

Childcare Preferences of Parents in the Czech Republic and the Slovak Republic¹

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Childcare Preferences of Parents in the Czech Republic and the Slovak Republic. In spite of recent economic and social developments in the EU and related pressures on labour market participation, family policies in the Czech Republic and the Slovak Republic are very familialistic. With the combination of long-term leaves and limited access to institutional childcare the reconciliation of parenting and work remains an irresolvable task that has implications for gender equality and specifically for the participation of women in the labour market. This article seeks to examine the relationship between the ideal preferences and real decisions parents make concerning care for preschool-age children against a backdrop of cultural values, economic factors, and institutional provisions established under the system of family policy and childcare policy in the Czech Republic and Slovakia and in relation to gender in/equality in society. The aim is to shed light on the structure and content of parental views on childcare in the context of both real and hypothetical decision-making. As the data show, the ideal preferences and hypothetical choices of parents reflect their actual practice which is determined by the given childcare policies. It is therefore necessary to take this into account in relation to increasing gender equality in society and the participation of both men and women in childcare.
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Introduction

Welfare states across Europe have been challenged by the economic crisis that has lasted since the end of the previous decade. Generous social policies have become widely discussed themes and the stress is again and more than ever before being placed on participation in the labour market as the central means of inclusion in society. Nevertheless, changes in the way the labour market functions caused by the growing demand for quality labour, increased competition and wage differentiation, and processes that impose greater work

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and flexibility demands on workers have led to an increase in the risk of job loss, not just among workers in low-qualified occupations but also among qualified workers. (Cerami 2008; Keller 2011) The most vulnerable groups in the labour market, which include parents caring for small children, end up in difficult situations since non-participation in the labour market is riskier than it was in the past. (Křížková et al. 2011; Sirovátka – Bartáková 2008; Filadelfiová 2007; Kešelová – Hanzelová 2014) The new social risk that this imbalance between professional and family life represents (Taylor-Gooby 2004) potentially deters people from having a second or third child or leaves families in a worse economic situation⁵, and has an impact on gender equality in society. (Leitner 2003; Esping-Andersen 2009) The unequal sharing in the burden of care among parents is proven by the effects motherhood has on access to work (Correll et al. 2007), by the gender gap in employment rates (Plantega – Remery 2009; Eurostat 2016) and unemployment rates (e.g. Bičáková – Kalíšková 2015), and by the gender pay gap. (Kahn et al. 2014; Gafni – Siniver 2015; Válková et al. 2016) Mothers also face obstacles when they try to return to work, many of them are unable to get their original job back and some are even left unemployed. (Tomešová Bartáková 2009; Křížková et al. 2011; Filadelfiová 2007)

Recent research conducted in Europe has focused particularly on the institutional arrangements of childcare and its cultural contexts on the macro level of their effects. While some international comparative analyses have shown that the real choices parents make about childcare and labour-market participation are significantly influenced by the institutional frame of childcare policies in a given welfare state (Crompton – Lyonette 2005)⁶, others have drawn attention to the fact that childcare arrangements both reflect and give rise to certain values, norms (Pfau-Effinger 2005), and discourses (Schmidt 2010) relating to childcare, paid work, and gender equality in a country. Therefore, parental strategies for combining care for small children with paid employment should be understood as a complex issue that is influenced by both institutional and cultural factors. (Hobson et al. 2011)

Given that insufficient attention has been paid to the micro level of this issue, this level was made the focus of a qualitative study called *Parental Choice and Caring for Children in the Czech Republic and Slovakia supported by the Grant Agency of the Czech Republic*⁷. The study also examined the ideal

⁵ Esping-Andersen (2009) mentions in this context two sub-optimal scenarios: 'low-fertility equilibrium' and 'low income-low employment equilibrium'.

⁶ The welfare state creates links between economic needs and cultural values in society in that it both assists in the distribution of material goods and also establishes and spreads cultural norms associated with the demand for services and benefits. (Fraser 1997)

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(hypothetical) decisions parents would make about care for preschool-age children. We based this study on the assumption that macro-structural components, namely, institutions and cultural values, interact on the micro level with the actual practice and preferences of individuals, that is, with what a person deems preferable and wants to do (Hakim 2003), and also interacts with the possibilities open to individuals, that is, with what a person actually can do. (Tomešová Bartáková 2009)

Conscious that such reciprocal effects and interactions may exist, in our research we focused on both the real-life choices parents make and the ‘hypothetical’ or ideal choices they would make if they could. In this regard it can be assumed that a new definition of ‘input factors’ (including economic conditions) could prompt actors to search for (hypothetical) solutions and new justifications for their preferences that need not necessarily correspond to their current circumstances, that is, to the actual decisions parents have made and the arguments for those decisions.

The article begins with a comparison of the institutional and cultural contexts of childcare in both countries in the study. We then introduce the sample and methodology used in this research. The analytical section presents the ideal notions and real-life childcare strategies childcare of parents in Czechia and Slovakia between 2003 and 2009. In the latter part, we try to identify the effects of these parental choices for gender equality both in the families and in the labour market including their implications on the political level.

Institutional and cultural contexts: policies, cultural values, norms and discourse

Childcare policies may contribute to gender equality in several ways. According to Saraceno and Keck (2011), the most important dimensions from a gender equality perspective are the degree to which the policies allow women with care responsibilities to remain in paid work (defamilisation), the degree to which the care work is recognised as valuable (supported familialism), and the degree to which policies support men in caring. Therefore, we summarised the main features of the Czech and Slovak systems in terms of leave schemes, public childcare, and men’s rights in relation to care. The focus in this analysis is childcare policies during the period of 2003 to 2009,⁸ during which time the interviewed parents took maternity and/or parental leave to care for their children and were receiving a maternity or parental allowance.

⁸ These children were born in the years 2003 – 2006 hence the period in which these parents’ were eligible to take parental leave was between 2003 (if the baby was born in 2003) and 2009 (if the baby was born in 2006). During the fieldwork (2010 – 2012), we have been conducting interviews with the parents of first graders in the elementary schools.

Czech and Slovak family policies have undergone changes since the fall of the communist regime. The highly defamilialized system⁹ of childcare enabling women to reinsert fast in the labour market has changed and moved in the reverse direction - refamilialization (Saxonberg – Sirovátka 2006), which means the main responsibility for childcare is shifted back into the family sphere. Szelewa and Polakowski (2008) classified childcare systems in both countries in the early nineties as *female mobilising* - especially given the not very generous provision of limited leave. In 1997 both systems changed and became *explicitly familialistic*¹⁰, as available places in day-care institutions continued to decrease and systematic support for daycare provided by a family member increased through the introduction of long paid parental leave (ibid). Because Slovakia offers little compensation for the loss of income incurred when a parent provides care at home, some authors (Javornik 2014) consider the Slovak system *implicitly familialistic* (unlike the system in the Czech Republic and some other Central European countries).

Leave schemes

During the studied period, three-year parental leave was the policy in both countries, but in the Czech Republic the completely flat-rate parental benefit could also be paid beyond the three-year leave period¹¹ until a child was four years old. In 2008 this benefit was replaced with a three-tier benefit, which pays more per month if one decides to stay at home for a shorter period and pays less per month if one decides to stay at home for a longer period. (Křížková et al. 2008) However, the shortage of childcare available for children at the age of 2, as there continue to be few facilities for children of this age, makes it almost impossible to choose the shorter option, and therefore no real change in childcare arrangement patterns has occurred. In Slovakia, a new type of benefit was introduced in 2009 to pay for childcare for a child up to the age of 3. This type of care may be provided in public or private schools, by private childminders, or by any other person who is not taking up parental leave. The amount of the allowance is capped at 280 EUR a month¹².

⁹ A de-familializing regime is one which seeks to unburden the household and diminish individuals' welfare dependence on kinship. (Leitner 2003)

¹⁰ While explicit familialism supports familial childcare and reinforces gendered parenting, implicit familialism leaves parents without public support. (Leitner 2003)

¹¹ Parents who take parental leave have the right at the end of the three-year leave to return to their original employer, if however they opt for the four-year leave they lose this right.

¹² If the care is provided in a public kindergarten listed in the register of school institutions, the amount provided is 80 EUR. If the care is provided by a working parent/grand parent, the amount provided is 41.10 EUR.

Table 1: System of leave (between 2003 and 2009)

	CZ	SK
Maternity leave	28 weeks	34 weeks
Maternity benefit	69%	65%
Maternity benefit available for fathers	Until 2008, yes, only if mother dies or cannot take care of the child From 2009, yes if mother dies, cannot take care of the child or an agreement between the parents is concluded ¹³	Yes, if mother dies, cannot take care of the child or an agreement between the parents is concluded ¹⁴
Parental leave	4 years (job protection for 3 years)	3 years
Parental benefit	Until 2008 a flat rate From 2008 a three-tier system	Flat rate
Conditions for combining leave with paid work	Children under 3 cannot attend a childcare facility for more than 5 days a month; children over 3 cannot attend a childcare facility for more than 4 hours a day	Until 2005 reduced benefit when take-up is combined with work From July 2005 simultaneous take-up and work is allowed
Parental benefit available for fathers	Yes	Yes ¹⁵
Father leave (daddy quota)	No	No
Cash for care scheme	No	Yes from 2009

Source: authors' compilation (Správa 2003 – 2009, Act 187/2006 Coll., Act 311/2001 Coll.)

Fathers in both countries are entitled to parental leave and benefits, their participation in care however has remained very low in both countries and only 2% of fathers have taken up parental leave. (Ženy a muži v datech 2011); Súhrnná 2008) Saraceno and Keck (2011) point out the parental leave may be used more by men in countries where the replacement rate reaches at least 60% of previous income, whereas in other cases positive action (daddy quota) may be more effective. The systems in both countries do not offer either of these measures to encourage men to engage in full-time childcare.

The parental benefit is set at a flat rate. The amount in absolute figures was lower in Czechia than in Slovakia until the way the amount is calculated was changed in 2007 and became based on average income in 2007 and the later introduction of the three-tier system (see Table 2).

¹³ A written agreement has to be concluded between the parents that the father will take over the childcare and will therefore take-up the benefit. Such agreement can only be concluded from the 7th week of the age of the child.

¹⁴ The conditions are the same as in Czechia. However, the benefit is available for fathers for 28 weeks (respectively 31 weeks in case of a single parent).

¹⁵ Until 2005 the parental leave could have been taken up by both parents simultaneously (parental leave for the other parent). This was abandoned in July 2005. (Správa 2006).

Table 2: Overview of the monthly parental benefit

	2003	2004	2005	2006	2007	2008	2009
CZ (in CZK)	2,552	3,573	3,634	3,696	7,582	11,400 (2 years) 7,600 (3 years) 3,800 (4 years)	11,400 (2 years) 7,600 (3 years) 3,800 (4 years)
SR (in Sk/EUR)	3,790 1,200 for the other parent	4,110 1,300 for the other parent	4,230	4,440	4,560	4,780	164.22 EUR

Source: authors' compilation (MPSV 2006, Správa 2003 – 2009)

Public childcare

A shared feature of both systems is the shortage of institutional day-care for children and especially for children aged 0 to 2. While in 1989 there were 1,709 nurseries in the Czech Republic with a total capacity of 65,000 places, a year later there were just 1,043 facilities with fewer than 40,000 places. (Kuchařová 2006) In Slovakia, the situation was quite similar, as the 1,289 facilities with a total of 49,000 places that existed in 1989 decreased within a year to 1,069 facilities with 37,000 places. (Statistická ročenka 1992: 596)

During the studied period, in both countries government investment in childcare and preschool services was among the lowest in Europe and even the lowest in the countries' own history. This is especially true for Slovakia, where investment in 1998 was slightly higher (0.4 % of GDP, and 0.5 % of GDP in 2010) but dropped in between 2004 and 2008 (0.3% of GDP). Similarly, in Czechia investment was only 0.3 % of GDP between 2003 and 2008. (Social Expenditure Database 2013)

Given the conditions for the provision of parental leave and the limited social investment in early childhood education and care, the enrolment rates of children below the age of 3 remained very low in the studied period (between 2.5 % and 5 %). The rate was higher in the Slovak Republic until 2008 (see Table 3) when the situation changed. On the other hand, there is a larger share of children aged 3 to 5 in kindergarten in the Czech Republic than in Slovakia, though the overall trend suggests a worsening of the situation as the rates have been decreasing over time (from 84.6 % in 2003 to 79.4 % in 2009).

This is also evident from the number of applications rejected by kindergartens, which (in absolute numbers) increased in Czechia from 6,800 in 2005 to 29,600 in 2009 (and then soared to 50,000 in 2014, MŠMT 2015). In Slovakia, the observed trend is similar with almost 1,500 applications rejected in 2005, 5,150 in 2009, jumping to almost 13,500 in 2015. (Herich – Urban 2016)

Table 3: Percentage of children in formal childcare and preschool services

Country	2003	2004	2005	2006	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012
CZ 0-2 year olds	2,5	2,6	2,6	2,2	4,7	4,0	6,2	5,0
SR 0-2 year olds	2,9	4,9	3,0	3,0	2,8	3,0	4,6	4,7
CZ 3-5 year olds	84,6	85,3	84,5	82,0	82,4	79,7	79,4	78,9	78,1	76,4
CZ 3-5 year olds	70,7	72,4	73,7	73,0	73,5	73,5	72,2	71,7	71,7	72,0

Source: OECD 2012, Family Database

The systems in both countries are rather familialistic, but in family childcare is bolstered more in the Czech Republic than in the Slovak Republic due to higher parental benefits and smaller share of preschool-age children in public childcare. (Saraceno – Keck 2011, Javornik 2014)

Childcare discourses

Measures of family policies regarding childcare are closely tied up with discourses on care and they reciprocally influence each other. (Dudová – Hašková 2010) Discourse is consequently a central issue as it has the potential to legitimise changes and shape the public's perception of them. In the Czech Republic, but not in Slovakia, changes to parental leave were accompanied by a discussion about the right of families to choose how to organise care for children under the age of 3 and about the principles of subsidiarity. At the same time, the discourse on nurseries as institutions of care for children under the age of 3 was prevalingly negative among professionals (psychologists, paediatrics), politicians, and, consequently, in society as a whole. (Hašková et al. 2012) Czech families with small children have very limited options for obtaining childcare that can be combined with work, but, unlike in other countries, they widely accept this situation.

In Slovakia, in the past two decades several changes have been introduced in the sphere of social and family policy designed to respond to changes in demographic behaviour and to help people to better balance private and especially family life with their work. The changes however did not go far enough. In terms of discourse, society maintains a primarily conservative view of how young children should be cared for. (Marošiová et al. 2006) According to Šumšalová (2008) these conditions put mothers in a difficult situation: on the one hand they are subject to pressure in the labour market, where they are forced to accept the conditions placed on them by employers, and on the other hand they are under pressure from conservative public opinion, which requires them to be the primary carers of their children. Interestingly, compared to the Czech Republic, Slovakia has a slightly larger share of children under the age of 3 attending day care. (European Commission 2014) It can be assumed,

however, that this is more the result of economic pressure and the need for two incomes in the family than it is a sign of parental preferences. Despite the difficulties attached to combining work and family life in young families in Slovak society there has long been no wider discussion on the position of women/mothers in the labour market¹⁶.

Methodology

The above-mentioned qualitative study we conducted based on semi-structured interviews with parents of first-graders offers a deeper analysis of their subjective lived experience and its importance. (Silverman 2006) These parents were asked to provide a retrospective overview of the childcare arrangements they chose and the reasoning for their real and ideal (hypothetical) choices. When testing their ideal choices we redefined some crucial factors or 'input conditions', which include financial security while caring for small children, the father's participation in childcare, and the availability of public care institutions, etc. (cf. Gornick – Meyers 2003; McDowell et al. 2006) In this way we tried to eliminate the influence of the current institutional frame (with related values and norms) and to create room for parents to express their ideal (hypothetical) choices and explain their actual and preferred choices.

The research was carried out in the capitals of both countries (e.g. Prague and Bratislava) and in two other large cities (e.g. Brno and Banská Bystrica)¹⁷ between December 2010 and June 2012 among parents of children who had started to attend school in the autumn of the given year. These cities were selected on the assumption that the variation of patterns of parental action, preferences and attitudes should be greater in large cities than in small towns or rural areas, where people usually have fewer choices (for example, in terms of institutional day care).

In each city, we interviewed parents of children from schools located in the city centre and in the city suburbs, i.e. with a different social composition in the neighbourhoods. We thereby ensured that the social composition of the sample was diverse in terms of different levels of income and education. We conducted 20 interviews in each city with the same number of mothers and fathers¹⁸.

¹⁶ One of the current impulses has been a project of the Slovak Ministry of Labour, Social Affairs and the Family titled 'Family and Work', whose objective has been to enable parents with children up to the age of 10 to work flexible working hours and thus create a pro-family environment in the labour market. Also, more recently, there has been a discussion about working mothers in their workplaces stirred up by the two mothers – members of the Slovak parliament, who wanted to combine childcare with their daily work in parliament.

¹⁷ These cities are different sizes: Prague has more than 1 million inhabitants, the population of Brno is approximately 350,000, that of Bratislava approximately 420,000, and that of Banská Bystrica approximately 78,000.

¹⁸ Regarding socio-economical characteristics of each respondent we focused on sex, age, family status, level of education, employment status, number and age of children living with a given respondent in his or her household.

Should have, would have, could have...

The work and care arrangements Czech and Slovak families with preschool-age children adopt are relatively uniform. This is foremost the result of the childcare options that are available to them: the absence of childcare facilities for children under the age of 3 does not allow mothers to work (in either case, whether they have to or want to) unless they can arrange special working conditions (e.g. working from home, part time, or outside office hours), or can rely on grandparents to provide care during working hours.

A certain level of conformity also relates to the way parents view their possibilities, norms and ideals. These are deeply rooted in the actual policies and existing institutional setting. Most of the informants had difficulty imagining a system that was different from what they had adopted; in other words, their answers were usually based on their current experience.¹⁹ In their reasoning they often tended to rationalize their real-life practice, as well as their ideal solutions. However, some of the parents' ideal preferences were different from the "mainstream" model of childcare and were either more conservative or progressive in terms of gender equality in the family. Some fathers with lower education (5 Czechs and 2 Slovaks) were more conservative in their responses than what they were actually doing in practice. In their view, mothers should be at home with their children until they reach the age of 6 or even 10.

However, in both the Czech and Slovak sample there were some parents who took more out-of-the-box positions in their reasoning. For example, one father from Prague rejected an 'either-or' way of thinking, i.e. full-time day care provided by the mother or full-time institutional day care for the child. According to him, it would be ideal if both parents had more balanced access to attaining self-fulfilment in and outside of work. He also pointed out some problematic aspects of the existing rigid practice, which defines working hours regardless of other personal obligations and consequently separates the individual both geographically and in terms of time from the family.

I wouldn't set any boundaries. I think I would organise time, or rather the time of the whole family, so that everyone would have room for personal self-fulfilment ... and for time together. (father, 35 years old, secondary education, I.T. specialist, married, 3 children, Prague)

Two mothers from Prague with university degrees, who had stayed at home with their children until they reached the age of 3, envisioned combining part-time work and care so that a child would not have to attend any preschool facility before reaching the 'right' age. This demonstrates that even though

¹⁹ The ideal preferences originated in real practice in answers by half of the informants in Slovakia (28 parents) and almost half of the informants in Czechia (22 parents), more by mothers (27) than fathers (23).

women choose a certain arrangement (full-time care and no work), it is not necessarily the arrangement they consider best. It seems that for some women, mainly those with tertiary education, the conventional practice of being at home until a child is 3 years old is a choice forced on them by the absence of flexible work conditions in the Czech labour market and not a choice based on the mother's own preferences.

In this regard, some women in the Brno sample who managed to combine care of a child under the age of 3 and work imagined there could be resistance to such a model in Czech society.

I think, yes, Czech society simply isn't ready for that model [short-term leave and allowance combined with institutional day care], so it would be really difficult, especially for some types of people, to accept it. (mother, 35-44 age group, university degree, self-employed, married, 1 child, Brno)

In the Slovak sample most of the mothers and fathers constructed their ideal notions in accordance with their actual practice. A specific case was that of one university-educated mother from Bratislava whose husband worked abroad. Even though she had stayed at home with her child for three years and in this way complied with the traditional model in society, she regretted it later because she suffered from feelings of social exclusion. (Friedan 2002) Therefore, her ideal choice would have involved a different solution.

I was at home for too long and, you know, your self-confidence deteriorates because you are with the child all the time and all the care is focused on the child. (...) Because most of the time I'm alone with the baby, my husband's working abroad, so I'm alone with my child almost all the time. (...) Maybe I'd try to deal with this by hiring a nanny, if that were financially possible. And I'd go to work. (mother, under the age of 35, tertiary education, nurse, married, 1 child, Bratislava)

In terms of outside-the-box thinking, an interesting trend was represented by some of the Czech (8) and Slovak (5) fathers. They stated that the ideal solution would be if both of the parents could stay at home and care for the child together. Some of them would prefer to combine the childcare with flexible job opportunities (such as part time or remote working) for both parents. But, surprisingly, only one mother, a middle-class educated woman from Bratislava, considered this an ideal solution. It seems that the mothers did not think that sharing parental leave with their partner was an ideal option. Some mothers even ridiculed this idea, reasoning that their partner would not be able to take care of the child as well as they had. Paradoxically, this shows that women who – from the perspective of an equal division of labour in the family – seem to be in a disadvantaged position, are sometimes more conservative with respect to breaking the *status quo* than men. (Tichenor 2005)

Parents' ideal views about childcare arrangements also depend on what they consider the right age for a child to start preschool. In this regard, parents only rarely – and more often Slovak than Czech parents – considered a younger age than 3 as the time to start preschool.

For her one year was the ideal age because she was ready then for preschool, she wanted to go. (mother, 35-44 age group, tertiary education, educator, 2 children, Bratislava)

The reason for this seems to be quite straightforward: given that ideal preferences relate to the actual practice, parents from Slovakia, whose children had started attending a preschool facility sooner (before the age of 3) had accordingly adjusted their ideal age for children to start preschool. Otherwise, the reasons that the parents stated as important for defining the ideal age reflect popular psychological discourse. (Hašková et al. 2012) Whithin this discourse a child under the age of 3 should be brought up in the family by a person 'close' to the child, namely the mother; a younger child is not mature enough to join a group and does not need other children to interact or play with; and education is perceived as necessary for the socialisation of a child only from the age of 3 (but certainly not under the age of 2). The prevailing opinion that parental care is essential during the first three years of a child's life was used by parents from both samples who cited it as necessary for the 'natural' mental and social development of the child, for instilling values and norms in a child within the family environment, and for creating a bond between the child and parent and specifically the mother. As opposed to this, the formal care for older children was viewed by most mothers and fathers as necessary for the socialisation of a child and for the development of a child's abilities and talents. Some parents in the Czech Republic, mainly fathers with lower than tertiary education were in this respect more conservative than those in Slovakia. They very rarely revised the ideal age limit down to 2 and a half years and more often raised it to the age of 4 or more. The views of these parents reflect how intertwined childcare policies (their institutional form) are with parents' real-life choices and how their ideals are nevertheless consistent with the social norm and the dominant discourse of childcare during a given period of a child's life. (ibid)

Parents' opinions on nurseries, which generally are very negative, also seem to be a factor in this regard. Mostly those who did not have actual experience using nurseries for their children were opposed to them. In the Czech Republic, only two mothers and one father in Prague and two mothers in Brno (in all cases with tertiary education) accepted the idea that children attend a nursery from the age of 2 – even if the promised quality of care were high. No parents favoured the possibility of having their child attend this facility before the age of 2. In Slovakia, the situation was quite similar: most of the parents, regardless of their gender or education, were strongly opposed to the idea of their child

attending a nursery whatsoever and only four parents in Bratislava and two parents in Banská Bystrica spoke of it in more positive terms. In the end, only those respondents from both samples consider nurseries to be a valid option, whose children actually attended them²⁰ and whose experiences had been positive. However, even some of the satisfied mothers (mainly from the Czech sample) said that they would have preferred to stay at home longer and avoid the nursery, despite the good quality of care. This dissonance again underlines the strength of socio-cultural norms.

Sometimes the childcare arrangements of the parents in our sample did not correspond to the traditional model of childcare. Usually, this was the result of the need for a two-salary income in the family or other, mostly financial, reasons. In relation to this, some of the parents from the Slovak sample shifted the ideal age limit in their reasoning to the age of 2 or even younger, but their conservative position preserving current gender relations and the unequal division of the labour in families as well in labour market remained unchanged. (Křížková et al. 2011, Filadelfiová 2007) Consequently, the key question is: how can we change the perspectives of the parents, when their ideals reflect their practices, and when their practices reflect a certain institutional setting?

Money (sometimes) matters

Given that paid maternity and parental leave is an established practice in the Czech Republic and the Slovak Republic and is perceived as mandatory, we presented parents with the idea of having non-paid maternity and parental leave. Interestingly, more than half of the parents in both samples (mothers and fathers regardless of education) declared that the loss of parental leave would make no difference as the allowance is considered too low anyway²¹.

Men in both countries presented themselves as 'responsible' and 'ready' to fulfil their role as breadwinners, which serves to preserve gender inequality in families. (Maříková et al. 2012) Conversely, some mothers, mainly from families with a lower income, declared their willingness to return to work earlier if the family needed a second income. In the given context, they often thought of working outside office hours (late afternoon, evening) in order to alternate in childcare with the father or to work part time. Some mothers would (if a second family income were required) choose a solution that would allow them to balance work and childcare, even if this was detrimental to their professional careers. Like their partners, their opinions conserve gender

²⁰ However, even they chose this option out of necessity – because of the need of the mother to return back to the work while not being able to find other childcare solution (as for example care by the grandparents).

²¹ Even though this was a hypothetical question and it does not have to comply with their actual decision.

inequality in the family as they consider care to be primarily their role and responsibility.

When we questioned informants on the possibility of sharing parental leave, there were two kinds of reaction. Some of them, surprisingly mothers (regardless of their education) more than fathers, took an explicitly traditionalistic position that they are biologically pre-dispositioned for the role and as such more important caretakers of an infant. Others reasoned pragmatically that their partner has a higher salary. Therefore, we proposed a hypothetical situation where the father could take parental leave while receiving 100% of their previous income sometime in the period when the child was under the age of 2. The family's income would consequently not decrease and financial concerns should be eliminated from their reasoning. The perspectives of parents ranged from resistant to accepting, while some of them opted for the more "balanced" solution. Interestingly, the option of a father taking a parental leave appeared more acceptable to men than women, although some of them considered it possible on the condition that the child was over the age of one or was no longer breastfeeding. Here is the response of one father in Brno to represent them all:

I can imagine the situation where my wife would have been at home for the first year and maybe I could have been at home for part of the second year. I can easily imagine this because I think that in the first year the mother feels more attached to caring for a small child. But after a year, I could imagine taking a break from work for half a year. (father, 35-44 age group, tertiary education, manager in an insurance company, married, 1 child, Brno)

As for the mothers, most of the women (especially the less educated ones) expressed strong disagreement with such a solution. They often portrayed themselves as the sole caregivers on a full-time basis (Kremer 2007) and many said that the father would not be able to care for the child 'properly'. We consider this rather conservative attitude to be a potential barrier to the greater participation of fathers in providing childcare.

Some do participate, but we are all well aware that these days a guy mainly has to take care of the family financially. Simply put, that's the way it is and I think it will be like this forever, it is in our nature and also genetically, a man is a man. So the mother is always the one who is nicer, more sensitive and understanding. (mother, 40 years old, secondary education, account clerk, married, 2 children, Banská Bystrica).

By contrast, one or two women in each sample (mostly with tertiary education) would welcome the possibility to alternate in providing full-time childcare at a certain point, with the mother providing care after the birth of a child (for at least 1 year). Their views suggest that changing the terms of parental leave (based on a definition of care as the undeniable individual right

of each parent and increasing the amount of the parental allowance whereby the allowance would be set as a percentage of previous income (Saxonberg 2008) might stimulate fathers to participate more and in this way contribute to greater gender equality in the area of childcare. In the conclusion, various statements and the answers of both mothers and fathers in all the research samples showed the close relationship between the institutional setting and the actual practice on one hand, and ideal notions and preferences on the other. For parents, buried in their everyday routines and problems, it is very difficult to even consider options that are outside of the norm. Even though in some cases parents did think of more progressive ways or solutions, let's not forget that the options they were presented with were hypothetical and the actual practice they would opt for could be different. A preference for flexible and possibly more progressive arrangements could in reality change into more conservative and traditionalistic positions. (Hobson et al. 2011)

Who provides care and who works until a child starts preschool?

While in Slovakia approximately one-half of mothers worked or studied until their child reached the age of 3, in the Czech Republic the figure was just one-third. In Slovakia mothers more often worked full time and parents also more often made use of childcare facilities to care for their children. In the Czech Republic mothers usually worked part time or performed temporary fixed-term contract jobs. They were thereby more often able to perform their work from home, which made it possible for them to work and care for their child or children at the same time.

In both samples parents usually considered the care choices they had made and followed as uncomplicated and as a 'suitable', 'normal', or even the 'optimal' arrangement.

But I think that I am that type of women that can be home for four years and then the kindergarten, or three years and then the kindergarten, that the system is convenient. Six years is too much for some kind of children characters. (mother, 35-44 age group, tertiary education, married, manager, 3 children, Bratislava)

The pattern of linking successive terms of parental leave continuously in a row, without the mother returning to work, was observed more often in the Czech Republic than in Slovakia²².

Three cases of unemployed mothers were found in the Czech sample, unlike the Slovak one. A new study on female unemployment in the Czech Republic (Bičáková – Kalíšková 2015) shows that 60% of women with three-year-old

²² Statistical data from 2005 to 2009 show (Eurostat 2016) that employment gender gap in the age group 25-54 as well as employment impact of motherhood was always higher in Czechia than in Slovakia.

children become unemployed as soon as their parental leave ends. This unemployment likely occurs as a result of the women losing their right to return to their previous place of employment. In some cases we were also able to confirm that the loss of job security (after the end of parental leave) often left mothers faced with the difficulty of finding another employer willing to hire a mother with a preschool-age child at home. Some employers view motherhood as a 'handicap' in job performance, an observation that has been confirmed in previous studies. (cf. Tomešová Bartáková 2009, Křížková et al. 2011)

In our samples in both countries we found cases where upon completing maternity/parental leave the mother had accepted a job beneath her qualification level in order to be able to better reconcile work and family obligations. This strategy is not uncommon in either country and it testifies again to how strongly a woman may identify with her maternal role, and perhaps also to how hard it is for people to imagine adopting a different model, where the father would be the carer, because this model is not widely accepted in society and is often financially the less advantageous arrangement.

After parental leave I started working with a TV channel again as a journalist. I soon realized that the job was wonderful and that I loved it, but because of all the night shifts and weekend shifts, the job wouldn't have worked. My children have many hobbies and they are sometimes sick and I wouldn't have been able to manage, not even with the help of the grandmothers and my husband... I decided to quit because it was too challenging. I began to work in a grammar-school. Thankfully I taught the Czech language to the upper classes. (mother, 35-44 age group, tertiary education, married, teacher, 2 children, Brno).

Persistent gender inequality in the family has the effect of reinforcing gender inequality in the labour market, unless effective measures are taken to reduce inequality in the private sphere. (Křížková et al. 2008)

In terms of perceptions of gender role arrangements in family, fathers, especially those in the Czech Republic, presented a more uniform picture of how their families functioned up until their children reached the age of 3 or 4 than mothers did. Fewer fathers (just 3 cases) stated that their partner was working during this period than the number of mothers (10 cases) did. In Slovakia a smaller discrepancy was observed (12 women as opposed to 9 men). It is possible that in the Czech sample the male responses were a true reflection of reality, but it is also possible that the fathers were less sensitive in their perceptions to the life situation of mothers. When a mother performs paid work (often precarious forms of work and work performed from home) while caring for a child during parental leave, her husband or partner may have the impression that his wife or partner is not actually working because her main

task is caring for their child. In this case a woman is (subconsciously) being compared with the notion of an 'ideal worker' (Williams 1999), that is, with someone who has no care commitments and can fully devote themselves to performing their job full time outside the home, which still corresponds more to the life experience of fathers than mothers. When the job being performed does not have these attributes, then men (probably) do not regard whatever job is being performed as 'fully fledged' work, and consequently do not register it as such.

Because in neither country in the study is there as yet legislation establishing a parent's non-transferable right to care for a child ('the daddy/parental quota'), it is not surprising that in our entire sample there were only two fathers, both from Banská Bystrica, who were at home on parental leave for a one-month period. In one case the mother was studying and the father only covered for the period during which there was no one else in the family who could care for the child. In the other case the child started attending a nursery school after one month at home with the father. This father nevertheless continued to be the primary carer for the child, as the mother, who had a higher level of education than the father, was working in a different city. In both countries there were rare examples of alternative paternal involvement to the mainstream solution where the parents alternated in caring for the child according to their time schedules.

An altogether different situation was one where a father in Prague, who had above-average income from the sale of a private business, stayed at home with his wife. The mother of the child however retained the role of primary carer and was not, in the father's view and to his displeasure, willing to share the role of carer with him. The father in this case described the mother as a gatekeeper preventing him from becoming more involved in caring for their child. (Allen – Hawkins 1999) The care arrangement of this couple thus retained the features of the traditional care model followed by the other couples, where the woman is the primary carer and the man has the role of the main breadwinner.

In this respect it is necessary to mention that the issue of involving fathers in early childcare is not addressed much in public discourse or the media in either country. If it is mentioned at all, then it is more in reference to the well-being of the child than about equalising the opportunities open to men and women in life. (Křížková et al. 2008) Public childcare policies and the related public discourse do not highlight gender equality and the father's right to care. In these circumstances it is hard to challenge let alone change gender norms in the household or in the workplace towards achieving a greater gender balance in daily practice.

With respect to having employment while having a child under the age of three, more mothers in Slovakia worked than Czech mothers. In the Czech

lands it was slightly more often university-educated women who worked (6 out of 19) than women with secondary education (4 out of 20), while in Slovakia approximately one-half of mothers in each educational category worked.

The question necessarily arises of what kind of professions tend to be performed by those mothers who return to work before their child reaches the age of 3, and what are the motives and reasons for returning to work? While in Slovakia the mothers who returned to work were employed in a relatively wide range of professions, in the Czech lands it was women who were doctors and pharmacists who returned 'early' to the labour market, and they did so for professional reasons (see for example attestations or maintaining their qualifications) or for reasons of self-fulfilment. Among the mothers who returned 'early' to work, however, were also women for whom it was difficult to interrupt work owing to the risk of losing clients (e.g. in case of doing tax and financial services), or mothers who worked in one of the freelance professions, which are flexible enough to allow a mother to work and care for a child at the same time. Most of these mothers worked part time or did only casual work on the temporary contract, and they often worked from home, so that they could continue to care for their child.

In contrast, among the mothers in Slovakia who returned to the labour market before their child had reached the age of 3, four of them worked full time, and more often than the Czech mothers they cited financial reasons for returning to work, regardless of their marital status. What was the decisive factor in this case was that the mothers felt a financial need to return to work, for example, because the family had a big mortgage to pay off, or because the family income was felt to be insufficient for its needs.

... (my daughter) attended preschool from the age of two. When mothers remain on maternity leave, the household misses their income... (mother, 35-44 age group, secondary education, working in civil engineering, married, 3 children, Banská Bystrica)

I was at home for two and a half years. I mainly returned to work for financial reasons.... A mother should be at home with her children for as long as possible ... (mother, 35-44 age group, tertiary education, working in chemical industry, 1 child, Bratislava)

In the Slovak sample some mothers from low-income families thus returned to work sooner than they would ideally have liked. In most cases they rationalised their return to work as the need for a second income in the family.

Nevertheless, our research confirms that the decisions that parents perceive as ones that they have made freely, i.e. not out of financial pressure or pressure from others around them, including their employer, usually correspond strongly to the options open to them as a result of the conditions established by public policy (in the case at hand this primarily means the amount of the parental

allowance). This interdependence between the institutional settings of childcare and the actual practice of caring for a preschool-age child, as well as a person's ideas about (child)care during this period have also been confirmed in international quantitative analyses (Crompton – Lyonette 2005), but also in qualitative research. (Hobson et al. 2011)

Providing care for children aged 6 and under

Although in both countries still only a minority of children under the age of 3 attend daycare facilities (see the statistics above), preschool facilities for children of this age were used more in Slovakia than in the Czech Republic. In Slovakia 9 mothers returned to work by or around the time of their child's first birthday, and a further 12 by the time their child was aged 2 and a half. Mothers of children aged 2 and under had in most cases arranged for childcare within the home environment – usually provided by grandmothers or in some cases nannies. Nevertheless, in Slovakia it was still possible to observe more use of preschool facilities for children between the ages of 2 and 3 years, either nurseries (9) or kindergartens (7), who admitted children from the age of 2, than what was observed in the Czech Republic.

In the Czech Republic only three of the parents used nurseries. They were all parents with university education. When working or studying, the Czech mothers in most cases combined their work with childcare. The model of working and caring for a child at the same time often serves to reinforce the idea that a woman should primarily devote herself to childcare when she has a young child. Within the family the mother's paid employment is seen as 'permissible' if she performs the work part time, preferably from home, and when the child has to spend minimal or no time in a preschool facility. In this respect there is no noticeable difference between parents by gender or by education.

In both countries, there is a difference when it comes to children under the age of 3 and children between the ages of 3 and 6, as in the latter group, with some exceptions, childcare is almost always provided by preschool facilities and the preference for this form of care is high, primarily on the grounds that it is necessary for the child's development and well-being (see above).

The correspondence between the settings of a care policy and real-life practices is conformed not just by examples of conventionally followed practices but also by the examples of the two mothers in Slovakia who were living abroad. One mother living in a French-speaking country returned to work when her child reached the age of 1 year, after which the child began to go to a nursery. The second was a woman had been residing long term in the Czech Republic and stayed home with her child until the child reached the age of 4. Both mothers regarded their decisions to be 'normal', and in all likelihood

this was not just because their decision corresponds with customary practice but also with the discourse about what constitutes the ‘right’ care for a young child in each of these countries. (cf. Dudová – Hašková 2010)

Conclusion

This comparative study examined from a gender perspective the ideal notions and the real practices of parents in Slovakia and Czechia relating to care and work arrangements when they had a child of preschool age. The results of the study confirm, in conformity with some international quantitative analyses and qualitative studies, that there is a strong interconnection between parents’ childcare practices for children of preschool age, and their ideas about caring for children of this age, and the setting of childcare policy.

Comparison of the two countries, which are largely similar in terms of childcare policies for children up to 3 years of their age (see the familialistic orientations of these policies), nevertheless reveals that there are certain differences between the two. As our data confirm, the implicit familialism that exists in Slovakia, where childcare support in the form of the parental allowance is relatively low, leads mothers back into the labour market earlier than the explicit familialism that exists in the Czech Republic. From the perspective of equal opportunities between women and men, in Slovakia opportunities for both parents to work are equalised earlier, even if the parents themselves do not always regard this opportunity as their ‘ideal’ arrangement and sometimes themselves advocate or embrace rather more gender-conservative viewpoints. This form of familialism nevertheless tends to preserve inequalities in the area of childcare within the family, as until the child reaches a certain age care still remains the ‘prerogative’[responsibility] of mothers. The explicit familialism found in the Czech Republic from a gender perspective disadvantages mothers of young children within the sphere of the family and delays their return to the labour market, but it is clear from this study that it also forces them much more to take up precarious forms of employment until their child reaches the age of 3 or 4; the latter finding needs however to be verified in further research.

In examining why mothers accept precarious or insecure forms of work or jobs in the years before their children reach the age to attend school it is not enough to simply declare that they simply choose this form of work voluntarily, which some of the parents we spoke to claimed, and it is necessary to differentiate between the voluntary and involuntary performance of such work. In the case of mothers caring for preschool-age children, it is possible to assume that their decision is influenced not just by personal characteristics (which people usually assume), as our research shows that it is also determined by institutional resources, in particular by the institutional settings of childcare

and labour market operation, and by social resources, which in this case are primarily represented by the cultural norms surrounding childcare and public discourses. (cf. Dudová – Hašková 2010, Hobson et al. 2011)

Although many parents often view their decisions as having been made ‘freely’, thus uninfluenced by any external factors, including pressure from others around them or employers, those decisions tend to correspond to the settings of childcare policies, as our data confirm that this system both reflects and itself shapes notions on what constitutes ‘proper’ childcare for young children. Parents who choose to provide care for their children at home for the first three years or more largely argue that maternal care is best during this period, and mothers in particular rule out, in terms of their ideal notions, the possibility of the father being the primary caregiver and limit the father’s role to that of breadwinner. This perspective on childcare necessarily serves to conserve a traditional, gender unequal approach to this issue.

If parents choose untraditional forms of childcare arrangements during the first three years of a child’s life, it is mainly when they are ‘forced’ to do so for financial reasons. If they then find their experience with untraditional childcare arrangements to be a positive one, they are able then also able to think ‘outside the box’ when it comes to their ideal notions. As this study confirmed, people’s ideal notions reflect their real practices or experience, which, however, in most cases is depends on the institutional settings of childcare and parents’ opportunities for finding work in the labour market. In the Czech Republic and Slovakia this has the effect of entrenching gender equalities both in and outside the family. This necessarily results in a vicious cycle, and the expectation that people’s behaviour will change and move towards greater gender equality is therefore unrealistic without the introduction of systemic changes ‘on top’.

If one of the aims of public policy relating to childcare is to increase gender equality, then it is essential that supported be given to measures that enable women to become participate more and more freely in the labour market (defamilialisation policies) and that encourage the increased participation of fathers in caring for their children. (Saraceno – Keck 2011) Experience in different countries has shown that the introduction of parent quotas, which involves introducing the individual, non-transferable right of every parent to care for their child, has the effect of increasing the number of fathers who use this type of leave to care for their child. (Hobson 2002) Without making use of measures of this type and without adjusting the amount of the parental allowance to compensate for lost income while caring for a young child (Saxonberg 2008) it is impossible to expect any change in the current gender imbalance of the prevailing family model where the mother is the primary carer while the father is the family breadwinner in the earliest preschool years of a child’s life.

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