



# Exchange of good practices on gender equality

## Parenting in France

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## Comments Paper - Greece

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# Parenting in Greece

Maria Karamessini  
Panteion University

## 1. Introduction

Parenting was much more difficult in Greece than in most EU countries before the current crisis notwithstanding the great improvements in reconciliation policy that took place in the 2000s. Since the onset of the crisis parenting has become even more difficult. This is reflected in the drop of the fertility rate, which reversed the upward trend that had been observed during the immediate pre-crisis period.

In the traditional familistic Greek social model, state support for parenthood was residual as the family had the legal and moral obligation to cater for its dependent members (Karamessini 2010). The state intervened to protect children only in the absence of the father or both parents (orphans) and in case of poverty (poor minors). Child benefits were very low and paid to working parents by the employer or social security. Maternity leave in the private sector was partially compensated – full pay was provided after 1977 – and public childcare services were almost non-existent. The 1980s saw the first policy measures for the ‘reconciliation’ of work and the caring duties of parents, not only mothers. The duration of maternity leave was extended and new parental leaves were established. The leave regime was also improved in the 1990s and 2000s but, until recently, continuous leaves after maternity leave were of limited duration and/or unpaid, which explains their low take up rate alongside problems of enforceability in the private sector of the economy. As for public childcare services, these have remained in short supply for decades.

The European Employment Strategy has greatly influenced childcare policy in Greece. An active reconciliation policy was adopted in the late 1990s whose main components were the creation of new public nurseries, crèches and after-school centres with the financial assistance of the ESF and the extension of the operating hours and schedules of public nurseries, kindergartens and schools.

Three are the basic pillars of the Greek childcare regime: the leave system, formal childcare services and informal care arrangements.

### 1.1. Leave system

The leave system includes five kinds of childcare leaves: maternity, paternity, childrearing (maternal), reduced working hours (parental) and parental leave. Out of these five kinds of leaves only the latter is unpaid.

**Maternity leave:** its duration is 17 weeks in the private sector and 5 months in the public sector. It is fully paid and funded by social contributions in the private sector and general taxation in the public sector. Law 4097 of 2012 provided for maternity benefits to self-employed women for 14 weeks.

**Paternity leave:** Men are entitled to a two-day leave upon their child’s birth, which is fully paid by the employer.

**Childrearing leave** (maternal, paid): In 1999, working mothers in the public sector became entitled to a fully paid childrearing leave of 9 months after the maternity leave. In 2008, working mothers in the private sector were granted the same leave but for 6 months maximum and paid at the minimum wage rate by the Employment Manpower Organisation. Maternity and childrearing leaves in both sectors are fully insured.

Most mothers in the public sector make use of the fully paid childrearing leave which, combined with the maternity leave, ends up to a 12-month continuous leave after childbirth. Conversely, very few mothers in the private sector take up this kind of leave and their number has been falling during to the crisis (9,626 mothers in 2007 against 1,721 in 2011). The same dualism is observed regarding reduced daily working hours: full enforcement in the public sector, very low enforcement in the private sector. In 2011 only 15,763 parents (98% of which mothers) working in the private sector made use of reduced daily hours (INE-GSEE 2013, table 40, p. 344).

**Reduced daily working hours** (parental, fully paid):

- a) Public sector. A mother civil servant or a working father (if the mother is working and does not make use of it) is entitled to work 2 hours less per day until the child becomes 2 year old and one hour less when the child is aged from 2 to 4 years.
- b) Private sector. For a period of 30 months after the expiration of the maternity leave, a working mother or a working father (if the mother is working and does not make use of it) is entitled to work one hour less per day with full earnings replacement. This may be taken as: two hours less per day for the first 12 months and one hour less per day for another six months; or, with the employer's agreement, in block(s) of time of equal time value within the 30 months period.

**Parental leave** (unpaid, non-transferable): Its duration in the private sector is 4 months while the upper limit for the age of child is 6 years. Parents in the public sector are entitled to parental leave of up to two years until the child turns six. Take-up rates are extremely low because the leave is unpaid and the leave period does not count as pensionable service unless employees pay themselves for both employer and employee social security contributions.

From the above description it is evident that the Greek leave system encourages either mother care of the child during its first year of age or reduced hours of work during the first two to four years of age. However, the institutional incentives and entitlements are enforced only in the public sector.

## 1.2. Formal childcare services

Coverage of children by formal childcare services in Greece was among the lowest in EU27 before the crisis and remains so today. Such services mainly include private and public crèches and nurseries and centres for the creative occupation of children during out-of-school hours. Public and private providers catered roughly equivalent numbers of children before the crisis.

Notwithstanding great progress in the availability of public childcare services in the 2000s, coverage by formal care of children aged less than 3 years and from 3 years

to compulsory school age was only 12% and 67% respectively in 2008. It is noteworthy that coverage improved during the first three years of the crisis. In 2011, 19% of children aged 0-3 years and 75% of those aged 3-6 years attended formal childcare services against 30% and 83% respectively in EU-27 on average.

A great institutional change took place in the beginning of the 2000s when public childcare provision was decentralised from the central state to local authorities. In 2002, a Joint Ministerial Decision put into force the "Model Regulation for the Operation of Municipal and Community Crèches and Nurseries". Although this Model Regulations sets minimum standards for the operation of the latter, decentralisation has led to differentiation in the provision of public childcare in terms of both levels of fees, conditions of access and quality of services.

According to the Model Regulation, public crèches and nurseries follow a system of subscription rights that gives priority to "...children of working parents and financially weak families, with preference to those who need care due to various social reasons i.e. children deprived of a parent, children of unmarried mothers, of divorced or separated parents, of mentally or physically handicapped parents, of large families etc.". The Municipal Board has the right to further specify and rationalise the criteria of eligibility and establish a quota system among them.

### 1.3. Informal care arrangements

Very low coverage of children in Greece by formal childcare services means that the great bulk of care needs are covered by informal care arrangements. In 2006, 41% of Greek children aged 0-2 and 18% of those aged 3-6 were cared only by their parents while 54% of the former group and 40% of the latter group were cared by grandparents, relatives, friends and childminders. These rates were among the highest in the EU27 (Eurostat 2009).

The child's age of attendance of a crèche is still an ethical issue in Greece. Public opinion disapproves of parents who take their child to the crèche during the first years of his/her life. According to the European Value Survey, 72.5% of the Greeks respondents in 2008 agreed with the statement that '*a pre-school child suffers with a working mother*' (Moreno and Marí-Klose 2013, table 11, p. 509).

It is thus no surprise that Greek families still try to avoid 'out-door care'. The most common care arrangement for babies and infants of working parents is still at-home care by family members, usually grandparents. Parents have less confidence to nannies than to their own parents when children are very young and to formal childcare (either public or private) when children grow older. Nannies are hired mostly by families with children under three where grandparents are not locally available, eager or capable of undertaking the care of grandchildren, especially for long hours. The short and rigid operating hours of crèches, nurseries and kindergartens and extended closure during Christmas, Easter and summer holidays oblige parents to combine formal childcare with grandparents' assistance.

The hiring of nannies to look after children at home was frequent in Greece among middle and upper-class families before the crisis, especially for children under 3 or 4 years. By contrast, dropping children at the childminder's home was very unusual. In both cases, paid childminding is an unregulated activity and childminders are not necessarily professionals. Many of them were unskilled women or female students hired to combine baby-sitting or the occupation of children with the performance of

some domestic chores. The earnings of these workers fluctuated around the national minimum while social contributions were often evaded (informal employment). Many childminders were migrant women and also live-in workers.

## 2. Policy debate

Current policy debate on reconciliation policy is taking place in the context of the most severe structural crisis that Greece has experienced in its recent history. This has been triggered by a sovereign debt crisis that led to a huge fiscal consolidation.

In the last three-and-a-half years, the austerity policies that have been implemented entailed substantial budgetary cuts to municipalities hovering to about 60% since 2009. This has led to the closing down of some childcare structures, but most importantly to the understaffing of many services, since all temporary personnel has been dismissed while the strict attrition rule that applies to the public sector has not allowed the replacement of exits to retirement by new hires. This puts at risk the capacity of public childcare services to meet growing demand in the coming years. Finally, the combination of understaffing with severe salary cuts and entitlements of the remaining personnel undermines the quality of provision.

Austerity and soaring unemployment have also seriously reduced the incomes of the middle classes and impaired their access to private crèches and nurseries and their capacity to hire childminders at home. Middle classes have thus turned their demand for care towards publicly-funded services provided by municipalities. At the same time, impoverished families cannot even afford the low fees charged by municipal crèches, nurseries and centres for the creative occupation of children.

In the context of crisis and fiscal consolidation, policy debate has revolved around the need to maintain the social care infrastructure at the municipal level and compensate for the decreasing capacity of low and middle classes to have access to formal childcare services. A voucher system, already planned before the crisis and funded by the ESF, was launched at the onset of the crisis and is being implemented until today for a constantly increasing number of beneficiaries.

Since autumn 2008, a large number of employed and unemployed women or female participants in active labour market schemes whose income is below a certain ceiling are granted childcare vouchers that they can use to have free access to the accredited crèche, nursery or KDAP of their choice, either private or public. The family income ceiling is €30,000 for beneficiaries with up to 2 children, €35,000 for those with 3 or 4 children and €40,000 for those with 5 or more children.

In 2013, 68.526 children were placed in childcare services under the coupon system while beneficiary mothers represented 71% of all applicants (EETAA 2013).

The voucher system has definitely prevented the social care system from collapse. It has not however been able to cover all social care needs and certainly not resolved the negative effects of the crisis on the quality of public childcare provision. This means that informal care arrangements must have increased in recent years, predominantly in the form of parents' and grandparents' involvement in childcare. Mothers and grandmothers are surely taking up the greatest part of the strain.

### **3. Transferability issues**

Any discussion on the transferability of the good practices of France should have a starting point in the Greek institutional, social and economic context briefly described above.

#### **3.1. An efficient information system to present all the solutions available to families**

This good practice could be transferred to Greece without any problem since it consists of a site that could be easily created. It would be welcomed, especially because the leave system is very complicated and many working women ignore their rights. However, the voucher system is already centralised and applications are submitted online while provision is localised and conditions differ by municipality. This means that the national site should provide links to the sites of municipalities.

#### **3.2. Official system of childminders encouraged by special employer cheques and ensuring quality of care through facilities offered to childminders**

The easiest way to transfer this good practice in Greece would involve the extension of the existing voucher system to include not only public and private crèches, nurseries and centres for the creative occupation of children but also childminders that perform their activity either individually or through cooperatives. This kind of extension could help parents with children up to 3 years to diversify their choices and emerge from the underground economy part of the care work currently performed informally by Greek and migrant women care workers.

However, a simple extension of the current voucher system that caters for low-to-medium income families would leave a great number of families with young children out of its scope. This means that one could consider supplementing this extension with tax rebates for private expenditure on care services. A drawback of this solution is the regressive nature of such rebates that would favour high-income families.

Finally, any transfer of the system of childminders in whatever form should be accompanied by the conclusion of formal labour contracts between employers and childminders as well as the introduction of a quality control system which is more difficult to implement in the case of individual contracts and easier to apply on social cooperatives of childminders, the creation of which could be encouraged.

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