**Gender Inequality**

**Olivia Stokes**

**20465672**

**Critically assess the work and family policies of one high-income nation of your choosing. Be sure to describe how the policies have evolved, critically discuss the social, cultural, and political factors that underpinned these policy changes and, assess whether or not these policies promote a universal caregiver model.**

In Germany, the role of the state in supporting families with young children has undergone significant changes over time. The country has implemented various work and family policies, including public childcare, parental benefit, parental leave for childcare, entitlement to kindergarten, and maternity leave. This essay aims to critically assess the evolution of these policies in Germany, exploring the social, cultural, and political factors that have underpinned policy changes. Furthermore, this essay will examine whether these policies promote a universal caregiver model, a model that recognizes the need for both parents to share the responsibilities of caring for their children, regardless of gender. By critically analysing these policies, this essay will provide insights into the challenges and opportunities of promoting gender equality and supporting families in contemporary Germany.

The rise in female employment creates a paradoxical situation where demand for care increases while women's availability to provide unpaid domestic and care services diminishes. Women in high-income nations now have more opportunities for education and employment, which reduces their availability and willingness to provide care without compensation or work for low wages (Brennan & Adamson, 2018). In recent Germany, the Family Benefits Office provides child benefit payments to all parents, regardless of their income, to ensure that their children's basic needs are met. Married couples must decide which parent will claim the benefit, while the parent with primary custody should claim the benefit in cases of separation. Non-parents who are caring for a child can also claim child benefit. The benefit is paid monthly, either by bank transfer or in cash, and the amount is fixed at 250 euros per child per month as of 2023. In addition to child benefit, certain parents may be eligible for a supplementary child allowance of up to 250 euros per month per unmarried child under the age of 25 living in their household (IamExpat, n.d). The German family policy framework has historically been designed to reinforce the male-breadwinner model, which dictates a clear division of labour between men and women. According to this model, women, particularly those who are married, are expected to prioritize child-rearing over employment responsibilities. As a result, public policies have been crafted to support mothers as the primary caregivers (Gülzau, F., 2018).

The legal right to public childcare for three-year-old children was not established until 1996. In the 1990s, there was a significant shift in the discourse around the male-breadwinner model, particularly following the entrance of the Social Democrats and Greens into government in 1998 (Gülzau, F., 2018). The welfare state in Germany was perceived to be in crisis during this period, despite considerable expenditures on marriage-related tax allowances and benefits, they were deemed to provide inadequate value for money. The family policy system was faulted for its inability to accommodate "new social risks," such as child poverty and single parenthood and was viewed as worsening demographic issues and labour market shortages rather than addressing the welfare state's crisis. Reformers within the German Social Democratic Party (SPD) proposed the social investment paradigm as a potential solution. The Schröder administration (1998-2005) embraced the social investment paradigm, prioritizing gender equality, work-life balance, and expanded early childhood education and care (ECEC) during their election campaign and later in their coalition agreement (Gülzau, F., 2018). This changed with the advent of the "PISA shock," which drew attention to problems within the German education system and stimulated a debate on family policy reform. Policies aligned with this approach were justified by invoking "the economic appeal of the family," echoing arguments from the social investment paradigm. An example of a policy reflecting a departure from the traditional German family policy is the Parental Benefit and Parental Leave for Childcare of 2007. The policy aimed to increase fertility rates by reducing the opportunity costs associated with having children and facilitating the swift reintegration of mothers into the labour market. It replaced the previous flat-rate benefit with a wage-related component equivalent to 67% of previous earnings (capped at €1,800 per month), payable for a period of 12 months. This policy shift reflects the concept of the "working mother" who takes only a short break from work after giving birth and can be characterized as de-familializing. Along with the substantial expansion of ECEC facilities for children under three years old, the Parental Benefit and Parental Leave for Childcare marks a clear departure from the traditional family policy based on the male breadwinner model(Gülzau, F., 2018).

Parents have a legal entitlement to kindergarten placement for their children between three and five years old, but no such entitlement exists for younger or school-aged children. However, it is the responsibility of the federal states to ensure that demand for childcare is met. Typically, kindergartens are required to be self-sufficient, although government funding is available for kindergartens that are intended to meet the demand calculated by municipalities and counties (Peus, C., 2006). Over 90% of children aged three to five receive some form of childcare in Germany, although often on a part-time basis. In 2014, about 75% of these children spent less than seven hours per day in childcare (Splash db.eu, 2014). Institutional care for children under the age of three has a long history in the eastern part of the country, resulting in a high usage of care for this age group. In contrast, childcare in the western part of the country has traditionally focused on children aged three to five. In 2014, municipalities in the western part of Germany provided care for 27% of children under the age of three (Splash db.eu, 2014). In addition to the east-west divide, regional differences in the availability and characteristics of childcare exist due to the decentralized nature of the German system. Although the federal parliament establishes legal guidelines regarding childcare, the details concerning organization, fees, and schedules are mainly left to the states or municipalities, resulting in variations in regulations. Germany's current system of child benefits and tax allowances is a combination of various mechanisms for redistributing resources from childless individuals to families and from higher-income to lower-income families. Child benefits are paid in the form of monthly lump-sum payments per child, with the amount varying according to the number of children in the family. The benefit is typically paid until the child turns 18 years old, or until they reach the age of 25 if they are still in education. However, from the age of 18, the benefit is subject to means-testing based on the child's income. Whether parents are entitled to tax allowances in addition to the child benefit payments is determined by the tax authorities when the parents file their tax returns (Splash db.eu, 2014). The first unified income tax system of the German Empire, introduced in 1920, already included regulations allowing for tax deductions based on the number of children in a family. Direct child benefit payments were first introduced in the 1930s but were revoked in 1945. Monthly child benefits for families with many children were re-introduced in East Germany in 1950, and in West Germany in 1954. In subsequent reforms in both countries, these benefits have been extended to children of lower birth orders (Splash db.eu, 2014).

Following the birth of a child, parents are entitled to take time off work to care for their child and participate in family life. During this period, employers may only terminate the employment contract in exceptional cases, such as insolvency or business shutdown. Upon completion of parental leave, parents have the right to return to their previous employment level (The Federal Government, 2023). During this time, they can choose to either fully interrupt their employment for child-care purposes or work part-time between 15 and 30 hours per week. To ensure greater flexibility, parents can share the duration of parental leave between them and may also postpone a part of the leave until the child is eight years old. During the period of parental leave, which begins when it is claimed and ends upon completion, both mothers and fathers are protected against dismissals (Peus, C., 2006). In both the former East and West Germany, an extended maternity leave was the initial form of parental leave introduced in the 1970s (Splash db.eu, 2014). However, in 1986 both states introduced a new form of parental leave that could be taken by either the mother or father. This allows parents to take leave until the child turns three years old and provides for an earnings substitution payment until the child reaches 14 months, with two months reserved for one of the parents on a “use it or lose it” basis. This arrangement is intended to encourage fathers to take leave and participate more in childcare. The uptake by fathers has been increasing since its introduction, from 21% for children born in 2008 to 29% for children born in 2012 (Splash db.eu, 2014). 78% of the fathers who took leave for children born in 2012 did not take more than two months. Employed parents receive 67% of their average monthly income from the 12 months before birth. The monthly benefit is capped at 1,800 euros and parents with an income below 1,000 euros per month receive a stepwise adjusted benefit of between 67% and 100% of their previous income. Since 2011, budget cuts have led to a stepwise reduction of benefits for parents with an average individual income above 1,200 euros per month, though the benefit is not reduced to less than 65% of their previous income. Non-employed parents receive a minimum amount of 300 euros. For recipients of welfare, the parental leave benefit is paid but is treated as income and deducted from their welfare benefit (Splash db.eu, 2014).

Germany's work and family policies have changed significantly over the past few decades, reflecting the changing social, cultural, and political landscape of the nation. The government has implemented various measures to support working parents, including public childcare, parental benefits, and parental leave for childcare. These policies have been influenced by a variety of factors, such as changing gender roles, the need for a skilled workforce, demographic shifts, and the country's economic and political environment. The policies on parental leave and parental benefit allow both parents to take time off work to care for their child, and the entitlement to kindergarten from the age of three promotes the use of public childcare services. These policies enable mothers and fathers to share the responsibilities of raising their children and challenge traditional gender roles, which have long assumed women to be the primary caregivers. However, the policies still tend to assume that the mother will take the primary role in childcare, as evidenced by the fact that the majority of parental leave is taken by mothers. This may create a barrier to gender equality in the workplace and in society more broadly. The availability and quality of public childcare services are not always consistent across the country, and access to these services is still limited in certain areas. Furthermore, the entitlement to kindergarten and parental leave for childcare is not guaranteed for all workers, particularly those in non-standard employment.

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