



## Exploring Maternity Leave Policies in European Union Countries: A Legislative Review

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### Abstract:

**Background:** The European Union promotes gender equality, and it has implemented comprehensive policies to support families and promote work-life balance, including maternity leave regulations. This paper aimed to provide a review of maternity leave regulations in the European Union.

**Methods:** A review of the legislative framework was carried out for each of the 27 EU member states by researching the online institutional repositories. Population size, gross domestic product, gross domestic product per capita, unemployment rate, and the average number of children in each family were the factors taken under consideration.

**Results:** The EU has set a minimum standard of 14 weeks of fully paid maternity leave. However, several EU countries offer over 30 weeks of paid maternity leave, as well as additional parental leave, paid paternity leave, and flexible work arrangements to support families. The country with the longest maternity leave is Sweden, whose laws grant a considerable number of days (up to 480 in between the two parents). This might be a crucial factor of the welfare system that sees the highest EU average in children per household percentage.

**Conclusion:** While progress has been made in Europe with regard to family policies and maternity leave, there is still room for a better promotion of workplace gender equality.

**Keywords:** Maternity leave, European union countries, Health policies, Review, Occupational health, Work-life balance.

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

Maternity leave legislation in the European Union (EU) stands as a vital component of social policy, reflecting the region's commitment to gender equality, labor rights, and family support. Over the years, these regulations have evolved, adapting to changing societal norms and economic demands. The EU, composed of 27 diverse member states, each with its own historical and cultural context, has navigated the complex task of harmonizing maternity leave legislation while respecting national sovereignty [1].

Maternity leave is a right that allows mothers to take care of their newborns during the last weeks of pregnancy and in the first days of life. This is one of the measures implemented by the Italian National Social Security Institute and falls within the scope of social security forensics [2]. Maternity legislation, often seen as a fundamental human right, serves a dual purpose. It not only supports mothers during a significant period of their lives, but also contributes to broader social and economic goals. These goals encompass promoting women's workforce participation, addressing gender inequalities, and ensuring the well-being of children [3].

Gender equality is a fundamental principle that underpins the well-being and progress of society worldwide. Recognizing the importance of achieving gender equality, governments around the world have implemented various policies and regulations aimed at promoting equal opportunities for men and women in all aspects of life, including occupational [4]. One critical area where gender equality is pursued is in the realm of family well-being, particularly concerning maternity leave provisions [5-9].

Borrell *et al.* [10] and Pfau-Effinger [11] found that gender inequality in employment outcomes varies from country to country, indicating them to be impacted by many variables, such as cultural and social values, as well as legislative and political regimes. Through the establishment of laws, such as paid maternity leave, governments are essential in the process of reducing gender disparities. The implementation of such work-family policies can lead to improvements in women's health and well-being, by minimizing the conflict between work and family responsibilities; furthermore, these policies provide mothers with time to physically recover from childbirth, bond with their children, and adapt to new roles, by providing job protection and by minimizing the amount of stress that women experience because of balancing work and family responsibilities [7, 12].

The EU has long been at the forefront of advocating for gender equality and has implemented comprehensive policies to support families and promote work-life balance. Maternity leave regulations in the EU member states, such as Directive 2019/1158, play a vital role in ensuring that women balance their professional and family responsibilities. These regulations are designed to protect the rights of women during pregnancy and childbirth, while also aiming to reduce gender-based discrimination

and support equal participation of men and women in the workforce [13, 14].

This paper aimed to provide a comprehensive analysis of maternity leave regulations in the European Union, with a particular focus on their impact on gender equality and family well-being. Moreover, this research would contribute to the existing literature by highlighting best practices and lessons learned from EU member states' experiences in implementing maternity leave policies. It will provide valuable insights for policymakers, researchers, and advocates striving to advance gender equality, suggesting evidence-based strategies that can be employed to improve existing frameworks and address the challenges faced in achieving gender-balanced work-life arrangements.

This work is part of a series of European and global regulatory reviews conducted by our research group [15-18].

## 2. MATERIALS AND METHODS

A review of the legislative framework was carried out for each of the 27 member states of the European Union. This was accomplished by researching the online institutional repositories of the European Union, as well as the websites and archives of the Ministries of Health, National Institutes of Health, or ministries focused on the social affairs of the countries that were selected. The purpose of this research study was to screen information regarding maternity leave legislation in accordance with population size, Gross Domestic Product (GDP), gross domestic product per capita, unemployment rate, and the average number of children in each family.

The search was then extended to include the scientific literature by using the PubMed database to extract publications related to maternity leave, with an emphasis on laws or policies implemented explicitly to address this issue. When no regulations were identified in the databases on the official government websites, the search was expanded to include scientific literature. "Maternity leave" AND law\* OR legislation OR policy OR policies AND chosen country\* was the search query that we used.

The national archives were reviewed in their original language to determine the national laws that were in place in each country at the time of the search (labor code, civil code rules related to social policies, occupational health, safety legislation, and so on), with a particular emphasis on maternity leave policies.

Publications addressing maternity leave for each EU nation were included and reviewed for the appropriate laws specified in the study. For the scientific literature review, papers from six years (January 2018-January 2024) were selected as required using PubMed.

## 3. RESULTS

### 3.1. Austria

With a population of around 9 million inhabitants, Austria has a GDP (Gross Domestic Product) of approximately 480 billion dollars and a GDP per capita of

around 54,000 dollars. Furthermore, as of 2021, it had an unemployment rate of 6.2%. The average number of children per family in Austria is 1.5 and the average age of pregnant women is 29.7. The most current law [19] on maternity leave divides it into two parts: a mandatory period called “*Mutterschutz*” and an optional “*Elternkarenz*”. The first occurs during the 8 weeks before and after the birth (16 total), during which there is a complete ban on the mother's work. In case of cesarean, premature, or multiple births, the period after the birth is extended to at least 12 weeks. The second period can last until the child is two years old. It is optional but, at the same time, a lawful right, and therefore cannot be refused by the employer. During the leave period, one is also protected from dismissal. The leave period is a given right for both parents and can be divided between them a maximum of two times. During the leave period, one is entitled to a monthly allowance “*Kinderbetreuungsgeld*”, which is provided in two ways to choose from: the first is the salary-linked allowance “*Einkommensabhängiges Kinderbetreuungsgeld*”, which is paid until the child is one year old and amounts to approximately 80% of the mother's salary. The second is the general allowance “*Kinderbetreuungsgeldkonto/Pauschalssystem*”. This model is independent of having worked or not worked before birth. It makes available a fixed amount of about €12,000 for one parent, and €15,000 if both parents apply for leave. The amount is paid for a minimum period of 12 months (about €1,000 monthly) or up to 28 months (about €430 per month) [20].

### 3.2. Belgium

With a population of 11.5 million and a GDP of about 594 billion dollars (51,000 dollars per capita), Belgium has an unemployment rate of 6.3%. The average age of pregnancy is 29.2, with 1.6 average children per household. According to the most recent legislation on parental leave [21], maternity leave is 15 weeks for employees and 12 weeks for self-employed mothers (in the case of twin pregnancies, the leave is 17 weeks and can be extended up to 19 weeks). Employees cannot work during the seven-day period prior to the expected date of delivery, or during the nine weeks after the day of delivery; the remaining maternity leave weeks may be taken either before or after childbirth. During maternity leave, the maternity allowance is calculated according to the worker's salary: 82% during the first 30 days, and 75% from the 31st day.

### 3.3. Bulgaria

Bulgaria has a population of almost 7 million people, a GDP of about 84 billion dollars with 12,000 dollars per capita, and an unemployment rate of 5.3%. The average pregnancy age is 26.4 years, with 1.5 children per household. Maternity leave [22] in Bulgaria extends for 410 days, beginning 45 days before the due date of childbirth. If the birth occurs before the 45-day period has ended, the remaining days can be used after the birth. The daily allowance is calculated as 90% of the average gross daily income and cannot be more than the average daily

wage; however, the benefits cannot be less than the Bulgarian minimum monthly salary (650 BGN, about 360 USD).

### 3.4. Cyprus

Cyprus has a population of over 1.2 million people, with a GDP of 28 billion dollars (31,551 per capita) and an unemployment rate of 7.5%. The average age of pregnancy is 30 years, with 1.38 average children per household. Maternity leave, according to current legislation [23], is 18 weeks, starting between the ninth and second week preceding the expected birthdate, 16 weeks in the case of adoption, or 14 weeks in the case of surrogate mothers. For twin pregnancies, the period is increased by 4 weeks for each child. Maternity allowance is 72% of the salary for 18 weeks.

### 3.5. Croatia

With a population of almost 4 million people, Croatia has a GDP of almost 69 billion dollars with 17,685 per capita, and an unemployment rate of 7.6%. The average age of pregnancy is 29 years and the average number of children per household is 1.38. In Croatia, compulsory maternity leave is established by the current legislation [24] for a continuous period of 98 days, including 28 days before the expected day of delivery and 70 days after the birth of the child. After the compulsory leave, the mother has a right to extend the maternity leave up until six months from the birth of the child. Child allowance during maternity leave is 100% of the mother's allowance.

### 3.6. Czech Republic

Czech Republic has a population of over 10 million people, with 282 billion dollars of GDP, 26,821 dollars per capita GDP, and an unemployment rate of 2.8%. The average age of pregnancy is 28.5 years, with 1.5 children per household. The maternity leave [25] can last up to 28 weeks, starting 6 to 8 weeks before and 20 to 22 weeks after birth. Maternity allowance is equal to 80% of the mother's average salary for the past 12 months. Furthermore, a parent who personally cares for the child is entitled to parental allowance [26] (up to a total amount of 300,000 CZK, up to 4 years of child's age; for twins or more children born at the same time, the total amount extends to 450,000 CZK).

### 3.7. Denmark

Denmark has a population of 5.8 million people, with a 398 billion dollars GDP (68,000 per capita). The unemployment rate is 5.1%. The average age of maternity is 29.8, with an average of 1.7 children per household. The length of maternity leave [27] in Denmark is 18 weeks, starting from 4 weeks before the expected birth date and 14 weeks following birth. The first 2 weeks after the birth are compulsory. In the case of adoption, parental leave can be taken from the day the child is received (32 weeks shared between the parents). During maternity leave, the mother is entitled to an allowance of 100% of her average daily wage, provided by the Danish Social Insurance Board.

### 3.8. Estonia

With a population of 1.330 million people, Estonia has a GDP of 37 billion dollars (28,000 per capita) and a 6.2% unemployment rate. The average pregnancy rate is 28.2, with 1.6 children per household. In Estonia, maternity leave [28] can be extended for a maximum of 100 consecutive days. An employed mother can use maternity leave up to 70 days before the child's expected date of birth and 30 calendar days after the child's expected date of birth. In case of complications during pregnancy or childbirth, twin pregnancy, or a child with disability, the mother can request a longer maternity leave of up to 156 days. During maternity, the mother is entitled to a financial allowance provided by the Social Insurance Authority of Estonia, equal to 80% of her average daily income for the previous year, up to a maximum of 100 euros per day.

### 3.9. Finland

Finland has a population of 5.5 million people, with a GDP of 297 billion dollars (54,000 per capita) and an employment rate of 7.6%. The average age of maternity is 29.5 years, with 1.7 average children per household. Maternity leave [29] in Finland can be availed from 50 working days before the date of childbirth and must be taken 30 working days before the due date at the latest. The Finnish Social Insurance Institution pays maternity allowance from the start of the maternity leave for 105 working days. Interestingly, in Finland, an added maternity allowance can be claimed if the mother must be absent from work before the established period due to work exposure to chemical substances, radiation, or infectious diseases, on the condition that these risk factors are unavoidable at work, and no other duties can be arranged during the pregnancy. Financial maternity allowance is calculated based on the mother's income in the 180 days before the pregnancy.

### 3.10. France

France has a population of over 67 million people, with a GDP of 2,960 billion dollars (43,659 per capita) and a 7.9% unemployment rate. The average age of pregnancy is 28.9 years old, and the average number of children per household is 1.9. Maternity leave [30] is regulated by the French Labour Code (Code du travail), and it includes prenatal and postnatal leave. Its legal duration varies depending on the number of expected and already existing children. The prenatal leave is set at 6 weeks, but it can be 8 weeks if the mother already has two children, up to 12 weeks for a pregnancy with two twins, or 24 weeks for a pregnancy with more than two expected children. Postnatal leave is set at 10 weeks, but it can be prolonged to 18 weeks if the mother has two children already, and up to 22 weeks for twins. Parental allowance [31] is equal to the mother's average pay in the 3 months before prenatal leave.

### 3.11. Germany

Germany has a population of about 83 million people

and a GDP of 4,160 billion dollars (49,870 per capita). The unemployment rate is 3.7%. The average pregnancy age is 29.9 years old, with 1.5 children per household. Maternity leave [32] in Germany has a duration of at least 14 weeks, 6 before birthdate and 8 after; however, maternity leave can be extended to 18 weeks in case of multiple births or complications during pregnancy with 12 weeks of leave after delivery. The first 6 weeks are mandatory and must be taken immediately after the birth of the child. Paternal allowance is set at 100% of the mother's salary for the last 3 months of employment for the entire maternity leave. Furthermore, mothers insured with the German mandatory insurance are entitled to an allowance of 204 euros per year for the first and second child, 210 for the third, and 235 for the fourth and other children, until the child reaches 25 years of age [33].

### 3.12. Greece

Greece has a population of over 10 billion people, with a GDP of over 168 billion dollars, and a GDP per capita of 15,619 dollars. The unemployment rate is 15.8%. The average age of pregnancy is 30.7 years, with 1.3 average children per household. Maternity leave [34] in Greece has a duration of 17 weeks (19 in twin pregnancies). It is possible to request parental leave of up to 2 years; however, the additional time is unpaid and must be shared between the parents. Parental allowance [35] can be claimed within 12 months after the birth of the child: 2000 euros for the first child, 2100 for the second, and 2200 for the third and subsequent children.

### 3.13. Hungary

Hungary has a population of 9.7 billion people, an average GDP of 181 billion dollars, and a GDP per capita of 18,728 dollars. The unemployment rate is 4.1%. The average age for maternity is 28.4 years, with 1.5 children per household. Maternity leave [36] in Hungary is set at 24 weeks (37 in multiple pregnancies), and at least 6 weeks must be taken after childbirth. The leave period can be extended in cases of multiple pregnancies or complications during pregnancy or childbirth. In addition, in the case of a mother's death during childbirth, maternity leave may be granted to the father. Maternity allowance is set at 80% of the average salary for the previous year of employment and is paid for by the National Institute of Health and Welfare Insurance (NEAK). One parent [37] is entitled to an additional leave after maternity leave is over, up until the child reaches the age of 2 years old, as well as entitled to a childcare fee (GYED) at a rate of 70% of the salary up to twice the minimum wage.

### 3.14. Ireland

Ireland has a population of a little over 5 million people, with a GDP of 386 billion dollars and a GDP per capita of 78,670 dollars. The unemployment rate in Ireland is 5.2%. The average age of pregnancy is 30.9 years old, with 1.8 average children per household. Maternity leave [38] in Ireland is set at 42 weeks. At least 2 weeks must be taken before birth and 4 weeks after the baby is born.

Mothers cannot be fired from employment for at least 6 months after the end of maternity leave. A monthly parental allowance [39] of 140 euros is granted for the first child, 140 euros for the second child, and 148 euros for each subsequent child, up to 16 years of age.

### 3.15. Italy

Italy has a population of over 60 million people, with a 1,706 billion dollars GDP (28,200 GDP per capita). The unemployment rate is 9.5%. The average age of pregnancy is 31.4 years old, with 1.3 children per household. Maternity leave [40] in Italy is mandatory for five months (usually two before the birthdate and three after, but this can be changed to one month before and four after [41] birthdate if the mother requests it), during which the mother receives 80% of her usual salary. Furthermore, parental leave can be taken for an additional 6 months, receiving 30% of the usual salary (these additional months are optional and can be taken up until the child is three years old or three years from the adoption of the child).

### 3.16. Latvia

Latvia, a country with a population of about 1.8 million people, boasts a GDP of around 40 billion dollars, equivalent to a per capita GDP of about 21,100 dollars. In 2021, the unemployment rate in Latvia was recorded at 7.5%, a significant figure considering the country's economic climate. The fertility rate in Latvia includes an average of 1.5 children per family unit and the average age of pregnant women is 27.3 years. The most recent legislation [42] on maternity leave states 16 weeks (the first 6 weeks before birth). The leave allowance is provided and is equal to 80% [43] of the previous salary.

### 3.17. Lithuania

Lithuania, a country with a population of about 2.8 million people, boasts a GDP of around 66 billion dollars, equivalent to a per capita GDP of about 23,700 dollars. In 2021, the unemployment rate in Lithuania was recorded at 7.1%. The fertility rate in Lithuania includes an average of 1.5 children per family unit and the average age of pregnant women is 28.2 years. As for maternity leave [44], 18 weeks are allotted (10 weeks before delivery and 8 weeks after). The leave allowance is provided and is equal to 77.58% [45] of the previous salary.

### 3.18. Luxembourg

Luxembourg, a country with a population of about 640,000 people, boasts a GDP of around 85 billion dollars, equivalent to a per capita GDP of about 125,006 dollars. In 2021, the unemployment rate in Luxembourg was recorded at 5.1%. The fertility rate in Luxembourg includes an average of 1.5 children per family unit and the average age of pregnant women is 31 years. Regarding legislation on maternity leave [46] in Luxembourg, the duration of such leave is 20 weeks (8 weeks before and 12 weeks after the birth), and an additional week for each child born. The leave allowance is provided and is equal to 100% [47] of the previous salary.

### 3.19. Malta

Malta, a country with a population of about 518,000 people, boasts a GDP of around 17.3 billion dollars, equivalent to a per capita GDP of about 33,500 dollars. In 2021, the unemployment rate in Malta was recorded at 3.5%. The fertility rate in Malta includes an average of 1.3 children per family unit and the average age of pregnant women is 29.3. With respect to maternity leave [48], 18 weeks are normally provided, and 20 weeks are allotted in the case of multiple births (14 weeks paid by the employer and 4 weeks paid by the social security department). There are several economic benefits that can be claimed by parents, such as the one-time "childbirth grant" of 300 euros or the "family tax bonus" of 300 euros up to age 16.

### 3.20. Netherlands

The Netherlands, a country with a population of about 17.5 million people, boasts a GDP of around 1,010 billion dollars, equivalent to a per capita GDP of about 57,700 dollars. In 2021, the unemployment rate in the Netherlands was recorded at 4.9%. The fertility rate in the Netherlands has an average of 1.6 children per family unit and the average age of pregnant women is 30.2 years. Regarding legislation on maternity leave [49] in the Netherlands, 16 weeks or 20 weeks (in case of multiple births) are provided.

### 3.21. Poland

Poland, a country with a population of approximately 37.5 million people, boasts a GDP of around \$679 billion, equivalent to a per capita GDP of about \$18,000. In 2021, the unemployment rate in Poland was 3.4%. Additionally, the number of children per household in Poland is approximately 1.3 children and the average age of pregnant women is 27.9 years. With respect to maternity leave legislation [50-52], it has a duration of 20 weeks, of which 2 weeks are mandatory before the expected date of delivery. The remaining 18 weeks can be used at any time within the first 12 months after the birth of the child. The leave allowance is provided and is equal to 100% of the mother's average salary.

### 3.22. Portugal

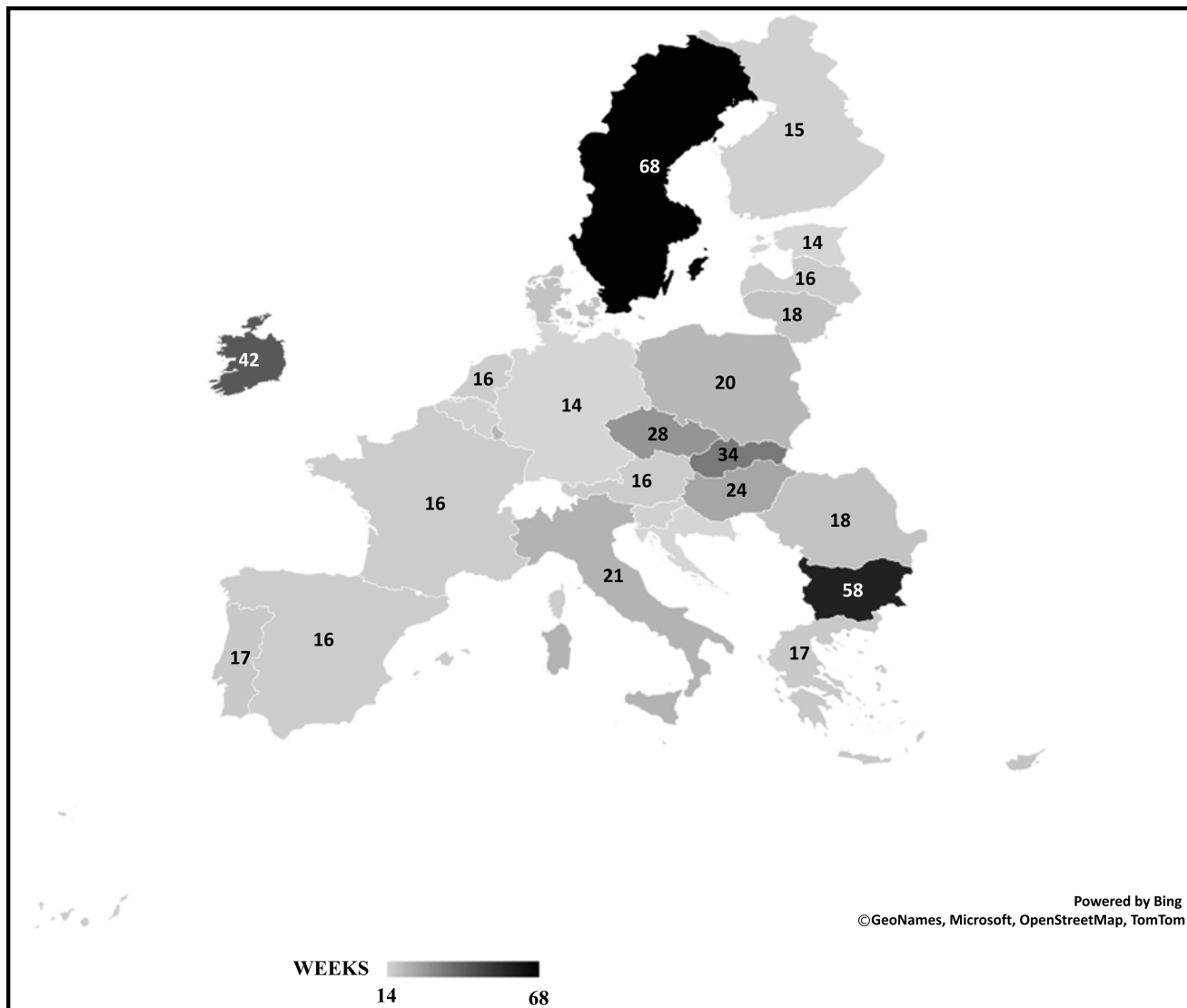
Portugal, a country with a population of approximately 10.3 million people, boasts a GDP of around \$254 billion, equivalent to a per capita GDP of about \$24,500. In 2021, the unemployment rate in Portugal was 5.5%. Additionally, the number of children per household in Portugal is approximately 1.3 children and the average age of pregnant women is 30.2 years. Regarding maternity leave legislation [53], it includes a duration of 120 days, which can be extended to 150 days in case of multiple births. The leave allowance is provided and is equal to 80% of the mother's average salary.

### 3.23. Romania

Romania, a country with a population of approximately 19 million people, boasts a GDP of around \$284 billion, equivalent to a per capita GDP of about \$14,800. In 2021, the unemployment rate in Romania was 5.6%.

Additionally, the number of children per household in Romania is approximately 1.4 children and the average age of pregnant women is 27.1 years. With regard to maternity leave legislation [54], it has a duration of 126

working days, of which at least 42 days must be postpartum. The leave allowance is provided and is equal to 85% of the mother's average salary.



**Fig. (1).** Maternity leave in weeks in EU countries.

**Note:** Directive 2019/1158/EU has set a minimum period of 14 weeks of maternity leave. The EU countries exceed 14 weeks (except for Croatia, Estonia, and Germany), with Ireland, Bulgaria, and Sweden exceeding 40 weeks.

### 3.24. Slovak Republic

The Slovak Republic, a country with a population of about 5.5 million people, boasts a GDP of about \$116.5 billion, equivalent to a GDP per capita of about \$21,400. In 2021, the unemployment rate in the Slovak Republic was 6.8%. Furthermore, the number of children per household in the Slovak Republic is approximately 1.5 children and the average age of pregnant women is 27.2 years. With regard to maternity leave legislation [55], it has a duration of 34 weeks, of which the first 6 weeks are mandatory for the mother, and the remainder can be shared with the father. If more than one child is born, maternity leave is extended by an additional 2 weeks for each child. The leave allowance is provided and is equal to 80% of the mother's average salary.

### 3.25. Slovenia

Slovenia, a country with a population of about 2 million people, boasts a GDP of about USD 62 billion, equivalent to a GDP per capita of about USD 29,200. In 2021, the unemployment rate in Slovenia was 1.5%. Furthermore, the number of children per household in Slovenia is about 1.5 children and the average age of pregnant women is 29 years. With regard to maternity leave legislation [56], it has a duration of 105 mandatory days, which must be taken before and/or after the birth of the child. In case of the birth of a child with a disability or serious chronic illness, the mandatory maternity leave is 180 days. The leave allowance is provided and is equal to 100% of the mother's average salary.

### 3.26. Spain

Spain, a country with a population of about 47.5 million people, boasts a GDP of about \$1.43 trillion, equivalent to a GDP per capita of about \$30,100. In 2021, the unemployment rate in Spain was 14.8%. Furthermore,

the number of children per household in Spain is approximately 1.3 children and the average age of pregnant women is 31.2 years. About maternity leave legislation [57], it has a duration of 16 weeks. In cases of multiple births, two additional weeks for each child from the second are provided. The leave allowance is provided and is equal to 100% of the mother's average salary.

### 3.27. Sweden

Sweden is a country with a population of about 10.5 million people, and it has a GDP of about \$635 million, equivalent to a GDP per capita of about \$61,000. In 2021, the unemployment rate in Sweden was 8.7%. Furthermore, the number of children per household in Sweden is approximately 1.9 children and the average age of pregnant women is 29.7 years. The maternity leave legislation [58, 59] lasts for a maximum of 480 days in total for each born or adopted child, of which at least 90 days must be taken by the mother and 90 days by the father. The rest of the leave may later be divided by the parents according to their personal preference. The maternity leave can begin 60 days before the expected date of delivery, and it can be extended in the case of a prolonged pregnancy or in the case of any medical complication. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, pregnant women at least 20 weeks along have been provided with pregnancy benefits since March 2021 to ensure their safety. The leave allowance is provided, and it is equal to 80% of the last salary received (Fig. 1 and Table 1).

## 4. DISCUSSION

Maternity leave and family policies in Europe have long been regarded as some of the most generous in the world. However, as countries continue to revise and update their policies, the following question remains: are policymakers doing enough to support families and women in the workforce?

**Table 1. Socioeconomic and demographic data of EU countries.**

Country	Population (million)	GDP* (billion dollars)	GDP per Capita (thousand dollars)	Unemployment Rate (%)	Children per Household	The Average Age of Pregnant Women	Maternity Leave
Austria	9	480	54	6.2	1.5	29.7	<b>Duration and fruition:</b> 16 weeks (8 before and 8 after delivery). 12 weeks for cesarean, premature, multiple births. It is obligatory to take leave.
Belgium	11.5	594	51	6.3	1.6	29.2	<b>Duration and fruition:</b> 15 weeks for employees. 12 weeks for self-employed mothers. Unemployed mothers have the same rights as employees.
Bulgaria	7	84	12	5.3	1.5	26.4	<b>Duration and fruition:</b> 410 calendar days or 58 weeks, from which 45 calendar days or 6.4 weeks must be taken before the expected date of birth. The first 135 days (19.3 weeks) are obligatory for mothers.
Cyprus	1.2	28	31	7.5	1.4	30	<b>Duration and fruition:</b> 18 weeks for the first kid, 22 weeks for the second, and 26 weeks for the third and subsequent children. Two weeks before the expected birth and the rest afterward are required.

(Table 1) contd....

Country	Population (million)	GDP* (billion dollars)	GDP per Capita (thousand dollars)	Unemployment Rate (%)	Children per Household	The Average Age of Pregnant Women	Maternity Leave
Croatia	3.8	69	18	7.6	1.4	29	<b>Duration and fruition:</b> 98 days (14 weeks) are mandatory (28 days before the expected date of delivery and 70 days after the birth).
Czech Republic	10	282	27	2.8	1.5	28.5	<b>Duration and fruition:</b> 28 weeks (6 to 8 weeks before and 20 to 22 weeks after birth). It is obligatory to take 14 weeks, including at least 6 weeks after the birth.
Denmark	5.8	398	68	5.1	1.7	29.8	<b>Duration and fruition:</b> 18 weeks (4 weeks before the birth and 14 weeks following birth). The first 2 weeks after the birth are compulsory.
Estonia	1.3	37	28	6.2	1.6	28.2	<b>Duration and fruition:</b> 100 calendar days (14 weeks). An employed mother can use maternity leave up to 70 days before the child's expected date of birth and 30 calendar days after the child's expected date of birth.
Finland	5.5	297	54	7.6	1.7	29.5	<b>Duration and fruition:</b> 105 working days or 15 weeks (for all types of leave, 1 calendar week consists of 6 working days): between 30 and 50 days must be taken before the birth. It is obligatory to take 2 weeks before and 2 weeks after birth.
France	67	2,960	44	7.9	1.9	28.9	<b>Duration and fruition:</b> 16 weeks; 26 weeks if the pregnant mother already has two children, and 34 weeks if the woman is expecting twins. Must be taken at least two weeks before the birth, and the remainder can be taken before or after.
Germany	83	4,160	50	3.7	1.5	29.9	<b>Duration and fruition:</b> 14 weeks, and 18 for multiple births (6 weeks before the birth and 8 weeks following the birth). It is obligatory to take eight weeks' leave after the birth.
Greece	10	168	16	15.8	1.3	30.7	<b>Duration and fruition:</b> 17 weeks, and 19 in twin pregnancies. 8 weeks must be taken before birth and 9 weeks after birth. It is obligatory to take the full amount of leave.
Hungary	9.7	181	19	4.1	1.5	28.4	<b>Duration and fruition:</b> 24 weeks, and 37 in multiple pregnancies. Must be taken up to four weeks prior to birth; however, two weeks are obligatory.
Ireland	5	386	79	5.2	1.8	30.9	<b>Duration and fruition:</b> 42 weeks. At least 2 weeks must be taken before birth and 4 weeks after the baby is born.
Italy	60	1,706	28	9.5	1.3	31.4	<b>Duration and fruition:</b> 5 months or 21 weeks (2 months before and 3 months after birth). Alternatively, the pregnant woman may work until birth if a medical specialist certifies that it is safe for her and the kid. This option can be chosen to receive five months of required maternity leave after the birth.
Latvia	1.8	40	21	7.5	1.5	27.3	<b>Duration and fruition:</b> 112 days or 16 weeks, of which 56 days are postnatal leave. According to the Labour Law, it is prohibited to employ a pregnant woman two weeks prior to the expected birth and a woman two weeks after the childbirth.
Lithuania	2.8	66	24	7.1	1.5	28.2	<b>Duration and fruition:</b> 18 weeks or 126 calendar days of which 70 days before delivery and 56 days after.
Luxemburg	0.6	85	125	5.1	1.5	31	<b>Duration and fruition:</b> 20 weeks (8 weeks before the birth and 12 weeks after). It is obligatory to take this leave.



(Table 1) contd....

Country	Population (million)	GDP* (billion dollars)	GDP per Capita (thousand dollars)	Unemployment Rate (%)	Children per Household	The Average Age of Pregnant Women	Maternity Leave
Malta	0.5	17	33	3.5	1.3	29.3	<b>Duration and fruition:</b> 18 weeks, and 20 weeks in the case of multiple births. 6 weeks must be taken following the birth, while a further eight weeks can be taken before or after birth. A further period of up to 4 weeks may be taken immediately after these 14 weeks. It is obligatory to take six weeks following the birth.
Netherlands	17.5	1,010	58	4.9	1.6	30.2	<b>Duration and fruition:</b> 16 weeks, and 20 weeks in case of multiple births. Leave must start 4 weeks before the birth, with 10 weeks to 12 weeks after the birth. If the birth is later than the expected date of delivery, the longer benefit period preceding childbirth is not deducted from the benefit period after childbirth. It is obligatory to take leave at least four weeks before and six weeks after the birth.
Poland	37	679	18	3.4	1.3	27.9	<b>Duration and fruition:</b> 20 weeks, including 2 required weeks before birth. No more than 6 weeks can be taken before birth. At least 14 weeks after birth are required. If a baby dies before the eighth week, the mother is entitled to eight weeks of leave and at least seven days after the death of a kid over eight weeks old.
Portugal	10.3	254	24	5.5	1.3	30.2	<b>Duration and fruition:</b> 120 days or 17 weeks, which can be extended to 150 days in case of multiple births. It is mandatory for the mother to take 42 calendar days (6 weeks) of leave following the birth. The remaining period may be divided by mutual agreement between the parents.
Romania	19.1	284	15	5.6	1.4	27.1	<b>Duration and fruition:</b> 18 weeks (126 working days), of which at least 42 days must be postpartum.
Slovak Republic	5.5	116	21	6.8	1.5	27.2	<b>Duration and fruition:</b> 34 weeks, of which the first 6 weeks are mandatory for the mother, and the remainder can be shared with the father. If more than one child is born, maternity leave is extended by an additional 2 weeks for each child.
Slovenia	2.1	62	29	4.7	1.5	29	<b>Duration and fruition:</b> 105 mandatory days or 15 weeks, which must be taken before and/or after the birth of the child. In case of the birth of a child with a disability or serious chronic illness, the mandatory maternity leave is 180 days.
Spain	47.5	1,430	30	14.8	1.3	31.2	<b>Duration and fruition:</b> 16 weeks. In cases of multiple births, two additional weeks for each child from the second are allotted. 6 weeks are obligatory and must be taken following the birth, while four of the remaining 10 optional weeks can be taken before the birth.
Sweden	10.5	635	61	8.7	1.9	29.7	<b>Duration and fruition:</b> Maternity leave lasts up to 480 days or 68 weeks per kid born or adopted, with the mother compulsorily taking 90 days and the father 90. The remaining leave can be divided among the parents as desired. Since being at danger during the COVID-19 pandemic, all women at least 20 weeks pregnant have started to receive pregnancy benefit since March 2021.

Note: \*GDP: Gross Domestic Product.

Currently, the minimum standard of 14 weeks of fully paid maternity leave is set by the EU for all member states, according to Directive 2019/1158/EU [60]. This directive was adopted in 1992 as part of EU efforts to

encourage gender equality in employment and address disparities between men and women in the workplace. The directive requires member states to provide a minimum of 14 weeks of maternity leave at full pay and protect the

health and safety of pregnant and breastfeeding workers. It also provides paid time off for antenatal appointments and allows for maternity leave to start before birth if the mother's health is at risk.

Currently, the average length of maternity leave in the 27 EU member states is 23.5 weeks. However, some countries go far beyond this minimum requirement. In fact, several EU countries offer over 30 weeks of paid maternity leave, as well as additional parental leave, paid paternity leave, and flexible work arrangements to support families. One of the most notable examples is Sweden, which offers a total of 480 days of paid parental leave, of which 90 days are reserved for fathers. This approach recognizes the importance of shared parental responsibility and aims to promote gender equality, as well as offers financial and social support to families.

Sweden appears to have the most extensive welfare state in Europe. The maternity legislation in this country has a distinctive characteristic: its gender-neutral nature. This implies that a certain number of days for parental leave is allocated to couples, giving them complete autonomy in determining how to distribute this time among themselves. Except for a period of 90 days, the remaining duration of parental leave may be passed to the other parent. Furthermore, the parent is entitled to take unpaid leave until the kid reaches 18 months of age. Throughout the whole of this duration, the remuneration amounts to 80% of the salary [58, 59].

Offering families the possibility to choose the parent able to use parental leave is an important step in household gender equality, as each family can choose the parent based on necessity, income, type of work, *etc.* Reserving parental leave at least partially for fathers allows both parents to establish a relationship with the child early on, which has proved important for the child's wellbeing [63]. Furthermore, policies similar to Sweden's may act as an important step in non-traditional households to allow parental leave to be used to its full extent, for example, in case of adoption.

Furthermore, from an economic point of view, it can be observed from the analysis of the Gross Domestic Product (GDP) and, above all, per capita product, that it is not a determining parameter in influencing the duration of maternity leave. In fact, considering the top five countries in terms of per capita income (Luxembourg, Ireland, Denmark, Sweden, and the Netherlands, respectively), only two out of five were above the average duration of maternity leave (23.5 weeks), that is, Sweden and Ireland.

The disparities highlighted by our review are noteworthy, especially regarding the maternity leave policy in Latvia (pregnant women cannot be employed in the two weeks before and after childbirth). Restricting employment opportunities for pregnant women is discriminatory and goes against the principles of equality and fundamental rights. It is encouraging, on the other hand, to observe how in Italy a more flexible approach is adopted, based on medical assessments, allowing women to continue working if they want to and if there are no

contraindications. The data underline the importance of promoting inclusive policies that respect women's rights.

When considering a worldwide context, it is evident that the United States does not provide any kind of paid paternity leave. Parental leave in the United States is subject to regulation by both federal and state labour laws. The Family and Medical Leave Act (FMLA), which was enacted in 1993, stipulates that individuals who are parents of infants or have recently adopted children have the right to take a duration of 12 weeks of leave without pay every year, contingent upon their employment with an organization that has a workforce consisting of 50 or more individuals. However, in the year 2020, the states of California, New Jersey, and Rhode Island took measures to tackle this issue by enacting a compulsory policy for paid parental leave. Notably, this policy was expanded to include employees irrespective of the size of the organization they are employed by, including those working in companies with 50 or less staff members [61, 62].

This review has highlighted Sweden and France to exhibit the highest average number of children per family, approximately 1.9. This trend could be attributed to the favorable maternity and parental leave policies in place within these countries.

It is interesting to note that Italy has one of the highest average ages of pregnant women in Europe, at 31.4 years. This may be due to a variety of factors, such as cultural values, education, and career opportunities. It is also worth mentioning that Italy's birth rate and length of leave policies are within the average of EU countries, which suggests that women in Italy are able to balance both their personal and professional lives.

This review has also highlighted the importance of work-family balance for women with children. During the COVID-19 pandemic, and with the recent and ongoing evolution of the workplace from a technological point of view, the need to distinguish work time and non-work time has become an important issue. In Sweden, additionally, pregnant women who reached a gestational age of at least 20 weeks were classified as vulnerable during the COVID-19 pandemic and were granted a pregnancy allowance starting from March 2021. Concerning the return to work after childbirth, it has been highlighted that a better work-life balance can be instrumental in ensuring the well-being of the mother; this was observed especially when policies were implemented at the company level rather than supervisor-based [63]. Work-life balance, as well as nurturing attitudes in parents, can have an important impact on the well-being and development of children. Furthermore, work-life balance has been highlighted to have a positive impact on the child's behavior and attitude. The work-life balance has been reported to not only have a positive impact on the employees, but on the employers as well, as organizational policies on work-life balance have been showcased to improve organizational performances [64, 65]. It is also important to note that better work-life balance established at company-level, and especially better maternity policies

implemented at a national level, may help reduce maternal stress, which has also been reported to act as a mediator between the mother's work-life balance and the child's wellbeing [66].

However, there are challenges to implementing these policies. One of the main concerns is the financial burden on employers and the state, as stakeholders and policymakers may be concerned that offering lengthy parental leave periods could be an impediment to overall economic growth and workplace productivity. However, as discussed in this review, family policies are essential to ensuring the long-term stability and sustainability of societies and the well-being of workers, as these policies have an important impact on women's career progression, particularly when it comes to their earning potential and advancement opportunities. While extended parental leave periods can provide significant support to families, they may also lead to career breaks and gaps in employment, making it more difficult for women to return to work and progress in their careers.

However, these policies might lessen parental stress and place less of a load on health insurance plans, as well as enable a lesser risk of potential child abuse, particularly in the current period, which is also burdened by the pandemic's effects [9]. Furthermore, these policies represent an essential step in the ongoing battle against the declining birthrate in Europe [67].

This study has involved some strengths and limitations. The review has provided a comprehensive exploration of maternity policies in all European Union countries, offering an overview of laws and policies as well as information concerning country populations, mean children per household, average age of the mother, and gross domestic product, thus offering a framework of the maternity policies in the context of these factors and a comparison of the European Union countries' policies. However, this study has included some limitations. Due to the nature of this review, a systematic approach has not been possible, and therefore, data have been gathered narratively from scientific databases, national and international repositories, and national legislation. Furthermore, since some legislations may have only been available in the country's national language, and the research has been performed by the authors in English, some information may have been missed due to a language barrier.

## CONCLUSION

A review of the current legislation on maternity leave in European Union countries has been performed in this study by searching grey literature, as well as national and international repositories. This review offered a comprehensive framework of maternity policies in EU countries, in the context of country-specific data (gross domestic product, average children per household, average age of the mother, *etc.*). This review aimed to be a starting point for stakeholders and policymakers to establish a shared standard concerning minimum maternity leave and other policies that may facilitate

parenthood for workers, while helping in maintaining a good work-life balance.

In conclusion, while progress has been made in Europe with respect to family policies and maternity leave, this review highlighted the need for shared EU policies regarding parental leave. This review could be a starting point for policymakers to improve on the current legislation to foster a balance between supporting families and businesses, while promoting gender equality, considering the long-term impact of family policies on women's career prospects. Through thoughtful, evidence-based policymaking and ongoing dialogue, we can continue to move towards a more family-friendly and equitable society.

## AUTHORS' CONTRIBUTION

It is hereby acknowledged that all authors have accepted responsibility for the manuscript's content and consented to its submission. They have meticulously reviewed all results and unanimously approved the final version of the manuscript.

## LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

EU	=	European Union
GDP	=	Gross Domestic Product

## CONSENT FOR PUBLICATION

Not applicable.

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## CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors declare no conflict of interest, financial or otherwise.

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