

Case study

Extended Maternity Leave: From measuring costs to appreciating benefits

Maternity leave in the EU countries varies between 14 and 28 weeks, sometimes on full pay, with occasional provision for fathers. The Committee on Women's Rights and Gender Equality has argued for the extension of maternity leave to 20 weeks, fully paid, and for the introduction of a fortnight's fully paid paternity leave. They commissioned a background document on the social, non-quantifiable benefits of this, and LSE Enterprise approached Dr Konstantina Davaki of LSE Health in July to write it. Along with papers from three other experts on both sides of the debate, MEPs used Dr Davaki's document to help them consider the amendments drafted by the Portuguese MEP, Ms Edite Estrela. In October 2010, the MEPs passed the amended Directive for Pregnant Workers by seven votes.

Dr Davaki says: 'Gender has always been a focus of my research and for my PhD I analysed the gender impact of policies in Germany and Greece. I've also lived this on a practical level as a mother of two.'

'The discussion about extending maternity leave has stressed the cost aspect too much, obscuring less tangible benefits, such as health effects, as well as socio-economic benefits. Increasing fertility and reducing the risk of child poverty are two of the most important priorities of parental leave policy in the current financial climate. Legislating on a supra-national level enables us to focus on the most vulnerable population groups, protecting the poorest across Europe. It is a step towards giving children in the EU27 a better start in life.'

'It's also a small step forward as far as gender equality in Europe is concerned, that has been fought for by many people for many years. Eventually we hope that the introduction of fully paid paternity leave will be instrumental in changing gender roles within the family, achieving work-life balance and mitigating the discrimination that women suffer in the labour market. There are ways to achieve this without harming small businesses. It all boils down to political will.'



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