

RESEARCH FOR THE WORLD

Why aren't family policies reducing gender inequality in the workplace?

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Bringing down the barriers women face in employment has long been a focus for politicians, but family policies are failing to make an impact. **Camille Landais'** research reveals why.

When Shared Parental Leave, a policy that allows both parents equal time off from their jobs to look after their baby in the first year, was introduced in the UK in 2015, then – Deputy Prime Minister Nick Clegg expressed his hope that it would help “tear down the barriers which still prevent too many brilliant women from reaching the top of their professions.”

Clegg's championing of the policy reflected a widely held view that the workplace underpins a culture where women are often primary carers while men focus on their careers. The argument followed that if entitlements for families, such as Shared Parental Leave, were available to all couples, women would have greater freedom to pursue their careers and gender inequalities would narrow.



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Parental policies have not levelled the playing field for women

Professor Camille Landais, whose research focuses on public finances and labour economics, examined whether such parental policies actually close the gender pay gap in his paper, “Do Family Policies Reduce Gender Inequality? Evidence from 60 Years of Policy Experimentation”.

Professor Landais says: “Having and raising children places strain on the careers of parents, especially when children are young. Research has found that it explains much of the remaining gender inequality in modern societies, as the biggest ‘child penalty’ falls on women and their careers.”

What makes Austria a good case study for the impact of family-friendly policies?

Professor Landais and his research partners focused on Austria to test the effect of new family policies. The landlocked central European country is culturally similar to its large neighbour Germany, and similarly conservative in terms of social norms around how domestic life should be managed. This made it a suitable environment to test family policies, as their introduction could potentially have the biggest effect on mothers’ participation in the labour market.

Austria also holds a rich supply of localised data on family policy, increasing parental entitlements several times since 1960. Present day Austria is relatively generous to new parents who are currently entitled to up to 35 months of taxpayer-funded Shared Parental Leave, alongside two years of job protection. Austrian parents also have access to heavily subsidised childcare places. In Austria, around a quarter of children under the age of three, and 90 per cent of children aged between three and five, attend formal childcare settings such as nurseries.

Professor Landais says: “We focused on all changes in family policies since the 1960s, with the data enabling us to study how they interacted as a package towards women’s careers.”

At the end of his analysis, Professor Landais found that that the combined family policies in Austria have had very little effect on reducing gender inequality between men and women. Both in the short-term and long-term, the “child-penalty” remained stable despite the introduction of numerous policies.



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Policies can only do so much – cultural attitudes must also change

One of the main reasons for the blunted impact of additional family policies, the researchers suggest, is the enduring cultural norm in Austria that women are expected to provide maternal care. Professor Landais points out that these strong cultural family norms are not confined to Austria, citing the experiences of many working families in the UK during the COVID-19 pandemic restrictions in 2020 and 2021. While many parents had to simultaneously work remotely while providing home-schooling due to school closures, early studies have shown that the burden of looking after children fell disproportionately on women during this time,



illustrating how deeply ingrained gender roles also remain in the UK. Professor Landais says: "You can have couples with very challenging careers, both working from home, but in many cases women will end up doing the majority of the childcare. The experience of the pandemic shows us even when a situation places the same disadvantages on both parents, it is naive to assume both mothers and fathers will behave in the same way.

To address our culture, we have to look beyond policies, to the norms that are so pervasive within society. These behaviours are very difficult to change and come up against very deeply ingrained patterns. ■

Professor Landais was speaking to
Peter Carroll, Media Relations
Officer at LSE.

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