Family policies have undergone a remarkable transformation over the past three decades. Their traditional pillar of ‘passive’ income support for families with children has been complemented with ‘activating’ services and measures, such as childcare services and parental-leave schemes. These are designed to reconcile work and family life, to foster female employment and gender equality and to promote child development, all of which are important pillars of the social-investment perspective (for example, Hemerijck, 2017). In that regard, activating family policies (or work–family reconciliation policies) are considered important instruments to deal with the perfect storm of inadequate resources, employment and policies: a triple bind experienced by many single parents.

Childcare services, for instance, are effective in supporting paid work among mothers, which in turn increases their financial resources (Steiber & Haas, 2012). In particular, having access to childcare is indispensable for single mothers, as there is no partner to share the burden of caring for one’s children. Being unable to access or afford childcare services, then, acts as a barrier against paid employment for single parents (Forry, 2009). An alternative strategy would be to rely on informal care; yet on their own, these care arrangements seldom offer the stability to sustain a strong attachment to labour (Van Lancker & Horemans, 2017).

Parental-leave schemes are also expected to be conducive to women’s employment, since they foster parents’ bonds with the labour market by maintaining the contractual link between employers and employees while the latter retreat temporarily from the labour market to take care of their children (Ray et al., 2010). This encourages women to engage
in paid employment before they have children, since parental leave allows them to return to their job and resume their career. Maldonado and Nieuwenhuis (2015) find that periods of well-paid leave are related to higher maternal employment rates and lower poverty rates, and that these associations are stronger among single parents compared with couples.

The problem of inadequate resources and inadequate employment can hence be (at least partly) tackled by these activating family policy measures. In order to be effective in safeguarding employment opportunities, however, they have to be used by single mothers in the first place. Despite large cross-country differences in the availability and generosity of reconciliation policies, as well as in the poverty and employment rates of single mothers, this issue has not been hitherto investigated in a comparative way. Therefore, the use of formal childcare services and take-up of parental-leave schemes among single mothers are the main focus of this chapter.

Analyses presented in this chapter focus on single mothers instead of single parents. Single parents are predominantly women; fathers are much less likely to be the main caregiver (Duncan & Edwards, 1997). Since only a small share of single parents are fathers, comparative exercises based on household surveys are limited due to small samples. After divorce, moreover, men tend to work more hours and return to predivorce living standards in the short term, while mothers tend to reduce their working hours and are more likely to experience significant long-term drops in income levels (Andreß et al., 2006; Jansen et al., 2009) – hence the relevance of reconciliation policies for this particular group.

Drawing on the 2010 Reconciliation between work and family life ad-hoc module of the European Union Labour Force Survey (EU-LFS) data and using multilevel techniques, this chapter will:

1. Explore take-up and use of paid parental-leave schemes and formal childcare services among single and partnered mothers across European countries;
2. Test whether and how the use of these measures impacts on the probability to work for single mothers;
3. Drawing on (1) and (2) above, infer policy lessons: what set of family policies is most effective in facilitating the paid employment of single mothers and tackling the triple bind?
Do reconciliation policies enable single mothers to work?

Previous research

There is a large body of literature examining the link between family policy and maternal employment. Over two decades ago, Gornick et al. (1997) showed how national policies to facilitate paid employment – including parental-leave policies, tax policies and childcare policies – are strongly related to maternal employment. Pettit and Hook (2005) focused on how state policies impact on employment rates of mothers with young children versus childless women. They found that the ‘child penalty’ was smaller in countries where public childcare services are sufficiently available and parental-leave entitlements are generous. For parental leave, however, the evidence was less unequivocal than for childcare, since parental leave was only conducive for women’s employment up to a certain length.

This body of research shows convincingly how social policy – a fortiori family policy – impacts on maternal employment and living standards, and explains cross-country differences in employment to a large extent (see Steiber & Haas, 2012, for a review of the literature). Yet in general, these studies do not focus on single parents specifically. Recent examples of studies that focus on the relationship between social and family policies and single-parent poverty and employment are Brady and Burroway (2012), Misra et al., (2007) and Maldonado and Nieuwenhuis (2015). Brady et al. show that the poverty risk of single parents is lower in countries with universal programmes, instead of social programmes targeted towards single parents. Misra et al. (2007) find that family policies impact on poverty rates of single and partnered women: child benefits and childcare services lower the poverty rates, while long parental leave has more ambivalent effects. Maldonado and Nieuwenhuis (2015) show that parental leave helps in alleviating single-mother poverty through facilitating paid employment, but only if the parental leave is paid. One take-home message from these studies is that single parents generally fare well in a context where all families fare well. The poverty risk of single parents is tied to the overall poverty risk in a particular country, and a set of (family) policies effective in reducing poverty and supporting paid employment for all is generally effective in reducing poverty and supporting paid employment for single parents as well (Van Lancker et al., 2015).

However, the majority of these comparative studies draw on macro-level indicators of reconciliation policies, such as legal entitlement to parental leave, duration and remuneration of parental leave, childcare coverage and childcare costs. There are some theoretical reasons why the mere existence of generous reconciliation policies might have a
positive impact on the living standard of single parents. If out-of-
home care use is widespread and formal childcare services are readily
available, for instance, single parents might be less inclined to reduce
their working hours after childbirth, since that is both possible
and accepted (for example, Budig et al., 2012; Uunk et al., 2005).
Moreover, such an environment usually goes together with more
progressive norms on motherhood, which make it easier for women
to pursue a career and have children.

Still, drawing on macro-level indicators remains an indirect way
to test how parental leave and formal childcare services help single
parents avoid the triple bind; being entitled to parental leave does not
mean that parental leave is actually used. Even if parental-leave use
is widespread, it might still be the case that it falls short in helping
specific families, such as low-income families or single parents. The
employment effect of leave schemes is complicated, however, as it
depends on the length of the leave, the conditions of entitlement and
the generosity of the allowance (Akgunduz & Plantenga, 2013). Short
periods of particularly well-paid leave have been shown to be beneficial
to female employment; young mothers-to-be are encouraged to
reinforce their labour-market attachment, being aware that taking leave
will induce only minor income losses and that they will subsequently
be able to return safely to their jobs (De Henau et al., 2007; Han et al.,
2009). Still, if the duration of the retreat out of the labour market
is too long, there are fewer incentives for young women to start a
career prior to childbirth due to deteriorated career prospects after
the leave period (Keck & Saraceno, 2013). The employment impact
of leave schemes with a long duration, such as homecare leaves, was
even shown to be negative. Under such schemes, caregivers receive a
cash allowance beyond the statutory parental-leave period, with the
explicit objective of giving parents freedom to choose between using
formal childcare or homecare. In sum, duration and payment of leave
periods are important features of the design of parental-leave schemes.
We will return to these characteristics of leave schemes in the section
‘Policy lessons’ later in this chapter.

Most studies that examine actual use of reconciliation policies
focus on specific countries. For instance, Hardoy and Schöne (2010)
(Norway) and Rønsen and Sundström (2002) (Finland) find that
cash-for-care schemes yield significantly negative effects on maternal
employment rates. Asai (2015) examined two changes in the
Japanese parental-leave regulation to estimate its impact on maternal
employment. The changes increased the replacement rate from 0% to
25% in 1995, and again from 25% to 40% in 2001. Using a difference-
in-difference regression approach, the authors find no impact of these changes in replacement rates on job continuity around childbirth. Asai suggests that this could be the result of social norms on motherhood and a lack of childcare availability when mothers want to return to work, confirming the importance of interaction effects between different policy measures. Indeed, the context in which leave policies take root—such as the state of the labour market and dominant norms on gender equality—will influence the probability for single parents to actually use these policies as well. As such, even if leave is paid and not too long, its effect on employment can be ambiguous.

A similar reasoning holds for childcare service use. Boeckman et al. (2014) show that higher levels of publicly supported childcare use are associated with lower motherhood employment penalties, in terms of both employment rates and working hours. Yet, even if childcare use is widespread among families with young children, single parents may benefit little if the services are too expensive, opening hours are not flexible enough or admission rules favour dual-earner families. A recent study comparing childcare arrangements between partnered and single mothers working nonstandard hours in Finland, Netherlands and the UK concludes that single mothers face much more challenges to balance nonstandard work with childcare arrangements for young children, related to the inadequate provision of formal childcare services for these parents (Moilanen et al., 2016). This means that macro indicators on childcare policies fall short of untangling the actual impact of using childcare for single parents.

In recent years, an increasing number of studies has exploited policy changes as a natural experiment, which allows us to more reliably estimate the causal impact of changes in the use of childcare on maternal labour supply. Havnes and Mogstad (2011) analyse the large expansion of subsidised childcare in Norway in the 1970s, and conclude that the newly created childcare-scheme places mainly crowd out informal care arrangements; the overall increase in net employment was almost negligible. Lefebvre et al. (2009) estimate the impact the introduction of universal, highly subsidised childcare in Quebec in 1997 on maternal employment. They do find substantial labour-supply effects among mothers with preschool children, although the effect was smaller than anticipated because a substantial share of the new childcare usage was accounted for by working mothers who previously relied on informal care. Both studies find that, in particular, partnered mothers with a working spouse entered the labour market.

Summarising all of this, the extent to which single mothers have access to childcare services and parental-leave schemes, and how this
is related to employment, is relatively unknown (for example, Bakker & Karsten, 2013) – certainly less so in comparative respect.

**Data and analytical strategy**

The European Union Labour Force Survey (EU-LFS) is a large household survey conducted in all European Union member states (as well as Iceland, Norway and Switzerland) and containing harmonised, cross-country-comparable data on labour-market participation. Its 2010 wave includes an ad-hoc module on ‘Reconciliation between work and family life’, which contains questions on working-time flexibility, the use of parental leave and the use of formal childcare services. The combination of microdata on actual use of both childcare services and parental leave makes this a unique data source to examine work and care arrangements across European countries.

The key concepts used throughout this chapter are defined as follows. First, a **single mother** is defined as an adult woman living with at least one child below 15 in a private household without a partner; a **partnered mother** is defined as an adult woman living with a spouse and at least one child below 15. In both cases, other adults can be present in the household. Second, **employment** adheres to the International Labour Organization’s (ILO) definition of employment, meaning that a mother is employed if she worked during the reference week (that is, the week of the interview) for at least one hour, or if she was not at work during the reference week but had a job from which she was temporarily absent. Third, the use of **formal childcare services** includes paid childminders, preschool, childcare centres and so on, apart from compulsory school. The respondents are asked whether they have used formal childcare services for their youngest child and, if so, how many hours in a usual week. The question hence does not reflect current use of childcare services. For that reason, the figures on childcare services used in this chapter cannot be readily compared with official statistics.

Finally, the **take-up of parental leave** is based on a question gauging whether the respondent has used full-time parental leave for at least one month for his or her youngest child, and further differentiates by the number of months of parental leave used. Similar to the question on childcare services, the question refers to the past experience of respondents. Parental leave excludes maternity or paternity leave, but includes homecare leave. It can be paid as well as unpaid, and is not restricted to public entitlements. Parental-leave entitlements as part of a collective agreement or employer-based leave agreements are included.
Do reconciliation policies enable single mothers to work?

The analyses in this chapter are based on a total sample of 256,787 mothers (199,082 partnered mothers and 57,705 single mothers), for whom we have full information on family composition and work status. The question on uptake of parental leave has been asked to only a subset of respondents with a youngest child below 8 years old. The question on childcare has a high share of no answers due to the filter applied in the questionnaire. This means that the analyses involving the formal childcare and parental-leave questions are based on a smaller sample of 116,782 mothers (107,866 partnered and 8,916 single). In the multivariate analyses below, Denmark is excluded (see text), which reduces the final N to 7,343. See European Commission (2013) for further reading on measurement and quality issues.

Single parents' work and care arrangements across countries

Let us start our analysis with a tour d’horizon of work and care patterns in European countries. The focus is on differences between single mothers and partnered mothers, both within and across countries. Figure 11.1 shows employment rates, subdivided into full-time and part-time work. In the majority of countries, single mothers with young children are less likely to work compared to partnered mothers with young children. In countries such as Bulgaria; Romania; Slovak Republic; Latvia; Portugal; Slovenia; Poland, France and Denmark, the gap is particularly large (more than a 10 percentage point difference). In contrast, in countries such as Sweden, Finland and Luxemburg, single mothers are more likely to work.

In general, countries with high levels of employment among parents living in couples tend to display high levels of employment among single parents as well ($r = 0.70$). It is also noticeable that the majority of working single parents are full-time employed (see Horemans and Marx, Chapter Nine in this book). Notable exceptions are Germany, the UK and the Netherlands, where the majority of working single parents are working part time, reflecting the more general work patterns and spread of part-time work in these countries.

We now turn to care arrangements. Figure 11.2 shows the share of single mothers (vis-à-vis partnered mothers) having enrolled their youngest child in a formal childcare service. Cross-country differences are enormous, ranging from less than 20% of single mothers in Ireland, Romania, Lithuania, Cyprus and Spain to over 60% in Sweden and Denmark. While parents living with a partner can rely on each other to share the burden of working and caring, single parents need to find
a way to ‘outsource’ childcare, be it part time or full time, in order to engage in paid employment. In that regard, one would expect single parents to make more use of formal childcare services than one would expect couples to. Figure 11.2, however, shows that this is true only in a handful of countries. The gap in favour of single mothers is largest in Sweden, the Netherlands, Austria, Poland and Germany. In contrast, partnered mothers are much more likely than single mothers to use formal childcare in France; Slovenia; Portugal; Latvia, Cyprus and Ireland. With regards to formal childcare use, single mothers seem to adhere to the general country norm: the correlation between use among single mothers and partnered mothers is very strong ($r = 0.94$).
Do reconciliation policies enable single mothers to work?

Figure 11.2: Share of single and partnered mothers having used formal childcare for their youngest child, European countries, 2010

Figure 11.3 shows the share of single parents and partnered parents who took full-time parental leave for at least one month to take care of the youngest child in the household. Again, these are not current rates of parental-leave take-up, but the numbers reflect the past experience of parents relating to their youngest child below 8 years old. Maternity leave is excluded from these figures, which is particularly relevant to understand the low Danish number. In Sweden and Denmark, maternity, paternity and parental leave are basically included in one and the same system.² Additional analyses (not shown) indicate that the share of mothers with a child younger than one year old currently on maternity leave is 54% in Denmark versus only 2% in Sweden. It thus seems that the phrasing of the questions included in the EU-LFS led to different interpretations of what ‘Parental leave (excluding maternity leave)’ actually means in these countries. For that reason, Denmark is omitted from the multivariate analyses.

Cross-country differences in take-up of parental leave for single parents with young children are quite large. The shares range from about 5% in Cyprus, Spain, Greece and Ireland to 30–70% in Poland,
The triple bind of single-parent families

Figure 11.3: Share of single and partnered mothers having used full-time parental leave for at least one month for their youngest child, European countries, 2010

Note: based on single and partnered mothers with at least one child below 8 years old.
Source: Own calculation on EU-LFS 2010

Luxemburg, Germany, Austria, Lithuania and Romania to over 80% in Finland, Sweden, Hungary, Slovak Republic, Czech Republic, Latvia, Slovenia and Estonia. Patterns of parental-leave uptake among single mothers are almost identical to patterns among couples (r = 0.98). In the majority of countries, and in line with the patterns of childcare use surveyed earlier, single mothers are less likely to have used parental leave than partnered mothers. Notable exceptions are Sweden and Austria.

How does the use of reconciliation policies relate to employment?

Theory would predict that the use of formal childcare is indispensable for single parents to be able to be meaningfully employed, while the evidence on parental leave is mixed. Let us now turn to the questions: 1) whether having used formal childcare services or having taken up parental leave is associated with a higher probability to engage in paid employment for single mothers; and 2) how these associations
Do reconciliation policies enable single mothers to work?

differ across countries (and hence policy designs). I estimate logistic multilevel models, estimating single mothers’ employment probability as a function of formal childcare use and parental leave take-up, controlled for sociodemographic background variables. The dependent and independent variables of interest follow the same definition outlined in the previous section. This means that the model actually estimates the effect of past experiences, in terms of formal childcare and parental leave use, on current employment. Current use of leave would bias our outcomes, since current use of leave in many cases requires an attachment to the labour market. The sociodemographic variables include sex, age and age squared, age of the youngest child and the number of children in the household, as well as educational attainment. Controlling for educational attainment is necessary, since it was shown that single parenthood is more common among those with vulnerable socioeconomic backgrounds. Moreover, being low skilled is a strong predictor for limited employment opportunities in today’s labour market (for example, Steiber et al., 2016). To ease the interpretation of the coefficients presented in Table 11.1, the relevant results will be reported as predicted probabilities in the text.

Model 1 shows that having used formal childcare services for one’s youngest child significantly increases the log odds to work by 1.1. This means that the employment rate for single mothers who have used formal childcare services for their youngest child is predicted to be 18% higher compared to those who did not, if we assume that all else is equal. The take-up of parental leave is significantly, but more weakly, associated with a higher probability to work: it increases the log odds to work by 0.34. This means that, all else being equal, the employment rate of single mothers who have used parental leave is predicted to be 6% higher than single mothers who have not used parental leave.

Of course, the size of the coefficient is difficult to compare, since the two policy measures are qualitatively different. To obtain a bit more purchase on this issue, Model 2 makes a distinction by intensity of use. The results are revealing: the probability to work is strongest if single mothers used full-time childcare for their youngest child (a coefficient of 1.41 translates into 23% higher compared to no childcare use), and less strong but still positive if they used it only part time (coefficient of 0.86 and 15% higher). The story is different for parental leave. The probability to work becomes lower if one retreats full time from the labour market for a long period of time (over six months). The coefficient for parental-leave use of long duration is 0.17 (3% higher probability compared to no parental leave use), showing that this is only slightly better than not having used parental leave in terms of
The triple bind of single-parent families

Table 11.1: Multilevel logistic regression models estimating the probability to work for single parents

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Model 1</th>
<th>Model 2</th>
<th>Model 3</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Age</strong></td>
<td>0.14 (0.03) ***</td>
<td>0.14 (0.03) ***</td>
<td>0.14 (0.03) ***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Age</strong>&lt;sup&gt;2&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
<td>-0.00 (0.00) **</td>
<td>-0.00 (0.00) **</td>
<td>-0.00 (0.00) ***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Education (ref = low)</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Medium</td>
<td>0.74 (0.07) ***</td>
<td>0.73 (0.07) ***</td>
<td>0.72 (0.07) ***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High</td>
<td>1.49 (0.09) ***</td>
<td>1.49 (0.09) ***</td>
<td>1.50 (0.09) ***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Number of children in the household</strong></td>
<td>-0.23 (0.03) ***</td>
<td>-0.22 (0.03) ***</td>
<td>-0.23 (0.03) ***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Age of the youngest child</strong></td>
<td>0.13 (0.02) ***</td>
<td>0.13 (0.01) ***</td>
<td>0.13 (0.01) ***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Has been using:</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Formal childcare</td>
<td>1.07 (0.06) ***</td>
<td></td>
<td>1.06 (0.11) ***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>&lt;30h/week</td>
<td>0.86 (0.07) ***</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>&gt;30h/week</td>
<td>1.41 (0.09) ***</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Full-time parental leave</td>
<td>0.34 (0.07) ***</td>
<td></td>
<td>0.33 (0.19)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>&lt;6 months</td>
<td>0.79 (0.13) ***</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>&gt;6 months</td>
<td>0.17 (0.08) *</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Random part</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Country-level variance</td>
<td>1.10 (0.37) **</td>
<td>1.07 (0.35) **</td>
<td>1.02 (0.35) **</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Formal childcare variance</td>
<td>0.13 (0.08) *</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parental-leave variance</td>
<td>0.58 (0.23) **</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Log likelihood</strong></td>
<td>-3,859.15</td>
<td>-3,833.72</td>
<td>-3,821.83</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>N</strong></td>
<td>7,343</td>
<td>7,343</td>
<td>7,343</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Countries</strong></td>
<td>26</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>26</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Note:** ***p<0.001, **p<0.01, *p<0.05. Standard errors in parentheses. Coefficients are reported as average marginal effects in the text. Denmark is excluded from the analyses. Source: Own calculations on EU-LFS 2010

Employment probabilities. In contrast, having used parental leave for a shorter period of time increases one’s probability to work (coefficient of 0.79 and 12% higher).

Finally, Model 3 exploits the strength of a multilevel logistic regression model. It adds the variables of interest as random slopes, allowing the effect of formal childcare and parental-leave use on the employment probability to vary across countries. In other words, it tests whether the association between the use of care policies and work differs across countries. Model 3 shows that the effect of using formal childcare on the probability to work is significant, but that the extent of the effect differs significantly across countries as well. In short: having used childcare is associated with higher odds to work, but
the strength of the association differs across countries. The story for parental leave is different: the coefficient of parental leave shows that, on average, having used full-time parental leave is not associated with a higher probability to work. Yet, the variance reported in the random part suggests that there is significant cross-country difference in the effect of parental leave use. To obtain more insight into this matter, Figure 11.4 shows the country variation in the coefficients obtained.

While the use of formal childcare is always positively associated with higher employment probabilities, this is not the case for the use of full-time parental leave. In countries such as Finland; Czech Republic; Estonia; Slovak Republic; Poland, Hungary and Germany, having used full-time parental leave is associated with lower probabilities to work for single parents compared to no use. In some countries – such as Bulgaria; Latvia; Spain, Sweden and Portugal – the effect is negligible, while in other countries – such as Austria; Slovenia; Italy; Romania, Greece and Luxemburg – having used parental leave is associated with much higher probabilities to work. This corroborates earlier findings in the literature that the employment effect of parental leave is much more complicated than that of formal childcare services.

Figure 11.4: Effect of take-up of parental leave and use of formal childcare on the probability to work

Notes: The coefficients shown are the total effect (fixed + random part) for each country of having used formal childcare or parental leave for the youngest child on the probability to work for single mothers.

Source: Empirical Bayes estimates derived from Model 3, Table 11.1
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Policy lessons

The literature predicts that long periods of leave will be detrimental for the employment opportunities of mothers, and in particular mothers from a disadvantaged background. Our results show that this equally holds for single mothers. Figure 11.5 relates the cross-country variation in the effect of parental leave on the log odds to work (the random slope variation in the previous section) to the design of the leave system. It shows a strong negative relationship ($r = -0.54$) between the length of paid leave entitlement and the country variation in the effect of parental-leave use on work. For countries with the longest duration of paid parental leave, the impact on the probability to work becomes negative. This confirms the assumption drawn from the literature.

Yet in the group of countries with leave entitlements between 30 and 50 weeks, the effect of leave usage on the employment chances of single mothers varies strongly. In some countries (Greece, Spain, and others).

Figure 11.5: Association between duration of parental leave and the effect of parental-leave use on the probability to work

Country abbreviations for Figures 11.5–11.8: Austria (AT), Belgium (BE), Bulgaria (BG), Cyprus (CY), Czech Republic (CZ), Germany (DE), Estonia (EE), Spain (ES), Finland (FI), France (FR), Greece (GR), Hungary (HU), Ireland (IE), Italy (IT), Lithuania (LT), Luxembourg (LU), Latvia (LV), Malta (MT), Netherlands (NL), Poland (PL), Portugal (PT), Romania (RO), Sweden (SE), Slovenia (SI), Slovak Republic (SK), United Kingdom (UK).

Source: own calculations on EU-LFS 2010 and OECD Family database (horizontal axis). The vertical axis depicts the log odds to work derived from the random part of Model 3, Table 11.1.
Ireland, the Netherlands and the UK), there is no entitlement to paid parental leave. However, in these countries, paid parental leave can be available as part of collective agreements.3

The level of payment was identified as a second important feature of the design of parental-leave schemes. Figure 11.6 shows the relation between the random effect and the average payment rate of the parental-leave entitlement. The association is weak but positive ($r = 0.23$), showing that the probability for single mothers to work tends to be higher if the parental leave is well paid. The use of unpaid parental leave is usually not conducive to employment, the only exception being Greece. There, however, single mothers hardly use it.

Indeed, for these effects to kick in, parental leave should be used by single parents. It was shown in Figure 11.3 that the actual take-up of parental leave differed greatly across countries. How does that relate to the findings presented here? In Figure 11.7, the use of leave is related to the duration of the leave (panel A) and to the average payment rate (panel B). Panel A shows a close association ($r = 0.82$) between

**Figure 11.6: Association between average payment rate of parental-leave systems and the effect of parental-leave use on the probability to work**

*Note:* average payment rate is the proportion of previous earnings replaced by the benefit over the length of the paid leave entitlements for a person earning the average wage. See OECD (2016).

*Source:* own calculations on EU-LFS 2010 and OECD Family database. The vertical axis depicts the log odds to work derived from the random part of Model 3, Table 11.1
Figure 11.7: Association between take-up of parental leave and (a) parental-leave duration, (b) average payment rate

(a) Parental-leave duration

(b) Average payment rate

Note: Average payment rate, cf. note Figure 11.6.

Source: Own calculations on EU-LFS 2010; OECD Family database
duration of the parental-leave entitlement and parental-leave use. The longer the entitlement lasts, the higher the share of single mothers that tend to have used parental leave for their youngest child. Panel B shows a strong positive association \((r = 0.54)\) between the average payment rate and parental-leave use: more single mothers tend to use parental leave in countries with higher levels of payment.

In short, the majority of single mothers are using parental leave in those countries where parental leave is not helping their employment chances, while in countries where parental-leave systems are increasing their employment chances, take-up rates are much lower. Slovenia and Austria are notable exceptions to this rule. One take-home message here is that providing adequate pay for parental leave might encourage take-up without hurting employment chances, on the condition that the duration of the entitlement is not too long. In contrast, providing very long parental-leave entitlements with adequate pay is an attractive option for single mothers to leave the labour market altogether.

With regards to childcare, the results from the multilevel model are much more straightforward to interpret: in all countries, using formal childcare is associated with higher probabilities to work. Yet here, too, this requires single mothers to actually be able to use formal care services for their children. Figure 11.2 showed that in some countries, less than one quarter of single mothers with young children used formal childcare services for their youngest child.

The 2010 ad-hoc module of the EU-LFS includes a set of questions on the reasons why respondents do not work, or work only part time. Respondents who were not seeking a job or were only working part time were asked to indicate whether this was due to structural reasons (‘suitable care services for children are not available or affordable’) or that care facilities did not influence their work arrangement (which suggests a matter of choice). Figure 11.8 shows the share of mothers indicating that they currently do not seek work because of structural constraints in relation to the share of single mothers having used formal childcare for their youngest child. This sheds some light on the barriers single mothers face in accessing formal childcare, which consequently hampers their employment potential.

Figure 11.8 shows a strong negative relationship \((r = -0.58)\) between the share of single parents facing structural constraints and formal childcare use; without outlier Germany, the association is even more clear \((r = -0.70)\). The link between structural constraints and formal childcare use indicates that, in many countries, a substantial margin for improvement exists. In Germany, the UK, Ireland and Austria, for instance, more than 30% of single parents indicate that they do
not work (enough) because childcare is unavailable or unaffordable. Earlier studies have indeed shown that, in the UK and Ireland, childcare prices are a serious barrier for many low-income families to enter employment (European Parliament, 2007). For Germany and Austria, the high share of single parents reporting structural constraints suggests that a large share of part-time work in these countries might be involuntary (Horemans et al., 2016). In general, people seeking to enrol their children in formal childcare services face shortages in supply in almost every country (except for the Nordic countries). Expanding the number of places available to single parents (while keeping costs at bay) is an effective strategy to increase formal childcare use (see Van Lancker & Ghysels, 2016). Yet in expanding the number of available places, governments have to make sure that the newly created places benefit single mothers, which was not always the case in the past.

As well as affordable and available, formal childcare services should be of sufficient quality. Low-quality services are not only harmful for young children’s development but also impacts on parents’ probability to work. Previous research showed, for instance, that parents are not
likely to use childcare services that are of low quality, or services that they do not trust, even if they are available and affordable (Van Lancker & Ghysels, 2016). However, the quality of services and the regulatory framework imposed by governments differ vastly across countries.

Yet, structural constraints do not explain the whole story. In several Central and Eastern European countries, only a small share of single parents indicate that structural constraints impede them from working (more), while at the same time single-parent employment rates and childcare participation rates are low. Here, other factors are clearly at play. Parents make other considerations as well when deciding upon paid labour, such as the type of jobs they have access to; the wages they can earn; the flexibility of the job, whether they can rely on informal care arrangements and so on. Although the overall picture is one of greater acceptance of working mothers in recent decades, a report on European Union countries suggests that norms on motherhood, employment and care use became more traditional in several Central and Eastern European countries (Plantenga & Remery, 2009). In a context in which the dominant cultural norm is against working mothers, it is difficult to behave differently (Van der Lippe & Siegers, 1994).

**Conclusion**

It is beyond doubt that single parents need reconciliation policies, and governments should step in to ensure that parental-leave policies and childcare policies are accessible, affordable and useful to them. Without parental-leave entitlements – preferably well paid – single parents often reduce their working hours or retreat from the labour market altogether. Without formal childcare services that are available and affordable, single parents face many difficulties in juggling paid work and care for their children, in particular when their children are young.

The results show that in some countries – usually countries with only limited entitlements and no or limited pay – less than 10% of single mothers took up parental leave to care for their youngest child. Governments of these countries should expand access and increase generosity of parental-leave entitlements. However, this chapter has also shown that the impact of parental-leave use on employment chances for single mothers is not unequivocally positive. In some countries, using full-time leave for a long period of time has a negative impact on the probability to be employed. These are also the countries in which the highest shares of single mothers actually use parental leave, often
extended with so-called homecare leaves. In designing parental-leave schemes, policymakers should be aware of these negative effects.

For childcare services, the results are more straightforward. Using childcare is associated with higher employment probabilities across all countries, be it part time or full time. The policy lesson here is that governments should ensure that childcare services are available, affordable and of sufficient quality. The results show that in many countries a substantial share of single parents does not work due to – or would like to work more, were it not for – lack of available and affordable childcare.

This chapter started with the observation that reconciliation policies are potentially an effective policy lever to remedy the triple bind faced by many single mothers, through the pathway of encouraging employment. The results show that reconciliation policies indeed help to sustain employment among single mothers; but for these expectations to materialise, single mothers need to be able to actually use these policies. Many European countries still have a long way to go to meet that requirement.

Notes
2 Barselsorlov in Denmark and föräldraförsäkring in Sweden. See the country notes on the website of the International Network on Leave Policies & Research: www.leavenetwork.org/.
3 See the International Network on Leave Policies & Research for more information: www.leavenetwork.org.

References
Do reconciliation policies enable single mothers to work?


