



Inadequate childcare policies affect scientists' careers

By Janna Degener

Published on EuroScientist: www.euroscientist.com

The inadequacy of childcare policies across Europe, means that scientists who do not wish to be away from their lab for too long are struggling to balance their life as parents and as researchers. There are still some significant decisions concerning harmonisation of such childcare provision to be made in Europe, while further policy support would be welcome.

Being able to perform scientific research while raising children is a balancing act that requires highly flexible work arrangements, and could do, in many countries, with additional policy support

Pauline Mattsson loves her job as a guest postdoctoral researcher at the WZB Berlin Social Science Center, funded by the Swedish Research Council. And she works hard to get ahead in her career. As a mother of two, she recognises the flexibility of her scientific occupation. She can live in Berlin, Germany, with her family even though she works for a Swedish university, the Medical Management Centrum at Karolinska Institutet in Stockholm. Every day she tries to spend a couple of hours of the afternoon with her kids and when they sleep at night or on the weekends she goes back to her desk. "I could not live the life I am living if I was not doing research," Mattsson says gratefully.

Read this post online: <http://www.euroscientist.com/inadequate-childcare-policies-affect-scientists-careers/>

EuroScience | 1, Quai Lezay-Marnésia | F-67000 Strasbourg | France
Tel +33 3 8824 1150 | Fax +33 3 8824 7556 | office@euroscience.org | www.euroscience.org

Still, it is a big challenge for her to manage both her scientific career and the children. The problems started arising when the kids were born. Back then, Pauline and her partner could not find a kindergarten for the babies. “In Sweden and Germany the system is very generous as long as you stay home until the kids are one year old. But as a scientist you cannot take a year off, as you would be getting off from research,” Mattsson says.

That is why, after the births of her children, she tried to continue working at home while taking care of her babies. With her first child she could work full time again after seven months because her partner then stayed at home. And the second child was looked after by a babysitter when she was four months old, even though this was a costly solution. “The system doesn’t support families in the cases where parents want/have to start working before the child is one. It is very difficult to find public childcare for children below one”, Mattson says.

Inadequate childcare

Of course, Mattsson is not alone. What’s more, the inadequacy of childcare provision, not only affects women, but also men. Estimates point to “8.4 % of men and 21.1% of women between 25 and 54 years old were inactive in 2012 due to the presence of young children in the family,” says Barbara Janta, analyst in the employment, education, social policy and population team at consultancy RAND Europe, based in Cambridge, UK. She referred to the reports on the [Use of childcare in the EU Member States](#) and on [Caring for children in Europe](#). “It is true to say that childcare responsibilities still affect women to a much greater extent than men. In contrast, fathers have higher rates of employment compared with childless men.”

The issue is largely a cultural one. “It is not due to science but due to the cultures of the different countries that the problem of childcare is more on the shoulder of women than men. But the role models and the family models are changing slowly and that affects scientists and other high educated women,” says Claudine Hermann, vice-president of the [European Platform of Women Scientists](#), retired professor of physics at the Ecole Polytechnique in Paris, France, with three children. Hermann claims that scientific institutions should invest more money to support female and male scientists with children to compensate the fact that the number of scientists with children [varies](#) much from country to country.

Indeed, limited, inadequate or overpriced childcare provisions in some European countries appears to be seriously detrimental to scientists’ careers. Even though it is impossible to generalise the issue for the whole of Europe, due to the [disparity](#) of childcare systems in place, the devil is in the details. Even when publicly funded childcare is available, that may be the case only on a part time basis. Thus, complicating the equation for working scientists who need to call upon complementary privately arranged childcare services.

Barcelona targets

[Many studies](#) deal with the arrangements and perspectives of childcare systems in the EU. And the European policy makers have long recognised the issue in general terms. Back in 2002, they established the [Barcelona targets](#), to improve the employment rate of young children’s parents to achieve greater gender equality in the workforce. Their aim was, by 2010, to provide childcare to at least 90% of children between 3 years old and the mandatory school age and at least 33% of the children under three.

This aim was not met by all the EU member states. And the childcare systems in some countries allowed parents only to work part-time. “If you think of the Netherlands for example that seem to be progressive in meeting all of the requirements, you see that a lot of women are in the labour force but overwhelmingly in part-time jobs,” says Melinda Mills, professor of sociology at the University of Oxford, UK who [evaluated](#) the achievements of the Barcelona targets. “So even though the Netherlands meet the targets in some ways, they actually don’t fully integrate women as equals into the labour force.”

For scientists, who double up as parents, part-time work is generally not an option anyway because the competition is high. “In some countries, people with part-time jobs get insurance benefits and work protection like fulltime workers so that they are in a less marginalised position,” says [Melinda Mills](#). “As a full professor and academic I

know that once you achieve a certain level in academic or other organisations it is very difficult to hold a managerial position if you work part-time,” notes Mills.

Informal childcare is often not a viable option for scientists either because they are expected to be internationally mobile. Grand-parents normally do not typically live nearby. And contacts with neighbours takes time to develop, Mills says.

Therefore, scientists with children often work fulltime in order to meet tenure track criteria and sometimes to fulfil their ambition to be eligible to become a professor. They benefit from the flexibility of working hours and places. But this autonomy goes hand in hand with the tendency to overwork that has the potential to harm health and family relations.

Emulating best practice

Childcare systems across Europe therefore need to become adequate, affordable and flexible enough to provide reliable support. And this is necessary, not only for scientists with children, but for other professionals who don't want to or who can't afford to stay at home or reduce working hours: “The system should support and encourage families that don't follow the norm,” Mattson says. But there is still a long way to reach this goal.

The trouble is that childcare systems in Europe still differ enormously, in quality and quantity – mainly due to [historical reasons](#). However, some best practice models have been tried and tested. According to a 2007 European Parliament report, called [The cost of childcare in EU countries](#), the most effective policies are those that offer a combination of maternity/paternity leaves for the period immediately following birth, and part-time jobs and childcare facilities for the following years.

That's the case in the Nordic countries, for example, according to Willem Adema, senior economist in the social policy division of OECD Paris, France, leader of a team of analysts of family and children policies and responsible for the online [OECD Family database](#). There, the States try to provide a continual of support throughout early childhood by paying parental leave of around one year. Finland, for example, has Home Care leave until the child is three years.

In Scandinavian countries, this approach is often complemented by systems of childcare support until children enter primary school at age 7, and a system of out-of-school hours care for school children up to age 11 or 12. As a result, the EP report states, both fertility and female participation rates are very high. Meanwhile, the negative effects on women's career and income perspectives seem to be rather modest.

[France](#) has a similarly comprehensive support system especially when it concerns children age 3 years and over. Meanwhile, the country has been [reducing](#) the duration of the primary school day and making local authority responsible for offering childcare in the form of supervised after school activities.

By contrast, in Southern European countries, there is a greater informal care support, often by relatives. This is change from countries like the Netherlands, Germany, Switzerland and the UK. There, people are more likely to find work-life/balance solutions by reducing their working hours, and many women work part-time in these countries. By comparison, countries in Central and Eastern Europe, such as in Czech and Slovak Republics and in Hungary, often have very long periods of paid leave before children enter pre-school according to Adema. And they experienced a clear downward tendency with regards to childcare facilities during the 1990, according to a comparative [review](#) of 30 European countries. “In some of these countries the (economic and social) climate for childcare services has improved over the last few years but in others shortages remain.

Clearly, harmonisation at the European level is needed. According to the 2007 report, entitled [The Cost of Childcare in EU Countries](#), this is true for the quantity and quality of the supply of care services, the affordability of care services for families among others things.

In line with such wide diversity of approach to childcare, the social acceptability of relying on childcare facilities differs across European countries. In her social environment, in Germany, Swedish scientist Pauline Mattson often feels misunderstood: “I don't know any family in Germany where both men and women are working fulltime. People often

Read this post online: <http://www.euroscientist.com/inadequate-childcare-policies-affect-scientists-careers/>

discuss what is best for the children but I don't think that children staying home with their parents until they are a year and a half old are happier than children in countries who spend more time in formal childcare especially for children below one."

Photo credit: [Phil Dowsing Creative](#)