may demand a refund from the National Insurance Scheme, if they have paid for more than 10 days' worth of carer's leave benefit to an employee within a calendar year. Employers get a full refund if they have paid carer's leave benefits to employees taking care of a chronically ill or disabled child.

Employees not entitled to carer's leave benefit from the employer may receive the benefit in question from the National Insurance Scheme. This also applies to freelancers and self-employed workers, subject to a 10-day waiting period (waived if the child is disabled or chronically ill).

When a child starts daycare or school, parents usually need to support the child in the initial period. There is no statutory right to a leave in such situations, but many collective agreements provide for parents' right to short-term leave, paid or unpaid. For example, municipal employees are granted 1 day off in connection with the start of school, and up to 3 paid days for the start of daycare (both on full pay). Moreover, public sector workers may be granted up to 12 days of paid leave for "important welfare reasons", of which the start of daycare or school are explicitly recognised. Some firms also grant employees short-term "welfare leave" as part of personnel policies, collective agreements or workplace agreements.

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Pregnant employees also have a right to paid leave to attend necessary prenatal check-ups with a doctor or midwife. This leave is paid in full by employers.

### 3.4.2. Carer's leave in Greece

Working parents of a child aged below 8 in Greece are entitled to 4 months of carer's leave, available to both parents, provided they have been with the same employer for at least 12 months. Carer's leave is unpaid as far as employers are concerned. Employees in private firms are eligible for carer's leave benefit equal to the statutory minimum wage, paid by the Public Employment Service (*ΔΥΠΑ*) for the first two months only.

In private firms, carer's leave entitlements may be converted to a shorter working schedule on the employee's request, with the employer's consent. Conversely, private sector workers eligible for a shorter working schedule may give it up in return of approximately 14 weeks of carer's leave on full earnings (paid by the employer). Fathers are ineligible if the mother is not in employment. Similarly, public sector employees foregoing their right to a shorter working schedule are eligible instead for 9 months of carer's leave on full earnings.

Further to main carer's leave, working parents are also entitled to paid leave of up to 10 days per year to care for a child in case of serious illness or admission to hospital, of up to 4 days per year to monitor a child's school performance, and of up to 2 days per year to attend to other child-related emergencies (such as accidents). In addition, working parents are entitled to unpaid leave of up to 6 days per year to care for a sick child, raised to 8 days per year for parents of two, and to 14 days per year for parents of three or more children.

There is evidence that carer's leave entitlements are overwhelmingly taken up by mothers, even when both parents are eligible. An analysis of data on 160,000 female workers and 170,000 male workers in the mid-2010s showed that while 16.0% of women took the main carer's leave, only 0.9% of men did (Karamessini & Symeonaki 2019). A similar pattern was observed as concerned other types of carer's leave.

### 3.5. Childcare provision

Economic theory predicts that in the absence of subsidized childcare, mothers may choose to either work longer hours to make up for the income loss associated with the payment of childcare costs (if such costs are fixed and relatively low), or not to work at all (if fixed childcare costs are too large). Therefore, subsidized childcare in the presence of fixed childcare costs is likely to have a positive effect on labour force participation (the extensive margin) and a negative effect on hours of work (the intensive margin). If, on the other hand, working mothers operate on variable rather than on fixed costs of childcare, for

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instance because they have to pay for a babysitter or nanny, subsidized childcare will increase not only the number of mothers working, but also their hours of work (Boeri & van Ours 2021, pp. 183-185).

Empirical studies based on microdata and cross-country data have shown that the effects of childcare subsidies on mothers' employment are significant, especially in countries like the United States and Canada where the cost of childcare is higher to start with<sup>31</sup>. Also, a recent report commissioned by the ILO has estimated that investing in universal childcare and affordable long-term care services could generate up to 280 million jobs globally by 2030, and a further 19 million by 2035 (Addati et al. 2022).

Nevertheless, other studies<sup>32</sup> provide a less optimistic view on the potential for childcare provision to raise female employment. In particular, a recent analysis of very large expansions of heavily subsidized childcare in Austria, based on detailed data covering the labour market and birth histories of Austrian workers from 1953 to 2017, found "a precisely estimated zero effect on mothers' careers, in the short run as well as in the long run" (Kleven, Landais, Posch, Steinhauer & Zweimüller 2024, p. 137).

Evidence from Norway points to the opposite direction: *Andresen & Havnes (2018) have shown that the expansion of childcare services for infants and toddlers in Norway (about which more below) has actually boosted the employment rate of cohabiting mothers from 63.4% in 2002 to 74.7% in 2008.*

Kleven, Landais, Posch, Steinhauer & Zweimüller (2024) argued that their findings point to the role of preferences and norms regarding maternal care:

*"An overwhelming majority of [Austrian] women (70-80%) report that they do not work because they have a preference for taking care of their children. Furthermore, we find only a marginally significant correlation between these reported preferences and the level of childcare provision. This indicates that expanding access to institutional childcare has not shifted the strong norms regarding maternal care."* (Kleven, Landais, Posch, Steinhauer & Zweimüller 2024, p. 141)

The availability of childcare provided by relatives (presumably free-of-charge) is known to contribute to that:

*"Family policies encouraging formal versus informal childcare can be rather ineffective in increasing the labor supply of women. Parents often trust their relatives (e.g., their own parents) more than outside childcare givers, especially when the child is very young."* (Boeri & van Ours 2021, pp. 186-187)

The design of policy may play an offsetting role here:

*"If not only formal but also informal childcare is subsidized, then a lower transfer would be sufficient to convince women to resume working soon after childbirth."* (Boeri & van Ours 2021, p. 187)

As seen below, the idea of informal care subsidies was recently taken up in Greece.

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<sup>31</sup> For recent reviews of the economic literature, see Olivetti & Petrongolo (2017), and Kleven, Landais, Posch, Steinhauer & Zweimüller (2024).

<sup>32</sup> For instance, those reviewed in Kleven, Landais, Posch, Steinhauer & Zweimüller (2024).

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Note that the benefits of universal access to affordable, high-quality childcare extend far beyond its effects on mothers' employment and earnings. A study of a policy reform in Spain lowering the age of eligibility for publicly provided universal pre-school from 4 to 3 years of age estimated a cost-benefit ratio of over 4 in the baseline scenario. The authors found that this result was mainly driven by the benefits of quality childcare for child development (i.e. the effects of improved skills on lifetime earnings). Gains in labour market outcomes for mothers (in terms of greater employment and reduced wage penalty) appeared to play a relatively minor role (van Huizen et al. 2019)<sup>33</sup>.

### 3.5.1. Childcare provision in Norway

All children in Norway are legally entitled to a daycare place. The right applies to children who turn one year old by the end of November in the year parents apply for a daycare place. The municipalities are responsible for assuring that the right is effective. Norway has one of the world's most inclusive childcare systems, with high participation rates (93.8% of all children aged 1-5 years in 2024). The rate of participation is lower for children born in lower-income families, or to parents of lower education, or to parents with an immigrant background, especially if they have recently arrived and/or are less than fluent in Norwegian.

The 2003 Daycare Agreement was an important milestone in the development of childcare in Norway. As female employment increased, a shortage of daycare facilities had begun to manifest itself since the 1970s. In 2003, approximately 30,000 children were on waiting lists for a place in daycare. In response to this, the Socialist Left Party proposed a daycare reform. The party received support for its proposal from the Labour Party, the Progress Party, and the Centre Party.

Eventually, the opposition and the then minority government reached a compromise, the main elements of which were (i) the expansion of daycare facilities, (ii) the equal treatment of public and private daycare centres, with a coordinated admission process for all, (iii) the reduction in user costs through the introduction of a cap on parental fees, and (iv) a stress on quality and diversity in childcare provision.

The reform aimed to ensure that all families who wanted a daycare place would be offered one by 2005. The national government took a greater responsibility for financing the establishment and operation of daycare centres, while it was mandated by law that municipalities must provide a sufficient number of daycare places.

The 2003 Daycare Agreement caused a large-scale expansion of daycare facilities. Private kindergarten providers accounted for approximately two out of three new daycare places. Today, approximately 50% of all children in daycare attend a private kindergarten.

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<sup>33</sup> For a review of the impact of the iconic Perry Preschool Project on the children and siblings of the original participants in the US in the 1960s, see Heckman & Karapakula (2019). For a review of the types of childcare that confer the greatest benefits, see Vandenbroeck (2020). For a review of the effects of early childhood education and care on child development, see Duncan et al. (2023). See also Foster (2002).

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Daycare is primarily funded through a combination of public subsidies and parental fees. The funding model is meant to ensure access to daycare for all children. The funding structure varies between municipal and private daycare centres, but the main principles are as follows:

- *Public subsidies.* The national government provides block grants to municipalities, which then fund daycare centres. Municipalities cover a significant share of the operating costs of municipal daycare centres, and pay private daycare centres a subsidy which is roughly equal to that on a per-child basis.
- *Parental fees.* Parents pay a monthly fee up to maximum set by the national government, which has been lowered considerably over the past three years. Currently the maximum monthly fee is NOK 2,000 (€168) for the first child and NOK 3,400 (€285) for the second or third child. In less central municipalities the maximum monthly fee is NOK 1,500 (€126) and NOK 2,550 (€214) respectively. In some municipalities in northern Norway daycare is not subject to parental fees. Income-based rebates and a free basic scheme are available for low-income families. Specifically, if the maximum fee is higher than 6% of the total income of the family, parental fees are reduced, while pre-school children in low-income families have the right to 20 hours of free daycare per week.

Less conventional types of childcare provision also exist. A “family kindergarten” with only a few children may take place in a private home, subject to regulation. Also, flexible drop-in “open kindergarten” centres, where parents can stay with their children, are often run by municipalities, churches, or voluntary organizations, aimed for children who are not yet enrolled in full-time daycare. Lastly, some large shopping malls and gyms provide short-term drop-in childcare services, which function similarly to crèche. On the contrary, given universal access to affordable childcare, Norwegian employers rarely provide crèche services.

In addition to kindergartens, working parents in Norway also benefit from the after-school programme (*SFO*), offered by municipalities to students in grades 1–4 (and to those with special needs in grades 1–7). These school-based leisure programmes are available both before and after regular school hours. In 2022, the government introduced a free core time (12 hours a week) in the after-school programme for children in first grade. In 2024, this was expanded to children up to third grade. More than 90% of first and second graders are now attending an after-school programme, while the attendance rate is 63% for third graders and 37% for fourth graders.

Parents also benefit from child health clinics (*Helsestasjoner*), that provide free medical services for children (from birth to school age) and their families. While all child health clinics are staffed by nurses and doctors, many include physiotherapists, and some psychologists. The clinics focus on preventive care, health monitoring, vaccinations, and parenting support. The clinics offer regular check-ups based on a standardized program consisting of 14 consultations. The first consultation is a home visit for newborns. The rest of the consultations take place at the clinic until the child is 4 years old. Some of the scheduled consultations are held in groups, although parents can choose individual appointments instead. The clinics also offer guidance on topics like breastfeeding, nutrition, sleep, and mental health. The service is an important part of Norway’s welfare system and helps ensure equal access to early childhood healthcare.

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### 3.5.2. Childcare provision in Greece<sup>34</sup>

Recent Eurostat statistics suggest that the share of children below the age of 3 in formal childcare in Greece was 29.6% in 2023. Most of them (17.6% of all children in the relevant age group) attended formal childcare for 30 or more hours a week. The remaining (12.0% of all) did so for 29 or fewer hours a week. Coverage was higher for children aged 3 or above: in Greece 87.0% (49.7% for 30 or more hours a week vs 37.3% for up to 29 hours a week).

Most public daycare centres are owned and run by municipal authorities, while 27 belong to the Public Employment Service (*ΔΥΠΑ*).

Public subsidies to childcare providers, both public and private, are co-financed from European Union resources (since 2008 from the European Social Fund, and since 2022 from Next Generation EU), in the form of a voucher that eligible parents can use in the daycare centre of their choice. The voucher scheme is administered by the Hellenic Society of Local Development and Self-Government (*EETAA*), jointly owned by municipal authorities and the national government.

The maximum value of the voucher is €180 per month for toddlers aged two-and-a-half to 4 years, or €237 per month for infants aged six months to two-and-a-half years. The amount is raised by €57 per month for a place in a daycare centre providing meals. The voucher is worth €121 for a place in an after-school centre. Higher amounts (up to €500 per month) are provided for disabled children. The voucher is paid for 11 months per year. Eligibility for the maximum value of the voucher is restricted to families with an annual income below €27,000.

In the 2024-2025 school year, 110,000 vouchers were issued for as many daycare places. This number corresponded to 34% of all children below the age of 4 (the mandatory school age). A further 54,000 vouchers concerned children attending after-school programmes at specialised centres open 4 hours a day, while another 9,500 vouchers were set aside for after-school programmes aimed for children with disabilities. The total cost of the voucher scheme was €361 million (0.15% of GDP).

In the 27 daycare centres belonging to the Public Employment Service (*ΔΥΠΑ*), enrolment is free of charge. Low-income, single-parent, and larger families are given priority. In 2022, over 300 infants and toddlers were hosted in 7 *ΔΥΠΑ* daycare centres in Attica (the province including Athens).

All childcare providers charge parental fees. At municipal daycare centres, parental fees are income related. Discounts for the second (or third) child of the same family also apply. Fee schedules vary by municipal authority. The City of Athens, which runs 68 daycare centres hosting over 4,500 infants and toddlers, in 2020 applied a graduated schedule with fees ranging from zero (for families with annual income below €20,000) to €400 per month (for families with annual income over €300,000). Fees were heavily discounted (by as much as 80%) for a second child of the same family. In contrast, the City of Thessaloniki (Greece's second largest city) charged families with annual income below €15,000 a monthly

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<sup>34</sup> This section draws on EETAA (2024) and Vatikiotis (2022).

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fee of €64, those with annual income between €15,001 and €27,000 a fee of €80, and families with annual income above €27,000 a fee of €96 per month. Second children of the same family were charged 25% off the standard fee, while third children 50% off.

Parental fees also apply at private daycare centres. These fees tend to be flat with respect to income, although again discounts apply for second (or third) children of the same family. Fees are higher than in municipal daycare centres, and may vary considerably between providers. For illustration, a place in a decent private daycare centre in Athens may cost well over €600 per month, while in Thessaloniki it will cost around €500 per month, i.e. in both cases significantly above the maximum voucher rate of €294 per month.

The quality of childcare provided tends to be uneven. Regulation of private and municipal daycare centres by the national government tends to focus on health and safety standards, rather than on the content of early childhood education and care. A concerted attempt to address this, initiated by the diaNEOsis think-tank, led by a Yale economist with considerable international experience (Meghir et al. 2021), caught the attention of ministers. The “Kypseli” curriculum the study proposed was formally endorsed by government, and subsequently found its way to the statute book. Nonetheless, its implementation has stalled ever since, and amendments are currently under consideration.

In addition to formal childcare, a “neighbourhood nanny” scheme was launched in 2023, paying families the sum of €500 per month (€300 if unemployed or in part-time work) with which to purchase informal childcare from a certified carer. In 2025, about 950 families participated in the scheme.

Lastly, crèche services are also known to be provided by certain larger firms in the workplace. A recent scheme provides public subsidies to firms wishing to introduce such services, with funding from Next Generation EU. The subsidies cover the wage costs of two carers for two years.

### 3.6. Child benefits

Economic theory predicts that child benefits provided to working and non-working mothers alike “would only involve a positive income effect, shifting up the entire budget constraint and reducing unambiguously the labor supply of mothers” relative to a counterfactual of no public cash transfers to families with children (Boeri & van Ours 2021, p. 185).

Still, child benefits are supported by three sets of arguments:

- vertical redistribution (poverty relief), with its implications for child development, in terms of the benefits of preventing scarring effects and interrupting the intergenerational transmission of poverty<sup>35</sup>; and

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<sup>35</sup> For a recent analysis of the effects on child poverty and child development of the 2021 expansion of the Child Tax Credit in the US (in a comparative perspective), see Koebel & Stabile (2024).

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- horizontal redistribution (from childless taxpayers to families with children), in recognition to the fact that raising a child is a costly activity involving positive externalities.

### 3.6.1. Child benefits in Norway

A universal child benefit (*Barnetrygd*) was introduced in Norway in 1946. The benefit is universal, tax-free, paid for all children below the age of 18, financed out of taxation. The benefit rate is currently 1,766 NOK (€148) per month.

Single parents receive a supplement worth 2,516 NOK (€211) per month in addition to the standard rate. Parents sharing custody can apply for shared extended child benefit (standard rate + supplement for single parents).

In addition to that, single parents responsible for at least 60% of the daily care for a child below the age of 8 may be eligible to transition benefit (*Overgangsstønad*). To qualify, single parents must work or study at least 50% of the time, or be a registered jobseeker. The benefit is paid for a period of up to 3 years, at a maximum monthly rate of 23,255 NOK (€1,950) before tax. Those earning more than 5,168 NOK (€433) per month before tax have their transition benefit reduced at a rate of 45% before that threshold. Transition benefit is fully withdrawn if recipients earn more than 56,833 NOK (€4,766) per month.

Single parents with a child aged below 3 may also be eligible for a toddler supplement in addition to the extended child benefit. Those earning below 5,168 NOK (€433) per month before tax, in receipt of full transition benefit, are eligible for toddler supplement at 969 NOK (€81) per month.

Furthermore, taxpayers living with a child aged below 11 are also entitled to tax relief on child-related expenses. The maximum level of deductible expenses is currently 25,000 NOK (€2,096) for one child, and 15,000 NOK (€1,258) for each additional child. The actual tax benefit parents receive depends on the amount of expenses and on their income level. In 2023, the child-related tax benefit was estimated to reach up to 5,500 NOK (€461) for one child, and up to 3,330 NOK (€280) for each additional child.

In addition to child benefit, Norway has had a cash-for-care benefit for young children since 1988. The cash-for-care benefit was introduced to compensate parents who did not enrol their child or children in publicly funded daycare, with the rate set equal to the public subsidy to daycare centres. The benefit is intended to make it easier for families to spend more time caring for young children.

Initially, the scheme was introduced for one-year-olds, but in 1999, it was expanded to include two-year-olds. In 2012, the cash-for-care benefit for two-year-olds was discontinued<sup>36</sup>. Today the benefit provides financial support to parents with children aged between 13 and 19 months without a full-time place in daycare. If the child has a part-time place in daycare, the cash-for-care benefit is reduced accordingly to

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<sup>36</sup> Meier & Rablen (2023) have suggested that as the share of modern double-earner families in all families rises, political support for public transfers targeted to traditional single-earner families may evolve non-monotonically. As a result, support for cash-for-care policies may rise at first (as the share of traditional families goes from high to intermediate), only to fall at a later stage (as the share of traditional families goes from intermediate to low).

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20%, 40%, 60% or 80% of the full rate of benefit. In February 2025, the full rate was set at 7,500 NOK (€629) per month. Official data show that the number of cash-for-care benefit recipients has declined, from over 100,000 in 2006 to below 30,000 in 2023.

Unlike other social benefits for families with children, the cash-for-care benefit is politically contested. The Conservative Party, the Labour Party, the Liberal Party, the Socialist Left Party, and the Red Party are all opposed. Several of these parties have included the discontinuation of the cash-for-care benefit in their programmes. The main political actor supporting the scheme is Christian Democratic Party, which helped introduce the cash-for-care benefit in 1998.

In addition to the benefits mentioned, there are benefits that parents may apply for under specific circumstances, for instance means-tested social assistance and housing allowance. There is also a child supplement in schemes such as disability pension, unemployment benefits, qualification benefits, and work assessment allowance.

### 3.6.2. Child benefits in Greece<sup>37</sup>

The consolidation of child benefits in Greece is relatively recent: it occurred in last decade, during the country's sovereign debt crisis. Prior to that, income support had been generous for two types of families: those with three or more children, and those of workers in public utilities, banks, and the civil service. In contrast, most children received little or no benefit, even when poor.

In 2013, most family allowances and tax relief for dependent children were replaced by a "unified" (i.e., non-categorical) child benefit, payable on an income-tested basis. Its introduction brought public assistance within the reach of hundreds of thousands of poor families that had been ineligible for income support under the previous system. The number of child benefit recipients as a share of all children in the relevant age group is estimated at 67%.

The child benefit is available to families with at least one child up to the age of 18 (23 if in higher education, or disabled), on an income-tested basis. The benefit amount varies with family income and number of children. The full rate of child benefit for families with two children is €140 per month, reserved for those with annual income below €12,000. The benefit rate is reduced to €84 per month for families with two children with an annual income between €12,000 and €20,000, and to €56 per month for those with an annual income between €20,000 and €30,000. Child benefit is fully withdrawn above that level.

Furthermore, a birth grant is available to most families. An income test applies, excluding families with an annual income of €70,000 (for a couple with one child), €80,000 (for a couple with two children), €90,000 (for a couple with three children) and so on. The birth grant is paid as a lump sum in two equal instalments. In 2024, the benefit rate was set at €2,400 for the first child, €2,700 for the second child, €3,000 for the third child, and €3,500 for the fourth and each additional child.

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<sup>37</sup> This section draws on Matsaganis (2020).

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In addition to child benefit and birth grant, low-income families with children may also be eligible for guaranteed minimum income benefit and for means-tested housing benefit. Moreover, supplements for dependent family members (10% of the basic amount) are available for unemployment insurance benefit recipients.

### 3.7. Interaction of cultural norms with institutional arrangements

Cultural norms and institutional arrangements interact in complex ways. On the one hand, clearly governments in a democracy can ill afford to antagonise the beliefs of large parts of the electorate, as ruling parties seek re-election. On the other hand, societal beliefs are not cast in stone: public opinion evolves over time, and public policy often plays a key role in this.

The findings of the study by Kleven, Landais, Posch, Steinhauer & Zweimüller (2024) cited above points to the surprising resistance of preferences and norms in favour of maternal care, in spite of very large increases of publicly funded formal childcare in Austria.

On the other hand, expansions in childcare provision have in many other cases shifted cultural norms. As the author of a recent book on the politics of care in Nordic countries (Ellingsæter, 2024) put it: “Government policies are normative. They shape people’s attitudes.” Her observation is in line with the findings of a recent study that greater availability of affordable childcare across countries tended to correlate with more permissive cultural norms about mothers relying on childcare in order to continue to work, rather than giving up work in order to look after their babies full-time (Pavolini and Van Lancker, 2018). As discussed earlier, evidence from Norway bears this out: the *expansion of childcare in the 2000s led to a significant rise in mothers’ employment (Andresen & Havnes 2018)*.

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## 4. Conclusions and policy recommendations

This paper aims to contribute to research on the motherhood penalty, comparing Greece (where female employment is low, and this penalty is significant) with Norway (where female employment is high, and the motherhood penalty is virtually non-existent). We find that in Norway traditional gender norms enjoy less support by public opinion, while parental leave, flexible working time, and childcare provision entitlements are stronger (and gender-neutral). Still, significant progress has recently been made in Greece, both in terms of the acceptance of gender inequality in work and care, and in terms of the strength of work-life balance policies. The trajectory of such policies and the evolution of cultural norms in Norway hold important lessons for Greece.

Policy is highly context specific. It is influenced by historical legacy, by the social attitudes and political beliefs of the age. It is subject to path-dependency, though interspersed with path-breaking moments. It relies on administrative capacity, and operates in symbiosis with cultural norms, in turn shaped by policy. For these and other reasons, policy transfer from one country to the other may not always be successful<sup>38</sup>.

Nonetheless, there are many instances of policy learning across countries, even though the process can be lengthy, and it is not always clear how the learning actually takes place. Also, policy ‘contagion’ tends to be easier when countries are more similar to begin with (as is the case with Nordic countries), when policy makers actively seek to learn from one another, and when there are institutions in place that positively facilitate policy learning (such as those developed over the years to facilitate the spread of “best practices” in the EU). But policy learning can be effective even when the countries concerned are at the antipodes of a continent, as is the case with Greece and Norway (Bråthen & Fløtten 2016).

As our analysis makes clear, parents in Norway live and work in an environment which is a lot more supportive of their decision to bring up a child without sacrificing their career aspirations. In Norway, laws and collective agreements oblige employers to facilitate the needs of employees with children. A more favourable institutional framework is likely to have shaped employers’ attitudes and to have fostered greater respect for working parents. Moreover, compared to Greece, in Norway paternal leave is longer and better paid, the father quota is significant and non-transferrable, child allowances and other social benefits are more generous, and childcare provisions more plentiful. Not coincidentally, the motherhood penalty is much lower in Norway than in Greece.

Still, a call to copy Norwegian policies and simply paste them into a Greek context would be unlikely to impress policy makers. The real challenge is to think of policies that are inspired by the Norwegian case, advance the cause of raising female employment and helping parents in Greece juggle family and work commitments, and yet lie within (or just beyond) the reach of policy makers in the country – in terms of the financial, political, and administrative resources they require.

A better understanding of the emergence of family-friendly work-life *balance* policies in Norway is essential to this task. Firstly, the policy commitment to helping workers balance work and family life has

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<sup>38</sup> For a recent review of policy transfer in the area of family policies, see White (2020). For a broader discussion of policy transfer, see Legrand & Stone (2022), and Evans (2019).

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evolved gradually over several decades. Secondly, this has required broad cooperation across political parties, and between political actors and the social partners, achieving a high degree of cross-party consensus on policy goals. Thirdly, work-life policies have been developed within established institutions, which promote policy learning<sup>39</sup>.

It is in this spirit that we present a short list of recommendations for policies *aiming to raise female employment and reduce motherhood penalties in Greece*. Our recommendations are inspired by an understanding of the gradual emergence of family-friendly work-life policies in Norway, and are informed by our awareness of the financial, political, and administrative constraints facing policy makers in Greece.

The recommendations concern two policy areas: parental leave (broadly defined to include carer's leave) and provision of high-quality affordable childcare. Improving income support for families with children, although possibly desirable in its own right, is less relevant from the perspective of raising female employment and reducing the motherhood penalty in Greece. In particular, cash-for-care policies would be detrimental to these goals, as they likely reinforce traditional gender roles, lowering female employment further. Lastly, we add two recommendations concerning the context in which policy solutions are worked out. Their aim is to raise the quality of policy, to ensure continuity beyond the term of a government (or a government minister), and to prevent the abandonment of policies before their effects have fully been assessed.

Our policy recommendations:

1. Gradually extend non-transferable paternity leave to 4 months on full earnings for all working fathers, in the public sector and in private firms.
2. Gradually extend maternity leave to 12 months on full earnings for all working mothers, in the public sector and in private firms.
3. For workers in private firms, split the cost of parental leave benefit equally between the Social Insurance Agency (ΕΦΚΑ) and the Public Employment Service (ΔΥΠΑ), at 50% of reference earnings each, fully eliminating the employer contribution<sup>40</sup>.
4. To accommodate parents' need for flexibility in combining work and care, allow workers on parental leave to opt for a longer period of leave on reduced pay, if they so wish, in agreement with their employer<sup>41</sup>.

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<sup>39</sup> For the politics and history of work-life policies promoting gender equality in Norway and other Nordic countries, see Bråthen & Fløtten (2016) and Dølvik et al. (2015).

<sup>40</sup> The purpose here would be to remove the disincentive to hiring young women by drastically reducing the cost of parental leave to employers, currently rather significant in the micro firms (with 0-9 employees) where 49% of all private sector workers in the country are employed.

<sup>41</sup> For instance, allow working fathers to opt for 8 months of paternity leave on half earnings instead of 4 months on full earnings.

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5. Gradually expand childcare provision building on the current voucher scheme, committing central government resources to reduce dependency on EU funding, with the aim of making access to affordable high-quality childcare for all a citizen's right, legally enforced<sup>42</sup>.
6. Make childcare affordable by capping parental fees at 10% of family income, and by targeting extra resources to ensure a high take up among low-income families.
7. Improve the quality of childcare provided both publicly and privately by introducing a harmonised curriculum early childhood education and care, building on previous work.
8. Encourage and regulate experimental forms of childcare provision in small groups, building on the experience of "neighbourhood nannies".
9. Involve stakeholders in the design of policies, to ensure successful implementation and broad acceptance of policy goals.
10. Carefully evaluate policy effects as they evolve, to improve outcomes and build consensus.

We invite political and social actors in Greece to consider our recommendations, and the media to bring them to the attention of citizens. Expanding and improving work-life balance policies would not be costless in the short term, yet hold the promise of significant medium- and long-term benefits for workers, firms, parents, and children in the medium term.

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<sup>42</sup> On the role of a legal entitlement to childcare provision across EU member states, see Corti et al. (2022).

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