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“SOCIAL WORK AND SOCIAL
POLICY IN TIMES OF GLOBAL
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FOREWORD

Continuing and multiple global scale shocks and crises disproportionately affect the world countries, with low and middle-income countries being particularly exposed and suffering. Within the last decade in particular, global crises such as Covid 19, wars and corresponding refugees and displaced flows, food, and energy price hikes and alike, have posed serious economic, political, and social challenges before governments to adequately cope with the consequences of these emerging crises. Considering that the global disturbances occur in the context of rapid climate change, which causes unprecedented floods, droughts, and heat waves, this adds to the severity of the crises and exaggerates their impact. Overall and irrespective of their nature, global crises have one thing in common: they threaten the livelihoods of poor and vulnerable people and aggravate existing inequalities in income, nutrition, health, education, and other aspects of their well-being. For social policy and social work, this is a call for prompt action!

In the context of globalization and given the limits of national policy responses, the need for (re)building developmental welfare states and promoting a “global social floor” consisting of a basic social protection package are high on the policy agenda. Governments are expected to alleviate negative consequences of global crises by drawing increased attention to the neglected dimensions of the crises and integrating social considerations into policy responses. Thus, social policies engage into proper redistribution of resources, extending the outreach of social protection schemes, setting up new ones and increasing the benefits and services designed for the poor, low-income and socially most vulnerable citizens. In other words, a redesign of the scope and scale of social protection is required in order to tackle extreme poverty, ensure access to food and basic health care to all citizens and build their resilience against upcoming shocks of different nature. To do so, a more universal, sustainable, and rights-based approach is a prerequisite for effectiveness of social protection schemes.



Parallel to such considerable policy shifts, social work professionals are particularly affected. In many fragile and lower income countries where social workers face challenging and substandard working conditions, case overloads and professional burnout, they are expected to live up to the emerging tasks, adopt and adjust frequent policy changes to the realistic possibilities and available resources in the practice. To be able to do so, social work practitioners deal with constant and flexible readjustments and introduction of new professional approaches, methods, and techniques, which emphasizes the need for their enhanced continuous professional education and training.

Due to the importance of the repetitive global crises and their social impact, in the last decade in particular, the Institute for social work and social policy within the Faculty of Philosophy, Ss Cyril and Methodius University in Skopje, organized an international conference titled “Social work and social policy in times of global crises” 19-22 September 2023 in Ohrid, North Macedonia. As the Conference was organized on the occasion of 65 anniversary of social work education in North Macedonia, awards for distinguished contribution were awarded to professors and researchers who contributed to the international promotion of social work education and research in North Macedonia. The Institute of Social Work and Social Policy received a certificate of appreciation from the International Association of Schools for Social Work for the engagement in promotion of social work education and research on the national, regional, and international level.

The Conference gathered over 100 domestic and international participants from academic, governmental, and nongovernmental organizations and institutions who took part in the wider academic discussion on new ‘imaginaries and ‘re-framing’ of social work and social policies during global crises. A total of 84 presentations were given by representatives from 24 countries (Norway, Finland, Germany, Italy, Belgium, Poland, France, Ukraine, Czech Republic, Greece, Switzerland, United Kingdom, USA, Canada, South Africa, Israel, Serbia, Croatia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Slovenia, Montenegro, Albania, Bulgaria, and North Macedonia).

This Collection contains 32 papers prepared by participants following the conference event. The Collection of papers comprises of topics that tackle the issue of global crises from variety of perspectives relevant for social work and social policy. The papers are contextualized within several broad domains, including: social work in crisis situations; children, youth, and family policies; older people and disabilities; public policies and social services; social work and mental health; social work education and practice; and social policy, social welfare, and human rights.

The social work in crisis situations chapter includes papers discussing the challenges of social work training and practice in the 21st century, humanitarian aid perspectives in armed conflicts and wars, as well as crisis management practices towards foreign nationals. It also contains discussions on deepened social problems during Covid 19 pandemic and loneliness issues.



Children, youth, and family policies chapter contains papers that discuss, family and child regulation and practices, protection of children without parental care, tutoring in higher education, divorce models and trauma informed care practices, as well as models of employee leave of absences and their impact on family-work balance.

Papers that discuss public policies and social services for older and disabled people are part of the third chapter. Authors refer to the importance of quality of care in inpatient institutions, innovative post Covid 19 home-care services, care for persons with intellectual disabilities leaving the social care system, followed by conditions and challenges related to social services for persons with disabilities and the need for personal and home-assistance.

Social work and mental health chapter includes papers that refer to mental health issues of diverse population groups, such as: forced migrants, high school youth, children and youth with behavioural problems, psychiatric patients and children and youth as potential social network addicts.

Fifth chapter of this Collection is dedicated to papers discussing social work education and practice challenges from different perspectives and domains: field education, education for sustainable development, social entrepreneurship as innovative social work practice, challenges faced by professionals in local level social care services for young people from vulnerable groups, as well as social prevention of violent extremism and professional competencies of social workers in times of crisis.

The final chapter encompasses papers related to social policy and social welfare topics within a human rights perspective: human rights in armed conflicts, electricity subsidy programs, as well as harm reduction as a component of increasing human capital productivity, income, poverty and inequality, and civil partnerships in social policies.

We believe that this Collection of papers will be a valuable reading resource for academics, practitioners and students of social work and social policy and other related fields. It is expected that it will further promote the academic research, policy actions, as well as social work practices that advocate welfare, human rights, and dignity of vulnerable groups, but also emphasise the need for professional support and incentives for frontline workers during multiple crises.

Editors



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NEW MODELS OF EMPLOYEE LEAVE OF ABSENCES AND THEIR IMPACT ON FAMILY-WORK BALANCE

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Abstract

The balance between work and family is one of the three key dimensions of the European Union's family policy. It is also one of the biggest challenges of contemporary families. Many European countries are trying to establish policies and provide instruments to help families. Among those instruments, absences from work due to having and/or raising children and their flexibility play a major role. Determined by EU membership, The Republic of North Macedonia makes continuous efforts to unify with the European legislation. In the context of this, the Law on Labour Relations is on the way to being changed, where a package of employee leave of absences for the birth of a child (maternity, paternity, and parenthood leave) is proposed. The main goal of this paper is to analyse the existing and new proposed employee leave of absence and to evaluate their potential impact on the family-work balance. Additionally, a research survey on the opinions of the respondents regarding employee leave of absence for the birth of a child will be conducted. The results will provide us with a broader picture and will help us to achieve the main goal of this paper.

Keywords: family-work balance, maternity leave, paternity leave, parental leave, family.

INTRODUCTION

In the modern landscape, achieving a harmonious work-life balance has become a paramount concern for parents. The delicate task of juggling professional commitments with parental responsibilities presents a formidable challenge. To address this challenge, a range of innovative strategies have emerged, including flexible work arrangements, progressive parental leave policies, and comprehensive initiatives



aimed at fostering seamless work-life integration. The European Union's vision for enhancing the synergy between familial and professional spheres is discernible through multifaceted forms of assistance and backing offered to parents. These encompass financial provisions, adaptable work hours, versatile employment engagements, and a diverse array of employer-backed support mechanisms, all intended to establish equilibrium and conciliation between family obligations and professional pursuits.

An array of benefits is extended to families to realize these aims:

Foremost among them is the priority accorded to the needs and welfare of children. Consequently, financial support assumes a crucial role, materializing in the form of social benefits and tax incentives that serve as recompense for the financial outlays associated with raising children.

The pursuit of congruity between familial and professional spheres also entails enhancements in education and the overall well-being of all family members. Provision of various forms of educational and caregiving assistance for young children is envisaged. This encompasses a spectrum of measures, ranging from direct service provisions to subsidies for essential services. These subsidies could take the form of tax credits, reliefs, or direct cash grants, aimed at facilitating families' ability to access necessary services.

A cornerstone of this initiative is the provisioning of family leave and other entitlements targeted at parents who are engaged in the upbringing of their children. This encompasses maternity leave, paternity leave, parental leave, and leave for the special care of a sick or disabled child. The provision of leave allowances primarily serves to safeguard the well-being of mothers pre- and post-childbirth, while concurrently addressing the child's caregiving needs and facilitating strong parent-child bonds. Recognizing the importance of nurturing paternal involvement, financial compensation is provided to fathers during their absence. This policy substantiates the aspiration for an equitable distribution of parental responsibilities between genders. This matrix of leave patterns – maternity, paternity, parental, and special child-care leave – spans the temporal sphere in which parents are absent from work due to their child's care requirements. In most countries, this absence is supplemented with cash disbursements to offset the earnings deficit incurred during this period of non-employment (Letablier, at al., 2009).

However, work-life balance remains a considerable challenge for many parents and workers with caring responsibilities, in particular because of the increasing prevalence of extended working hours and changing work schedules, which has a negative impact on women's employment. A major factor contributing to the underrepresentation of women in the labour market is the difficulty of balancing work and family obligations. When they have children, women are likely to work fewer hours in paid employment and to spend more time fulfilling unpaid caring responsibilities. Having a sick or dependent relative has also been shown to have a negative impact on women's employment and results in some women dropping out of the labour market entirely (European Parliament and Council of the European Union, 2019).



1. THE EUROPEAN UNION'S COMMITMENT TO ACHIEVING WORK-FAMILY BALANCE

Embedded within the framework of the European Pillar of Social Rights is the Work-Life Balance Initiative, a pivotal endeavour aimed at tackling the intricate challenges encountered by working parents and caregivers in harmonizing their professional commitments with familial responsibilities. This visionary initiative, encapsulated in the booklet “European Pillar of Social Rights,” endorsed by the European Parliament, the Council, and the Commission in 2017, underscores the significance of achieving work-life balance.

The Pillar delineates an assemblage of 20 fundamental principles and rights meticulously designed to underpin a labour market characterized by fairness and efficient functionality. Three pivotal chapters are important: equalizing opportunities and fostering labour market access, cultivating equitable working conditions, and nurturing social protection and inclusion.

In service of this overarching goal, the European Union has ushered in a directive heralded as (Directive (EU) 2019/1158), introduces a constellation of innovative measures designed to elevate the standards and provisions for parents navigating work-absence due to childcare, paternity, and guardianship responsibilities.


A core facet of the directive's aspiration is the infusion of greater flexibility into employment contracts, thereby accommodating the multifaceted demands of modern life. It not only augments the prospects for women's enhanced participation in the labour force but also champions a significant amplification in the utilization of parental leave by male workers, thereby fostering a more equitable distribution of caregiving responsibilities.

The Work-life Balance Directive introduces a set of legislative actions designed to modernize the existing EU legal and policy frameworks, with the aims of

- better supporting a work-life balance for parents and carers,
- encouraging a more equal sharing of parental leave between men and women, and
- addressing women's underrepresentation in the labour market.

Measures under the directive include:

- The introduction of paternity leave: under the directive, fathers must be able to take at least 10 working days of paternity leave around the time of birth of their child, compensated at least at the level of sick pay.
- Ensuring that two out of the four months of parental leave are non-transferable between parents and compensated at a level that is determined by the Member State.
- The introduction of carers' leaves: workers providing personal care or support to a relative will be entitled to five days of leave per year.

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- Extending the right to request flexible working arrangements to carers and working parents of children up to eight years old (European Commission, 2019).

In the context of absences, Article 33 is particularly binding. Article 33 of the Charter provides for the right to protection from dismissal for a reason connected with maternity and the right to paid maternity leave and to parental leave following the birth or adoption of a child, to reconcile family and professional life.

These absences, intrinsically intertwined with strategies to strike equilibrium between familial obligations and professional pursuits, assume a pivotal role. An undercurrent of empowerment surges through these measures, especially parental leave, which, while initially conceived as a tool to bolster parents' seamless reintegration into the workforce, has transformed into a robust instrument for catalysing gender parity.

Undeniably, this measure extends its mantle of support to fathers as well, accentuating the imperative of fostering close bonds with their new-borns. By embracing this approach, the directive implicitly champions the equitable distribution of parental roles across gender lines. The tapestry of absences, including maternity, paternity, parental, and special childcare leave, spans a temporal horizon wherein parents are distanced from the workplace due to childcare responsibilities. Notably, most countries institute cash-based remuneration as a means of recompense for income lost during these leave periods (Fliegner, 2014).

In this context, it is important to mention the International Labour Organization, which has a great contribution in ensuring the protection of mothers and work-family balance. A fundamental subject of interest for the International Labour Organization (ILO), since its foundation in 1919, is the provision of the well-being of the child and the protection of motherhood.

Maternity Protection Convention, 2000 (No. 183) is the most up-to-date international labour standard on maternity protection. The convention provides minimum standard for maternity leave, also requires ratifying states to take measures to ensure that a pregnant woman or nursing mother is not obliged to perform work which has been determined to be harmful to her health or that of her child and provides for protection from discrimination based on maternity. The standard also prohibits employers to terminate the employment of a woman during pregnancy or absence on maternity leave, or during a period following her return to work, except on grounds unrelated to pregnancy, childbirth and its consequences, or nursing. Women returning to work must be returned to the same position or an equivalent position paid at the same rate. Also provides a woman the right to one or more daily breaks or a daily reduction of hours of work to breastfeed her child (International Labour Organization 2020).



2. CHALLENGES AND PROSPECTS IN THE REPUBLIC OF NORTH MACEDONIA

Striking a harmonious equilibrium between professional commitments and familial duties is an ongoing struggle for numerous households in North Macedonia. Within this landscape, extended work hours, the scarcity of adaptable work arrangements, and the dearth of accessible, affordable childcare options collectively compound the challenges that parents grapple with in orchestrating their work-life balance.

In this realm, many Macedonian employees are ensnared in protracted work hours, engendering a scarcity of personal time for nurturing familial relationships and individual pursuits. This chronically prolonged labour can be a catalyst for weariness, tension, and, significantly, a dearth of quality moments earmarked for family bonding and shared activities.


Regrettably, flexible work options, a crucial facet for work-life harmony, remain a scarce commodity across industries in North Macedonia. The scarcity of such accommodations amplifies the difficulties parents confront when attempting to reconcile professional demands with familial responsibilities, including the intricate web of childcare and school timetables.

Another pressing hurdle lies in the inadequate accessibility to reasonably priced and high-quality childcare services within Macedonia. In pockets of the nation, these essential services are distressingly scant, casting an added burden on parents, particularly working mothers, who are compelled to expertly navigate the delicate dance between workplace obligations and childcare duties. These limitations in childcare resources have reverberations on work schedules and can exacerbate the pressures confronting families (Radulovikj & Todorova, 2020).

Embedded within Macedonian society is the persistence of traditional gender role expectations, which can compound women's challenges in simultaneously managing domestic responsibilities and advancing their careers. The formidable societal pressure on women to shoulder both these realms can profoundly impede their quest for a fulfilling work-life balance, curtailing their scope for professional growth and realization (Todorova & Radulovik, 2020). Existing campaigns to uplift women's roles in both familial and societal contexts, while commendable, have yet to shatter deep-rooted stereotypes. The image of women in leadership roles remains obscured by tradition. True gender equality begins within the familial confines, thus advocating for the equitable distribution of roles within households is pivotal (Radulović 2023:94).

The absence or insufficiency of family-friendly policies, including parental leave, flexible work hours, and workplace childcare provisions, casts a shadow over work-life harmony for Macedonian families. This lack of a supportive framework hampers parents in effectively balancing their vocational and familial obligations.

Efforts to transform this narrative are underway, as North Macedonia aligns with the European Union's tenets of family policy. The forthcoming law on labour relations, tailored to the EU Directive 2019/1158 on work-life balance, holds the poten-



tial to catalyse change. Facilitating this transformation necessitates provisions for preschool childcare facilities, already seeing progress through the establishment and renovation of public institutions (Radulović, 2023:94).

Nonetheless, despite these strides, the realization of family-friendly policies like flexible work hours, parental leave, and accessible childcare services remains elusive for many parents, particularly those in rural and underserved regions. The pursuit of comprehensive work-life equilibrium continues to stand as a collective aspiration for families across the nation (Radulovic & Misevska, 2020).

3. VARIETIES EMPLOYEE LEAVE OF ABSENCES DUE TO CHILDCARE

The landscape of parental leave systems is a tapestry woven with national nuances, rendering cross-border comparisons intricate. Within this intricate framework, four distinct categories of leave emerge to accommodate the needs of parents following the birth of a child (OECD - Social Policy Division - Directorate of Employment, Labour and Social Affairs, 2022):

Maternity Leave: This form of leave is tailored to employed women, primarily encircling the period surrounding childbirth, but also applicable to adoption. The International Labour Organization's Convention No. 183 mandates a maternity benefit of 14 weeks for eligible women. Mothers on maternity leave are entitled to a financial provision, ensuring they maintain a suitable standard of living for themselves and their child. This cash benefit should amount to no less than two-thirds of their previous earnings or an equivalent. The duration of this leave not only facilitates maternal recovery post-childbirth but also supports a seamless reintegration into the workforce. Striking the right balance is crucial; a leave period that is too brief may deter mothers from returning to work, whereas excessively lengthy leaves, particularly without job protection, can impact professional progress and income (Меѓународна организација на трудот, 2014). A global shift is evident towards maternity leave periods that meet or surpass the ILO's 14-week standard, with most countries now adhering to Convention No. 183. Notably, no country has reduced the duration of maternity leave since 1994.

Paternity Leave: An offering typically utilized by employed fathers in the months following childbirth. However, the duration of paternity leave is considerably shorter than that of maternity leave, often resulting in fathers receiving their salary throughout this period. Paternity leave utilization, especially for durations of two weeks or more immediately after birth, correlates with heightened paternal involvement in child rearing (Huerta et al., 2013). This form of leave can catalyse gender equality within households and professional spheres, reshaping attitudes towards parental roles and prevailing stereotypes. Although existing legal frameworks within the Union have limited incentives for equal parental responsibilities among men, rectifying this imbalance can lead to shifts in societal norms. The absence of paid paternity and parental leave across numerous Member States contributes to low utilization



by fathers. This disparity in work-life balance policy design perpetuates gender stereotypes, exacerbating discrepancies between caregiving and professional responsibilities. Equal treatment policies should ardently address stereotypes inherent in both genders' roles, emphasizing the vital role of social partners in enlightening both employees and employers, eradicating discrimination. The adoption of work-life balance measures by fathers, including leave and flexible arrangements, has demonstrated its potential to alleviate the disproportionate burden of unpaid family work on women, freeing them to allocate more time to gainful employment (European Parliament and Council of the European Union, 2019).


Parental Leave: This leave, availed by working parents, typically follows specific leaves like maternity or paternity leaves. It typically constitutes an individual right of the parent, though its usage might not be equally available to both parents in certain countries. Recommendation No. 191 (to Convention No. 183) and Recommendation No. 165 (to Convention No. 156) outline provisions for parental leave. Crucial aspects such as duration, compensation, and eligibility are typically decided at the national level. The diversity in parental leave systems is stark, encompassing variations in availability, payment, flexibility of use, the child's age, and transferability between parents (Меѓународна организација на трудот, 2014:9).

Child Care Leave: This form of leave often succeeds parental leave, enabling one parent to stay at home and care for their child, often up to the age of 2 or 3 years. While not uniformly available globally, this leave is prevalent in some nations. However, in many cases, it is unpaid, or compensation is minimal, underscoring the need for further enhancement in this regard.

4. LEAVE OF ABSENCE DUE TO CHILDCARE IN THE REPUBLIC OF NORTH MACEDONIA

The protection of the mothers during pregnancy and maternity, the protection of parents in the Republic of Macedonia is established by the Law on Labour Relations („Службен весник на Република Македонија“ бр. 62/2005; 106/2008; 161/2008; 114/2009; 130/2009; 149/2009; 50/2010; 52/2010; 124/2010; 47/2011; 11/2012; 39/2012; 13/2013; 25/2013; 170/2013; 187/2013; 113/2014; 20/2015; 33/2015; 72/2015; 129/2015 и 27/2016). In accordance with the stipulations of this legislation, mothers are granted the privilege of maternity leave under Article 165. During pregnancy, childbirth, and the early stages of parenthood, a continuous period of 9 months ensues, during which the mother is entitled to paid leave. For birth of twins or triplets, this entitlement is extended to a commendable 15 months.

In scenarios where the mother does not use her right to parental leave, it can be transferred to the child's father or adoptive parent. Unpaid parental leave with duration of three months, is available for nurturing of a child up to three years old, with the flexibility to split it into a maximum of three segments.



Additionally, the father has the right to paid leave in the event of personal and family circumstances, particularly linked to the birth of a child up to seven working days, outlined in collective agreements (член 165 и 166 од Законот за работни односи).

To sustain the financial underpinning of maternity leave compensation, the funds are sourced from the Budget of the Republic of North Macedonia. Notably, the compensation during periods of pregnancy, childbirth, and maternity stands at 100% of the foundational salary compensation. (Закон за здравствено осигурување на Република Македонија („Службен весник на Република Македонија“ бр. 25/2000, 34/2000, 96/2000, 50/2001, 11/2002, 31/2003, 84/2005, 37/2006, 18/2007, 36/2007, 82/2008, 98/2008, 6/2009, 67/2009, 50/2010, 156/2010, 53/2011, 26/2012, 16/2013, 91/2013, 187/2013, 43/2014, 44/2014, 97/2014, 112/2014, 113/2014, 188/2014, 20/2015, 61/2015, 98/2015, 129/2015, 150/2015, 154/2015, 192/2015, 217/2015, 27/2016, 37/2016, 120/2016 и 142/2016).

5. NEW DRAFT LAW ON LABOUR RELATIONS UNVEILED

The newly proposed draft law on labour relations has set in motion substantial transformations, igniting fervent public discourse particularly concerning maternity, paternity, and parental leave. Departing from the established norm, the current legal framework extends a worker's entitlement to a paid leave of absence for an unbroken period of nine months, which escalates to fifteen months in cases of multiple births (twins, triplets, and beyond) as per Article 165 of the Law on Labour Relations. This conventional approach now yields to a more progressive paradigm. The impending legislation introduces an enhanced guarantee for expectant mothers, 20 uninterrupted weeks for single births and 28 uninterrupted weeks for multiples. Fathers are bestowed with the prerogative to avail a total of 15 working days for a single childbirth to 20 working days for multiple births. This change is according to Article 4 of the EU Directive 2019/1158 demands. It is the right of the father whether he will use the leave in one part and continuously or in two equal parts with an interruption, whereby the first part must be used starting from the day of the child's birth, and the second part no later than the expiration of the maternity leave. This proposition also, aligns with the National Program for the Adoption of the Law of the European Union 2021–2025 (Влада на Република Северна Македонија, 2021: 106).

In addition, the right to parental leave is introduced. The right is guaranteed as a personal right that belongs to each of the parents (mother and father) equally and is intended for the care and nurturing of a child. Parents have the right to parental leave for a period of 4 months individually for one child, that is, 6 months individually if more children are born. With that, maximum freedom is provided in the use of parental leave, so parents can use it simultaneously (jointly), consecutively or combined. It can be used at once or in two parts, one of which must not be less than one



month. Parental leave can be used until the child reaches two years of age at the latest.

6. QUANTITATIVE STUDY: AGLIMPSE INTO PUBLIC PERCEPTION

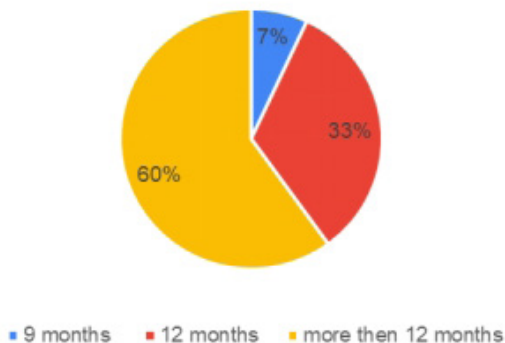
To see what the public’s opinion is about the types of leave for childbirth and raising children, as well as the proposed changes foreseen for the new Law on Labour Relations, we conducted research through a survey on the topic “New models of leave absences from work and their impact on family-work balance”. The survey was conducted through the Google forms platform during February 2023. The snowball method was used to collect the sample. The survey questionnaire includes ten questions about the different types of absences and their duration. At the beginning, clear definitions were given for the types of absences, to have a clearer understanding of the questions asked.


A total of 43 respondents engaged with the questionnaire, with a gender distribution of 76 % female and 24% male. Dissecting age demographics, the majority belonged to the 40+ bracket (43%), followed by 35-40 years (26%), 25-30 years (17%), and 30-35 years (14%). Significantly, all participants were married and had children spanning different age ranges.

The initial query probed participants on their perception of the optimal maternity leave duration. The choices encompassed 5 months, 9 months, 12 months, and a lengthier tenure. Remarkably, over half of the respondents (60%) advocated for maternity leave extending beyond 12 months, whereas 33 % favoured a duration of 12 months and 7% aligned with 9 months. Intriguingly, none endorsed a 5-month tenure (picture 1).

Picture 1. Opinions about length of maternity leave

How long do you think maternity leave should last?

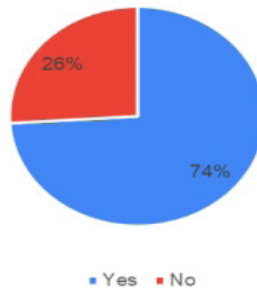




The subsequent query scrutinized the autonomy of women in determining the length of their maternity leave. Second question was: Do you think that a woman should decide for herself how many months of maternity leave she will use? Impressively, a majority (74%) endorsed women's choice in this matter, while 26% expressed dissent (Picture 2).

Picture 2. Opinions about woman decision of maternity leave lengths

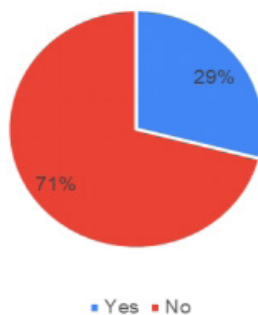
Do you think that a woman should decide for herself how many months of maternity leave she will use?



Challenging the impact of extended maternity leave on a woman's competitiveness in the job market, 71 % concurred with this notion, while 29% held a contrary viewpoint (Picture 3).

Picture 3. Opinions about length of maternity leave and labour competitiveness

Do you think that longer maternity leave makes a woman less competitive in the labor market?



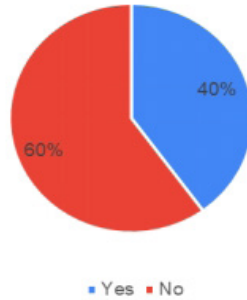
The theme of parity between parents was introduced through the fourth question, probing whether both mother and father should be entitled to an equal number of days for childbirth leave. The responses unveiled a split, with 59.5% endorsing the idea and 40.5% disagreeing (Picture 4). Data regarding gender showed us that 80%



of male respondents don't think that fathers and mothers should use equal number of days.

Picture 4. Opinions about equal share of maternity leave between parents

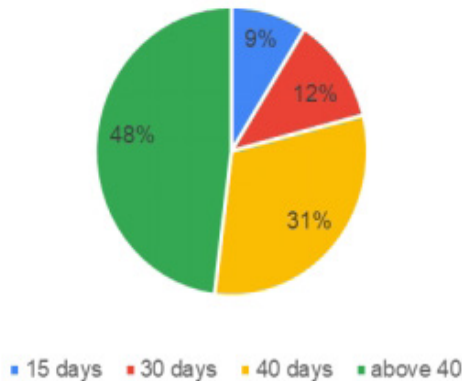
Do you think that mother and father should use an equal number of days of leave for childbirth?



Pertaining to paternity leave duration, the survey uncovered that 48% opined for more than 40 days, 31% for 40 days, 12% for 30 days, and merely 9% for 15 days (picture 5).

Picture 5. Opinions about length of paternity leave

How long do you think paternity leave should last?

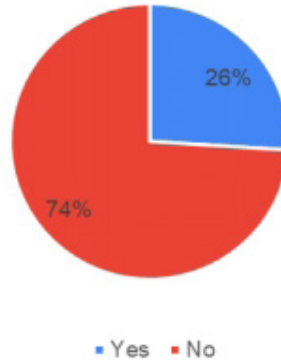


Inquiring about personal experiences, the survey assessed whether respondents knew fathers who had used a leave of absence to take care of a child. A majority (74%) indicated that they did not, while only 26% affirmed having knowledge of such cases (picture 6).



Picture 6. Acknowledgments about fathers that have used paternity leave.

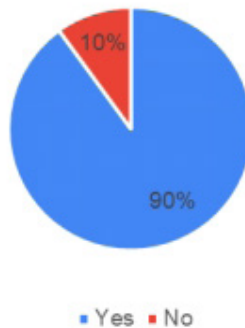
Do you know a father who has used maternity/paternity leave?



Regarding the draft Law on Labour Relations, which suggested a 4-month parental leave for both working mothers and fathers, spanning until the child turns 2 years old, an overwhelming 90% of respondents found the two-year span adequate, contrasting with 10% who held a differing stance (picture 7).

Picture 7. Opinions about new draft Law on Labour Relations

The new draft Law on Labor Relations provides for parental leave of 4 months for the father and 4 for the working mother until the child turns 2 years old. Do you think the period of 2 years is enough?

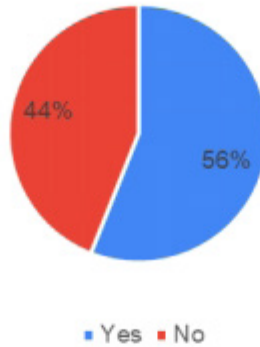


The prospect of male participation in this form of leave emerged in the eighth question. Half of the respondents (56%) believed their husbands or partners would use such leave, while 44% were sceptical (picture 8).



Picture 8. Opinions about new draft Law on Labour Relations

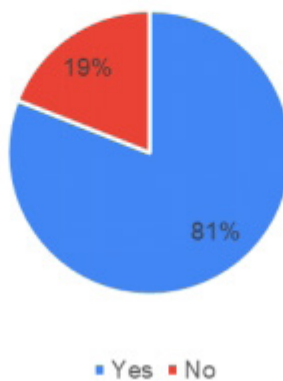
The new draft Law on Labor Relations provides for parental leave of 4 months for the father and 4 for the working mother until the child turns 2 years old. Do you think your husband/partner would use this kind of leave?



The sentiment of achieving a healthier work-life balance by embracing leave rights was overwhelmingly echoed by 81% of respondents, while 19% expressed a dissenting view (picture 9).

Picture 9. Opinions about work-life balance and rights of leaves.

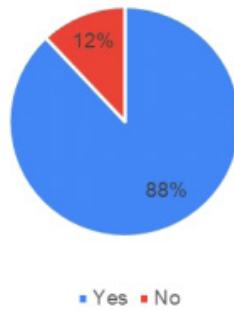
Do you think that if both the mother and the father use the rights of leave for the birth and raising of children, a greater balance between work and families is achieved?



Concluding the survey, the question of whether the flexibility of maternity leave contributes to an improved work-life equilibrium resounded with positivity, garnering an 88% agreement. In contrast, 12% remained unconvinced of the correlation (picture 10).

Picture 10. Opinions about work-life balance and rights of leaves.

Do you think that the flexibility of maternity leave (more options/duration) leads to a better work-life balance?



CONCLUSION

Absences from work for raising children are one of the key instruments for achieving work-family balance. The global endorsement of enhanced leave policies for both parents underscore their significance in nurturing family well-being and fostering broader community prosperity. The last two decades have borne witness to remarkable strides in terms of absence models and their durations, with European nations at the forefront of this transformative wave. In this context, the regulations and directives championed by the European Union and the International Labour Organization emerge as commendable driving forces, pressuring nations to elevate their legislative frameworks in this realm.

Although there are differences regarding the length and duration of absences, it can be noted that maternity, paternity, and parental leave as models is present in almost all countries of the European Union and that the minimum standards for their duration are respected.

In Macedonia, extant legislation accords nine months for mothers without provision for parental or paternal leave in the current paradigm. This disparity reveals that although maternity leave is transferable, it cannot be shared between parents, in other words, for fathers to take the leave, mothers must give it up entirely.

The newly proposed Draft Law on Labour Relations introduces the concept of remunerated maternity, paternity, and parental leave. This proposition has triggered a robust public response, notably fuelled by concerns over the reduction of maternity leave from nine to five months. Nevertheless, this draft law introduces a significant extension to paid parental leave, allocating four months for both parents, while also introducing a 15-day paternity leave. This configuration effectively amplifies the cumulative leave duration.

Our comprehensive survey yielded intriguing insights. Respondents, while advocating for maternity leave durations of 12 months or more, displayed contradictory



perspectives on whether longer maternity leave engenders a woman's diminished competitiveness in the labour market. The call for greater flexibility resounded across responses, with a consensus that women should possess the autonomy to determine the duration of their maternity leave. The sentiment prevailed that heightened leave flexibility could catalyse a more work-life balance.


Observing the survey's reception of the new parental leave proposal, a positive inclination emerges. Respondents overwhelmingly perceive the prescribed four-month parental leave period for both parents as substantial, aligning favourably with the two-year utilization period.

However, prejudices regarding the use of fathers' leave can be observed. Most of the respondents do not know a father who used some kind of leave to raise a child/children, and a significant proportion doubt that their husbands or partners would use this right. Also, majority of male respondents disagree that mothers and fathers should have equal days of essence for childbirth.

Considering these observations, it becomes evident that a revision of legislation regarding leave of absence due to raising children is needed, necessitating alignment with European standards. Paid parental leave, extended to both mothers and fathers, carries palpable advantages for working families. It manifests itself as a formidable tool for redistributing domestic responsibilities and nurturing childcare, ultimately culminating in an environment that nurtures work-family harmony.

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