

Executive summary

Germany has made great strides in reforming policies that support working families and promote equal partnership among parents in couple families. In the past, labour market institutions, public policies, and social norms reinforced traditional gender roles especially in West Germany, but social policy reforms over the last decade – such as parental leave reform and greater public investment in early childhood education and care (ECEC) supports – have increased opportunities for parents to find a better work/family balance.

This policy shift was accompanied and influenced by significant changes in attitudes and perceptions in Germany. The share of the population in Germany, for example, that believes mothers should not work at all when they have a pre-school aged child has halved in the decade to 2012. After Sweden, the population in Germany now is the most egalitarian in their attitudes towards the sharing of parental leave between the mother and the father. Compared to 2007, there are now fewer concerns over the financial cost of having children and more Germans consider their country as child-friendly. Yet, despite recent increases the total fertility rate (TFR) in Germany is still below the OECD average and German parents are still more likely than most in Europe to report work/life conflict.

Considerable challenges to parents' work-life balance persist. Overall, the main earner model continues to dominate in German families, albeit in a modified form: partnered fathers work, often long hours, while partnered mothers now tend to work part-time, rather than not at all. At home women do most of the unpaid work and spend much more time with the children than fathers.

A new German family policy approach aims to provide parents and children more time together through fostering a more equal partnership in the sharing of work and family life responsibilities (“Partnerschaftlichkeit”). Extending ECEC supports gives both parents better opportunities to combine work and care commitments. Building on the 2007 reform, the 2015 parental leave reform facilitates parents' ability to take leave on a part-time basis and grants a partnership bonus for at least four months when both parents work around 25-30 hours per week. Furthermore, efforts are underway in co-operation with social partners and other stakeholders to make working conditions more consistent with family life.

A more equal sharing of work/life balance opportunities and responsibilities between partners is good for the well-being of families. Equal sharing allows fathers to spend more time with their children, which in turn supports child development. And it gives mothers greater scope to pursue their labour market aspirations, strengthens their long-term labour force attachment and pension entitlements, and strengthens both their financial independence and their families' resources.

This report places the German experience with promoting equal partnership in families in an international perspective. It provides an overview of outcomes, driving factors, issues and policies to overcome obstacles to families spending more time together and a more equal gender balance in employment. These obstacles include:

long working hours, especially for fathers, that complicate combining paid work with family life; insufficient child care and after-school supports for working parents; and traditional gender patterns that develop at home after child birth, especially when mothers rather than fathers take time off or reduce working hours to care for young children. For that reason the debate in Germany over working-time flexibility and a more equitable sharing of work and family responsibilities between parents with small children involves “vollzeitnah” or “reduced full-time working hours” – a term not in common international use.

Promoting partnerships in which fathers and mother share the responsibility for children equally is good for families and their well-being, and also produces a range of less tangible, albeit important, social goods, like better father-child bonding and promoting egalitarian gender norms across generations. A family working-time model as currently debated in Germany could provide families with more time for each other and, if fathers and mothers were both to work reduced hours on a temporary basis, pursue their labour market career on a full-time basis as children grow up, could sustain labour supply and contribute to a marked reduction of gender pay and pension gaps. In all, a more gender-balanced sharing of work family responsibilities could ensure inclusive growth in future.

This review aims to support the German Government in its policy to promote equal partnerships in families. Recommendations include (for the full list see Chapter 1):

- *Continue to encourage more fathers to take up parental leave*, and monitor the effect of the 2015 “ElterngeldPlus” reform on fathers’ uptake of leave, and the sharing of working hours between the fathers and mothers of young children.
- Building on the experience with “Elterngeld” and “ElterngeldPlus”, *continue to develop family-policy measures*, including options for parents with young children to work reduced full-time hours for a specific period of time during which they may receive associated financial support.
- Having established the right to reduce working hours for family reasons, introduce the *right to increase working hours to full-time work* – or another level that fits their changing family circumstance – within a specified time frame.
- Building on the good progress in improving public investment in ECEC over the past 15 years, *continue to increase investment in, and ensure broader access to ECEC supports for young children*.
- Compared to investment in ECEC, Germany has to catch up regarding investment in out-of-school-hours (OSH) care supports: *greater investment and broader access to, out-of-school-hours care supports* for primary-school age children is needed.
- *Adjust the German tax-benefit system in order to encourage couples to share paid work equally* by improving financial incentives to work for second earners in couple families through, for example, a separate tax-free allowance for second earners.
- *Further extend the co-operation with social partners and other stakeholders to make workplace practices more conducive to family life*, through measures such as teleworking or allowing flexible work schedules.
- *Continue raising awareness of the benefits of equal partnerships in families*, also through initiatives aimed at fostering and sharing best practices at the local level.



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