



# The EU Mutual Learning Programme in Gender Equality

## Instruments to foster long-term paternal involvement in family work

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Comments Paper - France



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# Fostering long-term paternal involvement in family work in France: is it possible to learn from Germany?

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## 1. Related policy context

Since the 1980's, a concerted effort has been made by successive French governments to promote social policies designed to enable mothers to combine both family responsibilities and full-time employment. France had begun its move away from the breadwinner model already in the 1970s and, along with the Nordic countries, today leads the European Union in the provision of childcare and benefits aimed at reducing childcare costs for families. These developments have gone hand in hand with a progressive implementation of parental leave policies encouraging parents, principally women, to opt to stay-at-home or to work part-time after the birth of a child. In this domain, however, France remains a laggard country compared to the Nordic countries and Germany.

While over the last decade the focus has continued to remain on supporting mothers' employment by subsidising formal individual care arrangements as well as collective ones, the most recent reform in parental leave policy, implemented in 2015, once again illustrates the ways in which employment policies have encroached on the ground occupied by French family policy. It partially explains the rationales that have underpinned reforms since the creation of the child-rearing benefit (CRB, a parental allowance) in 1985.

As a matter of fact, in recent years, in the context of economic uncertainties and a high unemployment rate (8.7 percent in July 2018), French policy makers have been confronted with tensions as new economic and social challenges (in particular the rise in poverty rates among single parents) have emerged. Restraining public expenditure has at the same time become a high priority for the current government. On the other hand, however, the need to pay heed to demands coming from both their electoral constituency and from women's associations has been at stake too.

Over the last decade, against the background of numerous debates addressing gender equality issues (mainly focussed on the enduring wage gap between women and men and the instruments to tackle gender discrimination on the labour market), governments of both President Hollande and President Macron were put under pressure by the feminist movement and trade unions to match their words with action by encouraging fathers to take a more active role in their children upbringing and education.

In that context, the recent proposal of the European Commission for a directive on the Work/life balance package has giving new impetus to debates and controversies in this domain. In particular, the amount of the allowance in the case of parental leave has spurred heated discussions. More than ever, the government has therefore to cope with dilemmas as far as gender equality issues are concerned.

## 2. Policy debate and the reform implemented in 2015: a few small steps in the right direction

In the run-up period to the reform introduced in 2015, numerous women's organisations and feminist NGOs had put under pressure the socialist government as they wanted them to adopt a Nordic approach to the parental leave scheme, with a shorter but better paid leave. Indeed the long duration of the French parental leave (3 years following the birth) needed to be considered against the background of widespread research showing that returning to employment is more difficult after extended absences (even when the working contract is maintained). It was all the more important that mothers account for 98 percent of the beneficiaries of the parental leave allowance. The former socialist government, therefore, decided to make use of these arguments to legitimise its reform so as to proclaim its commitment to gender equality.

### ***Changes in the design of parental leave policies: Shortening of the duration of the leave payment but....***

Duration of the leave was significantly shortened while the 'father's quota' (in line with a take-it or lose-it approach) was extended to six months maximum while the allowance (called *Prepare* since the reform, *Prestation partagée d'éducation de l'enfant*, Shared benefit to raise a child) became income-related.

- In case the couple has at least two children, the maximum duration of the time during which one of the parents is provided with the parental benefit was shortened to 24 months (compared with 36 months previously), extended by 12 months if the other parent (generally the father) takes it up (within the limit of the 3rd anniversary of the youngest child).
- If the parents have a single child, the duration is six months maximum for each of the parents within the first anniversary of the child and after the end of the Maternity leave, i.e. to a maximum period of 12 months. Both parents can claim benefit and this is non-transferable. In other words, if one parent (e.g. the father) does not take any leave the remaining 6 months expire. Parents can take some time of the leave simultaneously: but the total amount of the *Prepare* cannot exceed €398 Euros (unless eligible for the *Allocation de base*).

**....the amount of the allowance (*Prepare*), however, remains very low and for the first time since its creation is income-related**

The *Prepare* has no relation at all with the previously earned-wage, it is a flat-rate allowance but income-related (Table 1). Parents with earnings lower than an income ceiling set by the national government (Table 2) are provided with a supplementary means-tested allowance (*Allocation de base*). As a result of this change, beneficiaries with earnings higher than the income ceiling have lost 182 euros per month (575 euros per month in 2014 and 398 euros in 2018 if the recipient does not work during the leave ) whereas for the others the amount remains the same (Table 1).

Both parents can benefit at the same time from the *Prepare* but the total amount of payment cannot exceed 398 Euros (if they are not eligible for the *Allocation de base*). They can also work part-time (between 16 and 32 hours per week) and take up parental leave simultaneously. If she (or he) works part-time the amount is dependent on the number of working hours (Table 1).

***Explicit and implicit objectives: limiting the negative outcomes of long leaves and restricting public expenditure***

The official aim of the decision to shorten length of leave was to limit the career penalty of motherhood on women's employment. But, against the background of a huge public deficit, an implicit objective of the government was to contain public spending. This was effectuated by more restrictive eligibility conditions (in particular for couples with a single child) that excluded parents who held a precarious and unstable job before the birth and by the decrease in the amount of the *Prepare* which affects a significant share of the beneficiaries. These measures resulted in a decrease in public expenditure.

An explicit objective was to create an incentive for fathers to take up the leave for at least six months. To make this measure more efficient, the amount of the benefit (*Prepare*) remains, however, far too low. Actually, the government was and still is unreceptive to any measures that could contribute to the already public deficit.

It comes, therefore, as no surprise that the number of fathers who have taken up a parental leave has stalled since that reform and that their share among the beneficiaries remains very modest (4.4 per cent at the end of 2016). Moreover, 74 per cent of the fathers who avail themselves of this option work on a part-time basis and are mostly employees who held a stable job beforehand (mainly in the public sector). Compared with fathers who do not take up parental leave, they are more likely to work in female-dominated sectors and to have partners with a higher level of education, a higher status job and higher earnings.

### ***A reduction in the total number of beneficiaries***

At the same time, a reduction in the total number of beneficiaries (-144,400 over the period 2006-2015, the total amounting to 410,000 by the end of 2015) has taken place from 2007 onwards. Three main factors seem to have been playing a key role:

- Consideration of cost-benefit: the impact of the reduction in the amount of the *Prepare* for those not eligible for supplementary means-tested allowance.
- The impact of high unemployment and of the dramatic changes at the workplace
- The impact of more restrictive eligibility requirements in a context of a rise in precarious jobs

## **3. Transferability aspects: the current Macron government is unlikely to adopt the German perspective**

It is unlikely that the current government will adopt the German perspective because budgetary constraints have been taking precedence over gender equality consideration. The adoption of the German PAP and the Partnership Bonus would not, however, automatically result in an increase in the take-up rate of fathers in France because the amount of the *Prepare* is too low. Moreover, the influence of the norms that a mother should be the primary care giver in the family even if she is employed is still strong.

On the other hand, against the background of an increase in the number of precarious jobs and unbalanced power-relationships between employers and employees (as an outcome of high unemployment rate in France), fathers (in particular if they earn more than their partner) are reluctant to stop working or to cut back on the number of hours they work when they are on leave. Only a significant increase in the amount of the *Prepare* might encourage them to take up the parental leave.

It is, however, worth mentioning that in France, over the last decade, the increase in the share of the beneficiaries who have taken up a leave while working part-time (instead of not working) has been significant. Nevertheless, it is still much more frequent in Germany than in France that one parent is working full-time while the partner (i.e. the mother) is not working when they have a child aged 0-2 years (see Table 3). In France, on the contrary, couples where both partners work full-time represent the majority of the parents with a child of the same age (41.5 per cent compared with 25.1 per cent in Germany).

Partnership Bonus and PAP encourage both parents to work part-time: but from the point of view of the fight against gender discrimination in the workplace, it makes sense to ask whether it is an appropriate instrument in particular as far as the

reduction of the gender wage gap is concerned? Mothers are much more likely to work part time in Germany than in France (see Table 3) which has negative effects on their career prospects and reinforces gender inequality in the labour market.

## 4. Conclusions and recommendations

Over the last decade, France has continued to progressively consolidate its promotion of policies to support work/family life balance along with steady increases in spending related to childcare provision. But in spite of recent modest reform efforts (shortening of the duration of the leave payment), France has not taken a Nordic style approach to its parental leave policy, in contrast to Germany. As a consequence, by the end of 2016, women still account for 96% of the beneficiaries of the *Prepave*. It is clear that the reform implemented in 2015 has been falling short in encouraging fathers to avail themselves of this allowance.

The French government did not really match its words with actions, as a blind eye was turned to the crucial role played by the level of payment in the decision-making process of couples with regard to parental leave.

*Some recommendations:*

- In both countries, the issue of the predominantly female workforce in the formal childcare sector has not yet been addressed although it would be a significant component of a holistic and comprehensive approach when it comes to fostering paternal involvement in family work. Promoting gender diversity in this largely female-dominated sector is at stake because it would be in line with a progressive change in the dominant value system underpinning attitudes and behaviour in the family sphere.
- Childcare policies should be taken into consideration in tandem with any reform in parental leave policy: in France, the duration of the leave is shorter than before but policy-makers have currently to tackle the problem of the mismatch between supply and a growing demand for subsidised and formal childcare arrangements. Spatial disparities in supply of places in centre-based settings remain wide in France (as well as in Germany). The shortfall of places is detrimental to mothers and fathers who want to resume their job at the end of the parental leave. The challenge of providing equal access, affordable and good quality subsidised childcare centres (such as *crèches*, childminders, *écoles maternelles*, nursery schools) for all children aged under-six is therefore at stake.

**Table 1: Amount of the CRB benefit (CLCA in 2014 and Prepare in 2018): evolution 2014-2018**

	2014*	From 1st 2018	From 1st 2018
	<i>Complément de libre choix d'activité (CLCA)</i> 'Supplement for the freedom of choice to work or not'	Parents eligible for the <i>Prepare</i> but not eligible for the means-tested supplementary allowance** ( <i>Allocation de base</i> )	Parents eligible for the <i>Prepare</i> and the means-tested supplementary allowance at full rate*** ( <i>Allocation de base</i> )
The recipient does not work during the leave	575.04	398	569.56
The recipient works part-time (less or equal to half-time)	437.08	257.29	428.35
The recipient works between 50% and 80 % of full-time	330.25	148.41	319.97

Source: CNAF, 2017 and HCFEA (2017)

\*Parents with a child aged under 3 and born before April 1<sup>st</sup>, 2014 who received the previous CRB benefit (CLCA)

\*\* 15 per cent of the beneficiaries are not eligible for the supplementary allowance (*Allocation de base*)

\*\*\* At full-rate (one of the parents does not work), *the amount of the supplementary allowance is dependent on the number of children, the number of earners in the couples and the net monthly income which must not exceed a ceiling set by the national government.*



**Table 2: Resources (net monthly income) ceiling to be eligible for the means-tested supplementary allowance at full-rate or partial-rate\* (*Allocation de base*) in December 2017 (in Euros)**

Number of children	Net monthly income ceiling to be eligible at <b>full-rate*</b>	Net monthly income ceiling to be eligible at <b>full-rate*</b>	Net monthly income ceiling to be eligible at <b>partial-rate**</b>	Net monthly income ceiling to be eligible at <b>partial-rate**</b>
	<i>Couple with a single earner</i>	<i>Couples with two earners</i>	<i>Couple with a single earner</i>	<i>Couples with two earners</i>
1	2683	3409	3206	4073
2	3167	3893	3784	4651
3	3651	4377	4362	5229

Source: CNAF, 2017 and HCFEA (2017)

\* 185 Euros (reduced to 171.56 Euros from 1st April 2018)

\*\* 92 Euros

**Table 3: Patterns of employment in couples with children by age of youngest child: Distribution (%) of employment patterns in couples with at least one child aged 14 by age of youngest child (2014)**

Age of youngest child	0-2	0-2	0-2	6-14	6-14	6-14
	Both partners work full-time	1 partner full time, 1 partner part-time	1 partner full-time, 1 partner not working	Both partners work full-time	1 partner full-time, 1 partner part-time	1 partner full-time, 1 partner not working
<b>Germany</b>	25,1	24,2	<b>40,0</b>	25,4	<b>47,6</b>	19,8
<b>France</b>	<b>41,5</b>	12,7	32,0	<b>54,5</b>	16,9	19,2

Source : OCDE, *Family Database*, 2018, Tableau LMF 2.2.A.