



2.3 The Maternity Leave Debate in Malta

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The report focuses on the proposed changes to maternity leave as approved by the European Parliament in October 2010. It discusses the length of the leave and who should be responsible for the related cash benefits. It also looks at the reactions of government, employers and the social partners. The economic costs and benefits of the extended maternity leave are also debated. The report suggests that a publicly funded, generous maternity leave can go a long way in ensuring that the economic and employment security of mothers is not compromised.

Defining Maternity Leave

Maternity protection is fundamental for ensuring that women, who in their vast majority become mothers during their life course, are not discriminated at work for fulfilling their maternal role.

Maternity (or pregnancy) leave is a period of absence from work to which women are legally entitled during a period immediately before and after childbirth. The duration of the leave and the benefit entitlements, if any, differ from one country to the other, depending among others on the national legislation and the welfare system. A few countries including Norway and Sweden integrate maternity leave into parental leave. Some countries also offer maternity leave on the adoption of children (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, OECD, 2007).

Unlike parental leave which can be taken by both parents, maternity leave is exclusively reserved for the mother. The core concern of this leave is to ensure that the mother's work "does not pose risks to the health of the woman and her child and to ensure that women's reproductive roles do not compromise their economic and employment security" (ILO, 2010, pg.v).

The concept of Maternity Protection was first introduced in 1919 by the International Labour Organisation (ILO) and gave women the right to leave

work if they produce a medical certificate stating that their “confinement will probably take place within six weeks” (ILO, 1919, Article 3b). The Convention stipulated that whilst absent from work, the mother “be paid benefits sufficient for the full and healthy maintenance of herself and her child, provided either out of public funds or by means of a system of insurance, the exact amount of which shall be determined by the competent authority of each country” (ILO, 1919, Article 3c). The same convention gave women rights to free attendance by a doctor or a certified midwife and the right to be allowed half an hour twice a day during their working hours if they are nursing their children.

The 1919 Maternity Leave Convention was revised in 1952, when among others, the maternity leave period was extended from 6 to 12 weeks. The most recent revisions were made in 2000 through Convention No 183, by which the scope and entitlements were progressively expanded (ILO, 2010).

The Stakeholders Involved

The debate around maternity leave involves many stakeholders with different, and at times, conflicting interests. First and foremost, maternity leave affects mothers, their health and wellbeing and their ability to care and breastfeed their newborn. It also affects fathers and the gender roles that will be assumed within the household. Last but not least, maternity leave has a direct impact on employers, their productivity and competitiveness and is a matter of concern to governments, legislators and unions, who are also normally involved in this complex debate.

Background to the Maternity Leave Extension Proposal

The European Union commissioned the Portuguese socialist MEP, Edite Estrela, to draft the European Parliament position on maternity and paternity leave. The Estrela’s motion, approved by the European Parliament in October 2010, proposed that the minimum maternity leave in the EU be extended from the current minimum of 14 to 20 weeks, of which six weeks would be taken immediately after childbirth (European Parliament, 2010). The proposed directive would also apply to parents who adopt a child less than 12 months old, and to domestic workers and the self-employed.

The current EU directive on maternity leave does not specify what percentage of the leave should be compensated. On the other hand, the

Estrela proposal specifies that during the maternity leave period, mothers must be paid their full salary, which must be 100% of their last monthly salary or their average monthly salary.

The Estrela motion intends to safeguard the mother's position in employment, so that female workers cannot be fired from the beginning of their pregnancy to at least six months following the end of their leave. Following maternity leave, women must be entitled to return to their jobs or to "equivalent posts" which means that they are entitled to return to a job with the same pay, professional categories and duties as before. The Estrela motion also calls on member states to give fathers the right to fully paid paternity leave of at least two weeks within the period of maternity leave.

In December 2010, the Council of Ministers of the European Union declared that the position of the European Parliament went a little bit too far. According to the Council, the original proposal of the Commission to increase the minimum maternity leave period from 14 to 18 weeks could be a more acceptable basis for a compromise (Euroactive.com, 2010).

The Maternity Leave Cash Benefits

At a time when expenses are likely to increase, the maternity leave cash benefits impact the income and the maintenance of the family. Issues about payments of benefit are highly contested. Some argue that maternity leave should only be paid partially, whilst others suggest that the leave should not be paid at all. Indeed this is the case of the USA, where employees working with organisations with more than 50 employees are allowed to take 12 weeks of leave without receiving any cash benefits. Lesotho, Papua New Guinea and Swaziland like the USA, are the other remaining countries which do not provide cash benefits to mothers. One can here mention that five states in the USA provide paid pregnancy leave that can be extended for infant bonding (Guendelman, Kosa, Pearl, Graham, Goodman, & Kharrazi, 2009). In reality, according to ILO data (2010), 97% of 167 countries provide cash benefits to women during maternity leave. The cash benefits differ from country to country.

According to ILO Convention No. 183, "the cash benefit paid during maternity leave should be at least two-thirds of a woman's previous earnings, or a comparable amount if other methods are used to determine cash benefits, for a minimum period of 14 weeks" (ILO, 2000, Article 4.1). The existing EU directive on maternity leave does not establish the cash

benefit that should be paid but implies that the allowance “shall be deemed adequate if it guarantees income at least equivalent to that which the worker concerned would receive in the event of a break in her activities on grounds connected with her state of health, subject to any ceiling laid down under national legislation” (European Council, 1992).

In some European countries like Belgium, France and the Netherlands, cash benefits are calculated as a percentage of earnings but are capped to a ceiling (ILO, 2010). According to the ILO (2010), many of the 27 developed economies and EU countries are in conformity with ILO Convention 183 with respect to the length of the leave (at least 14 weeks) and at least two-thirds cash benefits, with 78% of them “meeting or exceeding the standards” (ILO, 2010, pp.20-21).

The financial implications of maternity have a direct effect on the mother’s decision towards employment. In fact an abundance of international literature suggests that unpaid leave and/or leave without social security coverage are ineffective and restrict the options of both parents (Drew, 2005). Tanaka’s (2005) work among OECD countries likewise shows that if the leave provided is without payment or is at a low flat rate, parents may sacrifice the leave provided or may opt for an earlier return to work.

According to a report published in EurActiv.com, Estrela insists that “100% payment is fair because families should not be penalised financially for having children” (euractiv.com, par.17) and that they “should be able to have as many children as they want, which are children that Europe needs in order to face up to the demographic challenge” (euractiv.com, par.17). Indeed, having a child often equates with additional expenses, and so it seems unreasonable from the parents’ perspective, that when there is a surge in family costs, there is a net reduction in income.

It is interesting to note that in countries offering high to moderate earnings-related payments for family leave, this appears to correlate positively with high maternal employment rates (Impact Assessment Report, 2008).

The Length of Maternity Leave

Across the EU, national governments can decide on the length of the leave as long as this is at least of 14 weeks as regulated by the Directive 92/85/EEC. This means that across the EU there are countries like Malta and Germany with the shortest minimum statutory leave allowance of 14 weeks, and other

countries like the UK with 52 weeks of maternity leave. At present, 13 out of the 27 EU Member states already offer at least 18 weeks of leave whilst 7 already offer more generous terms of at least 24 weeks of maternity leave (European Women's Lobby, EWL, 2010a).

The Estrela report's proposed extension of the maternity leave period from 14 to 20 weeks was meant to improve the health of the mother and the baby. For example, the World Health Organisation (W.H.O., 1990) suggests that babies should be breast fed for at least 6 months. Research shows that mothers are more likely to do so if they have a longer maternity leave period in which they can do so (Guendelman et al, 2009). Exclusive breastfeeding in the first six months protects the baby against digestive and respiratory infections and lowers the risk of obesity and Type 1 diabetes in infants (Clark & Bungum, 2003).

Various studies show that the length of maternity leave affects the physical and mental health of the mother and longer maternity leave is equated with positive health outcomes both for the mother and baby, including fewer depressive symptoms after childbirth and fewer outpatient visits during the first six months after childbirth (Chatterji & Markowitz, 2004).

There are no studies about the Maltese women's level of satisfaction with the current length of maternity leave. However, existing studies indicate otherwise. For example, Borg Xuereb (2008) found that whilst 57% of mothers planned to continue with their career, only 23% of Maltese first-time mothers had returned to employment within 6 months of the postnatal period. Likewise a study carried out by the French Ministry of Employment (2006) found that 70% of women do not go back to work after their 16 weeks maternity leave and they usually prolong their leave by an additional five weeks through sick leave. According to the survey, 84% of French women would like a longer maternity leave period, with 70% saying they would like to stop for a whole year to stay with their child. It would be interesting to find out what Maltese mothers think of the length of maternity leave.

The reasons why only 23% of first time mothers had returned to employment by six months after giving birth do not emerge clearly from the Borg Xuereb (2008) study. Whilst some mothers may decide to opt out completely from the labour market after childbirth, one can speculate that others may either be reluctant to leave their child to go to work at such an early stage of their infant's life, or else, they may be facing real difficulties in doing so.

Source of Benefits

The issue of how much of the leave is paid and who is responsible for the payment, differs across countries. The latter normally “adopt one of three main approaches towards financing cash benefits for maternity: social security, employer liability or mixed systems” (ILO, 2010, p. 23).

In 18 out of 27 EU states as well as in Norway, maternity leave payments are paid by the state through public health insurance contributions; and in 4 member states and Iceland, this is paid from the general social security scheme. In Denmark and Slovenia, maternity leave falls under the Public Insurance Scheme. In Malta, the Netherlands and the UK, maternity leave is paid directly by employers. However, 92% of the cost of maternity leave in the UK is reimbursed through state funding. Likewise, employers in the Netherlands are reimbursed through unemployment funds.

Malta, is the only country among EU member states and EEA countries where employers continue to pay the full wages for 14 weeks while the mother is on maternity leave. The government only reimburses the National Insurance contribution paid by the employer for the 14th week (Malta Employers Association, MEA, 2010). This puts Maltese employers at a clear disadvantage when compared to other employers who do not pay the leave out of their own revenue and it doubles their costs if they find a replacement because they have to pay the full wage of the mother on maternity leave as well as the wages of her replacement.

Incidentally, the ILO had envisaged this possibility and in its original convention stipulated “that employers should not be individually liable for the cost of maternity benefits payable to women employed by them, and that benefits should be provided through social insurance and other public funds” (ILO, 2010, p.23). The ILO declares that the “principle of payment through social insurance or other public funds is important for mitigating against discrimination in the labour market, which could be more likely where employers directly bear the cost of maternity leave” (ILO, 2010, p.23).

Ironically, the argument of a level playing field was often used by the Maltese government when arguing about the possible extension of the maternity leave. As things are, since Maltese employers bear the full costs of the leave, they are surely not competing on the same level playing field with other European employers.

The Reaction of Employers to the Maternity Leave Extension Proposal

When the Estrela motion for the extension of the maternity leave was discussed at length in Malta in 2010, employers objected strongly to this increase. They argued that since 96% of the local businesses are micro-enterprises employing less than 10 persons, the increase would be “highly detrimental to competitiveness” (Ellul, 2010). In an article called “*Estrela – mother of more evils?*” the president of the Malta Chamber of Commerce, Enterprise and Industry, said with “firm conviction” that the extended maternity leave would also “be counterproductive to mothers” because it would “serve to fuel higher discrimination not least through a widening of the wage gap that already exists between genders” and would also “reinforce the reality of the glass ceiling phenomenon in career paths for women” (Ellul, 2010). She further argued that women taking maternity leave and who as a result are absent from work for long periods at a stretch could not “realistically aspire to occupy the highest positions in business” (Ellul, 2010).

Whilst it is illegal to discriminate on the basis of gender and family responsibility, this situation highlights the gendered nature of organisations whose main aim remains that of making profit, with little concern for the sustainability of the family and society (Acker, 1990). Whereas mothers pay a high price at work, men can become fathers without taking a financial dip in terms of salary earnings and promotion opportunities. Men continue to be seen as the ‘ideal workers’ (Acker, 1990) because they do not share any of the burdens related to the care of their children and remain career focused. Indeed, the employment rates of women aged 25-49 differ greatly between women with or without children. In Malta, the employment rate (inclusive of part-time work) of women without children is 58%, whilst it goes down to 39% for mothers with children (EWL, 2010b). This discrepancy calls for the EU to take action to ensure that family burdens are shared more equally between the parents and the two weeks of fully paid paternity leave would be a small step in the right direction.

Whilst some argue that the extension of maternity leave is detrimental to women, OECD studies show that “in countries where the maternity leaves are the longest, female employment rates were highest, with over 80% in Iceland and over 70% in Denmark and Sweden” (OECD, 2007).

The Reaction of Political Parties, NGOs and Unions to the Proposed Extension of Maternity Leave

There were conflicting reactions from government on the issue of the extension of maternity leave. Prime Minister, Dr Lawrence Gonzi stated that he agreed with the principle of having 20 weeks of maternity leave and with any measure that would help parents to better balance family and work. However, he said that the Maltese Government wanted to ensure that there was a level playing field across the different countries. He was concerned that whilst Maltese mothers received full pay during their 14 weeks of maternity leave, in other countries they received the minimum wage or a percentage of their salary (Times of Malta, 2010a).

The Prime Minister was of the opinion that any measures aimed at improving the work–family balance should be applied in a uniform manner among the EU Member States (Times of Malta, 2010a). Indeed the Estrela report would to a certain extent, harmonise the maternity leave payment issue by ensuring that at least 20 weeks are fully paid. However when it came to the crux of the situation, the Maltese government opposed the Estrela proposal. In December 2010, during the Ministerial meeting of the EU Council of Ministers, Minister Dolores Cristina was quoted as saying that “Malta thinks this is a premature proposal which requires more studies on its impact before it can be considered” (Laiviera, 2010, par.3). She reportedly added that the issue should be dealt with directly by member states and that there should be more flexibility on the issue (Laiviera, 2010).

The extension of maternity leave was backed by the Labour Party which is the main opposition party and by Alternattiva Demokratika (AD) which is the green party in Malta. Women’s Organisations in Malta were in favour of the of the extension and the Malta Confederation of Women’s Organisations (MCWO, 2010) as well as the National Council of Women (NCW) expressed disappointment when the Maltese Government rejected the maternity leave extension during the EU Council of Ministers meeting.

On the other hand, the two main unions in Malta, namely the General Workers’ Union (GWU) and the Union Haddiema Maghqudin (UHM) remained mysteriously silent on this issue. However, the Forum Unions Maltin said that Malta’s rejection of the maternity leave extension was “negative and retroactive” (Rizzo, 2010).

The Economic Costs and Benefits of the Estrela Proposals

The Malta Business Bureau (MBB) commissioned a report on the costs and benefits of the Estrela proposals for the extension of maternity leave from the current 14 to 20 weeks at full pay, and the proposal for the introduction of two weeks paid paternity leave for the father. The report concluded that these changes might cost the economy about €12 million a year. The same report claimed that the “economic benefits of these legislative changes on the Maltese economy can be considered to be relatively marginal, given that there is already a significant extent of maternity leave being granted” (MBB, 2000, p.i).

The conclusions of the Malta Business Bureau Report (2010) were questioned by the Labour MEP, Prof. Edward Scicluna who estimated that the costs would not exceed €5 million a year. Furthermore, Scicluna (2010) estimated that the implementation of the proposed changes would increase the female employment rate by some 9 percentage points. He claimed that “any financial outlays incurred for this purpose can have considerable returns, for the Maltese economy and the business sector” (p.3). Similarly, Löfström (2010) indicates that Malta stands to gain if there is full equality in the labour market. For example, Malta’s growth in GDP in the case of full equality in the labour market could increase by as much as 45%.

Conclusion

Between 2005 and 2010, there were on average 3,953 births per year in Malta (National Statistics Office, NSO). As the mothers’ waged income is increasingly becoming essential for the survival of many families, especially with the increase in single earner families, maternity protection must also be continually strengthened and improved in order to protect the livelihood of the whole family. The transition to parenthood poses a lot of challenges to mothers who plan to return to work, especially in a country like Malta where the motherhood mandate is still very strong (Russo, 1979; Tabone, 1995) and where gender roles are still rigid and traditional. This is compounded by the fact that maternity leave is relatively short and other forms of parental leave remain unpaid. To make matters worse, flexibility at work in the private sector is still not well regulated (Borg and Debono, 2009) and childcare facilities are developing at a slow pace and have still not won the trust of most parents.

A longer and fully compensated maternity leave is likely to give mothers the necessary space and time to fulfil their maternal roles without having to give-up work in this transitory stage of their life. Abundant research shows that it will have a positive effect on the health of the mother and the baby and will enable the mother to breastfeed the baby for a longer period. Longer maternity leave will also make it easier for the mother to return to work and to find care facilities for the baby who would be a bit older.

A poll carried out in Malta in 2010 showed that over 63% of respondents were in favour of extending the maternity leave to 20 weeks (Times of Malta, 2010b). The biggest challenge for Malta is to find out how the maternity leave cash benefit can be removed from being an employer's burden. Maternity leave should be financed through public funds or through a public insurance scheme in line with the ILO proposals (ILO, 1919).

One can better understand the concerns of employers, especially micro employers, when it comes to replacing staff on maternity leave. This highlights the importance of having temping agencies and temporary workers who will be able to replace staff on leave. Temping work may not be a solution to all employers; but granting more flexibility at work may go a long way in allowing mothers to combine work with care and enabling employers to retain trained staff.

As reiterated earlier, the maternity leave issue affects many stakeholders and it is in the country's interest that women in Malta are able to have as many children as they want without having to give up on the idea of remunerated work. A holistic and joined-up effort is needed to ensure that mothers find the supporting structures in place to help them combine their caring with work.

Family and work should be seen as allies and not as enemies (Greenhaus & Beutell, 1985) and motherhood should never be used as an excuse to justify institutional discrimination against women and their families. Mothers, like fathers, should not be penalised for becoming parents and generous maternity leave which is publicly funded can go a long way in ensuring that this does not happen.

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