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The purpose of this summary is to disseminate the research findings via the internet. The network coordinator has forwarded it to the programme administrator, for approval, in three languages: French, Dutch and English.

¹ See Art. 5.5.2 of the research contract.

Link to website describing the project team's work:

- <http://www.ulb.ac.be/pepsi/>

Summary

INTRODUCTION

The growing participation of women in the labour market, and especially of women who have children, was one of the most significant economic and social phenomena of the second half of the last century. This phenomenon was evident to varying degrees in all European countries.

Women's involvement in the labour market was also one of the objectives laid down at the Lisbon European Council, which set the target of a 60% per capita female rate of employment, to be reached by 2010². Quality jobs for women can only be achieved by:

- safeguarding continuity of employment around the time when children are born, so as to provide income security and to guarantee women's career prospects;
- stepping up men's involvement in childcare and domestic work;
- ensuring that improvements in the position of young mothers on the labour market do not result in greater job segregation between women.

Helping women to remain in the labour market is crucial for their own independence, for the development of society and perhaps even for the survival of social security systems. The birth of a child can in fact cause mothers to withdraw from the labour market, or else can force them to accept part-time jobs, often of lesser quality. This can happen in combination with a feminisation of certain occupations or of less well-paid sectors of the economy.

There is a risk that all of these penalties could impinge on the independence and financial security of young mothers. To the extent that these risks constitute constraints and not choices, it is vital to combat them by means of adequate, effective social and family policies. Such policies must support a commitment on the part of both parents to the work *and* family spheres, thereby preventing women from having to make a straightforward choice between going out to work and raising their children.

To this end, the policies traditionally designed by European countries to assist parents are childcare systems, maternity/paternity leave and parental leave. However, not all of these policies necessarily encourage both parents to go out to work, and it is vital to analyse their effects on gender equality and equality between mothers and non-mothers in the labour market.

Support for families with two working parents entails encouraging fathers to step up their commitment to the family sphere by sharing the domestic tasks. The allocation of time within the home is central here, especially the involvement of fathers in childcare through paternity leave or parental leave and the degree to which they devote this additional free time to domestic work.

Childcare facilities themselves are another aspect of the matter. Typically there is a mismatch between supply and demand, and what is offered by public and private service providers varies enormously. The consequence is uneven take-up by different socio-economic population groups, sometimes leading to severe inequalities. What is more, most of the work in this sector of the economy is carried out by women, many of them low-skilled.

THE AIMS OF PEPSI

The "Public Policies Towards Employment of Parents and Social Inclusion" (PEPSI) project³ sets out to study the impact that the presence of a young child has on labour market participation

² The fact that a per capita, rather than a full-time equivalent, target was set constitutes a threat to the quality of female employment, in that the target could be met via a proliferation of part-time jobs for women.

³ The "Public Policies Towards Employment of Parents and Social Inclusion" (PEPSI) project, financed under the Belgian Science Policy as part of the "Society and Future" programme, has been carried out jointly by the Department of Applied Economics (DULBEA) and the Children's Policy and Services Unit (UPSE) of the Université Libre de Bruxelles.

and the quality of parents' employment (full-time versus part-time work and inactivity, horizontal and vertical segregation, pay), for both the mother and the father, as well as on time-sharing between the parents.

The aim is to demonstrate that policy-making can rise to the new challenges now confronting European countries in terms of employment and fertility. We attempt to identify which measures operate to the advantage of families with two working parents, and to determine what policy instruments are beneficial or detrimental to the situation of women and men on the labour market (particularly when they have children). This is done by analysing those public policies aimed at promoting employment among parents, covering various dimensions of early years care: childcare services, maternity leave, paternity leave, parental leave, methods of taxation and the possibility of deducting childcare costs. Childcare policies are specifically examined in terms of their accessibility and the quality of jobs in this sector.

The study seeks to show Belgium's position in relation to other European Union countries, in order to identify examples of good practice which could help in the formulation of policy recommendations.

The analysis comprises three dimensions:

- **gender equality:** we looked for potential gender bias in policies, be it direct or indirect. For example, income inequality between parents, combined with flat-rate remuneration for parental leave, prompts more mothers than fathers to take this form of leave, thus damaging mothers' career prospects;

- **labour market integration:** we studied the overall effectiveness of childcare systems, combined with parental leave, in promoting continuity of employment and high-quality employment for both mothers and fathers;

- **social inclusion:** we analysed the quality of childcare policies in terms of the geographical, financial and social accessibility of services, as well as service quality, and in terms of fairness to all children. Unequal rates of coverage, favouring well-off areas, the concentration of women in in poor-quality jobs and the low level of training in the care sector are all issues that have been insufficiently studied in relation to labour market participation and the characteristics of parents' employment.

PARENTHOOD AND EMPLOYMENT: A HAPPY COUPLE?

It emerges from the study that, although many factors contribute to the inequalities observed between women and men on the labour market (education, work experience, institutions, social norms, stereotypes, discrimination, etc.), parenthood plays a key role in accounting for these inequalities.

Employment

Female labour market participation is significantly affected by the presence of a child in the household: in most European countries, women are more likely to reduce their working time or become inactive once they have a child. The younger the child, the more this is the case. In Belgium, the employment gap in full-time equivalents between mothers and non-mothers is less than 10%, which places Belgium amongst those countries where motherhood has the least impact (as in Hungary, Sweden, Portugal, Slovenia and Denmark), as opposed to countries such as Austria, the Czech Republic, Germany and the United Kingdom where these effects are highest. This finding nevertheless needs to be qualified, in that the employment rate among women in Belgium is relatively low by comparison with its European partners.

In general, fatherhood is favourable to the situation of men on the labour market: employment rates for fathers in all European countries are higher than those for non-fathers, but the impact of the presence of a young child on the number of hours worked is variable or non-significant, depending on the country.

Segregation

Women are overrepresented and concentrated in a narrower range of occupations than men (occupations related to social work and health, education, the retail trade, public administration, business services and hotels/restaurants). They are likewise to be found in jobs with lower levels of responsibility, where wages are lower and working conditions insecure (there is a greater likelihood of being employed on fixed-term or part-time contracts and of working non-standard hours). Parenthood reinforces this phenomenon. Although in Belgium the level of horizontal and vertical segregation between the sexes is about average by comparison with other European countries, the level of segregation between mothers and non-mothers, and between fathers and non-fathers, is among the highest.

Men are well represented among manual workers, artisans, engineers, etc. and in highly responsible positions. In most countries, the proportion of fathers holding such posts is systematically higher than that of non-fathers.

Wage

The wage gap between mothers and non-mothers can be partially explained by the employment gap between mothers and non-mothers and by segregation (horizontal and vertical): the earnings of mothers are systematically lower than those of non-mothers. Consequently, motherhood serves to reinforce the wage gap between women and men.

It would nevertheless seem that the wage penalty suffered by women is linked more to gender than to motherhood, so that discrimination affects all women in their capacity of potential mothers.

By comparison with other European countries, Belgium is one of those where the wage penalties are lowest:

- the gender pay gap is the narrowest (10% of female pay), meaning that Belgium is ranked along with Lithuania, Ireland, Luxembourg and Poland, whereas on the other hand the wage penalty suffered by women is highest (between 30 and 50%) in Estonia, Sweden, the Czech Republic and the United Kingdom;
- motherhood is associated with a wage bonus, since mothers' earnings are higher than those of non-mothers (the differential being 7%), whereas normally motherhood is associated with a loss of earnings, as is the case in Estonia, Luxembourg and the United Kingdom where it is highest, at around 15%;
- the presence of a child widens the gender wage gap proportionately less than in other countries: the wage differential between mothers and fathers is 20% (placing Belgium in the same category as Hungary, Lithuania, Italy and Poland). At the opposite end of the scale, the gap is at least 50% (in the United Kingdom, Spain, the Netherlands, Austria and Estonia).

Nonetheless, Belgium is also one of those countries where fatherhood is associated with a significant wage bonus (above 10%), as is the case in Ireland, France, Spain and Germany. Conversely, there is virtually no wage differential between fathers and non-fathers in the United Kingdom, Lithuania, Estonia and Hungary.

Time allocation

The presence of a child serves to reinforce the gendered division of labour within couples: women take on more of the everyday domestic and family tasks to the detriment of gainful employment, whereas men devote more time to their work. The gaps are wider in countries where female labour market participation is lower and where part-time work is relatively more common, such as for example in Germany, Norway, Sweden and the United Kingdom.

Moreover, fathers spend more time on so-called semi-recreational activities (gardening, DIY, playing with the children, etc.), whereas women undertake the repetitive and less optional chores (cooking, cleaning, washing and dressing the children, etc.).

Conclusion

It emerges from this analysis that women with children are doubly penalised on the labour market, since the phenomenon of segregation operates in two stages: discrimination is linked first of all to gender (and to the fact that all women are potential mothers) and then to the status of mother. Women are likewise faced with a reinforcement of gender inequality in their private life when they have a child, resulting in the investment of more time in domestic and family duties to the detriment of gainful employment.

Fatherhood, by contrast, is associated with a more favourable position on the labour market.

PUBLIC POLICIES ON EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION AND CARE FACILITIES (ECEC)

Analysis of ECEC systems and typology of countries

The analytical framework underpinning this study posits that ECEC is a system consisting of four interacting dimensions: political and legal structure, organisation, quality and performance. 14 indicators are used to describe these systems:

- **political and legal structure:** age of compulsory schooling, starting age of entry into pre-school, existence of an entitlement to childcare, political mandate, existence of a national policy statement on ECEC, integrated nature of the system;
- **organisation:** opening hours, share of the subsidised sector, cost of care (age 0-2), criteria for prices' scale, level of public funding for preschool;
- **quality:** child-to-staff ratio in collective childcare facilities, level of staff training required;
- **performance:** intensity of use of formal services.

A thorough analysis of the four dimensions of ECEC facilities in 18 European countries (EU-15, CZ, HU, PL) confirms the advisability of using specific indicators for each age group (0-2 and 3-5 years). Although some of the indicators on the political and legal structure (=policy factor), along with the level of staff training and the intensity of use of formal services, are the most valid descriptors to discriminate the systems in both age groups in the 18 countries examined, others prove to be more specifically relevant to one or other of the two age groups. For instance, prices' scales remain part of the model for 0-2 year-olds since affordability is critical for this age group. In the case of 3-5 year-olds, a stronger discriminating factor between systems is the child-to-staff ratio, which varies considerably between services run by education departments and those run by social services departments, and the opening hours indicator, where the disparities between countries are wider than in the case of services for under three-year-olds.

The typology of ECEC systems for 0-2 year-olds distinguishes four country profiles on the basis of four indicators (policy factor, prices' scales, training and intensity of use):

- **the Scandinavian type of ECEC** (DK, FI, SE): a well-developed ECEC policy, intended to be universal and highly inclusive;
- **the social type** (BE, DE, FR, HU, IT): a mixed private/public system favouring affordability for families;
- **the liberal type** (EL, ES, LU, NL, PT, UK): predominance of the private sector;
- **the residual type** (AT, CZ, IE, PL): services under-developed compared with the European average; childcare remains more of a private matter.

For 3-5 year-olds, countries are compared using six indicators (policy factor, level of funding, opening hours, level of training, child-to-staff ratio and intensity of use):

- **the Scandinavian type of ECEC** (DK, FI, SE): high values for all indicators;
- **the expanded preschool type** (BE, ES, FR, HU, IT, LU, PT): a similar profile to the above but with lower values for the indicators;
- **the reduced preschool type** (AT, CZ, DE, EL, NL): the private sector is highly dominant;
- **the residual preschool type** (IE, UK): very low levels of funding and intensity of use of services .

These typologies reveal similar policies on both age groups in half of the countries, testifying to the existence of shared values in respect of these policies. What is more, policy for pre-school

children is relatively more homogeneous across all the countries compared than is the case for under-three year-olds.

Belgium, for its part, is distinctive for the emphasis it places on affordability for both age groups. It belongs to the *social type* for 0-2 year-olds and the *expanded preschool type* for preschool services.

Methods of childcare and determinants of the use of formal ECEC services

An analysis of the use of different types of care, based on the EU-SILC 2005 database, highlights discrepancies in the use made of services for 0-2 year-olds, firstly between countries and secondly between families.

A national-level analysis of the use of the different types of childcare in the EU-25 (excluding Malta, for which no data on ECEC were available in 2005) reveals the predominant trend in 19 of the 24 countries for parents to look after their own children; in 11 of them (AT, CZ, DE, EE, FI, IE, IT, LT, LV, PL, SK) this was the method of childcare used by more than 50% of the families. Formal services are the number-one care method in Denmark, the Netherlands and Sweden, while informal care are mainly used in Portugal and Slovenia. In the case of formal care, i.e. services regulated by the public authorities, three country profiles emerge: those where over 33% of children attend a formal institution (BE, DK, ES, FR, NL, SE); six countries where between 20 and 33% of children do so (FI, IT, LU, PT, SI, UK); and 12 others where this is the case for less than 20% of children. Thus in 2005 only six countries, including Belgium, exceeded the Barcelona target for 33% of children to be covered by 2010.

The individual determinants of the take-up of formal services were analysed for 18 European countries (EU-15, CZ, HU, PL) and three logistical models were tested on the nine countries (BE, ES, FI, FR, HU, NL, PT, SE, UK) for which full data were available: the social model (mother's education); the activity model (mother's activity status); and the earnings model (household earnings). The earnings model is by far the most significant statistically, with a use rising in step with earnings. Under the activity model, mothers in employment make the same amount of use of formal services as inactive women in Belgium, Finland, France, Netherlands, Spain, Sweden and the United Kingdom. These findings highlight the fact that the economic function of ECEC facilities is the result of a targeted policy to this effect. Lastly, the social model⁴ reveals a profile of social inequality in certain countries (BE, ES, NL, UK), where an average and/or high level of educational attainment constitutes a factor for greater use than is the case for less well educated women. There are no social differences in either Finland or Sweden, however, which would support the hypothesis that horizontal equity results from a universal access policy as practised in these countries.

Workers in the early childhood sector

The issue of employment in the ECEC sector is a major determinant of the quality of a system. In Belgium, the findings on people working in formal, subsidised institutions for 0-2 year-olds confirm the reputation of a sector whose employment characteristics lead to gender-related socio-economic inequalities: a high rate of feminisation (over 95%), a low proportion of university graduates (17%) and a very high rate of part-time work (67-75%).

In conclusion

The main issue for governments, and for Europe, is what ideological stance to adopt with regard to ECEC policies. The nature of a country's early years system is wholly determined by the choice between a targeted or a universal policy: the structure of provision, as well as the access and the quality of the system, are the product of legislations and of the funding allocated to this sector, which forms an integral part of the European-level public policy-making since 2002.

⁴ Not tested for France.

PUBLIC POLICIES TO PROMOTE THE EMPLOYMENT OF PARENTS

The goal here was to analyse the public policies geared to promoting the employment of parents, comparing the different measures in force in European countries as concerns childcare facilities, maternity and paternity leave, parental leave, taxation systems and family allowances.

Leave periods granted to parents

The arrangements for leave granted to parents were analysed on the basis of a number of criteria:

- **maternity leave**: the qualifying period (i.e. the number of days worked/days of paying social security contributions to be entitled to leave), the duration of leave and the number of days paid in full;
- **paternity leave**: the number of leave days paid in full;
- **parental leave**: the protection afforded by the system (employment protection, protection of employment-related rights (length of service and pension), duration of paid leave), flexibility of the system (possibility of taking leave on a part-time basis and dividing it up, upper age of the child), remuneration for the leave period (as a proportion of the national average female wage), transferability of leave between the two parents and, lastly, the ratio of average household earnings if the father takes leave instead of the mother during the first three months.

An analysis of these three types of leave reveals four groups of countries:

- **the first group** consists of Austria, the Netherlands, Greece and Poland (paternity leave non-existent or very short; maternity leave of 16 to 18 weeks and remunerated at 100% of normal pay; parental leave poorly paid and poorly protected);
- **the second group** comprises the Czech Republic, Germany, the United Kingdom, Slovakia and Spain (no paternity leave⁵; maternity leave either very short and well-paid, or very long and poorly paid; parental leave very long⁶ and poorly paid);
- **the third group** includes Belgium, Denmark, Hungary, Latvia, Portugal, Sweden, Ireland, Luxembourg, Finland and Slovenia (paternity leave lasting 10 to 18 days⁷; maternity leave paid at between 60 and 80%⁸; parental leave relatively short⁹ and well protected);
- **the fourth group** is less homogeneous and brings together the remaining countries: Italy, France, Estonia and Norway (paternity leave long and paid to the tune of 100%¹⁰; maternity leave lasting around 20 weeks¹¹ and well-paid; parental leave devised in such a way that the household does not suffer an excessive loss of income if the father takes leave instead of the mother, since the loss of earnings amounts to less than 10%¹²).

Early childhood education and care facilities

The indicators relating to early childhood education and care facilities were constructed using the following criteria: childcare provision, opening hours, child-to-staff ratios, proportion of the sector that is in the public domain, cost of care and public expenditures. These indicators were also calculated for both age groups of children: those aged 0-2 and those aged 3-5 (the country classification according to the child's age is however relatively similar).

It emerges that Belgium, Denmark, Hungary, Sweden and Finland fare well in respect of the indicators on childcare facilities. Conversely, Austria, the Netherlands, Greece and Poland come

⁵ Except in the United Kingdom and Spain.

⁶ Except in the United Kingdom.

⁷ Except in Hungary, Portugal where leave lasts 5 days, Luxembourg where leave lasts 2 days, and Ireland where there is no paternity leave.

⁸ Except in Latvia, Portugal, Luxembourg and Slovenia, where the replacement rate is 100%.

⁹ Except in Hungary, Latvia, Luxembourg and Sweden.

¹⁰ Except in Italy, where it does not exist, and Norway where it is in fact parental leave, a proportion of which is reserved for the father.

¹¹ Except in France where it lasts 16 weeks.

¹² Except in France where it is 17%.

off worst with regard to the indicators on childcare facilities, whatever the age of the child (except for the Netherlands, whose ranking for preschool services is about average). The indicators obtained for the remaining countries classify these countries somewhere in between the two previously-cited extreme groups.

Taxation

The study looked at methods of taxation and whether or not it is possible to deduct charges for the use of childcare services.

In most countries, taxation is levied on an individual basis. In Norway, Estonia, the Czech Republic and Slovakia, however, couples may choose the method of taxation. In Germany, France, Ireland, Luxembourg and Portugal, joint taxation is either still the norm or it is in the interest of couples on average earnings to choose this option.

As for the deductibility of childcare costs, this option is available only in Belgium, France, Germany, Greece, Luxembourg, the Netherlands, Portugal and the United Kingdom.

DO PUBLIC POLICIES REINFORCE OR COMBAT LABOUR MARKET INEQUALITIES?

Early childhood education and care facilities

The top priority, when it comes to enabling parents to better reconcile their private and working lives, and reducing inequality, is the establishment of early childhood education and care facilities for children below the age of compulsory schooling.

Such facilities would in fact seem to be the best means of ensuring equal access to the labour market for mothers of young children, especially if the service is sufficiently affordable (this applies above all to 0-2 year-olds) and is available for a sufficient number of hours throughout the year (above all for 3-5 year-olds). This finding indicates that public provision of childcare services should be expanded and coverage rates should exceed the targets set by Europe at the Barcelona summit in 2002 (whereby services should be provided for at least 33% of under-three year-olds and at least 90% of children aged between three and the compulsory school age by 2010).

An expansion of service provision would prevent mothers from having to cut their working hours or withdraw from the labour market. This fact is particularly significant, in that analysis has revealed that better childcare facilities lead to a reduction in wage inequalities between mothers and fathers.

Nevertheless, the establishment of broadly accessible ECEC systems cannot be reduced to the mere provision of places for the children of working women. The research findings showed that those countries with the highest coverage had developed consistent policies based on the recognition of an entitlement for all children; those policies incorporated objectives such as financial and social accessibility and service quality for institutions looking after preschool children.

These policies must take gender issues into account, since the ECEC sector is still overwhelmingly female-dominated, despite the outsourcing of care that has occurred. Although levels of training and employment among younger generations of women are rising, female graduates are less likely to join this sector of the economy - whether the services be formal or informal - owing to the limited job opportunities. Consequently, the polarisation of female labour within this sector is likely to be reinforced, confining lower-skilled women and/or female immigrants to poor-quality jobs. An extension of ECEC services must therefore be part of an overall strategy to make this sector more attractive (training, career plans, working conditions

and pay, etc.) so as to minimise these effects.

Situation in Belgium:

Education and care systems for 0-2 year-olds and for 3-5 year-olds are separate but coherent in terms of their underlying values: they belong to the "social" type in the case of infants and to the "enlarged" type in the case of preschool, with the emphasis placed on accessibility. Belgium's ranking in Europe is quite favourable as far as use is concerned (universal access for 3-5 year-olds but still inadequate for 0-2 year-olds). However, the country comes off very badly in terms of the staff working with infants (aged 0-2): very low levels of training, a high prevalence of part-time work and almost exclusively female workers.

Recommendations:

Service provision must be extended, especially for children under the age of three. In addition, accessibility must be improved in the following ways: adequate opening hours, especially for 3-5 year-olds; a curb on the cost of care, especially for 0-2 year-olds; and broader inclusion criteria, especially for 0-2 year-olds. Last but not least, high-quality care must be ensured across all services by improving training levels for workers in this sector.

Paternity leave

Turning to the leave periods granted to parents, it would appear essential to reform paternity leave. Whereas there is currently talk of altering maternity leave, this study shows that it is more of a priority to focus attention on arrangements targeted at fathers, with a view to promoting gender equality and equality between mothers and non-mothers on the labour market.

Paternity leave is in fact an effective means of narrowing the employment gap between non-mothers and mothers if it lasts a sufficiently long time. Fathers would be more inclined to devote themselves to the family environment, and to share domestic chores and tasks related to the presence of a child, if they had the possibility of taking paternity leave.

Situation in Belgium:

Belgium comes mid-way in the league table of European countries, since fathers do have the option of taking paternity leave, whereas no such arrangements exist as yet in Germany, Austria, Ireland, Italy, Poland, the Czech Republic or Slovakia. However, paternity leave lasts only 10 days, while many other countries offer a longer leave period, and the level of remuneration is just 87%.

Recommendations:

Paternity leave arrangements need to be further developed and fathers should be encouraged to take it. To this end, paternity leave should be made compulsory and should last longer. At the same time, however, the level of remuneration must be improved: the replacement rate must be proportional to earnings, and high.

Moreover, paternity leave should be taken immediately after the birth so as to foster a better balance of task-sharing between the two parents and to promote the gainful employment of mothers.

Maternity leave

Maternity leave lasting more than 18/20 weeks has an adverse effect on mothers' employment in the medium/long term.

Indeed, maternity leave partly accounts for why mothers of a child aged between 3 and 5 are more likely to withdraw from the labour market. This finding suggests that an over-long period of maternity leave can have an adverse impact on mothers' employment, since even though they have a guaranteed right to return to work after maternity leave, some mothers reduce their working hours or do not go back to work.

Another effect of the existence and take-up of maternity leave is to increase the wage gap observed between mothers and non-mothers. According to discrimination theory, this finding could be explained by employers' attitudes to mothers: employers are reportedly more likely to recruit a woman without children than a woman who has - or is about to have - a child, since they expect that she will take maternity leave. Another explanation of this finding might be the loss of human capital connected with withdrawal from the labour market during the maternity leave period.

According to discrimination and human capital theories, employers are more likely to recruit a man, and men will more readily be offered career opportunities in the form of promotion and training. The ultimate effect is to reduce the earning potential of mothers.

Situation in Belgium:

Belgium comes bottom of the league table of European countries because, although its arrangements afford considerable protection of employment rights (guaranteed return to work, leave period counts towards the woman's pension) and the leave period is short (which avoids an over-long time away from the labour market), maternity leave is poorly paid (at 77% of the person's wages) throughout its entire duration (putting Belgium in the same category as Ireland, Italy and Sweden). In the majority of European countries it is remunerated in full.

Recommendations:

In order to minimise the penalties associated with maternity leave, it appears crucial that the leave period should not be excessively long, so as to avoid jeopardising the mother's career prospects. The existing literature has identified the period of withdrawal from the labour market (be it for maternity leave, parental leave or a combination of the two) beyond which mothers are penalised on the labour market as being 18-20 weeks. The recent proposals to lengthen maternity leave therefore represent a threat to women's careers.

Maternity leave must be improved in terms of its remuneration, which must amount to 100% of the mother's normal earnings.

Parental leave

Parental leave is largely accountable for the employment gap between mothers and non-mothers. It also serves to widen the wage gap between mothers and fathers, particularly when it is lengthy.

Parental leave has a discriminatory dimension which worsens the employment gap attributable to motherhood, in that fathers make very little use of this form of leave. Over and above gender stereotypes, one of the factors explaining this lack of take-up by fathers could be its low replacement rate, which results in an unacceptably high loss of earnings for the household. If the financial incentives were increased, more fathers might perhaps take parental leave, which would in turn reduce the penalty imposed on mothers' careers by this form of leave.

Situation in Belgium:

Belgium has a high ranking here (along with Italy, Sweden, Slovenia and Norway), since the leave period has the advantages of being short (thereby avoiding a deterioration in work capacity and adverse effects on the labour market) and of allowing the father to take three months of leave. Remuneration is low, however, and does not encourage take-up by men.

Recommendations:

The low level of financial compensation paid for parental leave must be raised: payment proportional to earnings would be an improvement, helping to minimise the distortions in leave take-up (or even to prevent it being taken solely by mothers), given that this is a major consideration when people, especially fathers, decide whether or not to take parental leave,.

CONCLUSIONS

In conclusion, although employment and wage penalties seem to be less onerous in Belgium than in other European countries, inequalities do nevertheless exist on the labour market: between women and men as well as between mothers and non-mothers. Belgium is moreover among the countries with the lowest female employment rates in the European Union.

To minimise the penalties associated with maternity leave and parental leave faced by women on the labour market, it appears crucial that leave periods should not be excessively long. The existing literature has identified the period of withdrawal from the labour market (be it for maternity leave, parental leave or a combination of the two) beyond which mothers are penalised on the labour market as being 18-20 weeks. The recent proposals to lengthen maternity leave therefore represent a threat to women's careers, and for as long as the public authorities focus their efforts on the leave periods granted to mothers, the effect will be to widen the gender gap on the labour market.

It is therefore vital, so that women can devote themselves more wholeheartedly to gainful employment, to find a means of relieving them of a share of the domestic and family duties for which they are still primarily responsible:

- by expanding early childhood education and care facilities;
- by encouraging fathers to share parental and domestic tasks, in particular through the use of paternity leave and parental leave;
- by promoting equal pay for women and men, since while wage inequality persists on the labour market it will always be mothers who put their working lives on hold to look after the children. Indeed, earnings are the main criterion when a couple considers which of them should take leave, with a view to limiting loss of income. Given that women earn less than men on average, it is mothers who take parental leave even if they continue to be paid as before.

As is pointed out by Barrère-Maurissson and al. (2001), the public authorities must concentrate their efforts on the family and work spheres together, rather than focusing on one or the other. This, in their view, is the only way of really getting to grips with the family division of labour. "Equality between men and women will not progress unless we ensure a fair distribution of domestic and parental duties, while at the same time guaranteeing both sexes equal status in the world of work" (Barrère-Maurissson and al., 2001).