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# Paid to Care: The Origins and Effects of Care Leave Policies in Western Europe

## Abstract

*A number of European countries have adopted paid child care leaves and allowances in the name of parental choice and valuing care. We examine the origins and consequences of these policies in Austria, Finland, France, Germany, and Norway. Care leave policies have been politically attractive to center-right governments seeking to fight unemployment, contain spending on child care, and appeal to parents struggling to balance work and family. Yet given the low benefits provided by these programs, choices for parents remain deeply constrained by gender and class. These policies also are likely to reinforce the traditional division of care work in the home. Temporary homemaking is being institutionalized as the norm for many women, who face potentially negative consequences for their earnings and long-term employment trajectories.*

While the United States has been busy in the past ten years dismantling its only system of public income supports for mothers, many countries in Western Europe have gone in the opposite direction. In recent years, governments have created two- or three-year job leaves and/or child-rearing benefits that allow parents (almost entirely mothers) of young children to care for their own children at home and receive public funds to support them. These policies have been adopted in the name of valuing care work in the home and

providing more choices for parents dealing with work–family conflicts. The development of these policies has thus been part of larger debates in European societies over how best to reconcile work and family life.

Care leaves and child-rearing benefits should be of interest to feminist students of the welfare state who have been engaged in debates over how public policy should treat caregivers and caregiving. There is now a large literature on the meaning of care and its heavily gendered dimensions, and on how to analyze the welfare state through the lens of care (Knijn and Ungerson 1997; Jenson and Sineau 2001; Meyer 2000). In both the public and private spheres, women perform most of the care work, which is usually either not remunerated or low-paid. Debates over how to improve this situation have tapped more fundamental questions about the goals of feminist theorizing and political action, given the difference-equality dilemma. For difference feminists, policies rooted in an assumption of male and female equality integrate women into the public sphere on male terms and impose unrealistic assumptions onto the reality of most women's lives. Yet for equality feminists, difference-based policies perpetuate essentialist norms and existing stereotypes (Fraser 1994; Mansbridge 1990). Thus, although many feminists have assailed domestic labor as unpleasant, unfairly distributed between men and women, and a source of women's oppression (Okin 1989), others reclaim care as a distinctive feminine experience worth valuing in its own right (Balbo 1987). The fundamental dilemma is how to value care without reinforcing the current gendered division of labor (Lister 1994).

In the United States, feminist debates about how to treat women's caregiving activities have also been fed by the backlash in American society and politics against poor single mothers on public assistance, and the decision to abolish their entitlement to welfare in the mid-1990s. Some feminists have concluded that instead of being forced into paid employment, poor mothers should receive public assistance but it should be at a level that enables them to survive and provide care for their children (Mink 1998; Women's Committee of 100 2002). Such a right to care could also be extended to a wider range of the population, giving all parents the possibility of spending extended time in the home rather than requiring that all be in the labor force (Kittay 1998). Others have been more skeptical, wary of how extended absences from the labor market could hurt women's employment chances in the long term, and suspicious of policies that might reinforce women's responsibility for children (Orloff 2001).

This article sheds light on some of these questions by exploring one way that a number of European countries have provided greater rights to care: paid leaves for parents who take care of their children

at home. What forces and motivations lie behind this particular set of policies? What are the consequences for women's labor force participation and the gender division of labor? To address these and other questions, the article first examines the origins of care leave policies in Western Europe, focusing on five states that have developed two- and three-year paid child care leaves (Austria, Finland, France, Germany, and Norway). These cases were chosen for comparison because they have adopted similar policies despite differences in existing welfare state structures and domestic politics. The second half of the article examines the available evidence on the effects of these leaves on women's labor force trajectories, class stratification, and the gender division of labor in the home.<sup>1</sup> The findings offer a cautionary note to advocates of paid care in the home. Efforts to remunerate caregivers of young children have been driven largely by forces seeking to reinforce traditional gender roles in the home. Moreover, the development of paid care leaves in different welfare regimes reflects their appeal to political elites at a time of high unemployment and fiscal pressures on the welfare state. These policies also have popular appeal in countries where there are constituencies that favor maternal care of young children. Though often couched in the language of choice and helping parents balance work and family, the underlying goal of care leave policies has been to value and support full-time female caregivers.

The effects of these policies are thus fairly predictable. Women make up almost 100 percent of the beneficiaries, as low benefit amounts and prevailing cultural norms impede men from taking them. Care leave policies produce a drop in women's paid work outside the home while their children are young, and they are likely to reproduce and reinforce gendered patterns of care and labor in the home. These policies do little to help solo mothers in the way that some have envisioned in the American context, and the long-term negative consequences of these policies will be borne largely by the lower-status workers who tend to take these leaves. Thus, although the rhetoric of choice pervades debates about care leave policies, the reality is that choice is highly constrained by both gender and class.

## Care Leaves and Allowances in Western Europe

### *Definitions: Care Leave versus Parental Leave*

Over the past three decades, most West European governments have instituted and often substantially expanded parental leave. Many had enacted limited maternity leaves in the first half of the 20th century, starting in the 1970s, but most countries expanded the length

of these leaves, opened them up to men, and increased the percentage of wages covered during the leave (Bruning and Plantenga 1999; Gauthier 2000).<sup>2</sup> Since the mid-1980s, some countries have gone further by creating child care leaves and child-rearing allowances for parents during the first two or three years of a child's life.

What is the difference between child care leave and a conventional parental leave? Care leaves often amount to substantially more time out of the labor force than a standard parental leave (Figure 1). Most countries offer paid maternity leave, and in addition parental leaves that range from three to twelve months. Care leaves, by contrast, range from two to three years per child. Another distinction between

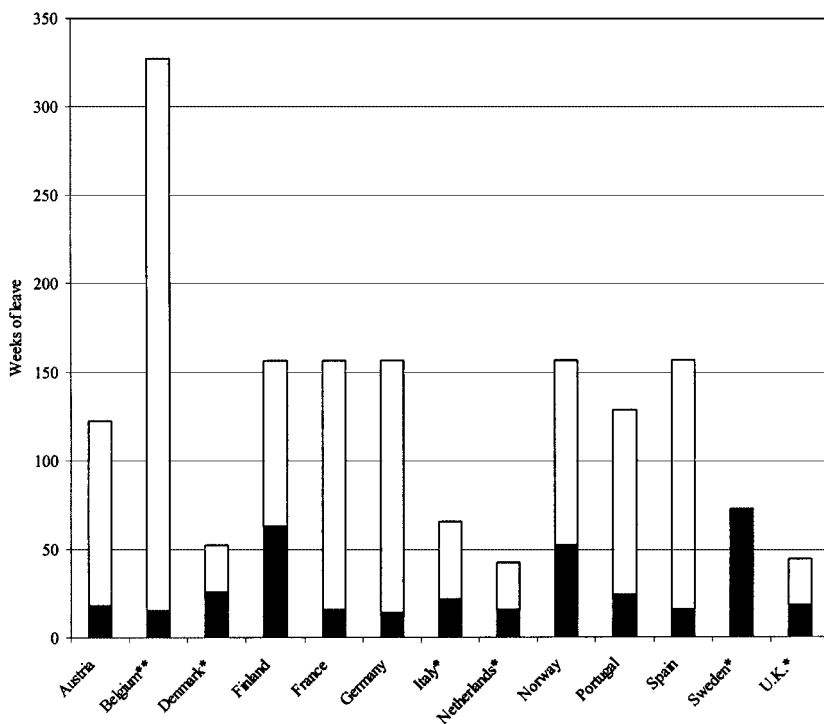


Figure 1. Parental and child care leaves in Western Europe. White portion of bars, child care leave; black portion, maternity/parental leave. Sources: Gauthier (2000); Leira (1998); Moss and Deven (1999). Note that child care leaves in Portugal, Spain, and the United Kingdom are unpaid.

\*Child care leave can be taken in increments until child reaches a certain age (ranging between five and nine years old in the different countries).

\*\*Leave can be taken for three to twelve months at a time, up to six years of full time leave and six years part-time leave over one's career.

conventional parental leave and care leave policies concerns their mode of payment. Parental leave in Western Europe is nearly always paid as a percentage of one's previous income, ranging from about 50 to 100 percent of prior wages. By contrast, care allowances are flat-rate payments that are sometimes means-tested and never very generous, particularly in the case of two- to-three year leaves. As Table 1 shows, countries pay between €269 and €485 a month (US\$266–480 at current exchange rates) in child-rearing allowances.

Care leave payments are not necessarily connected to a statutory right to a leave-of-absence from employment and thus not paid by employers but by governments. In both Germany and (since 2002) Austria, any parent who cares for his or her own child during the child's first two years of life is entitled to receive the child-rearing allowance, regardless of his or her connection to the labor force. In Germany, those who had been in the labor force are guaranteed a return to their jobs for up to three years. Beneficiaries receive the allowance for only the first two years (and the benefit is means-tested after six months).<sup>3</sup> In France, eligibility criteria for a three-year parental leave differ from those for a three-year child-rearing allowance, so that some people receive one and not the other. In Finland and Norway, parents need not leave the labor market to receive a care allowance, because these benefits can be used either to pay for private care or to support a parent at home.

This article focuses on countries with two- or three-year child care leaves that include monetary benefits: Austria, Finland, France, Germany, and Norway.<sup>4</sup> It is intriguing to find similar care leave policies in countries with very different histories of welfare state development. Finland and Norway are normally included in the social democratic cluster of welfare states, which have large sectors of public child care and other social services. Such services both promote women's employment by socializing many caretaking tasks and provide a source of paid employment to the women staffing these programs (Esping-Andersen 1999; Huber and Stephens 2000). In addition, these countries are characterized by active labor market policies that promote paid employment for all working-age people, including mothers. The creation of a paid care leave in France is also a departure from past policies because the French welfare state has generally supported working mothers, particularly since the early 1970s (Morgan 2003; Gornick et al. 1998). All three countries continue to offer a substantial amount of publicly funded or provided day care (Table 2), which has implications for the effects of these policies (as will be discussed). Not so in Austria and Germany: Care leaves and child-rearing allowances are more consistent with the policy logic of these conservative welfare states. In these cases, social policy has long been predicated

Table 1. Paid Care Leave Policies

	Length of leave	Cash benefit	% average wage (1999)	Enacted, expanded
Austria	30 months or 3 years if split among parents	€435.90 per month (2001)	31	1990, 2001
Belgium	3 months, to age 4 Can take career breaks, each 3–12 months, for up to 6 years full-time leave, 6 years part-time leave over entire career	€505/month (1999) €305/month for full-time break, higher for additional children	37	1984
Denmark	13 weeks until child is 8, 26 weeks if child is under 1. Can negotiate more leave with employer, not over 52 weeks	60% of highest unemployment benefit (approx. €230/week). Can be supplemented by local governments	63	Early 1990s
Finland	Until child is 3	€269 per month; can be supplemented by local governments, and for children under age 1	66	1985, 1990; changes to benefits in 1990s

France	Until child is 3	€485 per month.	39	1985, 1986, 1994
Germany	Until child is 3, or can receive until child is age 8	€307 per month for 2 years, means-tested after child is 6 months; budget option: €460 for shorter leave; 6 of 16 states cover part of 3rd year	24	1986, 1988, 1992, 2001
Italy	10 months until child is 8		30	
Netherlands	6 months if part-time, until child is 8	Unpaid	—	1991
Norway	Until child is 3	€368 per month	—	1998
Portugal	24 months until child is 3	Unpaid	—	1985
Spain	Until child is 3	Unpaid	—	1980, 1985
Sweden	18 months until child is 8	360 days, 80% of salary; 90 days flat rate (60 SEK/day, €6.6 )	—	
U.K.	6 months until child is 5	Unpaid	—	

Sources: Gauthier 2000; Moss and Deven 1999; Pettinger 1999.



Table 2. Child Care Provision, Mid- to Late 1990s

Country	Children 0–2 (%)	Children 3–6 (%)
Austria	3	80*
Finland	25	70
France	34	99
Germany		
West	2	78 <sup>a</sup>
East	50	100
Norway	25	77

Sources: European Commission Network on Childcare (1996); *Statistisches Jahrbuch* 1998; Caisse Nationale des Allocations Familiales; NOSOSCO.

<sup>a</sup>Services are largely part-day.

on the male-breadwinner/female-caregiver model of social relations (Ostner 1994). Child care provision for under-threes is minimal, and both preschools and elementary schools run on part-day schedules on the assumption that a parent is at home to provide lunch and afternoon care.<sup>5</sup> Care leave policies do, however, mark a departure from prior policies that kept women's caregiving entirely in the private sphere, unremunerated.

What explains the movement of diverse welfare regimes toward a common policy approach with regard to mothers' employment? Three interrelated factors help account for this trend: (1) the role of conservative and/or centrist parties and movements in promoting a traditional family policy; (2) enabling economic circumstances, such as high unemployment and fiscal pressures on the welfare state; and (3) the evident resonance of these policies among the general public at a time of rising levels of women's labor force participation and resulting struggles over how to balance work and family life. Center-right parties have appealed to this electorate, building coalitions around policies that also meet fiscal or labor market objectives.

#### *Party Ideology and Care Leaves*

Most care leave policies have been enacted under center-right or conservative governments, such as the Christlich Demokratische Union/Christlich Soziale Union (CDU/CSU)-led government in the Federal Republic of Germany (FRG) in the early 1980s, and centrist or center-right coalition governments in Finland (1985) and Norway (1998). In France, a Socialist government created a child-rearing benefit in 1985, but a center-right government in 1977 created the first unpaid

child care leave and later expanded both the leave and the benefit in 1986 and 1994. The Austrian case is a partial exception because a grand coalition government of Social Democrats and Christian Democrats adopted the care leave policy in 1990. However, the most vocal champions of care leave policies in Austria have been center-right or right-wing parties (Badelt 1996). Jörg Haider's Freedom Party put an extension of child care leave at the center of its last electoral platform, alleging that prior government policy forced women to hand over their children to day care centers. After the Freedom Party formed a coalition government with the Christian Democrats, the new government introduced a law on child care leave that increased the benefit, extended it from eighteen to thirty months, and made it open to all women, not just those in the labor force (Daum 2001).

Similarly, in France the most open advocates of the child-rearing benefit come from the political center or the right, such as conservative family associations. These associations were part of the Catholic mobilization against the separation of church and state in the early part of the twentieth century and became allied with advocates of pronatalist policies (Talmy 1962). The family movement's main activity has been to lobby for policies that promote and assist large families. This helps explain the pronatalist features of the French system of child-rearing benefits, which originally awarded benefits only to parents of three or more children (1985 and 1986 laws). In the debates around the 1986 revisions to the law, Family Affairs Minister Michèle Barzach used explicit pronatalist justifications for the policy, arguing that it would "incite families to have a third child" (Fagnani 1996, 113). In 1994, eligibility for the leave was extended to parents of two or more children, softening but not eliminating the demographic motivation underlying this legislation (Jenson and Sineau 1998). No other country in Europe links eligibility for child care leave or child-rearing benefits to the number of children, although both German and Austrian policies have been underpinned by demographic motivations as well. In the FRG, some conservative legislators agreed to support the care leave legislation as a way to combat abortion (Schiersmann 1991), and in Austria, recent revisions of the care leave were accompanied by a name change, from *Karenzzeit*, or "caring time" to one with more pronatalist connotations, *Kindergeld*, or "child money."

In Finland and Norway, conservative and center parties have championed paid care leaves as well. Finnish politics have never been characterized by social democratic hegemony, as the Agrarian Party (later renamed the Center Party) is the second largest party and frequently in power (Kröger 1997). Coalition governments are the rule, and there are few opportunities for one side to dominate in setting

the social policy agenda. The left has been far more powerful in Norway and shaped the welfare state according to social democratic principles, but public policies for women have been more traditional there than in Denmark or Sweden (Leira 1992). This can be explained by the fact that Norway is the only Nordic country with a strong Christian democratic political party. Though not large enough to engineer public policy on its own, Christian democrats have influenced the center and conservative parties with which they have served in coalition governments to favor policies that would strengthen the family's role in child socialization and care (Svåsand 1998, 188; Strøm and Leipart 1989, 278). Opposition by these parties to mothers' employment helped slow the development of public child care in Norway in the 1970s and 1980s (Leira 1992; Sainsbury 1999).

Conservative and center parties have driven the creation of paid long-term care leaves in both Finland and Norway. The Finnish Center Party began advocating home care allowances in the 1960s, reflecting the preferences of a rural constituency with little access to or interest in child care. The Center Party lost the battle for these leaves in the 1970s, when the Social Democrats pushed through legislation expanding public day care over cries of opposition. After a Center Party majority government came to power in 1983, the government created a paid care leave. Henceforth, local governments were required to provide either public child care or benefits for women who care for their children at home or use private child care services (Tyyskä 1995, 101–2). In Norway, Conservative, Center, and Christian Democratic parties have also advocated paid care leaves. When the Christian Democrats headed a coalition government in 1997–98, care leave legislation became a top priority and was passed, despite strong Labor Party opposition (Leira 1998).

As will be discussed, centrist and conservative parties justify these policies in the name of offering parents greater choice in matters of child care. They also have been motivated by a desire to value care. Although the vision of care has been a highly traditional one, advocates have placed a high premium on care work in the home and demanded that it be accorded value. Thus, the 1986 West German *Erziehungsgeld* (child-rearing benefit) was, from the beginning, open to all parents regardless of employment status as a way to value work in the home as the equivalent of work in the labor force (Fix 1998). In Finland, traditional women's organizations assailed the 1973 legislation that promoted expansion of the public day care system as reflective of a "masculine" ideology that devalues mothers' work in the home (Tyyskä 1995, 101).

In short, part of the story of the development of paid care leaves is clearly one of partisan power: center and conservative parties have

been the main advocates of child care leave and benefit policies and they have implemented these policies when in power. Yet while these parties have been the most vocal champions of paid care leaves, the left often has acceded either tacitly or actively to these policies. In Germany and Austria, for example, social democrats generally accept the premise that mother care is preferable for young children, but contest other aspects of conservative family policy. The German Social Democratic Party (SPD) has differentiated its views from those of the CDU-CSU by arguing that the child-rearing benefit should be linked to employment and made a worker's right. Before the reforms of 2002, there were similar lines of division over child care leave policy in Austria, since the *Karenzgeld* was awarded only to those who had been employed for at least fifty-two weeks of the two years prior to taking the leave. Conservatives have argued that all caretakers should be eligible, regardless of prior employment, while the Social Democrats have called for making the leave earnings-related and thus more generous (Thenner 1999). Despite differences over eligibility for the parenting leave, most parties in Austria seem to agree on the principle of the leaves, and there has been little discussion about expanding access to full-day child care (Badelt 1998).

In both countries, feminists inside and outside social democratic parties have blasted these policies and called for expanded access to public child care (Daum 2001). Feminist critiques of these new attempts to valorize care work in the home center on the fact that women's work in the home is unpaid, privatized, and gendered (Stiegler 1999). Because the *Erziehungsgeld* has never increased in value since its inception, some have argued that this is proof that the government's valorization of women's work in the home is only symbolic. Furthermore, care leaves do not change the gender division of labor, nor do they change the privatized nature of the work (Stiegler 1999). Since 1977, the German Arbeitsgemeinschaft Sozialdemokratischer Frauen (Caucus of Social Democratic Women) has insisted that men share the risk of unemployment associated with disrupted work patterns and be required to participate equally in caregiving. From the beginning, West German feminists have denounced the care leaves as a trap, criticizing them as a way to push women back into traditional roles of housewives and mothers (Klietz 1986). Nonetheless, the SPD/Green coalition government in the 1990s neither raised the child-rearing allowance nor restricted eligibility to employed parents.<sup>6</sup>

Social democratic parties in the Nordic countries have taken a stronger stance in favor of women's employment and opposed paid care leaves. This stance reflects the incorporation of a particular view of gender equality into party platforms since the 1970s. That social democratic parties would embrace mothers' employment was not a fore-

gone conclusion, as the male-breadwinner model was widely accepted in these countries through the 1950s and early 1960s. The relationship between social democrats and this form of equality politics was forged in the 1960s and 1970s, a time when labor shortages helped build broad support for policies that would induce women to enter the labor force. This connected the social democratic parties in power to a growing constituency of working women. In addition, women within social democratic parties and trade unions became influential champions of public child care. Social democrats were unyielding in their support for child care, upholding it as one of the achievements of the social democratic welfare state (Bergqvist et al. 1999; Mahon 1997).

In France, the Socialist Party has been internally divided over these questions, but while in office, socialist governments have generally supported the child-rearing benefit. The Socialist Party has often been a fickle friend of feminist causes (Jenson and Sineau 1995). A socialist government in 1985 created the first child-rearing benefit but faced strong opposition within the party at the time. The Communist Party (PCF) and its related trade union, the *Confédération Générale du Travail* (General Workers Confederation), also oppose the leave, advocating more public child care instead. Nevertheless, when the Socialist Party came to power in 1997 in a coalition with a green party and the PCF, the government did little to alter the child-rearing benefit that the previous center-right government had greatly expanded. The left government attacked other aspects of conservative family policy, such as subsidies for private nannies (received mostly by the rich), but essentially left the care leave untouched, aside from some measures to encourage mothers to reenter the labor force at the end of the leave.

A look at party politics shows that conservative and center parties have been the main architects of care leave policies but that social democratic parties have often been in at least tacit agreement in France, Germany, and Austria. Two questions remain: Why have parties of both the left and right often embraced paid care leaves? And what are the conditions that have enabled passage of these policies? The next two sections will consider two factors that account for the growing attractiveness of care leave policies: (1) labor market and fiscal pressures on the welfare state, and (2) the increasing salience of the family as an issue in political life.

### *Care Leaves as Labor Market Policy*

In many countries, rising unemployment helped build coalitions for policies that would reduce the supply of women on labor markets. The creation of child care leaves and allowances often has occurred at times of high unemployment and fiscal strains on the wel-

fare state. Since the 1970s, there has been a precipitous decline in annual economic growth rates and a concomitant rise in unemployment. Even the Nordic states, which managed to escape the economic maladies afflicting the rest of Europe in the 1980s, were hit with recession and high unemployment by the 1990s. The crisis in Finland was particularly acute, with unemployment topping 18 percent.

Declining economic circumstances helped generate support within governments for care leave and child-rearing benefits. In France, job creation became the primary objective for all governments by the 1980s, and child care policy was redeployed in the service of the antiunemployment fight (Math and Renaudat 1997). In the 1980s, the Mitterrand government abandoned the Socialist Party's electoral platform, which called for 300,000 new day care places, and instead embraced paid care leaves. In 1985, this government created a child-rearing benefit for parents of three or more children, but they could receive the benefit only if they had been in paid employment for two years out of the previous thirty months. In 1986, a center-right government extended eligibility for the *allocation parentale d'éducation* (APE) by reducing the employment requirement to two years out of the last ten and increased the length of the benefit to three years. The reform diminished the antiunemployment dimension of the policy and made it more appealing to full-time homemakers—a constituency for the center-right (Jenson and Sineau 1998).

In 1994, another center-right government expanded the care leave's employment orientation by requiring that parents have been in paid employment for two out of the last five years to be eligible. In addition, parents of two or more children became eligible for the leave and allowance. This extended the benefit to a much larger category of employed parents, because fewer mothers of three children tend to be in the labor force. In a speech describing the policy reform on the floor of the Assemblée Nationale, Health Ministry Secretary Simone Veil argued that it would create 50,000 jobs by opening up new positions while other employees were on leave (Jenson and Sineau 1998, 163). Job creation became the number-one priority for both the left and the right and tipped the scales in favor of policies that would promote women's exit from the labor force.

Similarly, in the FRG, parental leave policy was, from the beginning, viewed through the lens of unemployment. In the 1970s, a coalition government of the SPD and FDP introduced a six-month leave for employed women as an extension of the *Mutterschutzgesetz* (law for the protection of mothers). One significant motivation for the SPD was that such a policy could reduce unemployment by creating jobs to replace these women. In the mid-1980s, when the coalition CDU/CSU-FDP government developed the *Erziehungsgeld und Erziehung-*

*surlaub* (child-rearing benefit and leave), one of the objectives stated in the implementation plan was that this would have beneficial labor market effects. The hope was that there would not only be the need for temporary replacements of the women taking leave, but that some might not return to their jobs, resulting in new permanent jobs for others (Schiersmann 1991). These claims helped convince skeptics in the party of the merits of the care leave policy. Such examples lend credence to the view that governments often view women as a reserve army of labor, with female labor force participation not valued in its own right but used to obtain other economic or social objectives.

Growing fiscal pressures have shaped care leave policies as well. While care benefits entail increased government spending, they often serve the needs of more people, more quickly, than expensive public child care centers. In France, for example, national and local government spending on public child care in the mid-1990s amounted to about 38,700FF (about US\$7,000) per child per year, compared to 28,300FF (about US\$5,100) for each child benefiting from the care allowance.<sup>7</sup> Building child care centers also takes years and requires local governments to make substantial capital investments and commit to high long-term operating costs; it is much quicker to offer a benefit to parents and let them figure out how to take care of their children. In Finland, this is exactly what happened in the 1980s and 1990s as a national law required all local governments to either provide child care for every parent needing it or offer a care allowance that parents could use to care for their own children or spend on private child care. Many municipalities preferred to pay the money directly to parents rather than engage in the complicated business of setting up public centers, particularly during the economic crisis of the 1990s and the resulting squeeze on government budgets (Sipilä and Korpinen 1998). After rapid increases in public child care in the 1970s and 1980s, the development of new child care programs in Finland has stagnated. From the beginning, then, care leaves have been seen as a way to reduce pressures on states to create more public child care. Because the monthly allowance is lower than unemployment benefits, it has also proven to be a cheaper way to deal with high unemployment rates in a number of these states.

In sum, economic circumstances helped build support for care leave policies in a number of countries, which promised to diminish the number of women in the labor force at a time of high unemployment and provide cheaper solutions to parents' child care needs. However, this has not been the case in Finland in the 1980s, when a care leave policy was first adopted, nor was it true of Norway in the 1990s. In addition, in France, Germany, and Austria, there is evidence that care leave policies resonate very much with at least part

of the population. Thus, the third part of our explanation: Party competition over how to help parents balance work and family also has contributed to the development of these policies.

### *Contemporary Family Politics*

Debates over work-family issues have come to occupy a prominent place on the political agenda in many West European countries as political parties try to capture electorates concerned about these questions. All of these countries have a long history of providing financial support to families through wage-setting arrangements, the tax code, housing subsidies, and children's allowances. In recent decades, governments have been confronted with new challenges and demands as social transformations have undermined the male-breadwinner model. In most countries, full-time, dual-earner couples are not the norm; the reality tends to be "one-and-a-half"-earner families, in which women work part-time or interrupt their work for a number of years while they have children (Lewis 2001) (see Table 3). Families struggle to combine work and family life, with particularly strong pressures on women who spend more hours in paid employment but continue to bear the main responsibility for work in the home (Baxter 1997).

The resulting frustrations have helped propel the family onto the political agenda and policy makers are responding by increasing spending on family policy (Gornick 2001). How to divide these funds between mothers in paid employment and full-time caregivers is the contested question. In countries such as Denmark and Sweden, where nearly all women were transformed into earners by the 1980s,

Table 3. Labor Force Participation Rates of Women in Western Europe mid-1990s

	Women's employment (%)	Married/ cohabiting mothers (%)	Lone mothers (%)
Austria	76	46	58
Finland	84	70	65
France	81	68	82
Germany	76	41	40
Norway	81	77	61

Sources: OECD (1997); International Labour Organization (1998).



there is little support for the traditional stay-at-home mother and pressure for public child care and other aid to working mothers. However, in countries where this did not occur and there are few supports for working mothers, there is a larger constituency for programs that help women who care for their own children. In both Austria and (West) Germany, popular attitudes and public debates reveal the persistent notion that mothers should not be employed outside the house but should stay home and raise their children, at least up to the age of three (Winkler et al. 1995; Nebenführ 1995).

In France, Finland, and Norway, women are divided on these questions. In France, full-time homemakers are a small but significant sector of the population, and many women say that they wish that they could be home while their children are young (Dufour et al. 1998). Similarly, in Norway and Finland, there is a significant constituency for policies that support maternal care in the home. The Norwegian Christian People's Party, for example, came to power in 1997 on a platform that, among other things, promised to reaffirm Christian values and pay mothers who care for their children at home. In Finland, cuts in the child-rearing allowance made by a social democratic government in the mid-1990s met with strong opposition (Sipilä and Korpinen 1998).

Political parties have appealed to these constituencies using the rhetoric of "choice" (Schiersmann 1991; Boyer 1999; Leira 1998, 367; Tyyskä 1995, 95–96). In contrast to policies that force parents to put children in public child care, paid care leaves are said to offer parents real options in deciding how to balance work and family life. In Norway and Finland, parents can not only choose home care over public child care but can use the benefit to pay for private child care arrangements. A similar idea is now being investigated by the center-right government in France, which has proposed creating an *allocation libre choix* (free choice benefit). As discussed thus far, this would be a benefit of about €450 a month, which would be awarded to all parents with young children, regardless of work status. Parents could then spend the money as they wish to ensure the care of their children.<sup>8</sup>

Although the language of choice is often studiously gender-neutral, one need not scratch very far below the surface to find that the advocates for these policies share a strong belief in the merits of maternal care and the need to defend the well-being of homemakers (Heinen and Martiskainen de Koenigswarter 2001). Many advocates explicitly argue that care leave and child-rearing allowances assure truly equal treatment of women, whereas past policies (such as public child care supports) privileged those in the labor force at the expense of those at home. Thus, Christian Democrats in the FRG have argued

that maternity leave, when linked to employment, discriminates against housewives (Kolbe 1996). In the 1980s, West German bureaucrats in the Ministry of Family who developed the child-rearing benefit strongly believed that care by mothers was the best for young children (Sudmann 1997, 1998). Similarly, throughout the 1970s, the Center Party and other care allowance advocates in Finland called for a “mothers’ wage” to reward caregivers in the home (Tyyskä 1995).

Conservative or centrist women often have led the development of care leave policies in the name of valuing care. In Finland, women in both the Center and Social Democratic Parties were central to the debates over and the development of child care policy, with the former arguing strongly for a paid leave system and the latter defending public child care. Negotiations between these two camps led to a compromise policy of government funding for both care leaves and public services (Tyyskä 1995). In France, female ministers oversaw the creation of the child-rearing leave and benefits in both socialist and conservative governments. Simone Veil, the centrist politician whose name graces the abortion liberalization law of the 1970s, pushed the development of the care leave approach within her government in 1994 because she believed it was important to support and valorize women who care for their own children (Fagnani 1996). In the FRG, the lobbying of women within the CDU played a crucial role in pushing acceptance in the party of the child-rearing leave and benefit (Wiliarty 2001).

In sum, centrist and conservative forces have been the main champions of care leaves and benefits, and their views have been shaped in part by the context of unemployment and fiscal pressures on the welfare state. Feminists have generally opposed care leaves and child-rearing benefits, but the policies often enjoy broad support across the population, among both men and women. Thus, one cannot view the development of extended child-rearing leaves solely as an effort by governments to manipulate the female labor supply. These policies also represent efforts by policy makers to respond to the demands of families seeking help in balancing work and family life. The creation of care leaves and child-rearing benefits as a response to these concerns reflects the continuing significance of constituencies in these societies that favor mother care in the home.

The interest of parties in luring voters through care allowances is revealed by the language of choice and flexibility that justifies these policies. But what are the realities of care leave policies, once in place? What does paid care look like? Do these policies improve parental choice and offer greater balance of work and family life, without deleterious effects on women’s employment? The remainder of this article will evaluate the effects of paid care leaves.

## Evaluation of Care Leave Policies

We aim to answer these questions for Austria, Germany, Finland, France, and Norway, although the availability of data for Norway is particularly scarce, owing to the recent date of the reform (1998). In all of these cases, murky government statistics on care allowance recipients complicate the task of tracing the impact of these policies on the employment of women. One can only speculate as to the political motivations of governments that prefer to obscure the effects of these policies. As Anita Haataja (2000, 17) concluded after reviewing official labor force statistics across the European Union, “the current method of collecting and presenting statistics is a good way to manipulate the female employment rate and to hide the gender division of care work and the impact of reconciling policies.”<sup>9</sup>

Nonetheless, it is clear that in all of the countries studied, care leave policies have either produced a drop in mothers’ paid work outside the home or reinforced existing patterns of low workforce participation by mothers with children under age three. Although many mothers successfully return to their previous jobs after taking a paid care leave, there is evidence in some countries of lower pay, greater reliance on temporary or part-time work, and increased risk of unemployment for such women. The rhetoric of choice has surrounded the development of these policies, yet the extent to which paid care leaves actually promote parental choice hinges on the availability of out-of-home child care alternatives and decent jobs for women.

Moreover, although these policies might appear generous from an American perspective, benefit levels are by no means at wage replacement. Thus, the choices of parents in work and family matters remain deeply constrained by gender and class. Women make up nearly 100 percent of beneficiaries and, given the low benefit amount, only mothers who are married to a man with a stable income can choose to care for children at home. Sequential rather than simultaneous balancing of work and family is being institutionalized as the norm for women in these countries. In some cases, this represents a departure from an earlier emphasis on promoting mothers’ employment, whereas in others, the effect of these policies has been to reinforce the status quo of gender relations.

### *Effects on Women’s Labor Market Trajectories*

Though eligibility criteria for care allowances are gender-neutral, long leaves are taken almost entirely by mothers. In Austria, Germany, and France, for example, only 2 percent of the recipients are men. Even in Finland and Norway, where fathers can be recipients without being on leave, the percentages of male recipients was lower than 7 percent during 1990s (Bruning and Plantenga 1999; Social

Insurance Institution 2001; Rønsen 2001).<sup>10</sup> It is not surprising, then, that paid care leave policies only affect mothers' work patterns and have few consequences for male employment trajectories. In France and Finland, countries with historically high rates of mothers' employment, paid care leaves have induced mothers to leave the labor force to care for children at home (see Table 3). In France, the effects of the policy became apparent after a 1994 law made women with two children, the youngest under age three, eligible to receive the care allowance. Between 1994 and 1999, the percentage of mothers in the labor force with two children dropped from 74 percent to 56 percent, the first time since the 1970s that women's labor force participation trended downward (Bonnet and Labbé 1999).

Even in West Germany, a country with traditionally low employment rates of mothers, employment for women with children under the age of three has become even less common. Between 1986 and 2000, the overall participation rates of West German mothers with children under three dropped from 28 percent to 23 percent, whereas overall employment rates of West German married women with children increased from 38 percent to 50 percent (Beckmann and Kurtz 2001).<sup>11</sup>

In both East Germany and Finland, these policies were introduced during times of high unemployment, which led to significant drops in mothers' labor force participation overall. Employment rates of East German married women with children declined from 81 percent in 1991 and 74 percent in 1999. The average number of Finnish mothers with children under age three in the labor force fell to 50 percent during the 1990s, lower than the proportion of equivalent mothers in the workforce ten years earlier (Haataja 2000; Salmi and Lammi-Taskula 1999). Many of these women benefited from the care allowance, but it is difficult to untangle cause and effect, such as whether these beneficiaries would have taken a care leave in better economic times.

The only survey of care allowance recipients in Norway was conducted just one year after the program was created, making it difficult to draw conclusions about labor market effects. However, as the Norwegian care allowance lets parents spend the benefit on parental care, private child care, or a mix of the two, the benefit is being used for a majority of eligible children (approximately 76 percent), but this has not necessarily reduced the workforce participation of their mothers. Early results from the first year of implementation show a rise in the use of part-time work and greater reliance on nonsubsidized forms of child care (Rønsen 2001). In Finland, parents can also use the benefit for either parental or private care, yet statistics from the mid-1990s showed that most children (95 percent) whose parents

received the care allowance were cared for at home by a parent (Sipilä and Korpinen 1998, 273). This may reflect the fact that Finnish parents receive a basic amount for children not in publicly funded child care, but can receive an additional amount if one parent is engaged primarily in the care of that child.<sup>12</sup>

To evaluate the effects of care leave and allowance policies, it is crucial to look at both the short-term and long-term effects on women's employment. Do women return to the labor force after taking a leave, thereby nullifying or mitigating the potentially deleterious effects of these policies on women's long-term labor force trajectories? For most women the leaves are temporary, but national differences are intriguing as to how fast women return to their jobs after the leave. In addition, despite the fact that care leave policies safeguard women's jobs in most of these countries, not all women return to paid work after taking leave.

French, Austrian, and West German women tend to take the maximum time of two or three years, whereas Finnish and East German women return to work earlier (Bruning and Plantenga 1999; OSTAT 1992; Beckmann and Kurtz 2001). East German women take shorter leaves of one to two years (Engelbrech and Jungkunst 2001). Though 95 percent of Finnish women took a one-year leave, only 15–20 percent of Finnish mothers made use of the longer home care allowance until their child was three years old (Salmi and Lammi-Taskula 1999, 98). In East Germany and Finland, the longer tradition of mothers' employment and more pressing economic needs probably account for the faster return.

In both countries, women return to paid work at the highest rates. During the 1990s, over 75 percent of previously employed women returned to the labor market in East Germany after taking a care leave (Engelbrech and Jungkunst 2001).<sup>13</sup> Although there are no similar statistics available for Finland, we would expect a drop in the labor force participation of women with children if significant numbers of women had not returned to the labor market. Between 1995 and 1999, the employment rate of mothers with the youngest child between ages three and six actually rose from 70 percent to 80 percent, thus indicating high return rates for women after taking leaves (Haataja 2000). In France, return rates are somewhat lower; a study of women six to twelve months after they had received the care allowance showed that only 51 percent were in paid employment, compared to 76 percent who had been employed before they began receiving the benefit. The number of mothers who remained at home increased from 4 to 27 percent (Simon 2000).<sup>14</sup>

Return rates are low in West Germany and Austria. Only 40 per-

cent of Austrian mothers who had been employed before giving birth returned to work after the leave (Gisser et al. 1995, 89), whereas return rates are 60 percent for West German leave-takers. In interpreting these statistics, however, we need to take into account the situation prior to the reform. The drop in mothers' workforce participation in France represents a reversal of past trends—a decline in mothers' workforce participation in a country with a tradition of mothers' employment. By contrast, West German women usually have left the labor force for many years after the birth of a child; less than half of West German women who were previously employed in the mid-1980s returned after taking the leave (BMJFFG 1990). Comparing the life-courses of cohorts of German women, one can see that the extension of leaves has changed German women's return to the labor market significantly since 1986: Mothers are now returning more quickly to their jobs than in the past (Bird 2001). This change is also visible in the labor market participation rates for women with children aged three to six, which increased from 38 percent in 1986 to 59 percent in 2000 (Engelbrech and Jungkunst 2001).

For those who return to paid employment, workplace protections appear to have smoothed the way. Employers generally have not penalized women taking these leaves or impeded their return to paid employment; studies have found that only 8–15 percent of women say they encountered problems in the workplace when they returned (Fagnani 1995, 291; Gisser et al. 1995; Beckmann and Kurtz 2001; Salmi and Lammi-Taskula 1999). But a question remains: Why do significant numbers of women not return to the labor market? Critics of the child care leaves and benefits note that these policies have been developed at a time when women's place in labor markets is increasingly fragile. Unemployment and the growth of precarious forms of employment (part-time jobs, atypical forms of work) have impinged on all workers, but women are disproportionately affected.

Did mothers who went on leave risk losing their jobs during times of high unemployment? Though there was no significant increase in the unemployment risk in France, some women faced higher unemployment after the leaves in Austria and Germany. In Austria, 9 percent of women who had previously been employed were unemployed after taking the leave (Simon 2000). During the 1990s, 16 percent of West German and 21 percent of East German women were unemployed following the care leave (Engelbrech and Jungkunst 2001).<sup>15</sup> Half of these unemployed women had been dismissed and/or the companies had disappeared after they returned from the leave (Beckmann and Kurtz 2001). In East Germany, unification and economic reconstruction led to the closing down of whole production branches

and mass dismissals, creating a more precarious labor market for women.

The experiences of these women offer only preliminary evidence on the question of whether or not child-rearing leaves direct women down one-way streets or into mommy tracks of employment. Because the years of vocational and professional career development coincide with women's child-raising years, care leaves could negatively affect women's access to promotions. In Finland and Austria, 1 percent of the women who had taken leaves faced workplaces with fewer promotion or career options (Salmi and Lammi-Taskula 1999; Gisser et al. 1995). Moreover, child care leaves and allowances are likely to contribute to the perception that women are more expensive workers because their employers will have to find replacements during their absence from work. The Finnish Ministry of Labour has been concerned that "young women are in a bad position when the companies hire new labour force. Employers consider the investment being too risky. This has led to a situation, where, quite often, young educated women have been forced to accept fixed-term jobs, or even worse, lost the competition entirely" (Hietanen 1997).

The longer the leave, the more barriers women face in reinserting themselves into the labor market, including wage penalties. Between 1993 and 1997, Austrian women who did not go on leave increased their income by 20 percent, whereas women who took the leave lost 9 percent during the same period. The pay cut for Austrian women was partially due to their returning into part-time positions (Parlamentskorrespondenz 2000). For German women, all things being equal, the duration of the leaves itself makes a difference in future wages; the gender gap in pay increases further with the length of leaves. A recent German study finds that a year of parental leave cuts the five-year wage growth rate by one-third, and eighteen months of leave reduces it by one-half (Ondrich et al. 2002, 20).<sup>16</sup>

In sum, in all countries child-rearing benefits and leaves offer an incentive to women to leave the work force on the birth of their children. In most countries, these long-term leaves are very popular among women, and "temporary homemaking" for mothers of young children is becoming the norm in a number of these countries (Heinen and Martiskainen de Koenigswarter 2001). Contrary to some fears, reentry for those who return to work quickly after the leave does not seem to be a problem. However, a major concern in all countries is that these leaves otherwise undermine women's position in labor markets by increasing unemployment risks, encouraging part-time work, placing women into temporary and marginal forms of employment, and channeling them into mommy tracks of lower-wage and lower-status work.

*Do Child Care Leaves Foster Parental Choice?*

One may be inclined to dismiss the significance of these effects if they are the product of choices parents have made about how to divide responsibility for paid work and child care between them. Indeed, as the earlier part of this article has shown, the rhetoric of choice surrounded the inception of these policies, as political leaders and advocates argued that their aim was to provide flexibility and a wider range of choices to parents of young children.

The extent to which care leaves and allowances have expanded choice depends in part on the wider welfare regime in place, particularly the degree to which child care and other forms of parental leave are available. The possibility of parental choice is greater in such countries as France, Finland, and Norway, where publicly subsidized child care for under-threes is now fairly widespread. This is mitigated to some degree by regional differences in availability that may hinder fully free “choices” in some areas (David 1999; Rønsen 2001). One significant difference between these countries lies in the availability of conventional, well-paid parental leave. In Finland and Norway, parents can take nearly one year off from work and receive a high percentage of their salary, offering an attractive way to combine work and family without facing the potentially deleterious labor market effects of a longer leave. In France, by contrast, parents receive 100 percent of their wages for only sixteen weeks (or twenty-six weeks for the third child) (Gauthier 2000). This gives mothers few choices other than to quickly return to work or else accept the longer, low-paid care leave.

There are few choices open to parents in Austria and the states of the ex-FRG, where both public and private child care alternatives are minimal, and well-paid parental (maternity) leave is fourteen weeks in Germany, and sixteen weeks in Austria. Though full-day child care is fairly extensive in the East German states, actual use of programs has declined, perhaps owing to higher rates of unemployment. Some analysts thus fear that the shrinking client base will threaten the child care system (Hank 2001). Critics of the care allowance have identified this as a problem in Finland and France, where the shift of government resources toward paid care allowances has occurred at a time when the development of public child care has stagnated. By reducing the demand for child care and diverting resources toward parental care in the home, these allowances could undermine the public system, thereby reducing the extent to which parents can freely choose between parental and non-parental care (Jenson and Sineau 1998; Heinen and Martiskainen de Koenigswarter 2001).

Even in countries with widespread availability of public child care,



the fact that almost no men take paid care leaves reveals that the decision of whether or not to leave paid employment rests overwhelmingly with mothers. We see here the difficulties of implementing a procare policy in the context of a highly gendered labor market and entrenched cultural norms. Part of the issue is economic: As long as men earn more than women do, it is logical—indeed rational—for women to sacrifice their earnings for the modest child care benefit. In Germany and France, the levels of the child-rearing benefits are not meant to be and cannot serve as an income replacement. In France, these benefits amount to 39 percent of average wages in France and are only 24 percent in Germany (see Table 1). Even the newly introduced budgeting option in Germany, which reduces the time of the leave while raising the monthly benefit level to €450, hardly replaces an average male income of €1,300.

Measures to increase the role of fathers in child care have not been very successful. Neither leaves that specifically target fathers in Finland and France nor public relations campaigns endorsing fathers on leave in Germany have significantly increased men's participation in long-term leave programs. In Austria, men did not start taking the care leave when cutbacks in 1995–96 posed two options for parents: either take a reduced leave of eighteen months (down from twenty-four months) for one parent, or get an additional six months for the other partner. Most families opted for the reduced eighteen-month leave (Städtner 2002). If fathers took the leaves, one reason was their labor force attachment: 44 percent of these fathers had been unemployed before the leave (Städtner 2002). Even in Finland, where benefits have been most generous (replacing 66 percent of average incomes), fathers have been reluctant to take advantage of leave opportunities.

This reveals that it is not only economic incentives but cultural norms that perpetuate the gendered division of care. On the one hand, public opinion is divided as to whether women should take long employment breaks. In both France and Germany, surveys have shown that half the respondents believe it preferable that one parent stop working when they have a child—but half do not (Dufour et al. 1998; BMFSFJ 2000). In Germany, almost two-thirds of mothers prefer to have one partner work full-time and the other part-time (Engelbrech and Jungkunst 2001). On the other hand, care leaves are still mother-only leaves in public opinion. In France, of those who prefer to have one parent stay home with the children, 67 percent thought it should be the mother, 30.8 percent thought it should be the person earning less, and a mere 1 percent thought it should be the father (Dufour et al. 1998). When asked about the care leave possibility, half of German men reported that they had not even considered taking it (BMFSFJ 1999). Thus, superimposing a care leave policy atop gendered labor

market structures and gendered notions of caregiving is likely simply to reproduce gender gaps in employment and the gender division of care work.

Indeed, increasing the role of women in the home during the first three years of a child's life should only reinforce gendered patterns of care. One study in 1993 found that during the period of the care allowance, French households reverted to highly traditional roles in child care and housework (Fagnani 1995). Similarly, in Norway, studies have shown that couples divide housework and child care more evenly the longer mothers work outside the home. Thus, preliminary indications show that the use of the long paid care leave produces greater inequality in the apportioning of household tasks (Rønsen 2001, 28–29).

How can care leave improve women's choices by combining family and work simultaneously? Responding to demands to make leave more flexible, governments have increasingly allowed combinations of part-time work and part-time care. The hope is to solidify women's connection to employment and diminish some of the potentially negative effects of paid care leave. Yet these efforts have met with mixed success. In France, only one-fifth of care allowance recipients did part-time work during the leave (Afsa 1998, 37). Despite the fact that employers are increasingly offering part-time work and on-the-job training during leaves, over 90 percent of women in Germany did not work during the leaves (Engelbrech and Jungkunst 2001).<sup>17</sup> Interestingly, in Austria, fathers on leave more often worked part time than did mothers (17 percent compared to 3–4 percent mothers) (Städtner 2002). Even fewer women in Finland used the leaves to care simultaneously for children and do paid work, given reduced benefits for these partial leaves and the lack of part-time jobs in general (Mikkola 1991; Salmi and Lammi-Taskula 1999).

In sum, although the current format of care leave policies and benefits may increase women's options to care for their children full time at home, there are few incentives for fathers to care for children. Thus, we can expect that paid care leave policies will only solidify the gender division of care.

### *Care Leave Policies and Socioeconomic Differences among Women*

One argument on behalf of paid care leaves is that they better correspond to the preferences of low-income women, particularly those faced with the alternative of low-wage “junk” jobs.<sup>18</sup> Because the full-time insertion of women into labor markets is perhaps a middle- or upper-class ideal (Mink 1998), having time to care in the home can be especially welcome relief to many wage-earning women

who are trapped in difficult, unsatisfying, and poorly paid work. In light of the dim employment prospects facing many solo mothers in the United States, some American feminists have proposed caregivers' rights and benefits in response to the attack on welfare mothers. It is therefore worth asking whether the child-rearing leaves and benefits in Europe have contributed to women's ability to maintain an autonomous household, without being dependent on a male breadwinner (Orloff 1993). How do single mothers and low-income families fare under these policies?

One positive aspect of paid care leaves is that they allow low-income families and single mothers to care for their children for two to three years and receive public support in a universal program, thereby avoiding stigmatization. To some degree, care leave policies do recognize care in the home as valuable work. However, given the low level of the child-rearing allowances, the benefits alone have done little to help low-income couples or single mothers raise their own children at home and support themselves. Most countries have additional means-tested benefits, family allowances, and supplements for single mothers and low-income families. In France, for example, most solo mothers receive an allowance that is more generous than the care leave, the *allocation parent isolé* (single-parent allowance), which is worth about 71 percent of the minimum wage for a single parent with one child and 18 percent of the minimum wage for each additional child (Lefaucheur 1995, 271). In Norway, solo mothers also receive a means-tested but fairly generous transitional allowance for three years (Rønsen 2001).

Yet in many of these countries, solo mothers are expected to enter paid work after three years. In Norway, a shift in public policy in the late 1990s underlined the importance of encouraging solo mothers to take paid employment, which was hailed by advocates as a source of greater independence for women (Skevik 1998). In France, benefits to solo mothers are available only until children reach the age of three, after which the mothers are expected to be in the labor force (Hanratty 1994). With universal access to preschool education and the cessation of care leave and other benefits after three years, most of them have done so; in the mid-1990s, 82 percent of solo mothers were in the labor force, compared to 68 percent of married or cohabiting mothers. In Austria, the various source of income for low-income mothers and single mothers were the first to fall to welfare cuts in the late 1990s. These cutbacks reduced leave time for single mothers by six months (Thenner 1999).

Thus, although paid care leaves do help some low-income parents care for their own children for up to three years, they cannot be viewed

as part of a burgeoning movement in Western Europe to promote care in the home by solo parents. Instead, the care allowances and leaves are aimed more at the low- to middle-income earner who is married to a man with stable employment and a decent income. Thus, in France, only 4 percent of care allowance recipients are solo mothers. Women who take the child-rearing leave usually have a partner with a steady job, whereas those with a partner who is unemployed or in a tenuous form of employment tend to eschew taking such a leave (Simon 1999; Fagnani 1995). In West Germany, single mothers are also less likely than married women to take the leave. Only 18 percent of single mothers but 23 percent of married women with children under age three were on leave. The same is true in East Germany, where slightly more married women than single mothers were on leave (24 percent versus 22 percent) (Engelbrech and Jungkunt 2001).

One unresolved issue is the extent to which paid care leaves will exacerbate class stratification by channeling lower-skilled female workers into dead-end job tracks. It is too early to draw conclusions about the long-term effects of care leave policies, but we can examine the socioeconomic profile of who take paid care leave. In Germany, women with lower-status jobs are more likely to adopt the temporary homemaker role (Gottschall and Bird forthcoming). Similarly, in France the vast majority (84 percent) of care allowance beneficiaries are office/sales workers or blue-collar workers, who make up 64 percent of the workforce. Female managers and professionals represent only 3 percent of beneficiaries, but are 13 percent of the workforce (Simon 1999). Thus, the gap in the labor force participation of women according to socioeconomic status has widened in recent years (Bonnet and Labbé 1999). In Norway, preliminary data show that women with an intermediate or low level of education are more likely to take advantage of a paid care leave (Rønsen 2001). These differences reflect the low level of the payment, as well as the greater career attachment of many higher-status workers. For those earning the minimum wage or less (due to part-time work), they can maintain an equivalent standard of living on the care leave benefit, if one subtracts transportation and child care costs.

Thus, opponents of these policies have noted that the low-wage workers most likely to take these leaves risk being hurt the most by long absences from the workforce (Heinen and Martiskainen de Koenigswarter 2001). To the extent that these leaves have negative consequences for women's economic well-being and the gender division of labor in the home, low-wage women will be disproportionately affected (Simon 1999). As Gottschall and Bird (forthcoming) observe

in the case of Germany, “New forms of social inequality among women and among childless households and households with children are emerging through the leave policies.”

### Conclusion

This article has examined the origins and consequences of extended care leaves in a number of West European countries. These policies are a product of center-right political forces rather than being part of a feminist project to promote gender equality. This accounts for some of the limitations of care leave policies: Rather than being structured to enhance equality between women and men and equalize the division of labor in the home, the aim is to value mother care and respond to a constituency that favors extended homemaking for women. As a result, care leaves and child-rearing benefits are likely to reinforce the existing gendered division of labor in the home. Additionally, these policies have been affected by their origins in antiunemployment policy and fiscal crisis. In seeking to draw women out of the labor force and avoid greater investments in public child care services, the architects of care leave policies were not primarily motivated by concerns about assisting working women. Given the low level of these benefits, it is unlikely that these policies will attract many men for the near future.

Care leave policies have produced a substantial decline in the numbers of mothers with children under three who are in paid employment. Women often reenter paid employment after the duration of the leave, but many return to part-time, marginal, or temporary work. Critics have pointed out that care leaves encourage women to withdraw from the labor market at a time of growing labor market insecurity, thereby increasing the risks of poverty in the long-term. It is too early to say whether these prognostications will come true, but there is evidence that unemployment risks have been exacerbated in some countries, and that women who take these leaves risk depressed wages. Given that lower-skilled workers tend to take the leaves, these women will bear any of the long-term costs of these policies.

What are the implications for debates among American feminists about valuing care and reforming welfare? Certainly, care leave and allowance policies, as designed in most West European countries, do not fulfill the visions articulated by American feminists of a well-paid right to care. The low benefit amount and frequent lack of child care alternatives diminish the degree to which parents have real choices in how to balance work and family life. Moreover, these programs were not designed with the solo parent in mind; rather, the assump-

tion is that care leave recipients can rely on the income of a male breadwinner. Thus, care leave policies as currently structured satisfy neither the advocates of difference or equality, in that they provide only a weak valuation of care while undermining women's place in paid employment.

Proposals for a universal and well-paid care leave still sound fairly utopian within the context of the U.S. policy discussions, but the care leave and allowance policies currently being pursued in Western Europe offer a realistic version of what paid care might look like in public policy. As this article has shown, it is difficult to superimpose a right to extensive child care leave on highly gendered labor markets and traditional cultural norms without reinforcing the current division of labor in both the workplace and home. Until there are wider social, economic, and attitudinal changes, women will continue to make up the vast majority of recipients, and child care leaves and benefits will simply reproduce the norms and structures that feminists have been fighting.

## NOTES

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1. This article is limited to the study of child-rearing leaves. Some countries also have created benefits for those who care for aging relatives, with the German long-term care insurance policy being one of the most extensive policies to support family caregivers.

2. In addition, the European Union now has a collective agreement on parental leave that requires all EU member states to provide a three-month unpaid leave. Most countries already had more generous policies, so this agreement had little effect on policy making in these countries.

3. Some states do pay a third year of the benefit, which is also means-tested.

4. As Figure 1 shows, Belgium offers a substantially greater amount of time for paid care leave. These leaves are broken up over a long time period, so it is difficult to study the effects of these policies as comparable to the continuous, long paid care leaves in the other countries. For that reason, we concentrate on five countries with more similar policies.

5. German public schools for six- to nine-year-old children are open for half the day. The same is true in Austria, where few elementary schools are open until noon or 1 P.M., and only 6 percent of children six to ten are in a publicly funded after-school program (European Commission Network on Childcare 1996).

6. However, following demands from unions and women in the SPD and Green parties, the government did establish the right to part-time work in

companies with fifteen or more employees and extended the work hours that caregivers can work during the leave from twenty to thirty hours a week. The government also increased flexibility for both parents to share the leave, such as allowing both parents to take the leave simultaneously.

7. Authors' estimates from Caisse Nationale des Allocations Familiales (National Family Benefits Fund) data for 1996, calculated using current exchange rates, which make the value of these amounts seem lower than they are within France.

8. The proposal also would award this benefit to families regardless of the number of children they have, thereby removing the vestige of pronatalism that has clung to the APE.

9. Labor market statistics vary in how they classify parents on leave. For example, women on leave are counted as not in the labor force in Norway, but in Austria, women on leave are officially "unemployed." Finally, government statistics on benefit recipients and leave takers give little information about their current employment status; for example, recipients of care leave benefits in Germany could be either employed, unemployed, or have decided not to return to the labor force after the leave.

10. Because Finnish parents can use home care allowances either to care for children in the home or hire a private day care provider, fathers can continue to work full time while receiving the benefits. Thus, we have included the percentage of men as recipients of parental leaves.

11. The increase in mothers' employment was primarily due to increases in part-time work. In 2000, 75 percent of West German women worked part-time, and in 1986 only 50 percent of women had been employed part-time. Part-time work remains less common for East German women (Beckmann and Kurtz 2001).

12. Eligibility for this supplemental benefit also depends on income, because it is progressively reduced above a certain income level. Sipilä and Korpinen (1998) report that people in the middle-income bracket would still be eligible for this additional amount.

13. Still, married East German mothers' employment with children aged three to six fell from 81 percent in 1991 to 74 percent in 1999, in part owing to rising unemployment.

14. According to this survey, 40 percent of the mothers remaining at home continued to benefit from the APE because they had a third child.

15. Of those women who had previously been employed, 6 percent of West German and 16 percent of East German women were unemployed after the leave (Beckmann and Kurtz 2001, 5).

16. On the positive side, some countries do preserve mothers' pension rights while they are receiving parental or care leave. In Germany, mothers can receive one year of pension credits; in Finland, mothers continue to accumulate pension credits during the time they receive a home care allowance and care for a child under three at home.

17. Ten percent of West German mothers, 5 percent of East German mothers, and 3 percent of Austrian mothers worked part-time during the leave.

18. Owing to the limitations of the available data, we are not able to treat the question of how these policies might affect immigrant women.

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