THE POLITICS OF PARENTAL LEAVE POLICIES

Children, parenting, gender and the labour market

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Czech Republic: normative or choice-oriented system?

Jiřina Kocourková[1]

Maternity leave[2]: 28 weeks at 69% of daily earnings up to a ceiling of CZK479 per day.

Paternity leave: none.

Parental leave: until child is 3 years; leave is an individual entitlement but only one parent can receive parental benefit. There are 3 options for benefit payment: CZK11,400 (€400)[3] per month until the child is 24 months; or CZK7,600 (€265) until the child is 36 months; or CZK7,600 until the child is 21 months, then CZK3,800 (€135) until the child is 48 months.

Leave to care for sick children: 9 days per parent per illness of a child under 10 years at 69% of earnings up to a ceiling of CZK441 (€15) per day; there is no limit on the frequency of taking leave.

Other: none.

The **Czech Republic** is a member state of the European Union (EU). It became an independent state in 1993 after Czechoslovakia separated into two states. It has a low level of employment among women with children under 3 years and a low level of part-time employment among women workers. There is no information on how much time women or men take for parental leave, but the number of men taking leave is very low; in 2006, men accounted for 1.4% of recipients of parental benefit. There is a very low level of formal childcare provision for children under 3 years.

Introduction

Until 1992, the Czech Republic was a part of Czechoslovakia. Czechs and Slovaks shared the whole communist period as one country, as well as the onset of the fundamental economic and social changes that followed the collapse of this regime. The period of common history is taken only as the starting point for the main focus of the chapter: an analysis of policies in the Czech Republic since 1993. The pronatalist population policy practised before 1990 in Czechoslovakia is contrasted with the development of family policy after 1990.

The chapter is divided into two sections. The first is historically organised and consists of several parts reflecting the changes on the Czech political scene up to 2008. Developments in maternal and paternal leave policies are systematically presented; paternity leave has not so far been established in the Czech Republic. The second section is devoted to discussion of cross-cutting issues related to leave policy: work, fertility and gender. Finally, current policy development in the Czech Republic is considered as searching for a balance between normative and choice-oriented approaches.

The short history of leave policies in the Czech Republic has undoubtedly been influenced by overall European trends in family policy, particularly increasing support for women's employment and for the involvement of men in childcare. Nevertheless, during this period some elements specific to the Czech Republic can be distinguished in both politics and practice. Development of leave policies cannot be properly understood without taking into account the whole political context as well as changes in family policy objectives made by successive Czech governments.

Although the political resurgence of Catholicism has not been so apparent in the Czech Republic as in some other countries, like Slovakia or Poland, a 'traditional' approach to family policy has become dominant since 1990. It has been apparent in the character of all leave policies adopted in the Czech Republic and could be understood as the main reason why, until now, there has been a lack of political interest in the important contribution that leave policies could make to gender equity.

Changes in leave policy since 1945

Maternity leave policy before 1990

After the Second World War, maternity leave was considered to be an important part of pronatalist population policy in Czechoslovakia. During the period from 1945 to 1990, maternity leave was extended three times: in 1964 from 18 to 22 weeks, in 1968 to 26 weeks and in 1987 to 28 weeks. Women were given the possibility of taking unpaid additional leave, initially until the child's first birthday in 1964, then up to the second birthday in 1969. In addition, in the late 1960s, a new form of leave was prepared as a part of a 'pronatalist package' of measures. In 1970, Czechoslovakia became one of the pioneers of paid extended maternity leave or what might be termed 'childcare leave'; when first introduced it lasted until the child's second birthday and was available to women with at least two children. Until 1984, a woman having one child was entitled only to an unpaid 2-year additional leave. From 1985, however, such women became entitled to paid additional maternity leave until their child was one year old, while from 1987, a woman with at least two children could take extended leave until her youngest child was 3 years old.

So, before 1990 two types of paid maternity leave were widely used by women in the former Czechoslovakia. The first was an insurance-based maternity leave that was reserved for the first months after birth, the final extension taking place in 1987. Maternity benefit was income-related and paid at 90% of a woman's net average earnings before starting maternity leave. The second was a form of childcare leave called 'additional maternity leave', during which time all women had job security and retained full pension entitlement. Payment was not insurance-based and took the form of a flat-rate benefit. Length of leave and benefit was related to numbers of children, providing a strong pronatalist incentive (Kocourková, 2002). The policy encouraged women to have a second child as soon as possible after the first one.

This additional maternity leave became the basis for the parental leave system developed in Czechoslovakia after the change in political regime in 1989.

Discontinuity in family policy after 1989

In the late 1980s, Czechoslovakia was singled out as a country with an explicit and comprehensive family policy (Gordon, 1988): 'explicit' in terms of interventionist policies aimed directly or indirectly at encouraging fertility and 'comprehensive' in terms of the range and generosity of the benefits provided to families. However, this pronatalist orientation was not in tune with the goals of the new liberal-conservative government in Czechoslovakia in the early 1990s or the liberal-conservative government that took over in the Czech Republic in 1993. Moreover, the social security system of the former communist regime was criticised by the new political elite for being excessively redistributive (Cornia, 1991).

As a result, during the first half of the 1990s the former extensive state support to all families was both substantially reduced and no longer explicitly pronatalist; for example, the amount of family benefit paid no longer increased with the number of children in the family. Initially, there was a strong tendency to limit state support only to families considered most in need. Later, the political effort of the liberal Civic Democratic Party (ODS) to make all family benefits means-tested was somewhat diluted and only child allowances have been means-tested since 1995. After the adoption of a new social security law in 1995, no improvements occurred in the family policy system until the end of century. Family policy issues were of no further interest to the liberal governments of that period.

But at the end of the 1990s, a change of government raised expectations that family policy would gain more political attention. The Social Democratic Party (ČSSD) replaced the liberal government in 1998 and expressed concern about the extremely low fertility level in the Czech Republic. The political scene was opened up to public debates and initiatives of non-governmental organisations. It was a Christian interest group called the National Centre for Families that took the first initiative, by making proposals about how to improve the situation of families with children. Starting in 1999, this group organised a yearly conference on family policy topics; at these events, representatives from political institutions in

Germany and Austria presented their views on how the Czech Republic should develop family policy. Through this influence, a tendency to apply the German traditional model of family policy was strengthened.

Although the Social Democrats led only a minority government, with the help of representatives from the Christian and Democratic Party (KDU-ČSL) they were able to introduce new measures to support families in 2001. During the subsequent government, from 2002 to 2006, the Social Democrats together with the Christian Democrats introduced further improvements to family benefits, particularly related to parental benefit, child allowances and birth grant. In addition to these initiatives, the National Family Policy Concept was accepted in 2005. Although the need for a greater variety of tools for family support was stressed in this document, this has not been realised up to the time of writing. Since 2006 the main Czech liberal party, ODS, has led the government and has not accepted this document as binding on it.

Leave policies in the 1990s

The history of a parental leave system in which the father is also taken into account as a potential carer started in 1990 in Czechoslovakia when the previous 'additional maternity benefit' was renamed 'parental benefit'. At the same time the pronatalist element of parental benefit was scrapped as all parents became entitled to this benefit for a period of 3 years irrespective of the number of children they had (see Table 4.1 for details of changes in parental benefit since 1990). In 1993, the Czech Republic took over the legislation of Czechoslovakia, with no fundamental changes until the new law on the social and family system was approved by the Czech Parliament in 1995. Before this law came to a parliamentary vote, there was a strong discussion in the media about the range of proposed cutbacks. Due to strong public protest only child allowances became means-tested; the parental benefit remained universal since it was acknowledged as a priority.

To ensure regular increases in parental benefit, the new law indexed the benefit to the cost of living. However, the main change introduced by this law was an extension of the period of entitlement to parental benefit by one year. Parents now had the possibility of receiving parental benefit until their child's fourth birthday. This was a concession by the liberal ODS party to the Christian Democrat KDU, both members of the government coalition. In exchange, the KDU approved the introduction of means-tested child allowances into the same law, even though this was not in its election manifesto.

Extension of the period of payment of parental benefit was fully in line with the aim of supporting women to stay at home with very young children for as long as possible. Nevertheless, it has caused an anomaly in the system that continues up to the present day: according to the Employment Code, parental leave can only be taken until a child's third birthday (it was called 'additional maternal leave' until 2001); but according to the Social Security Code, the parental benefit is granted until the child's fourth birthday. As job security is ensured only for 3 years, women

Table 4.1: Development of parental benefit since 1990

Valid from	Period of entitlement (years)	Benefit level in CZK (per month)	Benefit level in euros (per month)	Benefit level as % of average wage	Maximum income for entitlement to parental benefit (CZK per month)
1 Oct 1990	3	900	36	27.4	800
1991	3	900	36	23.7	800
1 Apr 1992	3	1200	48	25.8	1000
1 May 1993	3	1360	54	23.0	1000
1 Feb 1994	3	1500	60	21.4	1800
1 Oct 1994	3	1740	70	24.8	1800
1Oct 1995	4	1848	74	22.2	1680
1 Jan 1996	4	1980	80	20.2	1800
1 Oct 1996	4	2112	85	21.5	1920
1 July 1997	4	2222	89	20.6	2020
1Apr 1998	4	2343	94	19.9	2130
1999	4	2343	94	18.3	2130
1 Apr 2000	4	2409	96	17.7	2190
1 Oct 2001	4	2552	102	17.3	3480
2002	4	2552	102	16.1	3480
2003	4	2552	102	15.1	3480
1 May 2004	4	3573	143	19.8	*
1 Jan 2005	4	3635	145	19.1	
1 Jan 2006	4	3693	148	18.5	
1 Jan 2007	4	7600	304	37.2	

Notes: 1 EUR = 25 CZK. * Since 1 January 2004 the income limit for a parent on parental leave has been abolished.

taking leave who do not want to lose their jobs can effectively use only 3 out of the 4 years of parental benefit payment.

In the late 1990s, some interest was expressed in simplifying the parental leave system. A right-wing party, the Freedom Union (US-DEU), proposed shortening the payment of parental benefit to 3 years while, at the same time, increasing the flat rate to make parental benefit a better substitute for earnings (Kocourková, 2001). But as the Christian Democrats (KDU-ČSL) have been in government for most of the time, in coalition either with liberals or with Social Democrats, all efforts to shorten the period of entitlement to parental benefit proved unsuccessful. Hence the persistent influence of catholic conservative policy has contributed to sustaining traditional gender roles in society.

While the additional maternity leave scheme, subsequently the parental leave scheme, has changed a lot since 1990, basic maternity leave recorded fewer changes. There was no public call to extend its length as, at 28 weeks, it already exceeded the minimum standard laid down in the EU directive. Maternity leave benefit was generous in Czechoslovakia, at 90% of net average earnings. However, in

the Czech Republic this rate was lowered to 69% in 1993 when reform of the sickness insurance system took place. Moreover, the ceiling placed on maternity benefit was very low for quite a long time in the 1990s, while it was not indexed until 1998, which caused a considerable drop in benefit levels particularly for women with higher incomes. By 1998, the highest possible benefit payment had fallen to less than 50% of average earnings.

One explanation for this decline in maternity benefit could be found in the economic difficulties that the Czech Republic was facing in the second half of the 1990s. In 1997, the then liberal-conservative government adopted cuts in public spending known as the 'Klaus package' after Prime Minister Vaclav Klaus, which also had an unfavourable effect on state support to families. For this reason, it was unrealistic to expect improvement in maternity benefit. Only since 1999 have several adjustments occurred to the maternity benefit ceiling, and currently the highest benefit payment is equivalent to about 60% of average earnings.

The new political context since 2001

Although the Christian Democratic Party has always been relatively weak in the Czech Republic, it has managed to keep its influence on political decision making by its participation in coalition governments for most of the period since 1990. It was expected that, after the division of Czechoslovakia in 1993, the influence of Catholicism would be weakened in the Czech Republic. During the common history of both nations in one state, Catholicism was always a stronger influence among Slovaks than Czechs. However, the political reality has developed differently. When Social Democrats came to power at the end of the 1990s, the position of Christian Democrats was even strengthened as the Social Democrats looked to them for support when introducing family policy measures.

Historically, both parties have had different aims for family policy measures. Christian Democrats advocate a traditional family, as they see the mother's role as essential for the socialisation and well-being of children. Social Democrats, on the other hand, tend to support families by promoting the individualisation of family members and making work and family responsibilities more compatible. Despite these different orientations, these two parties have not been much opposed, as there has been no great pressure to facilitate female employment through public childcare. The Czech Social Democrats, therefore, have focused their efforts on improving financial support to families, as this proved highly relevant.

With the accession of the Czech Republic to the European Union and the accompanying process of harmonising Czech legislation with EU regulations, family policy issues topical elsewhere in Europe have featured more on to the political agenda in the Czech Republic since the turn of the century. Accordingly, greater emphasis has been put on policies that could contribute to better balance between work and family. While public childcare facilities for children less than 3 years of age continue to receive little attention, an already well-developed network of childcare facilities for children between 3 and 6 years of age has

been further improved and adapted to meet a greater variety of family needs. As a result of meeting EU requirements, in 2001 Czech men formally gained equal rights to use the extended maternity leave that was then renamed parental leave. Moreover, a new tendency to support family-friendly forms of employment, such as part-time work and flexible working hours, became visible, with the new employment law facilitating such possibilities.

A more favourable political climate for the adoption of family- and work-friendly policies was created when Vladimir Spidla became the Czech Minister of Work and Social Affairs, from 1998 to 2002, then the Czech Prime Minister between 2002 and 2004. His influence was particularly felt in the preparation of Social Democratic Party's election programme. He argued for following the Swedish path towards the achievement of a more egalitarian model of family life. In his view, government should take full responsibility for the support of families, and particularly of working parents, by creating better conditions to allow women to combine paid employment and family responsibilities more easily and to allow fathers to take a larger role in childrearing. However, any aspirations for a Swedish type of family policy were put aside in the declaration by the new government in 2002 because of the need for coalition with the Christian Democrats. Since 2004, Spidla has been the EC Commissioner responsible for Employment, Social Affairs and Equal Opportunities, following his replacement as the Czech Prime Minister. His work in Brussels suggests that he continues to promote gender equality at the supra-national level.

Parental leave policies in 2002–06

Parental leave arrangements were significantly developed during the period 2002–06, since they were a key interest of both Social and Christian Democrats as coalition partners. Most of the changes concerned the amount of parental benefit and flexibility in use. The first significant increase in parental benefit, by 40%, occurred in 2004. However, the largest increase in parental benefit was approved by the Czech Parliament at the end of 2005, during the election campaign. Although it was the Social Democratic Party that had such measures in its programme, it was the liberal ODS party that took the initiative and unexpectedly proposed the measure in parliament. Not wishing to lose face, the Social Democrats voted for it, so doubling the amount of parental benefit from 1 January 2007. As a result, during 2007 all parents with children under 4 years of age were entitled to receive a flat-rate payment of CZ7,582 (€305), equivalent to 40% of average gross earnings in 2005.

However, this level of benefit turned out to be unsustainable in the long term for the state budget. The new liberal government, voted into office in 2006, immediately approved a reform in order to reduce the costs of parental benefit, although it was the same party that had proposed the original measure before the election. This shows both the importance of family policy issues during the election campaign as well as their misuse by populists in the Czech Republic.

Nevertheless, the financial situation of parents on parental leave significantly improved in comparison with their situation before 2006.

Since it has become more and more important for women not to lose contacts with employment when they are on parental leave, flexibility in the use of parental benefit has also increased. First, in 2004, the limit on possible earnings while receiving parental benefit was abolished, so that recipients of benefit can now work. Second, the measure adopted in 2001 allowed parents to place their child in a public childcare service for a maximum of 5 days a month without any loss of parental benefit. But since February 2006, this provision has been improved for parents with children over 3 years of age, who can now have their child in a public kindergarten for up to 4 hours each day. Accordingly, parents with a child between the age of 3 and 4 years can work part time while taking advantage of both public childcare services and parental benefit.

Parental leave reform in 2008

Taking account of the growing budget constraints, further substantial across-the-board increases in parental benefit were hardly likely. Although the National Family Concept was adopted in 2005, most of the improvements made to parental leave were not directly proposed in a measured way by the government, but unsystematically by parliamentarians. Parental benefit arrangements were not adopted so as to follow any well-designed plan, this haphazard approach leading for example to the continuing discrepancy between the length of parental leave and parental benefit. Parents can receive parental benefit even if they work full time; however, if they work, they have to make private arrangements for the care of their child, being allowed only limited access to public services. Parental benefit can, therefore, be considered a kind of childcare benefit or child allowance for young children, rather than a payment linked to leave taking.

The latest reform of parental leave policy in the Czech Republic came into effect in 2008. The aim was to enable parents to choose how long they want to care for their children. Parents may select one of three possible periods for receiving parental benefit: until their child reaches 2, 3 or 4 years of age. The length of leave selected determines the level of parental benefit – the shorter the period, the higher the amount paid. If benefit is taken until a child is 24 months, it is paid at CZK11,400 (€460) per month; only parents who are entitled to maternity benefit of at least CZK380 per calendar day may request this form of arrangement. The intermediate rate, opting to take benefit for 3 years, is CZK7,600 (€310); only parents who are entitled to maternity benefit may request this form of arrangement. The longest option is CZK7,600 until the child is 21 months of age and then CZK3,800 (€155) until the child is 48 months of age.

Cross-cutting themes

Work disincentives

The aim of extending parental leave in 1990 was to release women from the labour market. At the same time, children's well-being became an argument in debates that arose about state support for childcare. Childcare in the family was presented as the best alternative for children. Parental leave changes were among the first steps outlined in Social Reform in Czechoslovakia, the programme of the first democratic government after the collapse of the communist regime, where the high employment rate of women was viewed critically and support was given to valuing the care of children. This could be seen as a form of rejection of the previous communist 'duty to be employed'.

The first post-communist government took steps towards implementing more conservative, refamilialisation policies, which supported women in their roles as mothers and made it more difficult for them to remain in the labour market. As a result, an outdated pattern of gendered and implicit familialism has been established, which places work and family in opposition (Sirovátka, 2004). Parental leaves were designed to strengthen the mother's role as the sole carer.

Public opposition was not strong when this approach was implemented at the beginning of the 1990s. Most women welcomed the opportunity to provide better care to their children. Before 1990, they were used to being employed while having access to public childcare services. When they wanted to care for their own child they had to have as least two children to be entitled to leave for a longer period. Many women felt labour market participation was something they were forced into, rather than a right they had fought for, and were consequently perhaps less likely than women in Western Europe to perceive employment as part of a liberation process. An anti-feminist atmosphere arose when the communist regime collapsed, which can explain the relative weakness of the women's movement during the 1990s in the Czech Republic. Thus the negative experience of being 'forced' to balance work and care before 1990 contributed to the acceptance of the new policy design after 1990.

The possibility of taking care of children for 4 years, even without job security, is the most evident aspect of refamilialisation policy in the 1990s. The demand for childcare services for children under 3 years of age also fell as a result of fewer children being born during the 1990s. It subsequently became unprofitable for the state to run these services and it transferred the responsibility to the local municipalities. Since (as in Hungary too) the national government did not give the local municipalities funds to continue subsidising nurseries, there followed a sharp drop in provision; most public childcare facilities for children under 3 years of age were closed down by the late 1990s, and the proportion of the age group attending them declined from 14% in 1990 to below 1% by the late 1990s.

Low fertility

When the communist regime collapsed in 1989, Czechoslovakia had one of the highest employment rates among women in the developed world and a relatively high fertility level, at approximately the replacement rate. The former comprehensive and generous family policy strongly supported both childbearing and the full employment of women through a well-developed system of institutional childcare and leave policies. From a comparative perspective, these policies to ease the tension between employment and childcare were fairly progressive, despite no measures being undertaken to encourage fathers to share in childcare and household responsibilities. According to Saxonberg and Sirovátka (2006a), a distinctive model of gender relations emerged, which combined aspects of both 'defamilialist' policies, promoting gender equality in work, and 'familialist' policies, supporting traditional gender roles in childcare.

Since the beginning of the 1990s, the impact of societal changes on family life in Czechoslovakia has been both intense and deep. People started to enjoy more options in their lives. However, economic reforms aimed at transition to the market economy exposed families to new uncertainties and risks, such as unemployment and income inequality. The risks to household welfare increased due to changes in the labour market and reforms of the social security system including family policies. Most of the childcare costs were shifted to families after 1990, most obviously following the radical reduction of state support to childcare services for children under 3 years of age. A previously well-developed childcare system was broken, which significantly affected women and their choices for combining work and family, while parental leave arrangements (still, significantly, termed maternity leave) were given more attention by government.

With all these changes, reinforcement of traditional gender roles has become apparent. There has been a clear shift from institutional care outside the family to family-based (that is, maternal) childcare. Families, and especially mothers, have confronted renewed conflicts between work and family aspirations, with rather passive state support.

During the 1990s, major changes in reproductive behaviour occurred in the Czech Republic. Young people started to postpone childbearing and fertility dropped steeply to well below replacement level. As well as the possibility of new lifestyles, typical of democratic societies, people were facing the negative consequences of socioeconomic transformation. Family policies in the Czech Republic did not appear to be sensitive enough to the new obstacles that families started to face. The weakening of policies that shared the costs of parenting and eased the tensions between paid work and motherhood seems to have had a negative effect on fertility development during the 1990s (Rychtaříková, 2000).

While the parental leave system underwent fundamental changes from 1990, these had little impact on childbearing. Czech women had the opportunity to stay at home with children, but at the same time they started to face a considerable

decline in living standards because of the absence of a second income. The relative value of parental benefit was steadily diminishing and at the end of the 1990s it was equivalent to less than 20% of average gross earnings (see Table 4.1). Although social researchers as well as the media pointed out the lack of supportive family policies, no special policy attention was paid to the deteriorating situation of families until the change of government in the late 1990s.

Fathers' involvement

The renaming, in 1990, of 'additional maternity benefit' as 'parental benefit' can be seen as the first formal step to involve fathers in childcare (although already, since 1985, fathers could take 'additional maternity leave' if the mother were unable to take care of the child). From 1990, a father could receive the same flat-rate payment as the mother if he were unemployed and could stay at home with a child. Employed men, however, had only limited opportunities to use it, for example, if the mother was not able to take care of the child. Formally equal conditions for men and women were only established a decade later.

Moreover, there was inconsistent terminology between employment and social security codes: the Social Security Code used the term 'parental benefits', while the Employment Code referred to 'additional maternity leave'. Although this was often criticised, particularly by feminist interest groups, no government showed any concern until the late 1990s. Only then was the Employment Code amended, 'additional maternity leave' being renamed 'parental leave', while at the same time men were put on an equal footing with women as regards taking the renamed parental leave. Since then, both parents have been able to take parental leave at the same time; otherwise they can alternate with each other as often as they like, but with only one of them being entitled to parental benefit.

Although maternity leave is still primarily considered to be a right of women, recently there has been a tendency in the Czech Republic to distinguish between the physiological demands of pregnancy and childbirth on women and the care of children. Accordingly, it has been suggested that the first part of maternity leave should be reserved only for women, while the second part could be shared by both men and women. As a result of an effort to implement equal opportunities for men and women within family policy provisions, in 2006 the Social Democratic government proposed a redesign of maternity leave. The father of the child or husband of the woman who has delivered the child should, it was proposed, be able to take maternity leave instead of the mother from the seventh week after the child's birth. An amendment to the Sickness Insurance Act was approved, but its implementation has been twice postponed, first to 2008, then to 2009. With a change of government in 2006, wider political support needs to be gained, since the new law is much broader and part of it is not in line with the thinking of the newly elected politicians.

Gender: the gap between rights and practices

Feminist welfare state researchers have shown how a family policy package has an impact on gender relationships (Lewis, 1992; Orloff, 1993). The potential impact of policies for structuring private relationships is not immediately noticeable if we look only at the main parameters of policies (Neyer and Anderson, 2007). But gender neutrality of leave policies does not mean gender equality in practice. It is necessary to take into account the wider political background and look at the societal context in more detail.

During the 1990s, no policy makers in the Czech Republic considered any defamilialisation policies. There appeared to be little support among the population for gender equality and women's organisations did not pressure governments into introducing measures promoting gender equality (Saxonberg and Sirovátka, 2006b). The main argument was that under communism many women had been forced to work when they really would have preferred to stay at home. That is why in the 1990s women's organisations openly argued for the need for women to be able to become housewives if they so desired. No one group argued for the need to encourage men to share childrearing responsibilities. It was only in the context of harmonising the Czech Republic's regulations with EU rules that governments started to pay attention to policies on equal opportunities for men and women.

During the period of Social Democratic government, the family policy unit was established within the Ministry of Work and Social Affairs in 2003. Later on, this unit also got the remit for equal opportunities policies. Social Democrats wanted to stimulate women to be employed as a way for low-income families to improve their economic situations and to reduce economic differences between families. However, since 2008 due to new government policy, the issue of equal opportunities is no longer directly involved in family policy development. This agenda has been transferred out of the family policy unit at the Ministry of Work and Social Affairs. The current Czech government considers policies of gender equality to be connected more to women's employment rather than to their family membership.

Besides leave arrangements, women-friendly policies should include affordable childcare services and policies that stimulate fathers to make use of parental leave entitlements. Only the interaction of these measures can facilitate reconciliation of work and family. In the Czech Republic, scarcity of public childcare for children below the age of 3 years has contributed to limited family life choices. As mentioned above, although parental benefit was legislated for in 1990, truly equal conditions for both parents to make use of parental leave were established only in 2001. Until now, the right to take parental leave has not translated into a great deal of take-up by men. The number of men receiving parental benefit in comparison with women has remained negligible; currently only 1-2% of recipients of parental benefit are men. So although the potential exists for greater

participation of men in childcare, realising that potential is unlikely while the gender gap in earnings continues.

The current government has signalled the need for a fundamental reform of the parental leave system. The last big increase in parental benefit caused not only some problems for the state budget but also a fear that the parental leave system would be exploited by unemployed women and would inhibit them from returning to paid work, since parental benefit outstripped both unemployment benefit and the minimum wage. The new reform, introduced in 2008, offering different options for taking parental benefit, was intended to make parental leave more connected with women's employment.

Although discussion about possible changes in the parental leave system was high on the political agenda until 2007, no political parties have initiated debates on gender equality, particularly the adoption of a father's quota in parental leave. It was left to academics engaged in gender studies to open discussion about this possibility. Vladimir Spidla, in his role as EU Commissioner, took part in a national conference about parental leave in October 2007. He presented his opinion that the Czech Republic should take Iceland as an example to follow: one third of parental leave should be kept for the mother, one third for the father and one third should be used as both parents choose. Following this, Czech feminists prepared a proposal to shorten parental leave to 18 months, of which 6 months would be reserved only for fathers. The proposal was rejected by most of the public, since it was perceived as too radical. This experience confirms that introducing a father's quota is more difficult in the case of an existing long parental leave than in the case of a short leave period where a quota can be part of both parents getting more leave.

Normative policy versus parental choice

Since the 1990s, the Czech Republic could be characterised as a representative of the 'long leave mother home-centred' policy model (Wall, 2007), based on the idea that mothers should stay at home as long as possible. The 2008 reforms suggest, however, that policy makers in the Czech Republic want to transform the 'long parental leave' model by adopting policies that make choice more available. Accordingly, parents have been allowed to choose how long they want to care for their children. At the time the reforms were proposed, there was discussion about whether the parental benefit should be related to previous earnings and which alternative non-parental forms of childcare should be developed. Nevertheless, after one or 2 years of paid parental leave based on previous earnings, a low flat-rate payment for the rest of the benefit period was strongly advocated by representatives of the Ministry of Work and Social Affairs. To shorten the length of parental leave would have gone against public opinion, as a large number of women prefer to stay at home with their children.

The newly introduced parental leave system in the Czech Republic, with its options on length and payment, comes closer to the 'parental choice-orientated'

model, to be found in France, Norway or Finland (Wall, 2007). Shortening parental leave and providing childcare services after leave finishes – as can be found in Sweden, Iceland, Denmark or Slovenia – seems to be less acceptable for the Czech population. This model is strongly based on the promotion of gender equality both in work and family, which is not much in evidence yet in the Czech Republic.

To sum up, the aim of the new parental leave system in the Czech Republic is to keep women more attached to paid work, as this has proved to be a significant determinant of the living standard of families (Esping-Andersen, 2002). However, the state is rather vague about the next steps to be taken, for example, the promotion of greater participation of men in childcare or the development of various forms of childcare. The only acceptable way of supporting fathers' involvement in childcare seems to be paternity leave, whose adoption is currently discussed in the government; one week of paternity leave with wage compensation similar to maternity leave has been proposed by the Minister of Work and Social Affairs. If approved, this may be implemented during 2009.

As mentioned above, a father's quota is not considered due to its normative character. Similarly, development of childcare facilities for children below 3 years of age, required by the EU Employment Strategy (which sets a target of childcare places for at least 33% of children below 3 years of age by 2010) is perceived negatively in the Czech Republic.

Bourdieu points out that since family policies are directed towards the family, they also construct the family. In his view, family policies are those state activities that aim "to favour a certain kind of family organization and to strengthen those who are in a position to conform to this form of organization" (Bourdieu, 1996, p 24). Accordingly, parental leave policies may aim at both supporting a particular family organisation and institutionalising this family form as the norm. In the Czech Republic, the parental leave system has systematically led to the reinforcement of an outdated model of family. Most people in the country have conformed to the behaviour supported by such policies.

The EU work-friendly policies are based on promoting gender equality, which is not in line with family policy objectives of the current Czech government. Ministers do not support the earlier return of mothers to employment, which they believe will harm the well-being of children, or incentives to increase the involvement of fathers in childcare. In its current form, EU policies are not acceptable in the Czech Republic, either among policy makers or the wider public. They are perceived as pushing families in a direction opposite to that supported by recent family policies in the Czech Republic. Providing individual (maternal) home care to children is still considered to be a preferable strategy among most Czech families. However, it is perceived as a choice rather than a norm.

Conclusion

The short recent history of the Czech Republic has been in a very different political context to that of pre-1990 Czechoslovakia. Almost all women worked during the communist period. Since leave policy arrangements and a well-developed system of childcare already existed, adoption of measures to encourage men to share childcare would have brought the Czech family policy system closer to a Swedish model based on promotion of gender quality both in work and at home. Instead, reintroduction of a traditional family regime occurred through both explicitly and implicitly supported refamilialisation. Surprisingly, since the separation of Slovakia in 1993 the influence of Catholicism has not decreased; rather, it has become a stable latent political dimension.

Improvement of leave policy arrangements was preferred to the development of a mixed package of support for families. In the absence of comprehensive childcare facilities, parental leave entitlements helped to reinforce a traditional gender role model as women were encouraged to leave the labour market to raise children. The opportunity for men to take parental leave has remained rather hypothetical, mainly due to financial circumstances (in particular, the fact that men earn more than women). At the end of the 1990s, the apparent similarity with the (then) German policy and its traditional male-breadwinner model could be seen.

Most women welcomed the possibility to be full-time mothers in the 1990s. However, nowadays the post-communist refamilialisation policies seem increasingly at odds with the needs and aspirations of the younger population (Sirovátka and Bartáková, 2008). They are becoming more positive towards gender equality. Nevertheless, the current government is rather reluctant to introduce effective measures to involve fathers more in childcare. While the introduction of one week of paternity leave is being currently discussed at a government level, a father's quota is well off the agenda. A conservative approach still dominates policy making, although it is hidden behind talk of enabling parents to have choices in how to manage employment and family responsibilities.

The recent reform of the long parental leave model has, interestingly, been initiated by a conservative government and not by Social Democrats. Since 2008, it has been possible to take a shorter leave with a higher payment. However, the 4-year parental benefit has been retained among the options, as greater emphasis is still put on the supposed well-being of children rather than on the employment careers of mothers. In spite of its rather unique policy developments, different from most other European countries, the current parental leave system in the Czech Republic exceeds by far the standards set by the EU in its directives. So far, no paternity leave has been established, although its adoption has recently been several times discussed on the political level.

In contrast to recent EU trends, family-friendly policies in the Czech Republic are perceived as separate from working-friendly policies. As a result, since 2008, gender equality policies have been separated from the development of family policies. The EU requirements for childcare are viewed as renewing the 'forced'

pattern of combining female employment with childcare outside the family; as such, they are widely unacceptable in the Czech Republic, given negative experiences with childcare services before 1990. That is why the possibility of taking long parental leave has been retained. Parental choice about the period of childcare at home is preferred to support for an integrated family strategy that could lead, it is feared, to the enforcement of a norm.

Notes

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[2] Leave provision described here refers to statutory entitlements.

[3] Converted into euros at exchange rate on 23 February 2009, rounded up to the nearest 5 euros.

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