Do All Mothers Benefit Equally? The Effect of Childcare, Parental Leave Policies and Gender Norms on the Motherhood Wage Penalty by Occupational Group

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Abstract

Scholars are increasingly aware of cross-national variations in the motherhood wage penalty, and there is solid evidence of its linkages with policies and the enabling or hindering of gender equality. Evidence of the differentiated effects of policies and norms across institutional contexts, however, is scarce. There are, at the same time, strong arguments that the remedies that are appropriate for lower and higher labour market status women may not only differ, but sometimes even conflict with each other. This paper centres on the effect of childcare policies and gender norms on the motherhood wage penalty moderated by occupational groups. We rely on multilevel modelling and EU-SILC data and explore a pan-European view incorporating 25 European countries. We confirm that long parental leave has the ability to increase the motherhood wage penalty, while the availability of childcare and attitudes that favour maternal employment can reduce it. We demonstrate that these policy effects are not uniform across occupational positions in Europe. While traditional gender norms and generous parental leave tend to universally penalise mothers in terms of their earnings, the availability of childcare benefits more women in high-skilled occupations.

Keywords: motherhood penalty, childcare policies, gender norms, occupations, multilevel regressions.

Introduction

There are arguments that gender inequality is nowadays less driven by gender than by care duties, and that the gender inequality caused by motherhood penalties has featured a dramatic increase in recent decades (Kleven et al., 2019). This has attracted growing scholarly interest, especially in terms of the interplay of individual and institutional characteristics affecting the inequalities in gendered caregiving and breadwinning patterns (Ferragina, 2020). The motherhood wage penalty indicates either the pay gap between mothers and fathers, or as in this paper, the pay gap between mothers and non-mothers. There is a growing body of literature (Budig et al., 2012; Budig et al., 2016; Cukrowska-Torzewska, 2017; Cukrowska-Torzewska and Lovasz, 2020; Hallden et al., 2016) that contributes to the investigation of this phenomenon both conceptually and empirically.

What could policies do to buffer the motherhood wage penalty? There are arguments that policies may buffer motherhood wage penalties or, conversely, contribute to the potential stigma that challenges labour market negotiations and power relations for mothers. Scholars agree that family policies have a significant effect in moderating the country-level motherhood wage penalty by either enabling work-family reconciliation or by sending an important signal. In modelling the effects of childcare policies on the motherhood wage penalty, and after controlling for several individual differences, some policy effects have turned out to be quite robust. For instance, most studies (Budig et al., 2016; Cukrowska-Torzewska, 2017; Cukrowska-Torzewska and Lovasz, 2020) find that the increased prevalence of publicly funded childcare is significantly associated with smaller penalties. At the same time, paid care leave (maternity, paternity, and equivalent fully paid weeks of parental care) has given more ambiguous results, perhaps also partly due to variations in

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operationalising leave policies and limited coverage. There is evidence that both the absence of care leave, as well as very long leave for women serve to increase the negative effects of motherhood earnings (Budig et al., 2016; Fodor et al., 2018). The latter is not only due to the threat that longer leave allowances send a negative signal to employers when recruiting mothers, but also because policies are part of a complex institutional and cultural framework of options and constraints that shape labour market behaviour among mothers. Therefore, in analysing cross-country variations of the motherhood wage penalty and its country-level moderators, it is important to include gender norms (Lauri et al., 2020; Misra et al., 2010; Budig et al., 2012; Pavolini and Van Lancker, 2018). More specifically, attitudes that favour maternal employment tend in addition to mitigate the motherhood wage penalty.

The heterogeneity among women with respect to parenthood and labour market inequality and especially the differentiated effect of family policies and norms has not attracted much attention from scholars. Yu and Kuo (2017) point out that the wage reduction for each child is less in occupations with greater autonomy and lower teamwork requirements based on their US case study. Hallden et al. (2016) present a rare exception, adopting a comparative perspective by testing the differentiated effect of family policies. They (Hallden et al., 2016) do not find within-country variation in terms of the effect of family policies across skill levels of occupational groups based on ten countries from Western and Southern Europe. The results of Hallden et al. (2016) indicate that 'both a high share of small children in publicly funded childcare facilities and long paid maternity leave are associated with a decrease in the motherhood wage penalty regardless of skill level'. We aim to provide further evidence and, in line with Hallden et al. (2016) and Yu and Kuo (2017), we argue that not only is there cross-country variation in the magnitude of the motherhood wage penalty but there might be a within-country variation in this penalty across skill levels of occupational groups. We aim to contribute by adding a cross-European investigation of how policies and gender norms moderate the link between pay and motherhood by involving Central and Eastern European (CEE) countries, and thereby increasing the empirical coverage of this important topic and testing the robustness of previous findings in the pan-European perspective. Second, alongside policies, we also include the broader cultural setting, captured by gender norms regarding maternal employment.

In extending our case coverage to include CEE countries, we are seeking to capture diversity on a range of variables, including the variety in economic and social contexts. Therefore, in so doing our approach is aligned with the most different system design logic, which is arguably more appropriate for universal explanations (Peters, 2013; De la Porta & Keating, 2008) rather than contextual specificities. Therefore, instead of country-specific effects, we are rather aiming to reveal whether there are certain general associations between policies and norms and mothers' earnings despite the diversity of contexts. One of the distinctive features of CEE countries is that while parental leave was introduced relatively early (Dobrotic & Stropnik, 2020; Szelewa & Polakowski, 2008), this was a mother-centred leave that impeded equality, in that they did not promote gender equality in care. Hence, despite growing within-CEE diversity, the pro-natalist and re-familialist policy priorities in that region have resulted in contexts with the co-presence of gender equality promoting a policy mix with traditional gender norms that hinder their potential (Lauri et al., 2020).

Therefore, the main question of this paper centres on the effect on the motherhood penalty of childcare and parental leave policies and gender norms, and how it differs by skill level of occupational position across Europe.

Our article is structured as follows: in the second section, we provide a literature overview explaining the motherhood wage penalty, the mechanisms behind it and its links with childcare policies and gender norms to specify our model and formulate hypotheses. The literature overview is followed by the introduction of our data and analysis. In accomplishing our research aim we rely on a multilevel mixed-effects linear regression and EU-SILC data for 25 European countries. We conclude by presenting our results and offering some interpretations with suggestions for future approaches to exploring the phenomenon of the motherhood wage penalty.

The motherhood wage penalty – mechanisms behind it and links with country-level policies and gender norms

What is the motherhood wage penalty and why do we have it?

Access to employment is one of the most important dimensions of economic status and financial well-being. Its importance has especially increased through the policy turn toward social investment, which shifts the focus toward employment. However, as the labour market participation gap between men and women has decreased over recent decades and skill levels in women have surpassed those in men in most European countries, the question is not so much about the number of women in work but the conditions under which they work (Daly, 2020). Studies have shown that having children tends to reduce women's working hours (compared to women who do not have children). However, the effect varies considerably between countries from having a significant negative effect to having no effect at all (Misra et al., 2011). Moreover, while less working hours tends to relate to less earnings, having children has shown to have a negative effect on earnings even when keeping working hours controlled (Cukrowska-Torzewska & Matysiak, 2020). In other words, there is growing evidence of the presence of a motherhood wage penalty; that is, the tendency that women with children earn less compared to women without children (Budig et al., 2012, 2016; Hallden et al., 2016; Cukrowska-Torzewska & Lovasz, 2020; Yu & Kuo, 2017). Therefore, we know that there is a remarkable cross-country difference in motherhood wage penalties and at least a part of this difference is driven by institutions. To investigate these associations, it is important to understand the underlying mechanisms behind the penalty.

There exist three prominent explanations for the mechanisms of motherhood wage penalty: stressing human capital depreciation, preference adaptions, and employer discrimination. The human capital depreciation argument follows the human capital investment-based logic according to which these interruptions due to child-rearing cause skill depreciation and lower wage returns (Becker, 1954, 1991). Furthermore, given that mothers have increased work-family conflict, these are not only interruptions that cause wage penalties, but might also cause mothers to have different work preferences. More specifically, mothers prefer predictable (e.g., in the public sector) and/or flexible schedules (part-time work) to facilitate family-work reconciliation, and might be ready for trade-offs in wage levels to achieve this (Becker, 1991; Gough & Noonan, 2013). This explanation leans toward 'preference adaptions' and is more prevalent among sociological understandings behind the motherhood wage penalty (Hakim, 2000; Bielby & Bielby, 1984). In addition to the depreciated human capital and adapted preference-related mechanisms in explaining the motherhood wage penalty, mothers' wages might also be negatively influenced due to 'socially constructed' incompatibility between the role of mother and that of an 'ideal worker' (Correll et al., 2007). Furthermore, this construction of the mother's role could be negatively accelerated in the context of generous welfare policies, as it could be argued that extensive paid maternity leave can signal reduced productivity and work commitment to employers (Glass & Fodor, 2011) and might lead to employers showing discrimination as they are less willing to hire mothers.

Public policies, gender norms and motherhood penalty

A range of societal-level factors may account for the negative impact of children on women's earnings. The literature has confirmed that family policy has a significant effect on lowering gender inequality in both participation and earnings (Budig et al., 2016; Misra et al., 2010; Fodor & Glass, 2018; Hallden et al., 2016; Cukrowska-Torzewska, 2017). Or as summarised by Budig et al. (2016), for policymakers contemplating which policies might be most effective at reducing pay inequities, the answer should be clear: policies that serve to keep women attached to the labour market. The policy indicators that are most consistently used in these studies – and that have turned out to be the most relevant in investigating both the gender wage gap and the motherhood wage penalty – are the importance of the public role of the provision of (early) childcare and the presence of paid parental leave.

Many scholars argue that work-family policies boost women's employment and wages by helping them manage both work and family responsibilities. This claim is often supported by comparisons of broad welfare state regimes (Esping-Andersen, 1999; Gornick & Meyers, 2003; Korpi, 2000). However, this (welfare regime) approach has its limitations, as it is challenging to separate policy effects from other country-specific factors, such as cultural norms or overall earnings inequality. Additionally, the regime framework overlooks variations within welfare state categories. To better analyse individual outcomes and influences at the country level, researchers have increasingly adopted multilevel modelling with larger cross-national samples to study gendered policy effects (Boeckmann et al., 2015; Mandel & Semyonov, 2006; Budig et al. 2016).

The effect of the availability of childcare

The assumption that the provision of childcare – a policy that emphasises the dual aims of educating children and mobilising parents – shapes parents' (especially mothers') participation in the labour market has met the most robust empirical evidence. More specifically, programmes for children under three are especially beneficial for balancing care and employment, and the more easily accessible early childhood education and care is (ECEC), the lower the motherhood wage penalties (Budig et al., 2016; Hallden et al., 2016; Cukrowska-Torzewska, 2016; Pettit & Hook, 2005; Gornick & Meyers, 2003). Therefore, easily accessible early childcare, which is expected to increase the mother's chances of returning to work following childbirth, will also lead to shorter career breaks and a lower wage penalty for mothers. Drawing from previous evidence, we assume that:

> *H1. The negative link between motherhood and earnings is moderated by childcare enrolment rate in a way that the link is weakened when early childcare enrolment rates are high.*

The effect of parental leave

Care leave is the second most commonly included policy for measuring policy effects on the motherhood penalty. Care leaves may enhance women's pay by increasing job continuity. However, extended leave might encourage withdrawal from paid employment, with a concomitant reduction in work experience, as well as a decrease in productivity and earnings, and increased stigmatisation of women in the workforce (Budig et al., 2016; Hallden et al., 2016; Cukrowska-Torzewska & Lovasz, 2020). Previous research shows that the length of the leave matters for the probability of re-entry and the relation is likely to be curvilinear (Pettit & Hook, 2005; Budig et al., 2012). Consequently, very long leave may discourage women from fully reintegrating into the labour market and could lead to skill and human capital depreciation (Keck & Saraceno, 2013). This may also apply to excessively short leave, as it may force women to leave a job in order to stay with a child longer. At the same time, Keck and Saraceno (2013) show that if long leave is also well paid, mothers are actually more likely to work longer hours while a shorter leave disincentivises mothers to re-enter employment.

Some earlier research (see Gornick & Meyers, 2003; Keck & Saraceno, 2013; Pettit & Hook, 2005) has pointed out that certain policies in certain combinations might, counter to expectations, worsen the employment situation of women and especially that of mothers. In the literature on the subject, the tendencies of welfare policies not only to cure but sometimes also to reinforce social risks is known as the 'welfare paradox' (Mandel, 2012; Mandel & Semyonov, 2006; Saraceno & Keck, 2013). For example, long parental leave may weaken any attachment mothers may have to the labour force. In so doing, it increases the motherhood wage penalty through lost experience (Mandel & Semyonov, 2005; Boeckmann et al., 2015) or by giving perverse incentives for employers and thereby hindering re-entry into the labour market for mothers (Glass & Fodor, 2011). Therefore, in posing our second hypothesis, we assume that:

> *H2. The negative link between motherhood and earnings is moderated by parental leave in a way that the link is strengthened when parental leave is long and generous.*

Do all mothers benefit from policies equally?

The question arises of whether the motherhood wage penalty buffering effect of policies varies across occupation groups. If mothers from some occupations tend to have more resources and autonomy to reconcile the work-family relationship (Hakim, 2000; Hallden et al., 2016), it is reasonable to assume the existence of differences in both the magnitude and direction of policy effects within countries.

Given that the use of childcare is influenced by supply and demand, and there is empirical evidence that structural constraints in childcare provision tend to limit the uptake of childcare, especially for disadvantaged children (Pavolini & VanLancker, 2018), we assume (in this case the moderator; see Figure 1) the effect of early childcare on the motherhood penalty to vary across skill levels of occupational groups. Women in skilled positions may have greater autonomy and more regular working hours to make use of the availability of early childcare.

> *H1.1. Women in skilled positions benefit more from the buffering effect on the motherhood wage penalty of higher childcare enrolment.*

At the same time, highly skilled women are generally more attached to the labour market positions requiring constant upskilling (Blau & Kahn, 2007), and therefore potentially experience greater skills depreciation due to interruptions in their working career.

> *H2.1. Women in skilled positions suffer less from the effect of long and generous parental leave policies increasing the motherhood wage penalty.*

The effect of gender norms

Previous research by Cukrowska-Torzewska (2017) and Bukodi et al. (2012) has shown the importance of the prevalent gender norms in mitigating gender pay gaps and motherhood penalties. The question of who cares and the valuation of care work bears a strong normative ethos. Different policy designs endorse, legitimise, and reproduce the *ethos* of social norms and practices (Javornik, 2014). As policies are often the result of historical processes in which multiple actors and societal groups may have a say, different policies within countries may embrace different values or goals (Morgan, 2005; Morgan & Zippel, 2003). Therefore, there is always a possibility that childcare ideals as described in particular policy instruments may collide with wider social attitudes about proper childcare. This social resistance might assign the primary responsibility for childcare to mothers even despite the presence of favourable configurations of childcare policy instruments (Javornik, 2014; Kurowska, 2016; Pavolini & VanLancker, 2018). Therefore, we may assume that gender norms have an effect even beyond policies as these values guide the actions of mothers and employers. As explained in the introduction, one of the distinctive features of CEE countries is the mother-centredness of care leave in the post-Soviet era (Dobrotic & Stropnik, 2020). The divergence of leave policies in that region intensified during the transition from socialism to capitalism, as competing priorities and inter-related policy concerns, such as re-traditionalisation, fertility incentives (often linked with nationalist rhetoric), gender equality and labour market participation, influenced policy design (Dobrotic & Stropnik, 2020; Szelewa & Polakowski, 2008). However, EU accession has brought a gradual shift towards more gender-equal models. Therefore, not only is there increasing variety of care policy mixes in Europe that diverge from the typology of well-known welfare regimes (Lauri et al., 2020), the same package of policy instruments might also work differently across contexts as the presence of egalitarian gender norms can partly compensate for the deficiencies of certain policy mixes, and vice versa.

> *H3. The negative link between motherhood and earnings is moderated by parental leave in a way that the link is strengthened when gender norms are more traditional.*

To the best of our knowledge there is no previous research testing whether the cultural context effect on the motherhood penalty varies by occupational position. We assume that expectations

on the basis of gender norms affect women irrespective of their occupational position. However, as the minimum wage setting mechanism suppresses the wage level of less skilled occupations more and vice versa, there is more variability of wage among skilled occupations, and so we assume that mothers in skilled occupations have more to lose.

H3.1. Women in skilled positions are penalised more by the motherhood wage penalty enhancing the effect of traditional gender norms.

Data and Analytical Approach

In order to estimate the motherhood penalty, EU-SILC 2018 cross-sectional individual-level data is used. For the purpose of the analysis, the sample is restricted to women who worked during the last year and were aged 25–45 years, which is the life stage potentially most affected by (recent) motherhood and its respective effect on earnings. A total of 28 EU member states were included in the analysis and the effective sample size analysed is 45,636 cases. Due to a lack of macro-data in some countries, the analysis of macro-level effects was restricted to 24 or 25 countries, depending on the measure.[1] Consequently, there are two countries from liberal and two from central and eastern Europe with welfare regimes missing from our analysis. The dependent variable is the natural logarithm of gross annual earnings, adjusted for purchasing power parity. Due to data limitations, we cannot control for working hours, which means we may slightly overestimate the direct motherhood penalty effect, as in some countries women tend to reduce working hours and respectively their earnings when entering motherhood (Misra et al., 2011). However, the reduction of both earnings and working hours reduce directly or indirectly women's total earnings and contribute to the motherhood penalty. Annual earnings capture the motherhood wage penalty from two sources: different hourly wage and different working hours. A similar combined approach has been applied by several authors (e.g., the seminal work of Kleven et al. 2019). The main independent variable is motherhood – having one or more children[2] living in the household – with women without children as the reference category. The second central independent variable is the labour market status of women, operationalised via the respondent's occupation. We differentiate here between two broad categories: high-skilled (ISCO main categories 1–4) and low-skilled (ISCO main categories 5–9) occupations. Next to the main independent variables, the models control for age, education level, labour market experience duration, and the presence of a respondent's partner. In order to control for labour market selection, the models control for the inverse of Mill's ratio (ILM).

We include three macro-level measures, where two refer to policy measures and one to the prevalent gender norms regarding maternal employment. Childcare policies are included in the model as the first policy measure indicator. There are some differences in operationalising childcare provision. A cohort coverage is often the best measure to rely on; however, there are also studies that capture state expenditure in ECEC and/or tuition fees. We use the Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) indicator measuring the level of enrolment of children under the age of three in early childhood education and care facilities in 2018. Our second indicator measures the available care leave and refers to fully paid weeks of maternity and parental leave together multiplied by the replacement rate to account for the variety of payment rates and types of leave. Therefore, our measure for leave is 'full-rate equivalent' (FRE) of leave, which is calculated as the duration of leave in weeks multiplied by the payment rate (as a percentage of average earnings) received by the claimant for the duration of the leave. Later in the text, we refer to high FRE as 'long and generous leave'. Both indicators have been retrieved from the OECD Family Database (OECD, 2018). In order to measure the prevalent gender norms (our third macro-level indicator), we use data from the Eurobarometer (2014) survey indicating the share of the adult population

1 The UK, Ireland and Slovakia are not included in the analysis; Romania did not have data on fully paid weeks of parental leave.

2 Models are also run by differentiating the number of dependent children in the household. The effect is linear, i.e. the higher the number of children, the higher the motherhood penalty. As our aim is not to estimate the size of motherhood gap per se, but whether policies moderate the motherhood penalty in principle, we opted for the parsimonious option of differentiating only between women with and without children.

in the country agreeing with the statement "All in all, family life suffers when the mother has full-time work". The indicator refers to the mean of respondents in the respective country, where the higher the value the more gender egalitarian (1 – Totally agree … 4 – totally disagree). This question is extensively used in the related literature as arguably the best for capturing tensions related to work-family conflict (Keck & Saraceno, 2013; Budig et al., 2012; Cukrowska-Torzewska & Lovasz, 2020). Alternatively, we could have used the question "Women are less willing than men to make a career for themselves", but the robustness check showed no differences in the result; therefore, we preferred the former question. Still, it should be noted that the current measure refers to working mothers in general, without any reference to the age of the children. One could argue that societies might be more prone to working mothers in general than working mothers of young children, in which case the current estimator would underestimate the actual objection to mothers working. A study by Allen and Stevenson (2023) showed that the average agreement with the two indicators ("A pre-school child is likely to suffer if his/her mother works" and "All in all, the family suffers when the woman has a full-time job") in the UK have come closer in time and in recent decades have been basically overlapping. Similar trends were found by Banks and Russell (2011) in their comparison of eight countries. We are aware that it is hard to fully disentangle cultural norms and perceived opportunity constraints in combining being a parent and a full-time employee, as these are mutually reinforcing phenomena. These norms vary considerably across Europe. Clearly, Scandinavian countries are more in favour of women's labour market participation than the rest of Europe, and especially so compared to some Central and Eastern European countries (see Appendix 1). It is also important to note that in the case of the higher presence of the denial of mothers' full-time employment, in all countries, women are more likely to support this statement.

In order to analyse the effect of children on women's wages, we use a multilevel approach (individual cases nested in countries) and mixed-effects models for linear regression. The latter enables us to test the effects and relationships on both an individual and a country level (Hox, 2010; Raudenbush & Bryk, 2002). As summarised in Figure 1, we aim to measure whether family policies and norms moderate the link between motherhood and pay, as this may then help explain why the motherhood wage penalty varies between countries.

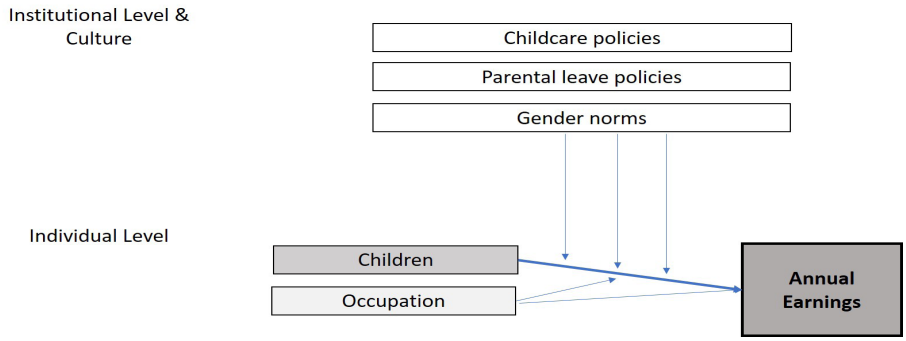

Figure 1. Motherhood wage penalty model

Source: Authors

The latter will be modelled as interactions between micro- and macro-level measures. As we are also interested in differentiating the (moderator) effects across occupational groups, we run separate models for high-skilled and low-skilled occupational groups (in order to avoid three-way interactions). The latter does not allow us to statistically test the differences between the two groups, but it does allow us to pick the (existing) associations within groups. In addition, education, age and job experience, and family characteristics (all measured at individual level) are included as controls in the models.

Results

The raw differences in annual earnings of women with and without children (Appendix 1) indicate considerable variability between countries. There are countries such Cyprus, Denmark and Sweden, where on average women with children tend to earn more; in other words, they experience a motherhood premium, not a wage penalty. On the other end of the scale, however, are countries such as Austria, Germany, and Latvia, where women with children show smaller average earnings compared to women without children. However, the motherhood premium tends to disappear in almost all country cases once we adjust for partnership status, age, education, tenure, occupation and labour market selection (Figure 2), signalling the pervasive existence of motherhood penalties across European countries.

Namely, if we compare the annual earnings of women with similar human capital and labour market positions, significant motherhood wage penalties are revealed, being especially high in Austria, Sweden, the Czech Republic and the Baltic states. In other words, in many countries working women with children are unable to compete against childless women with similar characteristics in the labour market, despite their high human capital.

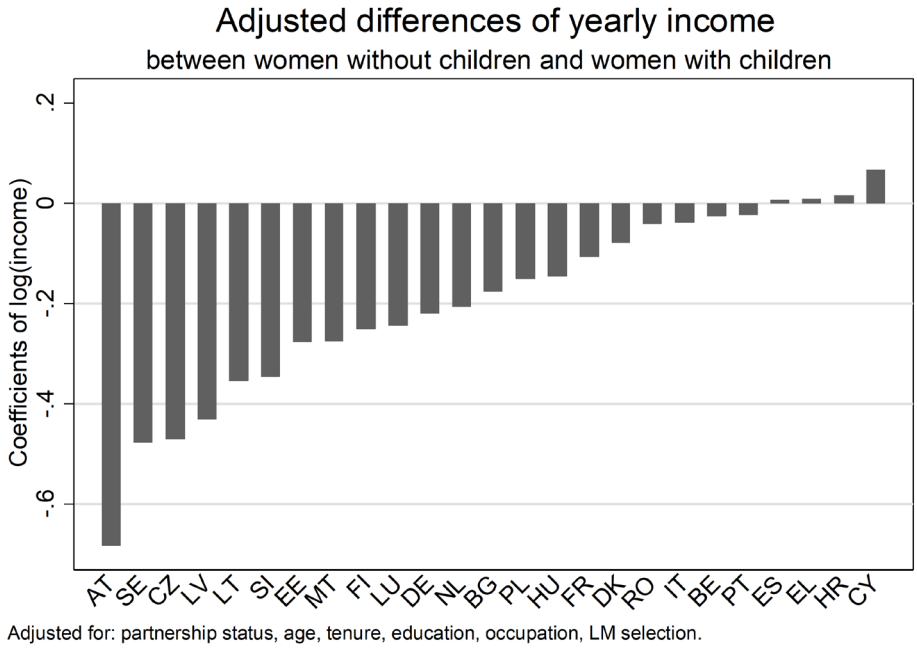

Figure 2. Adjusted motherhood wage penalty in Europe

Source: EU-SILC 2018, authors' calculations

The findings of the regression analysis indicate that on average, having children results in a significant penalty in earnings for mothers compared to women without children in EU countries. Women with children that otherwise have similar characteristics in terms of age, education, partnership status, labour market experience and occupational status tend to earn on average 18 per cent less (Model 1 in Table 1A-C) compared to women without children. The difference falls somewhat when controlling for enrolment in childcare (Model 2 in Table 1A), but still remains significant. In line with previous findings, the availability and use of early child education and care facilities tends to have a positive effect on women's earnings. Moreover, the positive (moderating) effect tends to be higher in countries with better access to care facilities (Model 3 in Table 1A) meaning the negative effect of having children on women's earnings is significantly smaller in countries with the higher early childcare enrolment rates, which confirms Hypothesis 1.

We move on to determine whether all women benefit similarly from childcare. When looking at the low-skilled occupational group (Model 4, Table 1A) and high-skilled occupational group (Model 5, Table 1A) separately, in both cases women with children tend to earn on average significantly less than women without children. However, women in skilled positions benefit more from the buffering effect on the motherhood wage penalty of higher childcare enrolment, which confirms our respective hypothesis (H1.1). In other words, for women in low-skilled occupational positions, better overall access to care policies does not seem to significantly moderate the effect of the motherhood wage penalty. This differs from the results of Hallden et al. (2016), who found that a high share of small children in publicly funded childcare facilities is associated with a decrease in the motherhood wage penalty regardless of skill level. In interpreting our somewhat contradictory results in light of the main argument of Esping-Andersen's (2009) 'incomplete revolution' thesis, it might be the case that in some countries 'the revolution has not trickled down to lower strata'. Therefore, the quest for gender equality might produce inequality as the endeavour to reconcile work and family life has remained a middle-class affair (pp. 169).

Table 1 A. The effect of having children and the enrolment of ECEC on annual (log-)earnings, unstandardised coefficients (standard errors)

	Model 1 (all)	**Model 2 (all)**	**Model 3 (all)**	**Model 4 (low-skilled)**	**Model 5 (high-skilled)**
Children (ref: no children)	-0.180***	-0.180***	-0.281***	-0.306***	-0.377***
	(0.017)	(0.011)	(0.020)	(0.033)	(0.026)
Enrolment of ECEC		0.041**	0.039**	0.036**	0.039**
		(0.016)	(0.016)	(0.017)	(0.016)
Children*Enrolment of ECEC			0.003***	0.000	0.003***
			(0.001)	(0.001)	(0.001)
N (individuals)	41,697	41,697	41697	19,276	22,842
N (countries)	25	25	25	25	25

Note: Models control for respondent age, education, relationship status, LM experience and occupation. * $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$.

Source: EU-SILC 2018, authors' calculations

In the next analysis (Table 1B), we test the (moderator) effect of parental leave policies on the motherhood wage penalty. In line with several earlier studies, our data on EU countries indicates that long and generous leave is associated with lower earnings of mothers compared to women without children (Model 2 in Table 1B). Moreover, the earnings gap between mothers and non-mothers – the motherhood wage penalty – tends to rise in the context of longer and more generous leave (see interaction effects in Model 3, Table 1b), which confirms Hypothesis 2. The moderating effect of parental leave policies tends to work similarly for low-skilled (model 4, Table 1B) and high-skilled (model 5, Table 1B) groups; that is, mothers in both occupational groups tend to be penalised by longer and more generous leaves, leaving our hypothesis (H2.1) unconfirmed. Still, interestingly, the wage gap is not significant for high-skilled women in less generous parental leave contexts – often a characteristic of leave policies in Anglo-American and Southern European countries – while low-skilled women do suffer from wage differences in these contexts. These trends may suggest that the potential labour market exclusion effect of care leave (i.e., staying out of the labour market for longer periods) may appear more likely in situations of lower social/welfare protection, where women with worse labour market prospects may have fewer incentives to return quickly to the labour market.

Table 1 B. The effect of having children and generous parental leave on annual (log-) earnings, unstandardised coefficients (standard errors)

	Model 1 (all)	Model 2 (all)	Model 3 (all)	Model 4 (low-skilled)	Model 5 (high-skilled)
Children (ref: no children)	-0.189***	-0.189***	-0.019	-0.100***	0.011
	(0.016)	(0.011)	(0.020)	(0.032)	(0.025)
Parental leave (FRE)		-0.032**	-0.028**	-0.028**	-0.028**
		(0.014)	(0.014)	(0.014)	(0.014)
Children*Parental leave (FRE)			-0.005***	-0.003***	-0.006***
			(0.001)	(0.001)	(0.001)
N (individuals)	40,391	40,391	40,391	18,251	22,140
N (countries)	24	24	24	24	24

Note: Models control for respondent age, education, relationship status, LM experience and occupation. * p < 0.05, ** p < 0.01, *** p < 0.001.

Source: EU-SILC 2018, authors' calculations

As predicted (hypothesis 3), existing gender norms also tend to have an impact on the motherhood wage penalty (Table 1 C). More specifically, in contexts with more traditional gender norms regarding the labour market participation of mothers, the observed wage penalty tends to increase (model 2 and 3 in Table 1C), the moderator effect being statistically significant. When looking separately at low-skilled and high-skilled women, the association points in same direction; however, the effect is no more statistically significant. In other words, the (negative) effect of having children on earnings does not differ significantly for different skills groups across different value contexts (measured as seeing mother's full-time employment as problematic for families).

Table 1 C. The effect of having children and prevalent gender norms on annual (log-)earnings, unstandardised coefficients (standard errors)

	Model 1 (all)	Model 2 (all)	Model 3 (all)	Model 4 (low-skilled)	Model 5 (high-skilled)
Children (ref: no children)	-0.180***	-0.180***	-0.122***	-0.149***	-0.148***
	(0.017)	(0.011)	(0.027)	(0.048)	(0.033)
Traditional gender norms		-0.046*	-0.044*	-0.043*	-0.045*
		(0.026)	(0.026)	(0.026)	(0.026)
Children*Gender norms			-0.002**	-0.002	-0.002
			(0.001)	(0.002)	(0.001)
N (individuals)	41,697	41,697	41,697	18,936	22,761
N (countries)	25	25	25	25	25

Note: Models control for respondent age, education, relationship status, LM experience and occupation. * p < 0.05, ** p < 0.01, *** p < 0.001.

Source: EU-SILC 2018, authors' calculations

Conclusion and discussion

Despite considerable gender convergence over the last century, gender inequality in earnings continues to be substantial. However, what has reduced mostly is the gap between the pay of childless women and men, while the earnings of mother's lag behind those of other workers (Waldfogel, 1998). Or as stated by Kleven et al. (2019), almost all of the remaining gender inequality can be attributed to children.

The aim of this paper was to test the effect of childcare policies and gender norms on the motherhood wage penalty moderated by occupational groups. For this, EU-SILC 2018 data for twenty-five European Union countries was applied.

In order to estimate the effect of having children on women's earnings – the motherhood wage penalty – we compared the earnings for working women with children with earnings of women without children. Our main contribution is to provide further evidence of how policies and norms may enforce or hinder inequalities between and also within countries. Our findings confirm that women with children (other characteristics being equal) tend to earn on average significantly less than women without children. Although there appears to be a pervasive trend across EU countries, the effect does differ in countries in terms of enrolment in childcare, parental leave policies and prevalent gender values. Our findings show that high enrolment in early (public) childcare helps reduce the observed motherhood wage penalty. However, the effect or association differs between low- and high-skilled occupation groups. The availability of childcare is more beneficial to women in advanced positions and less so for women in less skilled occupational groups, which contradicts some earlier findings on how different occupational groups benefit from childcare policies with regard to their earning capacities. Hallden et al. (2016) did not find the effect of the availability of childcare to differ across occupational groups in a smaller set of 10 European countries. Mandel's (2012) work focuses on the gender wage gap and compares women with men, but her results pointed in the same direction as ours. The analysis of Mandel (2012) indicated a significant gender wage gap between highly skilled and less skilled work, but also that especially highly skilled women benefit less from existing childcare policies when it comes to the earnings gap. Regarding our findings, we may argue that highly skilled mothers are especially more resourceful in terms of care arrangements or have more autonomy (Hakim, 2000) and employee-driven flexibility at the workplace, which allows them to make better use of the availability of childcare policies. Also, low-skilled jobs often relate to employer-driven flexibility and relatively worse working times/hours (e.g., non-standard working times) (Täht & Mills, 2016), which diminishes their chances of making full use of available childcare facilities which often operate during standard working times (daytime hours, working days). As noted by Täht et al. (2022), despite the extensive availability and use of formal care, informal care arrangements still tend to be relevant for mothers' labour market participation, whereas women in lower labour market positions tend to remain in a disadvantaged situation. Therefore, the benefits from the gender revolution – the extension of public support for care duties – are harder to achieve for those who occupy less advantaged labour market positions, which was proved by our analysis of a wide set of European countries. According to Esping-Andersen (2009), in some countries the revolution has not trickled down to lower strata and the endeavour to reconcile work and family life has remained a middle-class affair (pp. 169). Future research may investigate the issue more deeply, revealing the mechanisms of the motherhood wage penalty at play in specific segments of the labour market, such as gig work, or in specific occupations like pink-collar work (see the qualitative insights from Luhr (2020) as one of the few exceptions for the effect of parenthood in a specific sector in the US).

In line with earlier findings, our analysis also showed that long and generous parental leave relates to higher motherhood wage penalties, which may be due to detachment from the labour market and the consequent depreciation of skills. As the effects of a reduction in human capital are plausibly higher for highly skilled workers, we expected mothers in high-skilled occupations to be more (negatively) affected in countries with long and generous care leave. However, these expectations were not confirmed. Therefore, even when including Eastern European countries that helped to diversify our sample in terms of explanatory variables, our findings supported the earlier findings of Hallden et al. (2016), who did not find the effect differentiating across occupational groups.

Lastly, concerning cultural norms, our findings suggest that the negative effect of children on women's earnings is amplified even more in more traditional contexts relating to gender norms. The prevailing norms that see women primarily as caregivers guide the everyday actions of mothers, their family members and employers. The effect of prevalent values on the motherhood wage penalty seems to affect different occupational groups in the same way. Therefore, all women, irrespective of their labour market (occupational) position, are impacted by the negative effect of prevalent traditional gender norms.

We see our main contribution in adding additional evidence on the buffering effect of public childcare on the motherhood penalty and its cross-skill heterogeneity. Furthermore, we provided additional support for the *welfare paradox* and the importance of wider gender roles in revealing a universal detrimental effect of long parental leave and traditional gender norms on the motherhood penalty. Given that we extended our sample to cover all European countries, our sample was diverse in terms of different mixes of policies and norms, including countries with different gender regimes and parental working patterns, enabling us to explore universal patterns. Still, to reveal the importance of the interplay between norms and policies and their potential heterogeneities in penalising and benefitting mothers from different occupations would assume a different design and data. For instance, we might assume that in CEE, where almost all mothers work, regardless of norms and often out of necessity, the policy effect might be higher than in some southern European gender regimes where mothers active in the labour market already form a specific subsample of more career-oriented mothers.

As a policy implication, reducing the motherhood wage penalty requires more than expanding early childcare. While highly skilled mothers benefit most from such access, long parental leave and traditional gender norms deepen wage gaps across all groups. To avoid reinforcing labour market inequalities, gender equality policies must address occupational differences and ensure support measures reach women in all job sectors. This study also has limitations. We lack data on actual working hours, which would allow us to adjust earnings to the number of hours worked (i.e., hourly wages). However, as our central interest is (the level of) earnings in general, and specifically the effect of children on women's labour income, this limitation does not create a conceptual problem for the analysis. Annual earnings directly affect the consumption power of women with and without children and have implications for their pension entitlements in later life. Still, future analysis would benefit from the possibility to test for the robustness of the moderating effects of policies when also accounting for working hours. Furthermore, the current analysis exploits cross-sectional data, which allows us to test the association between children and earnings and the moderating effect of the institutional context. Any future research would benefit from both qualitative and quantitative evidence of the mechanisms at play, such as negotiations by mothers within the family and in the labour market in different institutional contexts to enhance the scientific understanding of the persistence of motherhood penalties in a more nuanced way. And last but not least, in the current paper, in order to test the effect of policies, we use a single-policy-measure approach. We do this for analytical clarity – analysing each policy separately allows us to isolate its specific impact, avoiding confounding effects from multiple policies. Still, this approach ignores the potential interactions between policies, which may reinforce or weaken the effect of each policy. So, while beyond the scope of the current paper, in the future research analysing policies separately could be complemented with welfare regime approach (Esping-Andersen, 1999), QCA (Hudson & Kühner, 2013; Lauri et al., 2020) or their combined (interaction) effects when relevant.

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The responsibility for all conclusions drawn from the data lies entirely with the authors.

Appendix 1. Descriptives

		Dependent Variable		Macro-level moderators				Occupation groups	
Country	Sample size	Motherhood penalty (raw income/ PPP)	Motherhood penalty (adjusted log income)	Early public childcare enrolment	Parental leave*	Gender norms 1**	Gender norms 2***	Proportion of high-skilled	Proportion of low-skilled
AT	1,366	-38.64	-0.72	20.00	49.35	1.96	2.62	65	35
BE	1,330	-1.35	-0.02	54.40	13.07	2.32	2.90	69	31
BG	1,476	-11.19	-0.17	16.20	69.73	1.86	2.79	42	58
CZ	1,765	-13.07	-0.47	9.10	46.92	2.23	2.74	60	40
CY	1,208	59.84	0.10	31.40	13.53	1.87	3.21	60	40
DE	2,166	-28.81	-0.23	29.80	42.60	2.29	2.87	78	22
DK	1,062	25.41	-0.04	63.20	26.52	2.88	3.03	71	29
EE	1,482	-14.86	-0.29	28.30	84.38	2.20	2.99	60	40
EL	2,967	11.73	-0.01	40.90	21.29	1.94	2.97	57	43
ES	3,172	14.58	0.02	50.50	16.00	1.99	3.29	54	46
FI	2,265	-0.20	-0.25	37.10	40.39	2.96	3.17	64	36
FR	2,433	-2.47	-0.11	50.00	18.02	2.40	3.32	59	41
HR	1,519	1.52	-0.03	17.80	40.95	2.19	3.04	51	49
HU	1,386	-9.20	-0.20	16.50	68.15	1.83	2.72	47	53
IT	3,546	1.43	-0.03	25.70	25.16	2.12	2.82	56	44
LT	931	-14.47	-0.37	20.80	62.00	1.96	2.71	59	41
LU	1,204	-16.23	-0.22	60.50	31.65	2.01	3.02	67	33
LV	1,251	-23.42	-0.44	27.40	51.63	1.80	3.10	58	42
MT	992	-14.19	-0.27	32.10	15.54	1.90	2.83	65	35
NL	2,355	-9.26	-0.20	56.80	16.00	2.63	2.93	72	28
PL	3,272	-2.99	-0.15	10.80	41.60	2.10	2.65	51	49
PT	3,204	-2.34	-0.01	50.20	20.39	1.99	2.98	51	49
RO	1,312	-1.54	-0.03	13.20	na	2.08	2.65	48	52
SE	1,547	6.24	0.48	49.30	34.58	3.04	3.36	67	33
SI	2,748	14.37	-0.30	46.30	48.43	2.20	2.93	57	43
Source	*EU-Silc 2018*	*EU-Silc 2018*	*EU-Silc 2018*	*OECD 2018*	*OECD 2018*	*Eurobarometer 2014*	*Eurobarometer 2014*	*EU-Silc 2018*	*EU-Silc 2018*

* Duration of leave in weeks multiplied by payment rate (as a percentage of average earnings) received by the claimant over the duration of the leave

** "All in all family life suffers when the mother has full-time work" (1 – Totally agree … 4 – totally disagree)

*** "Women are less willing than men to make a career for themselves" (1 – Totally agree … 4 – totally disagree)