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## ***Paid Parental Leave and Reconciliation of Childcare and Work in Lithuania***

### ***Abstract***

The paid parental leave is one of the measures of social welfare encouraging the employment of parents (and especially mothers) through the paid leave to take care of children. This article explores how the paid parental leave system contributes to the reconciliation of childcare and work in Lithuania. It is based on semi-structured interviews with parents of young children (N = 19) to analyse how parents of young children evaluate reconciliation of childcare and work during paid parental leave. The main findings of the research revealed that long-duration paid parental leave does not encourage parents to return to the labour market during parental leave. This study also showed that the parents' (especially mothers) possibilities to work during childcare is rather limited. This is mainly due to the still to a large extent dominant traditional gender

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role division, gender (un)equal leave policy designs, lack of childcare infrastructure for the youngest children. The findings of this study are expected to contribute to scientific debate on the role of paid parental leave and reconciliation of childcare and work. It also provides valuable insights to the discussion on implication of gender (un)equal leave policy designs and gender in(equalities) in employment.

**Key words:** paid parental leave, reconciliation of childcare and work, Lithuania

## *Introduction*

The reconciliation of work and life responsibilities has become an increasingly relevant policy topic in recent decades. Over the last years, the issue of reconciling work and family life has been high on the agenda of many countries and international organizations, with a view to promoting equal economic independence for women and men and removing obstacles to women's equal labour market participation. This broad topic covers notably the provision of maternity, paternity, and parental leaves, the use of flexible working arrangements, the access to care services for children and other dependents, and the equal sharing of household and care responsibilities between women and men.

Lithuania, as other post-communist countries, has undergone many changes in the social welfare and social protection system. For the development of welfare state policies an essential point was the transition from a socialist to a capitalist regime that started in 1989 and the EU accession in 2004 (Dobrotic & Stropnik, 2020). In this context leave policy reforms based on two EU directives had a crucial impact on national leave policy developments. Paid parental leave is an important social protection which allows parents to reconcile childcare and work. Different paid parental leave characteristics (conditions, duration, amount of the benefits) play an important role for reconciliation of employment and childcare among parents (and especially women). Bonoli (2013) argues that long term parental leave with low replacement rates has a negative impact on women's labour supply. Cantillon, Vandenbroucke (2014) state that encouragement of employment of parental leave schemes depends on the length of the leave, the conditions of entitlement, and the generosity of the benefit. Additionally, national leave policies are continuously evolving because of changing governments, political coalitions and economic pressures (Thevenon & Solaz, 2014).

Recent representative studies carried out by the Ministry of Social Security and Labour (2017; 2020) and by the Office of Equal Opportunities Ombudsman office (2020) have revealed that there is still strong support for traditional family and gender roles in Lithuania. From the administrative and research data (Braziene & Vysniauskiene, 2020; Duvander et al., 2019, etc.) from many countries, it is evident that women/mothers still take the largest part of parental leave. However, the share of fathers taking parental leave is also increasing. Various measures have been introduced to encourage fathers to use parental leave. Mostly these are wholly or partly individualized entitlements so that fathers not using their 'quota' lose it, as unused leave cannot be transferred to a partner.

This study also showed that parents (especially mothers) possibilities to work during childcare is rather limited. This is mainly due to the still to a large extent dominant traditional gender, gender (un)equal leave policy designs, lack of childcare infrastructure for the youngest children.

The aim of this article is to analyse paid parental leave system contributions for reconciliation of childcare and work in Lithuania. The findings of this study are expected to support scientific debate on the role of paid parental leave and reconciliation of childcare and work. Additionally, by being complemented with evidence from Lithuania, the article may support the debate on social policy in Eastern Europe since the scientific debate on paid parental leave and reconciliation of childcare and work is rather limited in the region. This article also provides valuable insights to the discussion on implication of gender (un)equal leave policy designs and gender in(equalities) in employment.

### ***Theoretical framework***

The activating nature as welfare policy of parental leave and childcare service provision was emphasized by Ghysels and Van Lancker (2011); Cantillon and Vandenbroucke (2014); Johnson and Tunheim (2016); Valentova (2019). They defined it as measures allowing for reconciliation of work and family life.

Three factors that may influence mothers' abilities to combine work and care include: public childcare (Budig et al., 2016; Williamson, 2015), duration and benefits levels of parental leave policies and taxation policies on wage of the second earner (Budig et al., 2016; Dearing, 2016; Ray et al., 2010; Schadler et al., 2017). Kluge and Schmitz (2018) stated that a medium length leave with generous benefit entitlements can increase job continuity and supply of mothers in the workforce.

The importance of leave benefits for the families providing the money, time, and job security to care for dependents has been emphasized by McKay, Mathieu (2016). Kowalewska (2017) focused on the regimes activating single mothers and found that most Mediterranean and post-Soviet countries try to include single parents in employment. Johnson and Tunheim (2016) emphasized the importance of parental leave policies working in tandem with a high coverage rate for childcare for the family and work reconciliation.

The importance of private or personal circumstances of the family was emphasized by Guerrina (2002). As stated by Björnberg (2002), the social construction of male identity is related to identification with a professional role, commitment to work, and providing for the family, while women are taking care of children. As it is stated by Javornik and Kurowska, *fathers are more sensitive to any income loss than mothers, and that the level of the potential income shock caused by the use of parental leave determines whether fathers take the leave at all* (Javornik & Kurowska, 2017).

Culture plays a major role in deciding who has to care for a child (Björnberg, 2002; Kangas & Rostgaard, 2007; Singley & Hynes, 2005). Nowak et al. (2013) stated that the decision to return to work can be affected by feelings of guilt about whether a woman can

be both a good mother and a good employee. On the other hand, according to Singley and Hynes (2005), mothers usually play a primary role in “balancing” work and family for the couple in the initial period of parental leave. Vujinović (2014) distinguished the financial aspect of the decision to return to work. Boye (2015) stated that men usually have higher wages and better prospects in the labour market. Thus, the relative income is central to understanding the division of this leave (Boye, 2015; Whitehouse et al., 2008). Bünning and Pollmann-Schult (2016) found that the father’s higher education is associated with more egalitarian gender role attitudes.

Following Kvist’s (2000) study on activating welfare states, three aspects of welfare state that contribute to employment were defined: (1) de-familiarisation of caring tasks through social services for children and the elderly, which in turn allows women, in particular, to (re-)enter the labour market, (2) de-commodification of labour through easy accessible and relative generous cash benefits providing a more flexible labour market, and (3) re-commodification of labour through conditioning of benefits and active labour market policies giving the long-term unemployed and people with low skills better opportunities to participate in the labour market, whether the ordinary or in special activities. Kvist (2000) has analysed the relationship between the state, the market and the family. According to Kvist (2000), the welfare states take over caring tasks from the family, thereby opening women’s opportunities to participate in the labour market. It is called a “de-familiarisation of the welfare state”. Decommodification means that relatively generous benefits for persons in shorter periods between employment are provided and ensure the flexibility of the labour market. De-familiarisation may increase if women can opt more freely for the labour market than if the welfare state contributes towards defamiliarization of caring tasks. It helps women to become commodified. Kvist (2000) stated that the Scandinavian model is distinguished with high de(familiarisation) (extensive childcare and generous parental leave schemes), high commodification (flexible employment protection legislations) regarding paid parental leave schemes.

Reconciliation of family and work is related to a favourable workplace environment. As stated by Bergmann (2008); Nowak et al. (2013); Williamson (2015); Schadler et al. (2017); Gloor et al. (2018); Vujinović (2014); Lott (2020), the employee-centred workplace flexibility would be the resource for the families seeking to manage the demands of their work and family domains. Johnson and Tunheim (2016) Lott (2020) stated that compressed work schedules and telework enable women to better balance their formal employment. Whitehouse et al. (2008) defined that job characteristics prior to the birth may affect financial and/or workplace security and impinge on attitudes to returning to work.

The perspective of the manager is important for the family-work reconciliation because managers hold key positions in organizations (Nordberg, 2019). Nordberg (2019) stated that parental leave has a different meaning within an organization in which the goal is to improve efficiency, profit, personal reputation etc. Björnberg (2002); Nordberg (2019) pointed out that the priorities of firms are primarily geared at protecting the interests of the business, and they recognize the needs of staff only under the pressure of necessity. Additionally, Mun and Brinton (2015) stated that the employees’ absence

may pose problems for the workplace in the case of occupations where competence and work tasks are respectively less individualized and have longer timeframes. The workplace characteristics, sector of employment and type of employment contract are also important determinants of parental leave usage (Geisler & Kreyenfeld, 2019). Borgh et al. (2018) disclosed that parents who experienced positive attitudes towards parenthood among colleagues and managers were more likely to experience high occupational balance.

### *Country context*

Generally, Lithuania can be characterized as a country with low total fertility rate (1.6 in 2018), aging population and high emigration rate of working age population. In terms of employment, Lithuania is among countries with relatively high employment rates for both women and men. The country's key features are high labour participation rate for women, the low gender employment gap, a high full-time equivalent employment rate for women and men. The employment rate (population aged 20–64) in 2018 was 76.7% for women and 79.0% for men, both on an increasing trend during the last decade. The women's unemployment rate is even slightly lower than men's (women had an unemployment rate of 5.4%, with men — at 6.9% in 2018). However, the gender pay gap has been constantly increasing since 2012 and we can observe a slight decrease from 2017. The gender pay gap amounted to 13.0% in 2018. The gender pay gap differs considerably by age groups. The highest gender pay gap was for the age group 35–44 and constitute 19.1% in 2018. For the age group of 25–34, the gender pay gap amounted to 13.7% in 2018.

Lithuanian labour laws provide equality for all the subjects irrespective their gender, age, etc. and prohibit the discrimination. Reconciliation of work and family responsibilities is defined by the Lithuanian Labour Code (2016). The possibility of returning earlier to work from parental leave, having more conditions for flexible working and combining the responsibilities of family and work are legitimised. Parents with children are entitled to shorter working time, longer annual holiday and other leisure time devoted to family responsibilities by the Labour Code. The Labour Code restrains terminating work contracts with parents raising children under 3 years. Thus, the employer cannot make an employee redundant during/after parental leave, unless they both agree.

In recent years, Lithuania has introduced measures for a better reconciliation of family and working life. The availability of flexible working time arrangements has increased as the new Labour Code (2016) entered into force. This introduces new types of employment agreements and has brought flexibility to labour relations whilst individual arrangements, such as flexible work schedule, individual working regime, overtime, and summary working time, can be requested (although there is no obligation for an employer to agree). In 2018, the Lithuanian Parliament approved Demography, Migration and Integration Policy 2018–2030 Strategy and Demography, Migration and Integration Policy 2018–2030 Strategy Action Plan 2019–2021. The first goal of the strategy is to develop a family-friendly environment, e.g., development of conditions for family members to reconcile professional and family responsibilities, to improve quality and accessibility of services and financial support for families.

Since 2016, the pre-primary education of 6-year-old children is compulsory and free of charge in Lithuania. The pre-primary education is mainly provided by the kindergartens, multi-functional centres and primary schools. For all other ages, 4 hours a day (20 hours a week) of childcare is funded from the national or municipal budget. Parents only make a financial contribution to cover the cost of meals and learning materials and municipalities can reduce the fees paid by families based on their social situation.

### *Paid parental leave scheme and accessibility of the childcare in Lithuania*

During the last decades, there have been several developments of the paid parental leave system. Since the 2000s, there have been transformations of paid parental systems in many CEE region countries as well as in Lithuania. Childcare leave started to be gradually transformed into parental leave and being made available for both parents. The parental leave policies in Lithuania, as well as in other post-communist countries are based on traditional division of gender roles.

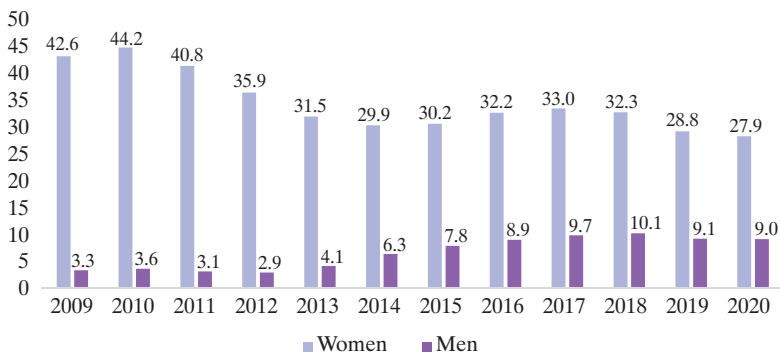
The paid parental leave scheme based on social insurance was introduced in 2000. In 2010 Lithuania introduced paternity leave. Currently, there are three childcare related paid leaves in Lithuania: maternity, paternity and parental leave. Maternity and paternity leaves are individual entitlements. Paid parental leave is a family entitlement. Major changes occurred after 2010, when as a response to an economical and financial crisis, a number of welfare retrenchment measures applied. Parental leave benefits have been reduced several times, and ceilings introduced. For comparison, in 2008, parents were entitled to 24 months of paid leave, which was reimbursed at 100% of the previous salary. On the impact of the crisis, 2009 the amount of paid parental leave reduced and parents were entitled to 100% of the parental leave allowance, up to one year and up to 85 percent — until the age of two years of the child. In 2010, another reduction in paid parental leave took place, when parents acquired the right to 90 percent the amount of paid leave up to the age of one and up to 75 percent of the previous salary until the child is two years old. Significant changes came into effect in 2011, with two options envisaged to parents: one hundred (100) percent of net earnings until the child is 12 months old, or 1) 70 percent of net earnings until the child is 12 months old and 40 percent of net earnings until the child is 24 months old. The remaining period of leave until the child is three is unpaid. Maternity, paternity and parental leave in Lithuania, as in many countries, is paid based on labour market participation and length of previous work record. With the tax reform in 2019, parents can choose between two alternatives to receive the benefit: 1) if duration of parental leave is until the child is one year old, the amount of the allowance is 77.58% of the replacement wage; if the chosen duration is until the child is two years old, the allowance is 54.31% until the child's first birthday and 31.03% until the child's second birthday. In the case of multiple births, the benefit is paid at 77.58% of the replacement wage. The benefit is earnings related and funded by contributions from the Social Insurance Fund, which is funded by contributions from employers and

employees (Braziene, 2020). The recipients of childcare benefits during the second year of the parental leave are allowed to work, while in the first year the benefit is reduced if the person has income from work. If parents choose to receive 77.58% of net earnings until the child is 12 months and start to work, the benefit is reduced by the amount of income they have received. If parents choose to receive 54.31% of net earnings until the child is 12 months old and 31.03% of net earnings until the child is 24 months old, and parents start to work during the first year, the benefit is reduced by the amount of income they have received; during the second year, the benefit is not reduced (Social Insurance Law on Sickness and Maternity, 2000).

There has also been a discussion around introducing a shared parental leave between mothers and fathers, some amount of which must be taken by the father; however, there are no legislative changes at the moment.

The administrative data showed that from 2009, the share of fathers taking parental leave is increasing (see Figure 1).

**Figure 1. The average monthly number of recipients of benefits for women and men**



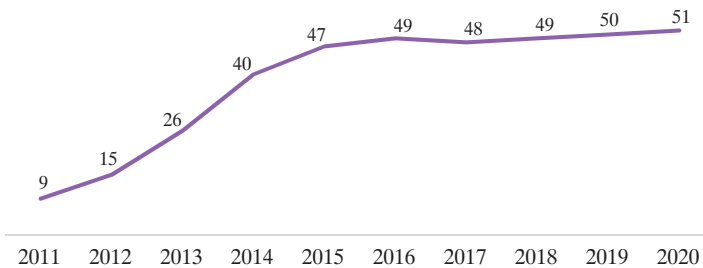
Sources: SODRA (State Social Insurance Fund Board).

From the administrative data provided by the social insurance fund board (SODRA), it is also evident that during the second year of parental leave, the percentage of men taking it has been constantly increasing since 2011, e.g., from about 11.4% in 2011, to 39.5% in 2018, and for women (for the second year), decreasing accordingly from 88.6% to 60.5%. This option is particularly popular among fathers, because the benefit (for the second year) is not reduced and fathers can work whilst receiving the benefit. Although this means that some fathers are working while receiving the benefit, and the mothers are spending actual time with their children. Families choose this for mostly economical calculations and reasons. It is more useful to use the father's income in the second year, because the benefit is 40% of net earnings, and while in most cases fathers usually earn more, families choose this structure as more beneficial. However, there is a lack of information on how many fathers are actually spending time with their children in the second year of their lives while receiving the benefit, and how many of them are working. The share of working



parents has significantly increased since 2014 (by about 14 percentage points), and it has been slightly growing during the last three years (see Figure 2). The implementation of different projects can partly explain the changes in 2014, for example, the “Complex Services for Families” project funded by the ESF program according to 2014–2020 or the EU funds investment action program eight priority “Increasing Social Inclusion and Combating Poverty” aimed at promoting positive fatherhood for parents raising children aged 1–3, family consulting and other services for families. These projects encouraged changes in the families’ attitudes towards the balancing work and childcare.

**Figure 2. Parents working during the second year of parental leave (%)**



Source: Social Insurance Fund Board data Lithuania.

Generally, institutional childcare is non-mandatory in Lithuania and can be provided for the children from birth up to 6 years of age. By the application order, with exception of the priority groups that are foreseen by the law (for children with special needs, for children from disadvantaged families etc.), the caring staff ratio in relation to the number of children is defined. Thus, if children are up to one year of age, 3 persons of staff can take care of a maximum of 6 children. If children are 1–2 years old, 10 children can be taken care of by 2 persons of staff and the number of children is increasing by age with the same 2 persons of staff. The provision of childcare is decentralised, and it is mainly under the responsibility of local municipalities. This means the providers of childcare can organise the care time, holidays time and programmes. The state subsidises 4 hours of education per day in day childcare institutions. The decentralized system of day childcare, the requirements of staff in relation with children by age create the obstacles to availability of day childcare, especially if the child is under 2 years of age. Requirements for a higher number of staff result in higher costs of such day care. Thus, the lack of state day care institutions is mostly felt in the group of youngest children and the private sector fulfils this gap. Parents can choose between state or private day childcare institutions; however, the costs of private day care are significantly higher. As a result, the state day childcare for children under 2 is scarce in Lithuania.

Voluntary childcare either in an institution or in the family and long parental leave create a familiarizing effect on childcare during the first two years after the child’s birth. Low accessibility of state childcare for the youngest children strengthens the effect of



familiarisation or in other cases has a commodifying effect on day childcare because the gap in state provision with institutional childcare is bridged with private providers, which means higher prices for services.

### ***Data and Methods***

To obtain the data for the analysis of the role paid parental leave and reconciliation of childcare and work, a qualitative semi-structured interview method was chosen. This method allows us to identify parents' attitudes, choices and perspectives (Babbie, 2013). This method makes it possible to authentically record experiences and perception of parents.

The survey instrument (interview guidelines) consists of the questions focused on the following topics: factors determining paid parental leave decisions and choices, family social and economic situation and paid parental leave decisions, childcare accessibility, childcare quality, reconciliation of childcare and work during parental leave and general evaluation of paid parental leave system in Lithuania. The selection criteria for informants were therefore as follows: (1) parents (mothers or fathers) of children aged 0–6; (2) paid parental leave during the last 3–4 years. Fieldwork was conducted from April to August 2020. On average, an interview lasted 55 minutes. The shortest interview lasted 40 minutes, the longest — 1 hour 30 minutes. In total, 35 people meeting the selection criteria were asked to participate in the study. The interviews were conducted in a park, in a café or using the Zoom online video call platform. A total of 19 parents (17 mothers and 2 fathers) participated in the study. The age of participants varies from 23 to 44 years of age. 18 participants are with tertiary and 1 with secondary education. By marital status, 15 participants were married, one was divorced, and three were living in a partnership.

More fathers than mothers refused to participate in the study. The main argument for their refusal was that they are not competent enough on this topic. The interviews were carried out in April–August 2020. After achieving data saturation after 16 interviews, in addition three interviews were conducted but in terms of content no new information was received. The study was carried out in line with the ethical principles of anonymity, confidentiality and privacy.

The data was analysed employing the qualitative method of content analysis comprising three steps: multiple reading of the text; identification of manifested subcategories; combining the subcategories into larger categories (Miles et al., 2014).

### ***Paid parental leave and reconciliation of childcare and work: the parents' perspectives***

Data collected during the interviews shows that generally, parents are satisfied with the amount of the benefit and length of the parental leave. But some of the informants tend to support higher benefits and stress that there should be no ceilings for parental leave benefits. Recently (in 2019) due to the tax reform, the decreased amount of the

parental leave benefit is not very favourably assessed by the informants. When it comes to reconciliation of parental leave and work, almost all of the respondents agree that there are limited possibilities to combine parental leave and work for parents with the young children aged 0–2. This is mainly due to the fact that, for example in case of employment and income in the first year, the benefit is reduced by the received amount. During the second year in case of income, the benefit is not reduced, but in the opinion of the respondents, the benefit in the second year is too low (at 31.03%). Also, there are difficulties in reconciling childcare and work for parents with children aged 0–2 (because of lack of public childcare institutions for the youngest children; private childcare institutions are very expensive; many families cannot afford to hire a babysitter, etc.). Due to the lack of pre-school facilities for children aged one (and younger), most parents (mostly mothers) are unable to return to work.

Some of the informants suggest that the paid parental leave should be extended until the child is 3 years old. By the opinion of the respondents this is because the fact *that not all children over the age of 2 are ready to go to kindergarten and separate from their mother*. Also, some of the informants suggested that more flexible parental leave schemes could be introduced. In the opinion of the parents, it would be appropriate to break parental leave into several parts and to take the leave when it is most needed by the family: *I think, would encourage most fathers to take parental leave*.

### *Factors determining paid parental leave decisions and choices*

Paid parental leave provides working parents an opportunity to reconcile work and childcare as well as compensates loss of income. Family paid parental leave decisions on who (mother or father) will take parental leave is highly influenced by the number of different factors. The family decision on paid parental leave is based on the culture of traditional family and gender roles, the financial situation of the family and the understanding of what is best for the child and other individual circumstances of the family: *There was no agreement: I just care for our child and the husband earns money I.14. My wife took parental leave, it seemed obvious to us*.

The still dominant traditional family and gender roles in Lithuanian society strongly overlap with the financial situation of family and income inequality between women and men in Lithuania. The gender pay gap, income inequalities, wage differences between women and men determines that more women than men take parental leave. Vujinović also distinguished the financial aspect of returning to work (Vujinović, 2014). Income inequality between women and men is reflected in the interview data. The decision on childcare and support for traditional roles are grounded in the more stable male career and higher salary as men generally have higher wages and better prospects in the labour market: *It was more financially beneficial for our family because the salary of my husband was a few times higher than mine. My career was at the beginning, while my husband had already gained an excellent*

*foothold in the labour market. And partially, the decision was predetermined by the traditional family model I.8 I went on parental leave because my husband's salary was higher.*

The expectation and cultural norms for motherhood and fatherhood are traditional and seemingly quite resistant to change in everyday life (Björnberg, 2002). The importance of the mother during the first years is another important factor for family paid parental leave choices and decisions. The indispensable caregiving role of a mother is based on understanding what is best for her child. The interview findings revealed that informants stress the importance of a mother's role during the first years of a child's life. The mother's role is perceived as her responsibility and as a continuation of her relation with the child, which started before the birth *I think that for me as a mother it is important to be with my child during the first year of life because I was carrying him/her inside me when I was pregnant for 9 months, ...The mother goes on parental leave because the attitude of our family is that the mother is needed for a child up to 2 years of age.*

Several informants emphasize that the most important thing is for the child in the first year after the birth to be with the mother, and the second year could be already optionally combined with work depending on particular family circumstances. Such a decision depends on the choice of an individual family and relevant circumstances. Only one informant points out that paid parental leave should last to three years of age. The main argument of this informant is that not every child is prepared to be separated from his/her mother after two years.

The understanding of the importance of the relationship between the mother and the child is the main motive of the decision on who will care for the child. On the other hand, such understanding has an impact on the decision about how long the relationship between the mother and the child should last. Two-year parental leave, which is provided for in the law, is acceptable and appropriate for growing a child at home. The data of the interviews revealed that such duration of parental leave is a usual choice in families. Thus, the duration of parental leave is mainly given a favourable evaluation. In other words, the norm of law is internalized, and it is consistent with the cultural understanding of what appropriate and good childcare is: *Duration is very great and appropriate for fostering the affectionate parenthood values.*

A few informants indicated that the amount of parental leave benefit is too low. According to them, in the case of commodified childcare, a higher parental leave benefit could compensate for it. To sum up, more women than men take parental leave in Lithuania because of the traditional family roles culture and wage inequality. The duration of parental leave, which is legitimised by law, is an internalized norm in family choices. The balance of work and family during parental leave is not understood as a widespread or unified practice. The father's role is dependent on possibilities, carried out after work or on weekends in the circumstances of traditional roles in the family. That inequality of childcare is an internalized norm, and the informants call it mutual both parents' childcare.

### *Childcare availability and accessibility*

Successful reconciliation of work and childcare is closely related to the public childcare system. Places for the youngest children (under one year of age) in childcare institutions is rather very limited in Lithuania. This is especially an issue in the capital and other larger cities. In this context could be mentioned that there is a positive relationship between women's labour market participation rates and the availability of formal childcare arrangements (Nowak et al., 2013). The data of interviews revealed that informants experience problems related to childcare availability and accessibility. The accessibility as a problem is characterized through the waiting time or registering time for day-care: *We registered daughter just after her birth, but we had to wait more than one year and half to get a place in day care (A); The day-care is accessible if we register a child just after the birth, We waited for a place in day-care for one year.*

A few informants emphasized that only state day care is insufficiently accessible. As a consequence, according to one informant, it is necessary to choose private day care, which is expensive. Thus, calculations have to be made on the cost and benefit of working. Some of the informants are ready to allow their child to attend day care earlier, e.g., it means at the age of one year or one year and half. However, *It is very difficult to find day-care for one-year-old children. And it is impossible to find such day-care for children under one year. Services for such children offered privately are extremely expensive. So, the mother has to spend a major part of her salary on this service.*

Quality of the childcare services is also an important factor for reconciling childcare and work during parental leave. The findings from our data are rather contradictory. Some informants find the quality good; the others would like more care for their children from educators. One informant would like an individual education plan and expressed disappointment that private day care does not ensure that. The accessibility problem revealed itself discussing the quality of children day care: *It would be sufficient to ensure development of the day care network and to satisfy the demand. An ideal place would be near the home or workplace.*

The lack of state childcare in Lithuania is partly compensated for by the private childcare institutions. As a consequence, it is accessible only for parents, who afford to pay for the services. Other parents who cannot afford private services encounter uncertainty about further childcare or are put on a long waiting list to the state day-care. Such reasons determine the familiarisation of day care for children under two years of age. The legal norms allow providing children with preschool education in the family or in an institution by choice. Thus, to sum up all these circumstances encourage families to choose a family-centred model. The childcare familiarisation is attributed to women due to the culture of traditional family roles in Lithuania. As a consequence, about half of women who are on parental leave withdraw from the labour market for two years.

### *Reconciliation of work and childcare during parental leave*

Parental leave institutional features are important for the decision of the parents when to return to work, however the complex of factors have an impact. Long parental leave withdraws parents (in the majority of cases, the mothers) from the labour market. This has a negative impact on the future career, income and personal development. The balance between work and family responsibilities is not as revealed as prevailing trends but rather as different evaluations of informants. Some informants see the following benefits from the balance of work and family: a break from childcare, encouraging the autonomy of the child, ability to continue the mother's professional career and increase in family income: *It is best to combine work and childcare. Although the state guarantees good conditions to care for a child and the employer has responsibility to secure a workplace for three years, it is dangerous to stay with your child for two years. The woman drops out from the labour market. She does not have any career development, her wage does not increase, she loses her working skills or her skills become outdated. I have read a study that revealed that childcare for a long time can be the consequence of 20 percent of financial loss without compensation. It is a strong argument to combine work and childcare.*

Other informants emphasize the importance of attending to the child's needs during the first years of life, the need to care after other children in the family or in general, they express an attitude that such balance during parental leave is impossible. A few informants consider that the childcare system in Lithuania is not very compatible with the caregiver's desire to work. Firstly, it is not compatible because of its compensatory nature and rules. The benefit is reduced if a person has work-related income during the first year of parental leave. On the other hand, this is not applied during the second year of parental leave, but the commodification of childcare and the lack of state day care do not allow the caregiver to work: *The system is not prepared for such career women or even not career women but just for mothers who do not want to withdraw from the labour market or would like to return to the labour market after one year or after a half year of parental leave. And that system does not encourage that because it fails to ensure quality education and accessibility to childcare.*

As suggested by the state-of-the-art, long leaves for mothers can be harmful to women's participation in the labour market, their career prospects and lifelong earnings (Akgunduz & Plantenga, 2013; Hegewish and Gornick, 2011). Also, long parental leave may weaken the mother's attachment to the labour force (Budig et al., 2016). Evaluating the impact of parental leave duration on the career, some informants have observed that parental leave will not influence on their career, whereas others see a possible negative impact: *...generally, the birth of the child has negative impact on a professional career — the possessed knowledge does not remain relevant IK But I always thought that if I have to withdraw for two or three years as other mothers go on parental leave and continue it one more year, so I will return as an astronaut to the labour market.*

A long duration of parental leave, insufficient possibilities for the balance of work and family responsibilities in some workplaces tend to reduce favourable conditions for

development of professional skills. Thus, the return to work or new employment can become more complicated and require longer reversal duration.

Workplace flexibility is an important factor for reconciliation of family and work roles. In Lithuania, there are necessary legal preconditions to afford parents with young children flexible working time arrangements, but practical implementation rather differs depending on the type of organisation and other institutional factors. The findings from our study are rather diverse. Some informants observed that they have flexible working hours, others refer to lack of flexibility at all. In general, the data from interviews reveals the tendency that informants are not provided with remote work possibilities and other flexible working arrangements.

The evaluation of the attitude of the manager towards the work — family balance is different. Some of the informants are not aware of the attitude of the manager, whereas other research participants indicate a positive or even critical one. *“The employer has a good opinion on employees who are willing to work part-time but this rule is not applied for mothers raising young children. The employer is worried that such employees will frequently not be able to come to work because of the sickness of their child or will want to work only according to a schedule convenient for them. Thus, it can be difficult to plan the work schedule or ensure a sufficient number of employees in the shift”* inf. *“My plan to return to the labour market is after my child is one year old, but I’m afraid of searching for a new job because of the employers’ negative attitude”*.

### ***Discussion and conclusions***

Lithuania is among the European countries with long parental leave and relatively low provision of social services for the youngest children. There are different childcare and work reconciliation strategies among the informants, but the dominant trend is that mostly women take long parental leaves. Parental leave in Lithuania is for two years allowed to combine work and childcare during the second year of parental leave. As would be expected, and as is evident from other studies, parents are generally being very satisfied with the duration, eligibility and amount of the benefits. State day childcare is scarcely accessible for children under the age of two. There is a lack of childcare institutions for the youngest children (under one year of age). Childcare for the youngest children is mainly based on private institutions and is highly commodified. Such structural conditions overlap with the traditional family and gender roles and lead to familiarisation of women rather than to their activation during parental leave in Lithuania. The study revealed that reconciliation of work and childcare during paid parental leave is rather limited in Lithuania. The familiarised Lithuanian paid parental leave system withdraws parents (mainly mothers) from the labour market for a long period (in most cases, for two years).

The familiarisation of childcare up to two years is an internalized norm within families and the latter accept the duration of two years as appropriate and suitable for the best interest of their child. The long paid parental leave and the low accessibility of state childcare does not support return of women with young children to employment in



Lithuania. Approximately half of the women tend to withdraw from the labour market for two years and it results in deteriorating knowledge and skills as well as obstacles for development their career development. Voluntary childcare either in an institution or in the family and long parental leave create a familiarizing effect on childcare during the first two years after the child's birth. Low accessibility of state childcare for the youngest children strengthens the effect of familiarisation or in other cases has a commodifying effect on day childcare because the gap in state provision with institutional childcare is bridged with private providers, which means higher prices for services.

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