Austrian Parental Leave System and its Impact on Parental Choices: A Feminist Critical Policy Analysis

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Abstract

Austria is categorized in welfare policy literature as a conservative welfare state that perpetuates the gendered roles of male breadwinner and female caregiver. Using this as a contextual basis, this thesis is the first research to employ an intersectional feminist critical framework to analyze Austria's parental leave and childcare allowance systems. I explore the ways in which these policies perpetuate inequalities based on gender, class, sexuality, and nationality by adopting two different methods of analysis. The first is a policy document analysis in which I examine the details of the policies and the presentation of the information to ascertain whether parents may face barriers in taking protected leave or receiving allowance benefits. The second is a qualitative analysis of 11 interviews with parents who had experience with the system, ensuring a diverse sample pool facilitated an intersectional feminist analysis to determine how the policies supported or prevented parents from taking leave and achieving their ideal division of paid and care labor.

Through the policy document analysis, I found the policies to perpetuate inequalities in all aspects I explored. Through their deep complexity and the confusing presentation of information, the lack of languages outside German and English, the poor quality of information in English, the way the policies are both gender*ed* and gender*ing*, as well as the use of gender-neutral and gender-restrictive language, Austria's parental leave and childcare allowance systems present barriers to parents understanding and utilizing all the available options. My interview analysis reflects similar findings, parents spoke of the complexity of the policies resulting in the adoption of the traditional model of male breadwinner and female caregiver since this was the easiest and most well-known option. Furthermore, while the policies offer individualization to a certain extent, many interviewees expressed a desire for greater flexibility to be able to achieve their ideal division of childcare and paid labor between both parents. Finally, I ascertain that cultural expectations in Austria reinforce a traditionally gendered division and, in combination with the effects of the policy, parents found themselves in stereotypical roles despite their desire for greater equality in their relationship.

Declaration

I hereby declare that this thesis is the result of original research; it contains no materials accepted for any other degree in any other institution and no materials previously written and/or published by another person, except where appropriate acknowledgement is made in the form of bibliographical reference.

I further declare that the following word counts for this thesis are accurate:

Body of thesis (all chapters excluding notes, references, appendices, etc.): 25,370 words

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Signed: Michelle Farrand

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Part I: Introduction

Chapter I.1: Topic Introduction and Author Positionality

In the summer of 2015, I moved to Vienna after completing my Bachelor of Arts in Music Administration and German at a liberal arts university in the United States, and started work in an office with mostly Austrian colleagues. Subsequently I have worked in companies with a significantly more international framework, both in terms of employees and in terms of the work being done. Over these past six years living and working in Vienna, I have heard many times how generous Austria's parental leave policies are – from both people living in Austria and from international friends and family who had heard about the policies, comparing them with those offered in their own countries. Nevertheless, I began to notice the impact having children has on women's careers, and conversely the (non-)impact on men's careers. Granted, this is just a small snapshot of the larger Austrian society, but herein lies my motivation for exploring the topic of Austria's parental leave policies. Furthermore, it is interesting to explore the contradictions and, as I found in my interviews, similarities between people's views and the literature, which categorizes Austria as a conservative welfare state that perpetuates the traditionally gendered roles of male breadwinner and female caregiver (see Chapter I.4). Finally, I am aware of the influence my positionality may have had on my interview results and research outcomes.

My desire to explore the policies through an intersectional lens stems from a variety of sources. First, having lived in five countries, attended several international schools and universities, and with friends and colleagues from a variety of backgrounds, I have always appreciated the richness of diversity and the importance of not only respecting cultural differences, but also understanding how these differences translate to disparities in experiences, access, and treatment in a variety of different realms and situations. Second, in the last five to six years I have become more and more aware of just how pervasive oppressions are within the society around me and how cycles of inequalities are so deeply engrained in our daily lives and societal structures. Finally, the year in this master's program at CEU has provided me with a greater theoretical and social

understanding to underscore the importance of intersectionality, I can no longer imagine analyzing something without taking into account the intersections of peoples' identities. Thus, it is not enough to analyze Austria's parental leave only through a gendered lens, ignoring the discrepancies between groups of women and of men, and the varied effects based on class, nationality, and sexuality, and how the intersections of these result in even more significant barriers to equal access to the system's benefits. My thesis thus represents the first intersectional study of Austria's parental leave system, and demonstrates the ways in which these policies are perpetuating inequalities and reinforcing stereotypical roles so that policy makers can improve the services and benefits to provide equal access for all parents.

My thesis will be divided into four main parts: (I) Introduction, (II) Austria's parental leave and childcare allowance systems, (III) Lived experiences of parents in leave and allowance uptake, and (IV) Conclusion. In Part I, I outline the theoretical framework and methods I used in my research, present an overview of the relevant literature on parental leave in Europe, and contextualize Austria as a conservative welfare state. Part II provides a detailed overview of the current parental leave and childcare allowance systems in Austria, as well as relevant employment and leave statistics. Both these chapters provide a basis for the analysis chapter in which I examine Austria's policies through an intersectional feminist critical analysis framework to ascertain how they may be perpetuating inequalities and reinforcing traditional gendered roles. In Part III, I turn to the lived experiences of the parents I interviewed, exploring their personal experiences with the system. Finally, Part IV ties together my findings by presenting a set of policy recommendations for reducing inequality and improving accessibility of Austria's system to all parents, before concluding the thesis with some final remarks on the research results and importance.

Chapter I.2: Theoretical Framework

Within this chapter I outline the theoretical framework for my thesis, namely: feminist critical policy analysis and intersectionality. These approaches guided me in exploring the implications and complexities of Austria's current parental leave and childcare allowance systems for parents and families in terms of gender, sexuality, nationality, and class. In the following sections, I highlight why a feminist critical framework is needed when analyzing policies, the importance of intersectionality as a key element of this theoretical framework, as well as the relevance of employing this approach in my own research on Austria's parental leave scheme.

I.2.1 Feminist Critical Policy Analysis

Beginning with an overview of feminist analysis frameworks, I highlight why it is vital to analyze policy using this approach. As Orloff (1993) outlines, welfare policies affect different groups of people in a variety of ways. One clear example of this is the category of gender and the ways in which policies impact women and men differently. Hence, scholars have outlined the importance of taking a feminist critical approach to highlight the ways that policies tend to disadvantage women, both those with an explicit gender aspect and those which may appear to be gender neutral (Bensimon & Marshall, 2003; Kanenberg et al., 2019; Lombardo et al., 2017; Marshall, 1999; McPhail, 2003; Paterson & Scala, 2015). As public policy is a field traditionally dominated by men (McPhail, 2003, p. 41), it is important to expose the gender elements of policy and make women visible in society. In 2003, Beverly McPhail laid out a set of questions, forming what she called a Feminist Policy Analysis Framework. These questions draw upon areas of feminist thought relevant to policy making and analysis, and aim to uncover forms of structural marginalization (McPhail, 2003, pp. 55-58). In 2019, Kanenberg et al. updated and expanded upon McPhail's framework to account for a more significant focus on "privilege, oppression, and intersectionality" (Kanenberg et al., 2019, abstract). Naming it the Intersectional Feminist Policy

Analysis Framework (p. 9), they deemed this new approach necessary given the current polarized political discourse surrounding racial discrimination not only in the United States, but also globally.

Feminist analysis is thus a fundamental tool for revealing the gendered and intersectional aspects of policies. Similar to McPhail (2003) and Kanenberg et al. (2019), other scholars have adopted a feminist critical policy analysis, arguing for its use in analyzing all policies, even those that do not obviously relate to gender. Bensimon and Marshall (2003), for example, use this approach to discuss higher education policies, while Paterson and Scala (2015) apply it in analyzing anti-smoking policy. These scholars have used the approach to evaluate the policies' broader impacts on society, verify that desired results are reaching the people intended, and ensure existing oppressions are not further perpetuated. In particular, Paterson and Scala (2015) highlight the importance of recognizing the "issues of hierarchy, power differentials and domination" as a key aspect of taking a feminist critical policy perspective (p. 481). Thus, it is inaccurate to claim gender neutrality within policies, as neutrality does not exist within a gender oppressive system that has clear power differentials between men and women.

The feminist frameworks and approaches to policy analysis I outlined in this section make clear that it is vital to recognize: (1) the ways in which policies can discriminate against and marginalize certain identities; and (2) how policies are both influenced by and can perpetuate the patriarchy, oppression, and power structures within the broader society. Feminist frameworks additionally emphasize the importance in policy analysis of accounting for women in a variety of different situations, in many instances calling for the inclusion of intersectionality.

I.2.2 Intersectionality

Intersectionality, a term coined by black feminist and American legal expert Kimberlé Crenshaw in 1989, refers to the exploration of interactions between a person's various identities, as prescribed by society, examining the intermingled effects of oppression on an individual. Feminist scholars have thus called for the use of an intersectional theoretical framework in

conducting research to prevent the "experiences and struggles" of certain people from "[falling] between the cracks" (Davis, 2008, p. 68; Collins & Chepp, 2013; Hankivsky, 2012; Lombardo et al., 2017; Taylor, 2009). Taylor (2009) highlights the importance of viewing intersectionality as an "experience" rather than a representational concept (p. 41). Approaching intersectionality as a lived experience can be witnessed within both the feminist policy analysis framework and feminist critical policy analysis outlined above. Similarly, Bensimon and Marshall (2003) argue that using an intersectional framework in analyzing policy can expose the various forms of discrimination and bias which are embedded in any given policy (p. 339). It enables an examination of how power structures within society may determine the development and impact of policies, as well as how these policies perpetuate social hierarchies, oppression, and inequalities (Hankivsky, 2012; Paterson & Scala, 2015). I argue that these differentials of power and domination within society are relevant and extend to a multitude of related areas, such as employment opportunities, family life, and social relations, which in turn affect the reach and impact of the policies. Therefore, intersectionality is a vital analytical framework that highlights these issues in order for them to be resolved within policy and for tackling existing inequalities.

I.2.3 The Intersectionality of Parental Leave Policies

Parental leave is a policy area which has clear gender implications and is often viewed through a feminist lens. Nevertheless, literature on the topic demonstrates that the various identities of women and associated power differentials are often not taken into account, with studies largely focused on the gendered dimensions, and at most the intersections with class. In my thesis, I explore Austria's parental leave scheme from multiple angles utilizing an intersectional framework, specifically how the policies affect parents differently based on gender, class, sexuality, or nationality. To do this, I employ a feminist critical perspective with an emphasis on intersectionality as my theoretical framework.

Writing from a Canadian context, Hankivsky (2012) highlights the increasing importance of utilizing an intersectionality based analysis (IBA) rather than gender based analysis (GBA) or gender and diversity analysis (GDA). IBA entails "mov[ing] beyond single or typically favoured categories of analysis (for example gender, race, and class) to consider simultaneous interactions between different aspects of social identity…as well as the impact of systems and processes of oppression and domination" (Hankivsky, 2012, p. 177). As she highlights, "gender inequalities thrive where there is a lack of awareness of the interaction of the impacts of the multiple identities and diversities of men and women" (Equality Commission of Northern Ireland, 2008:9, as cited in Hankivsky, 2012, p. 179). An intersectional approach is therefore vital to sufficiently analyze the impacts of parental leave policies and their associated financial benefits and the ways in which they may be perpetuating inequalities among women and men of all identities.

I assert that by not taking all categories of identity into account, one is paying attention only to dominant groups. In the case of parental leave in Austria, this generally means Austrian, employed, upper- to middle-class, heterosexual couples. If policies do not account for all groups and for the intersecting structural power differentials at play, inequalities will continue to be perpetuated and the experiences of oppressed groups only further marginalized (Ackerly & True, 2013). Taking an intersectional approach in policy-making, however, could result in "more inclusive and better quality policies" (Lombardo & Verloo, 2009, as cited in Hankivsky, 2012, p. 178). Similarly, feminist critical policy analysis aims to employ intersectionality as a way to "expose complex structures of penalty and privilege" beyond the gender binary of men versus women within policies in order to effectively achieve gender equality (Paterson & Scala,[1] 2015, p. 483). As Crenshaw (1989) asserts, "the goal of this activity [intersectionality] should be to facilitate the inclusion of marginalized groups for whom it can be said: 'When they enter, we all enter.'" (p. 139).

In Chapter I.4, I outline the relevant literature on parental leave policies in both Austria and Europe. In doing so I point out the ways this research has mainly focused on one aspect, such

[1] Citing Manuel, 2006 and Hankivsky, 2012a as examples (Paterson & Scala, 2015, p. 483).

as gender or class or sexuality, and thus situate my own thesis as an intersectional analysis of how the policies affect people based on a variety of lived circumstances. Prior to that, I outline the methods I employed in my research in the next chapter.

Chapter I.3: Methods

Following my theoretical chapter, I now outline the two specific methods used in my research: policy analysis and qualitative interview analysis. I conducted an investigation into Austria's current parental leave policies through a document analysis. My interviews utilized a qualitative approach to analyze lived experiences within the parental leave system. In the next sections, I explain these two methods in greater detail and highlight the role that feminist critical policy analysis and intersectionality played in applying the methods.

I.3.1 Policy Analysis

In order to sufficiently explore the various ways in which Austrian parental leave policies may discriminate upon or not take into account certain groups or identities, I performed a feminist critical document analysis. As previously mentioned (Chapter I.2), this method is fundamental to uncovering persistent inequalities within policies. My analysis included a thorough reading of official governmental websites, brochures, and other documents which present information on the available leave schemes and allowance benefits. I found these informational overviews of the current legislation on the Federal Ministry of Labor website and by clicking on links to further information on relevant topics. This led me to other governmental departments such as the Federal Chancellery, the Federal Ministry of Finances, and the Federal Ministry of Labor, Family, and Youth. I also looked at the Chamber of Labour website, as this is one of the most common places for employees to find information on their rights. Finally, I checked the International Network on Leave Policies & Research for Austria's country note, which gave an overview of the policies (Schmidt & Schmidt, 2020). This research provided me with the policy detail, and an understanding of what parents have to go through when trying to find options available to them. The critical feminist document analysis helped me determine which benefits are available, for whom, and on which bases.

I analyzed the policy itself using both feminist critical policy analysis and intersectionality to discover in which ways the policies may not be reaching all groups of people equally, if the policy formulation predetermines which partner will take leave, and whether the policies are perpetuating inequalities within Austrian society. To support my analysis, I additionally conducted a brief quantitative exploration of official statistics available on employment, salaries, and parental leave to contextualize my research and outline existing inequalities. This data was collected from the official websites Statistics Austria and Eurostat. An overview of the policies, my findings and analysis, and the policy impacts are all presented in Part II of the thesis.

I.3.2 Interview Analysis

As a form of qualitative research, I conducted 11 interviews with parents who had in some form utilized Austria's parental leave or childcare allowance schemes.[2] Participants were found through snowball sampling: via mutual contacts with friends and colleagues, as well as by contacting LGBTQ+ and family organizations to reach their membership bases. In order to facilitate an intersectional analysis, I tried to ensure a stratified participant sample representing a diversity in cultural background, socio-economic status, and sexuality. Following Taylor's (2009) classification of intersectionality as an 'experience' (p. 41), I chose to use it as a method within my interviews, to both support my intersectional analysis of the policies and understand the lived experiences of these parents. Only by doing this could I offer comprehensive and effective changes to the parental leave scheme and recommendations regarding further cultural efforts to prevent discrimination and its impact. In Chapter III.1, I provide further details on interviewee demographics.

My interview questions (see Appendix 1) were semi-structured and varied in scope, from background questions, such as participants' employment situation before and after leave, to more

[2] I spoke with parents from 10 couples, but since for one couple I interviewed the mother and father separately, it resulted in 11 interviews.

detailed questions concerning the factors they considered when deciding who would take leave and for how long, and whether they faced any barriers in taking leave. This approach enabled me to form a picture of each interviewee with regard to their leave decisions and experiences, as well as what impacts their final decision may have had. I also asked each participant about their own opinions of the available parental leave options, as well as what their ideal leave division would be. Finally, I strictly followed the CEU Ethical Research Policy throughout the entire interview and research process.

Further information on my interview sample, as well as my findings and analysis, can be found in Part III of the thesis. Prior to that, Part I concludes with a chapter on scholarly literature on parental leave and on Austria as a conservative welfare state, and Part II outlines and analyzes Austria's parental leave and childcare allowance systems.

Chapter I.4: Parental Leave Studies in Austria and Europe

The following literature review outlines the relevant scholarship that has been written on parental leave policies and the issues that are often distinguished as the most important factors in forming and analyzing these policies. I begin with a general overview of these concepts in Europe before exploring the specific example of Austria as a conservative welfare state, which perpetuates the male breadwinner model within its policies. Following this, I provide two comparative examples of policies within Europe, first looking at three conservative countries and their path towards gender equality, and then highlighting the Nordic Countries as those which are closest to the ideal model of paid and unpaid labor division. Finally, I categorize whether literature written has covered gender, class, or sexuality aspects of the policies and indicate the lack of intersectionality present within these studies, thus situating my own thesis within this field as an intersectional study.

I.4.1 Parental Leave Literature

Over the years, the intention of family policies has evolved. Knijn et al. (2018) outline this history and break it down into the initial goals of:

> fertility, child mortality and family restoration (after World War II)…, equity and social redistribution issues (during the 1970s and 1980s)…, [and] employment issues during the 1990s and the beginning of the twenty-first century, under the heading of both labour market flexibilization and work-life balance. (Lewis et al., 2008, as cited in Knijn et al., 2018, p. 154)

Parental leave policies, as an important part of family policies, were paid and protected leaves from employment for the purpose of childcare. They were first introduced in Western Europe in the form of "limited maternity leaves" in the 1970s and later expanded to provide longer periods, to open up leave entitlements to men, and to increase the financial benefits (Morgan & Zippel, 2003, pp. 51-52). In addition, parental leave policies focused on "the best interest for the child; the roles of mothers and fathers in raising children and in supporting child health, physical, cognitive and emotional development; parental labour market behaviour; attitudes towards gender equality;

employer attitudes" (Thévenon, 2018, p. 124), as well as the impact on fertility (Gauthier & Koops, 2018, p. 17), demographic development (Lohmann & Zagel, 2018, p. 49), and a reduction of child poverty (Bradshaw, 2018, p. 84). Austria, specifically, falls into a political structure in which there are two sides vying for family policies for very different reasons. This refers to the conservative politicians who value fertility and reproduction as an important part of the nation's work, and the left-wing politicians who believe family policy is a question of reducing inequalities and wealth gaps (Meier et al., 2007, pp. 114-115).

My thesis focuses on the balance between work and family, the gendered impacts and effects of leave, as well as the perpetuation of inequalities; while gender and employment are the main topics covered in current literature on parental leave policies. The hope is that a reconciliation of care work and paid labor will lead to a suitable length for parental leave so as to "increase female labour force participation" and "reduce the interruption of women's work associated with childbirth" (Gauthier & Koops, 2018, p. 17). In taking parental leave, parents have formed very gendered habits of the woman taking a long leave and the man taking either very short or no leave. Many scholars cite financial reasons, since male partners on average earn more, and career prospects as the main causes of these gendered leave-taking habits (Bygren & Duvander, 2006; Evertsson & Boye, 2016; Mauerer, 2018; Morgan & Zippel, 2003; Oláh et al., 2018; Schmidt et al., 2015; Schmidt & Rieder, 2016; Thévenon, 2018).

The reconciliation of paid and unpaid work between parents is a gendered issue that depends upon access to the labor market, equal pay, more generous paid leave, and a more evenly divided share of childcare and domestic labor. Thus, to achieve greater gender equality in the realm of parental leave, childcare, and employment, many European countries have started to promote paternity leaves, or leave periods that are specifically reserved for the father. In doing so, it is important to recognize the kind of benefits and regulations that will incentivize fathers to take this paternity leave. Millar (2018) notes that "men will be more likely to take leave if there is no option to transfer it to their partner" (p. 39), and Young Kang and Meyers (2018) highlight that "men are

expected to be more likely to use available leave if the replacement rate for lost wages is higher" (p. 73). These are significant factors that need to be considered when creating policies, as well as when analyzing and reforming them.

Another factor outlined in literature is the societal expectations around parenthood in many countries, specifically the need to conform to gendered roles of female caregiver and male breadwinner (Ciccia & Verloo, 2012; Evertsson & Boye, 2016; Geisler & Kreyenfeld, 2011; Leibetseder, 2013; Mauerer, 2018; Morgan & Zippel, 2003; Schmidt et al., 2015; Valarino et al., 2018). As Evertsson and Boye (2016) note, "motherhood comes with an expectation of self-sacrifice that tends to be associated with feelings of guilt" (p. 5). Thus, to be considered a 'good' mother, women often feel pressure to stay at home until their children go to kindergarten, or even longer (Brandth & Kvande, 2012; Evertsson & Boye, 2016; Morgan & Zippel, 2003; Valarino et al., 2018). Conversely, fathers are influenced by expectations that they should "spend sufficient time and energy on paid work to economically provide for the family" (Evertsson & Boye, 2016, p. 5). These gendered roles that have become embedded within much of European society continue to have a significant impact on the formation of policies and on how parents choose to utilize them.

Two studies explore the impact of factors besides gender on parents' leave-taking habits, namely class and education. Morgan and Zippel (2003) draw attention to the relation between gender and class in determining choices around parental leave, given the usually low wage replacement rate of benefits and the likelihood that lower class women are earning significantly less than their partners (p. 51). Evertsson & Boye (2016) note differences among women's likelihood to take leave, specifically that "higher educated women return to paid work faster after a parental leave than lower educated women" (p. 2). Nevertheless, these women still face difficulties in pursuing a career as the main caregiver of the child, no matter their level of education (p. 2). This shows the importance of exploring the intersection of gender with other categories of identity to sufficiently determine the effects leave has on parents.

The impact of gender, class, and education on parental leave habits are important to keep in mind when analyzing the policies, who has access to them, how they are used, and what effects they may have. Thus, these are concepts that will return consistently throughout the rest of this thesis, along with nationality and sexuality.

I.4.2 Austria: A Conservative Welfare State with a Male Breadwinner Model

Within this section, I provide context for the societal basis for the cultural expectations embedded within welfare policies in Austria. Specifically, I explore the concepts of the conservative welfare state and the male breadwinner/female caregiver model and how Austrian society perpetuates these traditionally gendered ideals. These elements serve as a basis for my policy and interview analyses in later chapters (Chapters II.3 & III.2). Following the introduction of these concepts, I provide examples of two qualitative research studies based in Austria which prove the presence and perpetuation of these gendered ideals and their impact on parental leave decisions.

In 1990, Esping-Andersen introduced a typology of Western welfare states, dividing countries into three groups: conservative, liberal, and social democratic (Esping-Andersen, 1990a, p. 3). Young Kang and Meyers (2018) define conservative welfare state countries as those with "generous family policies that perpetuate traditional gender roles…[and] have been structured by traditional family and gender values that prioritize women's work in the home" (p. 69). Linked to this, conservative welfare states perpetuate the existence of the male breadwinner model, which Ciccia and Verloo (2012) recognize as very common in Europe, specifically citing Austria as one example. This model supports policies "based on a traditional division of gender roles" (Ciccia & Verloo, 2012, p. 522), correlating with a father who "provides for his family and may help out occasionally but is not expected to take direct responsibility in childcare" (p. 511). Furthermore, it relies on a female caregiver who takes on the primary responsibility of childcare and domestic labor, and remains financially dependent upon her male partner.

Numerous scholars have categorized Austria as a conservative welfare state that perpetuates the male breadwinner model (Esping-Andersen, 1990b; Leibetseder, 2013; Mauerer, 2018; Morgan & Zippel, 2003; Oláh et al., 2018; Pfau-Effinger, 2018; Sainsbury, 1999; Sardadvar & Mairhuber, 2018; Valarino et al.; 2018; Young Kang & Meyers, 2018). This is reflected in the prevalence and strong uptake of its longer leave periods with flat-rate benefits and little incentive for fathers to share leave (Ciccia & Verloo, 2012; Sainsbury, 1999), most often resulting in mothers staying at home for long periods with consequent impact on their careers, and men continuing with full-time employment with little to no leave. Furthermore, Schmidt and Rieder (2016) highlight the lack of a well-paid, non-transferable leave period of several months reserved for fathers, as a key factor in the limited number of men who take leave in Austria (p. 492). Further evidence of these discrepancies is presented in Chapter II.2, where I provide recent statistical data on leave uptake and employment opportunities in Austria. These conservative characteristics naturally have a significant gendered impact on the formation of families, the division of household labor and childcare, and on access to the formal labor market. According to Mauerer (2018), "hidden challenges in sharing parenthood persist, caused mainly by the effects of a long tradition of a male breadwinner model" (Berghammer, 2014, as cited in Mauerer, 2018, p. 3). This applies not just to parental leave policies and to the parents making decisions, but also to employers and their own expectations with regard to parents, specifically men, taking leave. Mauerer (2018) notes that in Austria many employers have "conceptions of a work-family balance [in which] women function as primary caregivers in a family" (pp. 1-2), only perpetuating the ideals workers are surrounded by and expected to follow. The implications of these conservative beliefs are further discussed in Chapters II.2, II.3, and III.2.

Along these lines, Schmidt and Rieder (2016) interviewed 11 heterosexual couples from different socioeconomic backgrounds to determine how they justify their parental leave decisions (p. 495). They were found to be largely affected by individual jobs and financial situations, but also on the basis of gendered expectations around responsibilities and skills of each parent and what is

best for the baby's nurturing and development (p. 494). Thus, Schmidt and Rieder outline the following four main justifications for the division of parental leave: "economic, employment-centered, child-centered and parental role-specific" (Schmidt & Rieder, 2016, abstract). While there has been an increase in the number of parents who shared leave in Austria in the years prior to their research, there was nevertheless a tendency to follow traditional roles and only 4.2% of paid leave days in 2011 were taken by fathers (pp. 491-492).

In another study, Schmidt et al. (2015) explore the ways in which masculinity was constructed within relationships in the transition to parenthood, and how it affected the way 11 heterosexual Austrian couples divided parental leave. This study exposes the highly gendered division of paid and family work within Austria, despite increasing numbers of women in the labor market (p. 373). Utilizing interviews as a method, they found that even in cases when the couple shared parental leave, the decision remained "father-centred" (p. 374). The interviews showed that fatherhood is perceived as an "individual choice" and motherhood as a "social duty" (p. 375), thus "men did it only as an additional bonus when external circumstances and conditions were adequate" (p. 382). Similarly, when the father did not take leave, the couple "repeatedly attribut[ed] his impossibility to take leave to external circumstances and structural factors," refuting any personal responsibility for the decisions they made (p. 379). This further shows the impact of the conservative Austrian society and the implications its gendered cultural expectations can have on parents' leave choices. Their results additionally show that fathers were more likely to share leave in the shorter model available, taking leave for just 2-3 months themselves, but nevertheless it was the longest option that was utilized most often by parents (p. 377). Finally, a discrepancy in salary, whether the man or woman earned more, was always used to justify the man continuing with his job and the woman taking leave (p. 379).

Similar findings can be found in an earlier study by Morgan and Zippel (2003), citing several scholars in arguing that in Austria there is a common belief that "mothers should not be employed outside the house but should stay home and raise their children, at least up to the age of three" (p.

64).[3] While there is movement towards a fairer share of care responsibilities, as I discuss in the next section, the conservative welfare state of Austria continues to foster the male breadwinner model. In Part II of the thesis, I outline how Austria's parental leave policies in many ways predetermine which parent takes leave and the ways class and nationality may further perpetuate gendered inequalities. In Part III, I provide qualitative evidence from my interviews of how Austrian society and cultural expectations perpetuate the male breadwinner model when it comes to parental leave and childcare responsibilities, whether that was the parents' intention or not.

I.4.3 Comparative Study of European Parental Leave Policies

Given the context of Austria as a conservative welfare state, I will now highlight Pfau-Effinger's (2018) research in which she argues for the possibility of conservative welfare states' evolution towards a model of greater gender equality. She refers specifically to Austria and Germany as two examples of conservative countries that have begun to adapt "towards a more gender-egalitarian family policy," and Switzerland as a country that "has remained conservative" (p. 168). She notes that between the early 1990s and 2015, Austria and Germany have "started to support women's employment and gender equality" rather than a female caregiver role by improving public childcare services and extending their reach, providing more comprehensive and generous paid parental leave, and by promoting a more equal share of childcare between parents (pp. 171-173). Switzerland, however, continues to provide little support for parents in terms of either public childcare services or paid leave and has made few adaptations to its policies since the 1960s (pp. 172-173), thus solidifying its categorization as a conservative welfare state. She acknowledges that even though the role of the EU may have contributed to this distinction between Switzerland versus Austria and Germany, there is evidence that the EU policies actually had little effect on reforms in the latter two countries (p. 179). Furthermore, Pfau-Effinger highlights the

[3] Citing Winkler et al., 1995 and Nebenführ, 1995 (Morgan & Zippel, 2003, p. 64).

emergence of the 'male breadwinner/female part-time carer' family model within Austria and Germany (p. 175). Similar to the model I introduced in the last section on Austria, this one highlights the tendency of mothers to remain employed, but only part-time to be able to continue childcare responsibilities (p. 175). Nevertheless, despite the positive changes in policy towards greater gender equality, the Austrian gender culture remains "more conservative towards gender equality and the employment of mothers of young children" than either Germany or Switzerland (p. 177).

Comparing conservative welfare states like Austria to the Nordic countries may also be useful, as they are often deemed as the most advanced in terms of gender equality within parental leave policies (Ciccia & Verloo, 2012; Esping-Andersen, 2009; Eydal et al., 2018; Mauerer, 2018; Oláh et al., 2018; Sainsbury, 1999; Thévenon, 2018; Valarino et al, 2018; Young Kang & Meyers, 2018). In contrast to Austria's 'male breadwinner' model, Sainsbury (1999) highlights the 'universal caregiver' model as the ideal division of labor that parental leave policies should be designed to foster. Accomplishing this entails on the one hand encouraging men to take the role of primary caregiver in an equal manner with women rather than simply supporting women in care tasks, and on the other hand involving employers and the state in supporting this division (Ciccia & Verloo, 2012, p. 511). Within a 'universal caregiver' model, the gendered roles are eliminated and both men and women are equally involved in family/home life and paid work, which are then "considered equally valuable activities" (Ciccia & Verloo, 2012, p. 511). While this ideal model does not yet exist, in 2012 Sweden was the country which came closest, with 16 months of leave and significant efforts towards promoting gender equality, including the second longest father's quota in Europe (Ciccia & Verloo, 2012, pp. 520 & 525). All the Nordic countries have been successful in implementing father quotas, which increased the take-up rates of men when it comes to the division of parental leave (Thévenon, 2018, p. 124; Eydal et al., 2018). In 2017, "the father's quota was three months in Iceland and Sweden, ten weeks in Norway and nine weeks in Finland" (Eydal et al., 2018, p. 199). These countries have proven that fathers take a bigger portion of the leave when the

part reserved for them is higher (Eydal et al., 2018, p. 199), and this has resulted in father's higher participation in childcare after leave as well (p. 202). Thus, the Nordic countries have become the model towards which other European countries strive and with which they are compared in terms of gender equality.

While parental leave policies vary greatly within European countries, I have briefly outlined in this section two contrasting models: the conservative policies found in Austria, Germany, and Switzerland and the more gender-equal policies found in Scandinavian countries. The aspects of each model presented here form the basis of arguments in the coming chapters, as I aim to explore the ways in which Austria's policies perpetuate inequalities based on class, gender, sexuality, and nationality. In the next section, I briefly cover the importance of this intersectional research and how it is lacking within the current literature.

I.4.4 Intersectionality in Parental Leave Research

Thus far, Austrian and European parental leave studies have explored the effects of gender (Brandth & Kvande, 2012; Ciccia & Verloo, 2012; Esping-Andersen, 2009; Mauerer, 2018; Morgan & Zippel, 2003; Schmidt et al., 2015; Schmidt & Rieder, 2016; and many more – almost all parental leave studies consider gender), class (Esping-Andersen, 2009; Morgan & Zippel, 2003), and sexuality (Wong et al., 2020) as individual characteristics, with the occasional overlap of gender and class. In my research, I further explore the intersections of these categories but with the additional consideration of nationality, specifically with regard to Austria's parental leave scheme. As outlined in my theoretical framework (Chapter I.2), I consider it vital to employ intersectionality in the analysis of policies in order to sufficiently determine the oppression and inequalities that are being perpetuated by the policies and the effects of the power differentials in Austrian society that ultimately affect people's access to these policies. By only paying attention to one category, gender, the numerous effects of intersecting categories are lost and thus barriers to equal access remain in place.

Part II: Austria's Parental Leave and Childcare Allowance Systems

Chapter II.1: Overview of the Policies

This chapter provides an overview of Austria's parental leave options, including maternity protection, daddy month, parental leave, and parental part-time. During these leave periods, the parent's current employer (where applicable) no longer pays a regular monthly salary, but rather a variety of financial benefits provided by the state are available to parents. I additionally outline these benefits, such as the 'weekly money', 'family time bonus', and childcare allowance; as well as options for additional earning potential while receiving these benefits. All information on Austria's various leave and allowance benefits and eligibility criteria has been collected from websites and brochures produced by the following governmental departments or institutions: Chamber of Labor; Federal Chancellery; Federal Ministry of Labour; Federal Ministry of Labour, Family, and Youth; Federal Ministry of Labour, Social Affairs, and Consumer Protection; and Federal Ministry of Finances.[4]

II.1.1 Maternity Protection

Birthing mothers are required to take a leave from employment entitled 'maternity protection' ('Mutterschutz'), defined as the period eight weeks prior to and eight weeks after the birth when they are not legally permitted to work. This may begin earlier due to medical reasons or extend longer after birth, on average to 12 weeks, in the case of a premature birth, multiple births, or a C-section. The birthing mother is afforded job protection starting at the point at which she informs her employer of the pregnancy and ending four months after the birth.

During this 16-week obligatory leave period around birth, birthing mothers are provided with a financial benefit called 'weekly money' ('Wochengeld'). For employed birthing mothers, the

[4] For specific sources, refer to the following bibliography entries: AK, n.d.-a; AK, n.d.-b; AK, n.d.-c; AK, n.d.-d; AK, n.d.-e; AK, n.d.-f; AK, 2021; Bundeskanzleramt, n.d.-a; Bundeskanzleramt, n.d.-c; Bundeskanzleramt, n.d.-d; Bundeskanzleramt, n.d.-e; Bundeskanzerlamt, 2019; Bundeskanzleramt, 2021; BMA, 2019a; BMA, 2019b; BMA, 2020a; BMA, 2020b; BMA; 2020c; BMA, 2021; BMAFJ, 2020a; BMAFJ, 2020b; BMASK, 2017; BMF, 2021; BMSGPK, 2021; Schmidt & Schmidt, 2020.

amount is calculated at 100 percent of the net income for the three calendar months prior to the start of the maternity protection, with no limitations. Those who were working 'geringfügig' receive a flat rate of €9.51 per day,[5] amounting to approximately €288.30 per month.[6] Those who were unemployed directly before the birth receive 180 percent of the unemployment benefit they were receiving.

II.1.2 Daddy Month

For all births since December 1, 2019, fathers or non-birthing mothers have the right to one month of protected leave from their employment to support the birthing mother and the child post-birth – this is called a 'daddy month' ('Papamonat'). This leave can begin starting the day after the birth and must be used in full before the end of the maternity protection period. The parent taking this leave must live in the same household as the child and the birthing partner and must inform their employer at the latest three months prior to the expected delivery date when they plan to begin their daddy month. As with maternity protection, the job protection for the daddy month begins at the point of notifying the employer, but at the earliest four months in advance of the delivery date, and ends four weeks after the daddy month finishes. Following the daddy month, the father must return to his previous workplace.

The financial benefit associated with daddy month is called the 'family time bonus' ('Familienzeitbonus') and amounts to approximately €700 for the month. The amount of the family time bonus received is taken away from the childcare allowance (covered in a later section) that they are later eligible for, but it does not affect the length of the allowance or of a possible parental leave. Additionally, the same person is not allowed to receive the family time bonus and childcare allowance simultaneously. Proof of residency or asylum status in Austria must be provided for both parents and the child.

[5] 'Geringfügig' is a special employment contract with a maximum monthly income of €475.86 a month.
[6] Thus, those working 'geringfügig' at the maximum salary receive only 60 percent of their regular earnings.

II.1.3 Parental Leave

Following the end of the maternity protection period, employed parents have the right to take protected parental leave ('Elternkarenz') from their employment up until the day before the child's second birthday, provided they live in the same household as the child. During this leave time, parents do not receive salary from their employer, but are eligible for a childcare allowance (covered in II.1.5) from the state. This leave entitlement is available to both heterosexual and same-sex couples; however, since the parental leave is directly connected to a protected absence from a contract with a company, it is not available to those parents who are self-employed, unemployed, studying, stay-at-home, or seeking asylum. The leave allowance can be shared between both parents and can be changed twice, provided each leave period lasts at least two months. Although parents are not allowed to be on leave at the same time, it is possible during the first change that the parents' leaves overlap by one month, however this then reduces the total leave allowance by one month, thus until the end of the child's 23rd month. The length of each leave period is up to the parents to decide, as long as it falls within the above-mentioned conditions; however, in the case that the parents wish to receive childcare allowance (covered in II.1.5) during this time, they must pay attention to the specific criteria regarding lengths for this allowance to avoid losing out on potential benefits (see **Table 1)**.

Employers must be informed of the leave three months in advance, but it is a legal right of the parents, so the employer cannot deny a request for leave. Should a parent wish to extend their leave, they must inform their employer at least three months before the end of the registered leave or, in the case that the original leave was less than three months, at least two months before. The job protection associated with the leave begins when the employer is informed and at the earliest four months prior to the start of the leave, therefore it is advised to inform an employer no earlier than these four months prior. The protection ends four weeks after the respective period of leave finishes.

During leave, it is permitted for parents to take on what is called 'geringfügig' employment, a form of part-time work in which one can earn up to €475.86 per month. This employment can be either with the parent's own employer, from which they are taking leave, or with another company. Another option available to parents is to exceed the 'geringfügig' limit within the company from which they are taking leave, but only for a maximum of 13 weeks per calendar year. This enables them, for example, to fill in for colleagues on holiday or on sick leave. This arrangement of working over the 'geringfügig' restrictions can also be arranged with another company but requires the agreement of the parent's employer. Furthermore, it is permitted for both parents to postpone three months of their leave, but without job protection or entitlement to childcare allowance during this time. The delayed leave must be taken prior to the child's 7th birthday or, at the latest, at the point when the child starts school.

If a birthing mother returns to work while breastfeeding, she may request from her employer a certain amount of time for breastfeeding during working hours, which the employer must then provide. If she works more than 4.5 hours per day, she is entitled to a breastfeeding time of 45 minutes. If she works 8 hours or more a day, she is entitled to two breaks of 45 minutes or one of 90 minutes for breastfeeding. These breaks cannot result in reduced salary for the breastfeeding mother and she shall not be expected to make up the time during other hours, nor do these breaks count as part of the legal rest periods for employees throughout the day, for example lunch break.

Adoptive and foster parents are eligible for many of the same parental leave benefits as biological parents. Nevertheless, there are a few discrepancies in conditions. The leave may begin on the day of the adoption. In the case that the child is 18 months or younger at the time of adoption, the leave can only last until the day before the second birthday. In the case that the adoption takes place after the 18-month mark but prior to the child's seventh birthday, each parent is entitled to six months leave. As with biological parents' leave, each leave period must last a minimum of two months.

II.1.4 Parental Part-Time

Up until the child's seventh birthday, both parents (including adoptive and foster parents) have the right to be on 'parental part-time' ('Elternteilzeit'), which allows them to reduce their hours and/or organize them to fit better with family life. The following eligibility criteria must be met: the parent must have worked for their company for at least three years including any leaves and this company must have a minimum of 21 employees, they must live in the same household as their child, and the other parent is not allowed to be on parental leave for the same child during this time. Nevertheless, both parents may utilize parental part-time simultaneously, but each parent can only use it once per child and it must last for a minimum of two months. In case the above criteria regarding company size and employment duration cannot be met, the employee and employer can come to an agreement for parental part time, but only until the child's fourth birthday.

During parental part time, the weekly working hours must be reduced by at least 20 percent, but a minimum of twelve hours per week must still be worked. Similar to parental leave, parental part-time provides job protection beginning with the notification to the employer that the parent shall take this leave, but at the earliest four months prior to the start of the change in hours. The protection ends four weeks after the finish of the parental part-time. Following the parental part-time period, parents have the legal right to return to their original employment contract.

II.1.5 Childcare Allowance

'Family allowance' ('Familienbeihilfe') is a monthly payment per child (€114 per month during the period in which childcare allowance is available).[7] It is outside the scope of this thesis,

[7] The family allowance ('Familienbeihilfe') is available until the respective child's 24th birthday. There are no additional requirements outside of those for the childcare allowance that must be fulfilled for the family allowance. For further details on the requirements, length, and amounts of the family allowance, see bibliography entries BMA, 2020c and Bundeskanzleramt, n.d.-d.

suffice to say that receiving the family allowance is one eligibility requirement for the childcare allowance.[8]

The childcare allowance ('Kinderbetreuungsgeld') is a financial benefit with two different systems dictating the length and amount of the allowance: the flat-rate model and the income-based model. It is important to note that the use and length of the childcare allowance do not necessarily need to correlate with the use or length of parental leave. Thus, parents who are not eligible for parental leave are still eligible for the flat-rate childcare allowance options,[9] but not for the income-based allowance. Parents must fulfill the following requirements to be eligible for the childcare allowance: collection of the family allowance; living in the same household as the respective child and having one's life centered in Austria;[10] completing the mother-child-passport check-ups ('Mutter-Kind-Pass-Untersuchungen');[11] keeping to the limits set on additional earnings (covered later in this section); proof of residency in Austria or fulfillment of asylum requirements; and, for parents who are separated, the receiving parent must have legal custody of the given child.

As mentioned above, parents can choose between two systems of childcare allowance: flat-rate or income-based. **Table 1**, below, exemplifies the two systems and, within the flat-rate model the shortest and the longest options. In the flat-rate system childcare allowance can be withdrawn for any number of months within these upper and lower limits, in which case the daily amount received will be altered accordingly.[12] All models can be shared between both parents and, in the case that they are, the total amount of time possible increases. For example, in the shortest flat-rate model, if one parent takes childcare allowance, they receive €33.88 per day for 12 months. If

[8] It is also a requirement for receiving other financial support such as the 'family time bonus' during the 'daddy month'.
[9] As mentioned in II.1.3, this may include: self-employed, unemployed, studying, stay-at-home, or asylum-seeking parents.
[10] The Federal Chancellory brochure states that having one's life centered in Austria means it is not enough to have a registered home in Austria or an Austrian or EU citizenship (Bundeskanzleramt, 2019). Nevertheless, there are exceptions in which parents working outside Austria or owning property outside Austria are still eligible for childcare allowance (Bundeskanzleramt, 2019).
[11] The mother-child-passport ('Mutter-Kind-Pass') requires five check-ups with a doctor for the pregnant mother and five check-ups with the baby once it is born. If this is not completed, €1,300 will be taken off the childcare allowance.
[12] The general idea is that the total amount of the flat-rate childcare allowance received is the same, but since it is divided by a different number of days, the daily amount changes accordingly.

both parents share the allowance, they can receive €33.88 per day for 15 months total. During these 15 months, 3 months of this are reserved exclusively for the 'second' parent, but this parent can still take more than 3 months if they wish to. The income-based model is available to parents who were either employed or self-employed in the 182 calendar days (approximately 6 months) prior to the birth of the child, paid Austrian health and pension insurance, and did not receive any unemployment benefits during this time. This is the shortest model and the allowance amount is calculated at 80 percent of the weekly salary previously earned, with a minimum of €33.88 and a maximum of €66 per day.

Table 1: Childcare Allowance Lengths and Amounts

Option	Possible length	Daily amount	Approx. monthly amount	Approx. total amount
Flat-rate model – longest	28/35 months	€14.53	€436	€12,205 - €15,256
Flat-rate model – shortest	12/15 months[13]	€33.88	€1,016	€12,197 - €15,246
Income-based model	12/14 months[14]	€33.88 - €66	€1,016 - €2,000	€12,197 - 28,000

Sources: Bundeskanzleramt, n.d.-c; Bundeskanzleramt, n.d.-e; and own calculations.

As can be seen in **Table 1**, parents can choose to receive the income-based model for 12 or 14 months shared and the flat-rate model for between 12 and 35 months, with varying amounts of daily payment. The desired system and length must be chosen at the point of application. If they choose the flat-rate system, the specific length chosen can, under certain circumstances, be changed once, resulting in a recalculation of the daily amount, applied retrospectively. It is important to note that while it is possible to receive childcare allowance for up to 35 months, parents are only entitled to job-protected parental leave until the child's second birthday, up to 24 months.

In certain circumstances, additional support is available. For births after March 1, 2017, parents receive a one-time 'partnership bonus' ('Partnerschaftsbonus') of €1000 (€500 per parent)

[13] While it is possible to receive the childcare allowance for less than 12/15 months, the daily amount will nevertheless remain at €33.88 as this is the maximum amount one can receive (Bundeskanzleramt, n.d.-e).
[14] In the income-based model, this length represents the maximum amount of time for which parents can received childcare allowance. It is possible to receive the money for less time.

if there is a more or less equal consumption (50:50 to 60:40) with a minimum of 124 days of childcare allowance. Single parents are eligible for an additional three months of childcare allowance over the maximum number of months that one parent can take. An additional daily allowance of €6.06 for a maximum of 365 days (amounting to a maximum of €2,211.90 altogether) is available to low-income families, as long as restrictions on additional earnings, which will be explained in the next paragraph, are not exceeded. Parents who receive the family allowance can additionally apply for the 'family bonus plus' ('Familienbonus Plus'), which is a form of tax credit and equals €125 per month (€1,500 per year) until the child's 18th birthday.[15]

It is possible to earn additional money while receiving childcare allowance, within certain limits. For those on the flat-rate model, there is a limit of €16,200 yearly. In the case of employed parents whose salary in the calendar year prior to the birth of the child (when no childcare allowance was claimed) exceeded this limit, their limit is increased to 60 percent of this previous yearly salary. For those on the income-based model, there is a limit of €7,300 on additional yearly earnings while on the childcare allowance.[16] It is important to note that these limits differ from the restrictions on working while on parental leave, which are outlined in the parental leave section. Thus, if parents combine parental leave and childcare allowance then they must comply with the 'geringfügig' limit of €475.86 per month.

In the next chapter, I present relevant Austrian statistics on employment, salaries, and parental leave as a basis for the following chapter, in which I analyze the leave systems and financial benefits outlined within this chapter. I do so in order to determine ways in which the policies foster equality as well as how they may perpetuate certain inequalities based on gender, sexuality, class, and nationality. I additionally determine whether the formulation of the available models pre-determines which partner takes leave and for how long.

[15] Between the child's 18th birthday and the end of the family allowance (24th birthday), it decreases to €41.68 monthly, or €500.16 per year).
[16] Until 2019, this limit was €6,800 (Bundeskanzleramt, 2019, p. 12).

Chapter II.2: Relevant Austrian Statistics and Leave Impacts

This chapter provides a general overview of employment trends in Austria as related to gender-based inequalities. Following a summary of some insightful statistical data on Austria's employment, parental leave, and gender pay gaps, I briefly discuss child and motherhood penalties and fatherhood premiums as significant gendered impacts of childcare responsibilities. These statistics and concepts provide a framework for my policy and interview analyses, providing evidence of the inequalities that both significantly affect, and are affected by, the parental leave system in Austria.

II.2.1 Employment and Leave Statistics in Austria

I have selected a few key statistics to illustrate the gendered differences that either affect, or are affected by, parental leave in Austria. There were no statistics based on class, sexuality, or nationality, and thus the statistics in this chapter represent differences based on binary gender: men versus women. The lack of this data makes it difficult, not just for researchers but also for policy makers, to determine the stratified effects of their policies and analyze inequalities. Lohmann and Zagel (2018) highlight the importance of comprehensive and comparable data produced by countries and how this is needed to sufficiently "evaluat[e] whether family policy meets its aims" (p. 48), noting this as a research area that has suffered from distinct data limitations.

Austrian employment for both men and women compares favorably with the EU, as can be seen in **Table 2** below.

Table 2: General 2019 Employment Statistics in Austria vs. the EU Average[17]

Statistics	Gender	Austria	EU
Employment Rate	Women	72.4%	68.2%
	Men	81.2%	79%
Tertiary Education	Women	31.1%	31.8%
	Men	31.1%	27.3%
Unemployment Rate	Women	4.4%	6.5%
	Men	4.6%	6.1%

Sources: Eurostat, 2021a; Eurostat, 2021c; Eurostat, 2021d.

The gender difference in Austria is most notable when considering part-time work: the percentage of women working part time in 2020 was 47.3%,[18] *cf.* 10.7% men (Statistik Austria, 2021a). In 2021, 68% of mothers and 91% of fathers with children under 15 years old were employed and of these parents, 72% of the mothers, but only 7% of the fathers, worked part time (Statistik Austria, 2021d). From data for 25–49-year-olds, the percentage of women with children under 15 years who worked part time increased from 39.9% in 1994 to 74.3% in 2019; the comparable increase for men was 2.2% to 5.6% (Statistik Austria, 2020c). Finally, in 2019 there were 757,600 couples with children under the age of 18 in Austria and in 45.8% of the cases the man was working full time and the woman was working part time, while in only 1.1% of the cases was the woman working full time and the man part time (Statistik Austria, 2020e). When comparing these part-time statistics with the number of men and women employed in Austria, it is clear there are significant motherhood penalties and fatherhood premiums, as is covered in the next section. In Chapter III.2, I discuss the implications of these statistics in relation to parental leave and gender equality. The gender differences seen in part-time work may be a factor in that, despite the comparatively high percentages of female employment and education (see **Table 2**), Austria had

[17] The EU average included here refers to the EU 28 in 2019, i.e. including the United Kingdom.
[18] This statistic refers to the percentage of women working part-time out of the total number of women employed in Austria; and refers to those between the age of 15 and 64.

the third highest gender pay gap at 19.9% in the EU in 2019 and the fourth highest gender pension gap at 38.7% in 2015 (Eurostat, 2021b; Mayrhuber & Mairhuber, 2020, p. 4).

Among several factors that contribute to these high gender gaps in Austria is the high percentage of women in low-earning jobs versus men, with percentages of 23.1% versus 8.7% respectively in 2014 (Geisberger & Glaser, 2017, p. 464). These discrepancies in income levels then play a role in decisions around which parent takes leave and for how long. As discussed in Chapter I.4, financial reasons are a big factor in choosing the mother as the main caregiver and thus the one who takes longer leave, while the father takes either none or just a short leave. Furthermore, the fact that employers know women are more likely to take leave results in them "compensat[ing] for this risk … [by] pay[ing] women less than men" (Esping-Andersen, 2009, p. 102). In fulfilling the caregiver role, women in Austria often return to part-time work for the first years of their child's life. These factors perpetuate the gendered inequality cycle of the male breadwinner and female part-time caregiver model (see Chapter I.4).

The quarterly labor market statistics, published by Statistik Austria,[19] analyze the number of employed 15+ year olds, and provide a breakdown by gender. It is noteworthy that the number of employed people currently on parental leave is not provided for males - "due to the low number of men in parental leave, a separation of men does not make sense due to the high sampling error" (Klapfer, 2021, p. 11). Between 2013 and 2020, of those who took parental leave, the percentage of women ranged between 95.76% and 99.74% (Fasching & Klapfer, 2019; Moser & Fasching, 2017).[20] The numbers changed little despite reforms in 2017 and 2019 designed to encourage men to take leave (e.g. adjusting the models and introducing the daddy month). Outside of these quarterly reports there is very limited data available on parental leave on the Statistik Austria website. However, it is possible to approximate the number of men and women who were on

[19] See: Fasching & Klapfer, 2019; Klapfer, 2021; Knittler & Fasching, 2018; Moser & Fasching, 2015a, 2015b, 2015c, 2016, 2017.

[20] These percentages were calculated by the author by comparing the number of women employed versus the number of all employed on parental leave during each quarter of the years 2013-2020 (Fasching & Klapfer, 2019; Klapfer, 2021; Knittler & Fasching, 2018; Moser & Fasching, 2015a, 2015b, 2015c, 2016, 2017).

parental leave in the prior year using the labor participation data of 15- to 64-year-olds. The findings of these calculations are presented in **Table 3**.

Table 3: Approximate Parental Leave Statistics in 2019 and 2020

Gender	Statistics	2019	2020
Men	Number on leave	1,800	2,600
	Percentage of total	2.46%	3.27%
Women	Number on leave	71,400	76,900[21]
	Percentage of total	97.54%	96.73%
	Total on leave	**73,200**	**79,500**

Sources: Statistik Austria, 2020d; Statistik Austria, 2021b; and own calculations.

Buber-Ennser (2015) noted that the longest model of parental leave is the one most commonly used in Austria (p. 17). Although the number of parents choosing the shorter one is increasing, "they are disproportionately used by mothers with a high income, and fathers engage most frequently in them" (Buber-Ennser, 2015, p. 17). Considering the fact that long leaves have proven to have significant negative effects on future employment and earnings, particularly for mothers (Ciccia & Verloo, 2012; Evertsson & Boye, 2016; Gauthier & Koops, 2018; Mauerer, 2018; Millar, 2018; Morgan & Zippel, 2003; Sainsbury, 1999), the fact that mainly middle- to upper-class women and men are utilizing the shorter leave option highlights a gender and class division in access to this more favorable model, which has fewer negative impacts on employment and income.

I have noted the lack of statistics on parental leave and childcare allowance on governmental websites. Specifically, there are no statistics available on the uptake of the daddy month, which has been in effect since 2019, thus it is impossible to determine whether this reform is having the desired impact.

[21] Out of these 76,900 women on leave in 2020, 3,500 or 4.55% are single parents. In comparison, none of the fathers on leave are single parents.

II.2.2 Child and Motherhood Penalties and Fatherhood Premiums

Within this section, I introduce the concepts of child and motherhood penalties, and fatherhood premiums as pervasive results of gendered expectations around childcare responsibilities and the division of paid and unpaid work in Europe and elsewhere. These are very relevant for discussions on parental leave and will be referred to in my interview analysis chapter (Chapter III.2).

Kleven et al. (2019) define child penalties as "the impact of children on the labor market outcomes of women relative to men" (p. 122), and estimated these penalties in six European countries, including Austria. Their findings were significant, showing that although women's and men's earnings followed a similar path prior to children, they "diverge sharply after parenthood" in all six countries (p. 123). These penalties, i.e. loss of earnings, were still evident ten years after becoming a mother. While there was no correlation between parental leave policies and long-term penalties, there was evidence that "increasing the duration of paid and job-protected leave implies larger short-run child penalties" (p. 125). Interestingly, they found that the countries with greater child penalties were those "characterized by much more gender conservative views" (p. 125), such as Austria.

Similar to child penalties is the concept of motherhood penalties and, in contrast, fatherhood premiums (several scholars,[22] as cited in Evertsson & Boye, 2016, p. 6). The motherhood penalty refers to the lower wages and lack of career opportunities that mothers suffer in comparison to women without children (Evertsson & Boye, 2016, p. 6). The fatherhood premium indicates the opposite effect, i.e. higher wages and increased career prospects for fathers compared to men without children (Evertsson & Boye, 2016, p. 6). Parental leave benefits and the length of that leave have been shown to have significant effects on the size of the motherhood penalties. For example, "in countries where the job-protected parental leave is long, women have

[22] Bygren & Gähler, 2012; Cooke, 2014; Gangle & Ziefle, 2009; Hodges & Budig, 2010; Sigle-Rushton & Waldfogel, 2007 (as cited in Evertsson & Boye, 2016, p. 6).

difficulties returning to paid work after the leave period is over" (Evertsson & Boye, 2016, p. 7), thus resulting in a greater motherhood penalty. Motherhood penalties and fatherhood premiums are directly related to employers' expectations of their employees and the associated roles of a mother and of a father, expecting the man to be more committed to paid work and the woman more committed to care work (Evertsson & Boye, 2016, pp. 7-8). This can result in "the implication…that fathers are more deserving of status than are men without children" (Ridgeway & Correll, 2004, as cited in Evertsson & Boye, 2016, p. 8). Evertsson & Boye (2016) argue for the need to change these gender norms and rethink expectations of mothers and fathers, noting that:

> If fathers take a greater share of the leaves to care for small children, then any statistical discrimination against women in the labor market should decrease and the benefits to employers of using parental leave as a signal of work commitment should diminish. (p. 9)

These income and employment outcomes clearly show the impact of parental leave, not just statistically but also with regard to cultural expectations and gendered decisions on behalf of the employer. It is thus vital to incentivize fathers to utilize leave and to take on childcare responsibilities in order to hinder these gender norms and strive for greater equality. These concepts are referred to in the two analyses chapters of this thesis (Chapters II.3 and III.2) as evidence of the effects of leave-taking decisions and cultural pressure.

Chapter II.3: An Intersectional Analysis

Having outlined Austria's parental leave and childcare allowance systems, as well as evidence of the take-up of these systems, I now provide an analysis of the policies. I examine the ways in which these policies create barriers to equal access to the system and, thus, how they perpetuate inequalities present within society. In order to do this, the policy analysis is divided into three sections: complexity and presentation of policy information, father incentivization, and (non-)inclusive language.[23]

As Leibetseder (2013) highlights, "a feminist perspective also includes a freedom of choice – either work or care, either two-parent family or single parenthood – an optional familialised model, where both the right to care and not to care are valued" (Leitner, 2010, as cited in Leibetseder, 2013, p. 544). Therefore, it is important to keep in mind, while discussing potential changes needed to parental leave policies, that some parents have a strong wish to stay home for a long time with their children, and this should also be supported, respected, and valued. Nevertheless, there are currently significant inequalities in Austria due to a lack of opportunity for women to combine unpaid and paid work and a lack of incentives for fathers to share leave and care responsibilities. My thesis recommends changes which can work towards eliminating these inequalities, while still maintaining options for those parents who wish to take longer leaves and preserving a sense of value and respect for all decisions parents make with regard to length and sharing of leave.

II.3.1 Complexity and Presentation of Policy Information

Within this section, I argue that the complexity of these policies, the confusing presentation of the available options, and the availability of information in languages other than German present barriers to equal access based on class, gender, and nationality.

[23] While I noted numerous other forms of unequal access within the details of the policies, due to length limitations I only cover these three dimensions within my analysis.

The policies and systems are very complicated with numerous requirements, stipulations, regulations, and exceptions, even when compared with other European countries. For example, there are descriptions of the two different systems of childcare allowance (flat-rate or income-based), but it is not always clearly explained how this can relate to the length of leave periods and to what extent sharing is possible. Thus, the ability to determine available options and the best decisions for one's family is dependent upon the parents' German language skills, education level, and determination to find alternative options. This complexity of the decision-making process makes it more likely that parents will resort to choosing the most common model that they see their colleagues, friends, and families choose. As outlined in previous chapters, this model tends to be the flat-rate model in which the mother takes a long leave and the father takes either a very short or no leave. I argue that in order to make the system more accessible to all parents, it is vital to create more clarity regarding the benefits and requirements, improve the manner in which the policy is presented online, and increase uniformity between websites and sources of information. The Chamber of Labour is taking steps towards this with a series of short videos that explain the different aspects of the leave and allowance systems, outlining the most important points and the steps that need to be taken. This should be continued and expanded upon, and the written information updated to match the clarity of the videos.

When compiling the policy overview for this thesis (Chapter II.1), it was clear that different websites present information in their own style, and that these differences lead to confusion about what is available and the requirements. I was unable to find a single website that covered all the options and provided all the relevant information for parents. If parents use only one source of information, they will likely be misinformed; this was evident in my interviews, all parents mentioned aspects of the policies and benefits that were inaccurate. The confusing presentation of policies and options is itself a barrier to equal access to the benefits, especially posing problems related to class and education level, since not all parents will have the capacity to decipher the complicated German legal phrasing.

Finally, language represents a significant barrier to the accessibility of these policies. In 2018, 16.1% of the Austrian population were not Austrian citizens and 19.4% were born outside Austria (Statistik Austria, 2020a). While these numbers do not necessarily correlate with language skills, they indicate an international demographic of Austria and therefore the likelihood that significant portions of the population do not understand German sufficiently well to decipher the complex legal policy explanations. Even those who do speak German fluently may not be able to understand the complicated language used. There were only two websites where I found parental leave information in English, and even these linked to German-only brochures or webpages for further information. The first was the governmental migration page (Migration.gv.at, n.d.), but it had extremely limited and outdated information on just maternity leave and parental leave, with only a brief mention of childcare allowance. The governmental help website also provided limited information (Oesterreich.gv.at, 2021a), and in this case only on options for the mother, there was not a single mention of the father taking leave. This website was updated as recently as January 13, 2021, yet still provides limited and very gendered information. Whilst another part of the same website provides fairly extensive information on the childcare allowance system (Oesterreich.gv.at, 2020), numerous sections remain available only in German and the layout is user-unfriendly and the options appear very overwhelming. The 2018 population data showed that of Austrian residents born in non-German speaking countries, the majority were from Bosnia and Herzegovina, Turkey, Serbia, and Romania (Statistik Austria, 2020b), and yet no information is available in these languages. Even the new Chamber of Labour videos, mentioned above, are only available in German.

Overall, the complexity of the policies, the confusing way in which the information is presented, plus the unavailability of other languages are substantial impediments to equal parental access. Access is therefore strongly based on factors such as class and nationality, thereby perpetuating these inequalities in Austrian society. Furthermore, an inability to understand all available options may push parents towards choosing the most traditional model, which in Austria

means the male breadwinner/female caregiver ideal of a long leave for mothers and little or no leave for fathers, thus perpetuating gender inequality. From an intersectional point of view, this will have the greatest impact on lower-class, non-Austrian women, who face multiple barriers in attaining accurate and sufficient information on the possible options and are therefore more likely to end up in traditionally gendered, unequal roles. This topic of complexity and traditional models is discussed further in the interview analysis, Chapter III.2.

II.3.2 Incentivization of Fathers

Oláh et al. (2018) highlight how "more and more scholars indicate that a redefinition of men's role within the family is crucial for progressing in transformation of gender roles[24]…Along with empowering mothers as economic providers, the new role of fathers should be strengthened" (p. 55). In this section, I discuss whether Austria's leave options for fathers provide sufficient incentives for men to utilize them. Since these reserved leaves are so vital to improving gender equality in terms of childcare and employment (Brandth & Kvande, 2012; Ciccia & Verloo, 2012; Sainsbury, 1999), men must use them for the desired results to be achieved, and therefore the policies must incentivize men to do so. I argue that neither Austria's new 'daddy month' nor the sharing options of parental leave are (a) promoted enough and (b) very incentivizing for fathers, and in Chapters III.2 and IV.1, I provide recommendations for remedying this problem.

Austria's 'daddy month' has been in effect since September 1, 2019 and is available for births after December 1, 2019. It is an optional, month-long, protected leave following the birth of the child and provides approximately €700. It does not represent a wage replacement for most and thus is not much of an incentive. To make matters worse, if this paternity leave is taken then the €700 of benefits is subtracted from any childcare allowance received later if the parental leave is shared. Sainsbury (1999) argues, "to dismantle a gender differentiation in claiming parental

[24] See: Esping-Andersen and Billari, 2015; Goldscheider at al., 2015 (as cited in Oláh et al., 2018, p. 55).

benefits, it is essential that benefits compensate the parent for the loss of his or her income" (p. 19). Numerous scholars have provided evidence that fathers are much more likely to share leave with their partner if the financial compensation replaces their monthly wage (Ciccia & Verloo, 2012; Schmidt & Rieder, 2016; Thévenon, 2018; Young Kang & Meyers, 2018). Therefore, a leave that pays so little in comparison with average monthly earnings provides little to no incentive for fathers to claim this benefit.[25] Furthermore, this low compensation is a significant barrier to lower class families with few savings and in which the father's income may be the main source of money each month.

Looking beyond the financial side, as discussed in previous chapters there is a certain stigma in the workplace, allied to cultural expectations of a male breadwinner role, that pressures men into not taking leave from employment. The fact that the daddy month is optional and poorly paid means that it is not worth the risk of facing potential repercussions at work. Similarly, Thévenon (2018) found that "granting benefit to replace loss of earnings is an important determinant of the father's use of leave rights…so that the opportunity costs of fathers taking care of a child is reduced" (p. 136). The same can be said for the shared parental leave. As Ciccia and Verloo (2012) cite, "even though the sharing-bonus can be interpreted as a special support to paternal care, it lacks the force of obligatory paternal quotas, and implies that parental leave is still expected to be taken mainly by the mother" (Leira, 1992, as cited in Ciccia & Verloo, 2012, p. 522). I argue that enforcing a mandatory, fully paid leave on birthing mothers (maternity protection period, see Chapter II.1), but then offering only optional, poorly paid leave for fathers reinforces a male breadwinner/female caregiver model in which the woman takes on the primary role in childcare and domestic responsibilities while the father is seen as a secondary support to this role, with his focus being on career and earning money for the family. Finally, a mandatory daddy month would eliminate the possibility for employers or workplace culture to pressure fathers into not making

[25] The average monthly net income for 2019 in Austria was approx. €1,579: €1,302 for women and €1,853 for men. (Statistik Austria, 2021c).

use of this leave, "circumvent[ing] workplace constraints by obligating employers to accommodate their leave-taking requests" (Ciccia & Verloo,[26] 2012, p. 519).

Several governmental information sources about the parental leave and childcare allowance systems do not sufficiently promote the idea of fathers taking leave or even mention it at all. While I will expand more upon specific language in the next section, I would like to briefly point out here that some of the websites still contain nothing about the daddy month, even though it came into effect two years ago. At the most, these websites might provide links at the bottom to further information about paternity leave ('Väterkarenz'). Therefore, depending on where they look, men may not even be aware of this father-specific leave option. More efforts are required to promote the idea that men can and do take leave in order to change the stereotypical view of childcare as a woman's role. The minimum requirement should be making the information about paternity leave options clear and accessible, but efforts should go further, such as including men in the examples provided or in the pictures within brochures more frequently.

II.3.3 (Non-)Inclusive Language

Within this section I outline how the language used in the policy information can be either inclusive or non-inclusive and how it can be "both gender*ed* and gender*ing*." (Paterson & Scala, 2015, p. 487), to determine the ways that may perpetuate gender and sexuality inequalities. The first part explores the inclusivity of the policies for same-sex couples, the second part examines how the presentation of information perpetuates the male breadwinner/female caregiver model.

Wong et al. (2020) categorize policies into gender-inclusive, gender-neutral, and gender-restrictive to determine how inclusive they are of same-sex couples (p. 529). Gender-inclusive refers to policies in which "same-sex partnerships were legally recognized and…sources specified that leave can be taken or shared with 'partners,' 'cohabitating partners,' 'civil partners,' 'registered

[26] Citing Brandth and Kvande, 2001 and Leira, 2002 (Ciccia & Verloo, 2012, p. 519).

partners,' 'co-mothers,' or 'co-fathers"' (p. 529). Gender-neutral refers to cases when "same-sex partnerships were legally recognized and legislation referred only to 'a parent' or 'parents,' without specifying sex or gender" (p. 529). Gender-restrictive means "same-sex partnerships were not legally recognized [and] policies us[ed] the term 'parents'.…[or] gendered terminology such as 'mother' and 'father"' (p. 529).

In general, the policy information for Austria's parental leave and childcare allowance systems fits into the categories of either gender-restrictive or gender-neutral. It very often refers to the 'mother' and 'father' and occasionally mentions 'partner.' It nevertheless does recognize same-sex partnerships as legal and in many cases adds a sentence or section stipulating that the benefits and regulations are also applicable to foster, adoptive, and same-sex parents. As a specific example, the daddy month page on the Ministry of Labour website does use inclusive language such as 'the other parent' throughout (BMA, 2019b), but still continues to speak only of fathers taking the daddy month. In order to be truly inclusive, it should refer to both the father and the non-birthing parent as eligible for leave.[27] It is clear that the government is attempting to include same-sex parents in the policies by referring to 'partner,' but the binary of men and women within heterosexual relationships is still clearly stated as the norm. Thus, Austria's parental leave policies currently represent a mix between gender-restrictive and gender-neutral.

The inclusion of adoptive, foster, and same-sex parents into the policy benefits and regulations is often done by adding a small section somewhere stating how the information listed previously also applies to these situations. This formulation of 'adding on' is discouraged by standpoint feminist epistemology, which "urges us to move away from the idea of simply adding the 'other' to preexisting frameworks" (Lorde, 1984, p. 144, as cited in Bensimon & Marshall, 2003, p. 342), because doing so lessens the value of adoptive, foster, and same-sex parents and creates a

[27] It is important to include gender in some form when it comes to leave entitlements available to fathers, as Morgan and Zippel (2003) found that "though eligibility criteria for care allowances are gender-neutral, long leaves are taken almost entirely by mothers" (p. 66). Thus, by not mentioning men ever, it could reinforce people's expectations that women are the ones to take leave from paid employment and care for the children.

stigma that it is less likely for same-sex couples to have children or take leave, thus forming potential barriers when they do. Therefore, same-sex couples should be incorporated into the policy information more inclusively by utilizing the words suggested above by the gender-inclusive category, such as 'civil partners,' 'co-mothers,' 'co-fathers,' etc. The way it is currently written not only perpetuates stereotypes and inequalities, but also makes it sound as if the leave policies are made for parents in heterosexual relationships, specifically mothers, and all other parents or non-traditional family formations only apply as an after-thought. While some websites and brochures are currently better than others at doing this, all governmental institutions should be ensuring their policies are promoted in a fair and inclusive manner.

Similarly, on several websites the leave options available to fathers and the ability to share parental leave are simply added on in a small section. This gender*ed* presentation already formulates, prior to decisions being made, expectations regarding who will take leave, thus gender*ing* the policies by implying that women will most likely take a long leave and, if the father takes any at all, it will simply be to briefly support the mother.[28] The most significant example is a page from the Austrian Economic Chamber website entitled "Mutterschaftskarenz" or "maternity leave" (WKO, 2021), the majority of information refers only to the leave options available to women, with only a small section on fathers. Thus, the idea that taking leave is a woman's responsibility, and the father can share some leave in order to support the mother, is perpetuated. Furthermore, since it is the website that most employers will refer to for information on the policies, it also reinforces employer expectations around gendered leave-taking habits, thus further perpetuating employment inequalities and pay gaps outlined in Chapter II.2. Rather than presenting the policies in a way that perpetuates one form of traditional parental roles and goes against the incentivization of fathers to take leave, the institutions should create uniformity and inclusivity within their promotion of parental leave and childcare allowance.

[28] The concepts of gender*ed* and gender*ing* come from Paterson & Scala, 2015.

II.3.4 Conclusion

Austria's parental leave and childcare allowance systems may be most beneficial for and accessible to heterosexual, middle- to upper-class, Austrian families, but they act to perpetuate inequalities based on class, nationality, sexuality, and gender. They are not presented in a manner that facilitates accessibility to all parents, rather they demand a certain level of education, determination, and language skills that inhibits accessibility and reinforces the traditional male breadwinner/female caregiver model. The issue of complexity begetting traditional is covered in more detail through lived experiences in the interview analysis (Chapter III.2).

Finally, the lack of incentives for fathers to take leave further perpetuates gender and class inequalities. Not only is the idea of men taking leave not promoted, but the leave options are such that lower-class parents do not have the same ability to utilize them. Benefits with low financial compensation rely on a high regular income outside the leave period and on a certain threshold of savings for the father to be able to take leave at such low compensation rates. As Morgan and Zippel (2003) outline, "the choices of parents in work and family matters remain deeply constrained by gender and class" (p. 66), given the expectations around gendered roles in paid and care work as well as low benefit levels that favor families with higher income and more savings. In Chapter IV.1, I outline several recommendations for Austria's parental leave and childcare allowance policies based on the findings in this policy analysis and in the interview analysis (Chapter III.2).

Part III: Lived Experiences of Parents in Leave and Allowance Uptake

Chapter III.1: Interview Methodology and Participant Sample

In this chapter I turn to the interviews conducted. As Paterson and Scala (2015) highlight in their research, it is vital to look at the "ways in which policies structure lived experience and (re)produce or transform social hierarchies" (p. 487). Thus, by conducting interviews and performing a qualitative analysis of the findings, I intend to determine how the policies translated into parents' experiences and how they may impact existing inequalities and maintain certain social oppression.

All eleven interviews were conducted in April 2021 online via Zoom,[29] and ranged from 20 to 90 minutes. Ten interviews took place in English and one was conducted in German.[30] The interviews were recorded on Zoom and initially transcribed using the Otter AI software.[31] I finalized the transcripts using the Zoom recording and utilized the finished transcriptions for my qualitative interview analysis in which I identified consistent themes throughout the interviews and grouped examples and quotes for each theme. Upon completing this in-depth analysis of the findings, I categorized the similar themes into three overarching dimensions that were present throughout the interviews and that related to major findings, which are the focus of my next chapter: cultural expectations, system complexity, and flexibility.

In order to perform an intersectional analysis, I ensured as much as possible a diverse interview sample in terms of age, nationality, sexuality, and class. My interviews included both men and women – sometimes as a couple, sometimes separately, and sometimes just one partner; while two couples had separated, none were single parents. My interviewees originated from Austria, Bangladesh, Costa Rica, France, Germany, Honduras, Poland, UK, and USA; and at the time of their leave in Austria, six couples were living in Vienna, three in Salzburg, and one experienced leave in both cities. The total leave and allowance periods per couple per child ranged from 12 to

[29] Due to the COVID-19 pandemic and related lockdowns, in-person interviews were not possible.
[30] Any quotes from the German interview were translated by myself.
[31] https://otter.ai

27 months and took place between 2005 and 2021. Nine of the interviews were with heterosexual couples, while two interviews were with same-sex partners, one male and one female couple. Professions include private tutor, international development officer, project manager, lecturer, customer service representative, and senior executive, among others. One parent is currently a stay-at-home mother, but with aspirations to begin a career once the children are settled in kindergarten and school. Numerous parents who had worked full-time prior to having children are still in part-time work following their leave and many of these planned to remain in part-time positions at least until their child(ren) begin school. The interview questions can be found in Appendix 1 and a full overview of the interviewees and their answers can be found in Appendix 2.

There were several limitations in finding participants for my research. The first was access to certain groups of people, for example non-heterosexual couples or non-European/non-US participants. Most of the same-sex couples I know do not have children and I had very little response through organizations that I contacted. Furthermore, most of my friends and their acquaintances with children are from either Europe or the US. Secondly, due to the COVID-19 pandemic and school closures, I had to cancel one interview with a Serbian/Austrian couple who unexpectedly needed to homeschool all three of their children during my interview phase. I feel the response rate from parents within the organizations I contacted would have been higher had there not been the added burden of homeschooling children and the psychological stress that COVID-19 brought with it during this time. Finally, due to the method of finding interview participants, this research has been very urban-focused, there were clear differences between Vienna and Salzburg, and there may have been larger differences in rural settings.

Finally, I would like to note three important points that should be kept in mind when reading the next chapter.

1. My interviewees took parental leave between 2005 and 2021, a period in which there were many changes in leave policy. The time constraints of this research did not allow a detailed analysis of these changes.[32]
2. Any discrepancies in policy and services between regions of Austria are beyond the remit of this thesis. The policy overview in Chapter II.1, which I based my analyses on, refers to the national policy information.
3. I am aware that my positionality may have impacted the interviewees' responses. My interviewees were aware of my thesis topic and it is possible that their strong inclinations towards favoring equally shared leave were influenced by this knowledge. This in turn may have affected my interpretation of the interview results.

In the next chapter, I present the interview findings and my analysis of them with regard to inequalities present in Austrian society by highlighting parents' decisions and opinions, as well as barriers faced. As support for this chapter, Appendix 2 offers an overview of the interview results per parent/couple. In order to maintain anonymity of the participants, pseudonyms have been used and no specific companies or job titles have been reported.

[32] See Pfau-Effinger (2018) for a brief overview of major changes in parental leave policies and childcare services in Austria between the early 1990s and 2015.

Chapter III.2: An Intersectional Analysis of Parents' Experiences

Following Part II that considered Austria's parent leave and childcare allowance policies themselves, Part III is focused on the real-life experiences of parents in Vienna and Salzburg. As Sainsbury (1999) highlights, "the notion of equality is not limited to equal opportunities but also encompasses equality of outcomes" (p. 15), thus in this chapter I focus on the real-world outcomes of these policies and how societal expectations and realities may come into play. I highlight the main points that need to be addressed by current policies to achieve greater equality in terms of parental leave access, experiences, and outcomes.

As discussed in Chapter II.3, Austrian parental leave and childcare allowance policies are, in many ways, established and presented in a gender-neutral way that affords mothers and fathers more or less the same rights. I argue, however, that these gender-neutral policies do not take into account the complexity of circumstances that intertwine to create distinct barriers to taking leave and reduce the reach of certain benefits. As Brandth and Kvande (2012) claim, "the shareable and, in principle, gender-neutral parental leave in practice is gendered traditionally" (p. 64), considering the power differentials with regard to the roles and expectations of mothers versus fathers. I use an intersectional critical feminist framework in this chapter to argue that the policies in their current form perpetuate cycles of inequality and very often result in the traditional model of male breadwinner/female (part-time) caregiver. In order to prevent this, the policies should account for the myriad situations which couples may be in, so as not to reinforce gender stereotypes. Additionally, I will highlight some of the positive impacts these policies can have on certain families and the ways in which they have been successful. Should this thesis be used for further analysis or for reforming the policies, it is important to highlight what works well so that these aspects remain available to those who need them and can be used as a basis for evaluating what works.

Throughout my interviews, it became clear that the decisions made by parents regarding the length and division (or not) of leave were more or less in line with Schmidt and Rieder's (2016) distinction of four major justifications: finances, employment, childcare, and parental roles

(Schmidt & Rieder, 2016, abstract; see Chapter I.4). Nevertheless, through my interviews I noticed the deep complexity of decision-making around leave and how each of the above justifications is impacted by a variety of factors, including gender, class, nationality, and sexuality. Additionally, each of these factors has implicit effects on the short- and long-term consequences of taking leave. Employing an intersectional feminist critical analysis, I outline a variety of findings from my interviews regarding these complexities and highlight how the policies could be adjusted to eliminate barriers. Following an introductory section outlining the usage of the father's leave and opinions on the ideal division, my interview analysis is grouped into three main dimensions: (1) cultural expectations and societal influence, (2) system complexity and confusion, and (3) flexibility or lack thereof. I explore how each of these dimensions relates to the policies' perpetuation of inequalities and of the male breadwinner/female (part-time) caregiver roles, irrespective of the parents' intentions. Following this analysis, in Part IV I provide concrete recommendations for how the policies might be improved so as to alleviate many of the problems and restrictions that parents have faced in their experiences.

III.2.1 Father's Leave Usage and Ideal Division

Chapter III.1 outlined the demographics of my interviewees and provided a general overview of their parental leave usage, and Appendix 2 presents detailed information on each couple. In this section, in order to highlight the gendered discrepancies in leave-taking habits and couples' attitudes, I explore the parents' usage of the daddy month and of the father's share of parental leave, as well as their opinions on the ideal division.

None of the eight heterosexual fathers I interviewed took the daddy month, in six cases the birth of their children pre-dated the introduction of daddy month. In one case, the father had not previously been employed in Austria (Abdul) and in the other case, he misunderstood the system and believed taking the daddy month made him ineligible for sharing parental leave and receiving childcare allowance (Tobias). Nevertheless, four fathers did take several weeks off

following the birth by using their holiday entitlement or unpaid leave (Will, Tobias, Diego, Abdul). The majority of mothers and fathers I spoke with found it very important to have both parents at home following the birth and were in support of a daddy month. Rosa claimed, "you're getting to know a little stranger, so being with it for a month is a minimum requirement for parents." Lukas and Jakob (same-sex foster parents of one) conversely felt that the first few months were the easiest part and having two parents at home during the later months would have been most useful, but it should be noted that as foster parents they did not have to physically recover after birth; several mothers noted that they were very glad to have their partners home during the first few weeks to take care of the baby, so they could recover from the birth (Lena, Julia, Rosa).

The eight heterosexual fathers all asserted that, had it been available to them, they would have taken the daddy month entitlement. Even though it would result in low income for the month, several stated they were in the fortunate position to have enough savings to cover this. Nevertheless, all the parents agreed that the daddy month should provide 100% of the partner's earnings, in the same way that the maternity protection period does for the birthing mother. Most parents agreed that this month should be mandatory, but several noted concerns and suggested that instead it should be made harder to opt out of (Oliver, Liam, Abdul, Will); nevertheless, they did not express this apprehension about the mandatory 8-12 weeks maternity protection period.[33] In two interviews the parents were very supportive of a mandatory, fully paid daddy month. Julia (took 12 months leave, father was at home and on unpaid leave for the first few months) argued:

> It's mandatory that someone take care of your child, so I always find it funny that people are saying 'oh, you shouldn't obligate a man go on leave'…[but] by not obligating it then it becomes the default pattern, which is that the female has to do it.

This is in line with the argument in my policy analysis (Chapter II.3), that by making the maternity leave mandatory but leaving the paternity leave optional, a gendered division of male breadwinner and female caregiver is reinforced within the policy and the culture. Additionally, Max (father of two, took 18 months leave for each child) felt it needs to be taken even further:

[33] Only one suggested this should also be possible to opt out off or shorten in certain circumstances (Oliver).

> It would be a first step, but I really think it doesn't nearly go far enough. All those little symbolic gestures are not going to solve the problem…In those cases I'm more a friend of clear cut, more radical solutions because we can go about this another 30 years before we get to equality and why not just be done with it.

These two examples as well as the overall support from all interviewees for a fully paid and more widely used daddy month, show that there is a desire for more fatherly involvement in childcare, but certain outside limitations are inhibiting this.

Five of the eight heterosexual couples I interviewed divided the parental leave entitlement between them. Four of the couples divided the leave in a very gendered way, with the women taking between 12 and 24 months and the men only 2-3. Only for one couple, Max and Sarah (Austrian, took leaves between 2011-2014), did the father take the majority of the leave (18 versus 6 months). Furthermore, of these five couples, two organized the father's leave so that it coincided with the mother being either unemployed or on unpaid leave and used the leave time to travel (Liam and Sophie, Maja and Antoni); note that one of the couples who did not share leave had intended to do the same, but had misunderstood the system and could not do so, but were fortunate that his company granted him 2-3 weeks leave, which he timed to coincide with the children's summer holidays (Oliver and Louise). The fact that these three couples utilized the father's parental leave for time as a family to travel is in line with Mauerer's (2018) research:

> Current analyses of strategies on claiming paternal leave reveal that there is a tendency to treat men's short-term childcare allowance claims as extended vacations or summer holidays with the family, 'when the workload in the company is less and more people are off.' (Bergmann & Schiffbänker, 2016, p. 120, as cited in Mauerer, 2018, p. 14)

While it is relevant that these three couples are non-Austrian and thus wished to combine a family holiday with visiting their families, the gendered implications of organizing leave in this manner remain. Furthermore, it perpetuates stereotypes that parental leave is some form of vacation rather than a very busy and tiring time that should be valued as work.

Moreover, the fact that both parents were on leave and fulfilling childcare responsibilities at the same time eradicates the aim of shared leaves to facilitate the role of father as primary caregiver and to enable the woman to return to paid employment. Ciccia and Verloo (2012) argue

that "non-simultaneous entitlements represent a step forward towards the norm that fathers can and should be carers on their own" (p. 519), an opportunity that these parents missed. Likewise, evidence shows that when men take leave this has "long-lasting effects on their subsequent involvement in childcare" (Haas & Hwang, 2008, as cited in Ciccia & Verloo, 2012, p. 510), but that this relies on the father being the only parent during the leave:

> Fathers' paid leaves are an important base in family policies triggering men's ability to take care of a child on their own for at least one month, which is a crucial factor contributing to the positive effect on the amount of time fathers spend on childcare. (O'Brien & Wall, 2017, as cited in Mauerer, 2018, p. 14)

Thus, by utilizing the father's leave as a joint childcare period and a time for travel, there are potential implications down the road for greater gender inequality in terms of parental roles and paid work division. This is already somewhat evident in these three couples, two mothers remain in part-time work and one remains at home (Sophie, Maja, and Louise, respectively). While two of these mothers have done so by choice and a desire to care for their children for longer, the question remains to what extent these gendered expectations and decisions around sharing leave played a part in their current roles.

There was consensus in many of the interviews that the daddy month and the option to share leave are good first steps but are not enough, and that more needs to be done, not just to allow or incentivize father's taking leave, but also to truly enable it. When asked about their ideal division of leave, almost all of the parents agreed that a much more equal division would be their preferred option. Their arguments came from the points of greater gender equality, care for the children, and improving the connection between the child and father. Tobias (on parental part-time, took three months leave and one month holiday) felt that it would be beneficial for the whole family: "50/50 would be a big effect of learning for everyone, for mothers, for fathers, for the kid. And also, that you respect more the part of being at home, because this is a 24-hour job." Diego (took 3 weeks holiday) was very disappointed that he was unable to take leave due to financial constraints, as he would have liked to spend a significant amount of time at home with his daughter.

His wife, Rosa (took 20 months leave), was also in support of a more divided leave: "for us it would have worked, because we do everything 50/50 and he's as much a parent as I am to our baby." Finally, Max (took 18 months leave) was in favor of a more radical approach in order to reach gender equality and mitigate the risks a man faces in taking leave:

> There should be a law that the man has to take the same amount of parental leave as the woman, because that's the only way that this will no longer be a problem…If it's just whatever you take both have to take it and there's no discussion, then it cannot endanger the career of a man because the law says he has to take it and that's that.

In her research, Pfau-Effinger (2018) found that "in both Germany and Austria, cultural change has been ahead of change in family policies" (p. 176). From my interviews it appears as though this may be the case currently in Austria. In the next sections I explore how, even though parents idealize a more equal division and support a leave time for fathers, most of them ended up in very traditionally gendered roles.

III.2.2 Cultural Expectations and Societal Influence

Pfau-Effinger (2018) defines culture as "a potentially contradictory and dynamic system of collective ideas relating to the 'good' society and the 'ideal' way of living and (morally) 'good' behavior…compris[ing] cultural values, cultural models or 'ideals', and world views" (p. 170). She argues that the way families organize their home and working lives and division of labor rests on these cultural values and the gendered models they sustain. Furthermore, she claims "welfare state policies are embedded in the societal context of the welfare culture (the relevant values and ideas in a given society surrounding the welfare state)" (Pfau-Effinger, 2005, pp. 4-5). Throughout my interviews it became clear that, whether explicitly mentioned or implicitly recognizable, the conservative culture of Austria (see Chapter I.4) significantly influenced parents' leave-taking habits and thus the roles they took on as caregivers and workers. These expectations and influences stemmed not just from the larger society, but also from geographical location, the years in which they took leave, workplace culture, and comparison points from other countries. Within the

following subsections, I explore these aspects and how they affected my interviewees' decisions and experiences.

III.2.2.a Traditionally Gendered Roles and Family Care versus a more Equal Division

One of the most surprising findings in my interviews was that location (Salzburg or Vienna) and the years (i.e. whether the leave was between 2005-2015 or 2016-2021) appeared to have more impact on leave-taking habits than did cultural background (e.g. nationality or religion). This was evident in the longer parental leave and childcare allowance periods for those living in Salzburg, and both Salzburg and Vienna for those who took leave prior to 2015, as well as in their employment choices and the gendered division of unpaid and paid work. All four couples who took leave in Salzburg assumed the traditional roles of a female caregiver (i.e. stay at home or part-time work organized around the children's needs) and a male breadwinner (i.e. works full-time and supports childcare only when his work schedule allows). While these fathers were sometimes quite involved in childcare or household responsibilities due to the flexibility of their working hours, these tasks remained the primary responsibility of the mother. Interview participants identified the expectation in Salzburg as one which values a parent, specifically the mother, staying at home for a longer period with the children and only starting with childcare or kindergarten at a later age. These kinds of expectations penetrate the beliefs of not just parents but also employers, further perpetuating gendered roles and thus the forms of employment that are open to mothers. As Sophie (employed part-time, US-American/German) expressed:

> When we started talking about and thinking about having kids, for me, I definitely had this expectation for myself and for us as a couple that I would at least initially be the one to be the primary caretaker of the kids.…the culture that we were living in made that seem like the 'normal' choice.…Having that model all around definitely influenced our decision making.

Sophie later pointed out the very gendered division of tasks within their relationship and the stereotypical roles they have fallen into, explaining them as "a direct product of the way in which we have split up our working careers" in connection with parental leave. Being surrounded by the

conservative models of female caregiver and male breadwinner instills this as the correct division of labor and forms certain gendered expectations around male and female roles.

Similarly, those who took leave in Vienna prior to 2015 placed a significant emphasis on spending time with their children, the child's development at home, and a later start to kindergarten at the age of three as the main criteria for their leave decisions, thus resulting in utilizing the full length of parental leave available. In comparison, parents who took leave in Vienna after 2016 expressed different views and showed different habits with respect to taking leave. They valued the earlier educational development and social opportunities of a child in childcare (play group, nursery, or kindergarten) starting as early as 5 months and at the latest 18 months. Additionally, they were more interested in trying to combine paid work and childcare as individuals and, even though certain barriers made it difficult sometimes, placed an emphasis on sharing parental leave more equally between partners. These couples tended more towards shorter leaves at higher pay and returning earlier to a job with increased hours.

III.2.2.b Impact of the Employer – For Better or Worse

Workplace culture was a common theme that came up in interviews as playing a significant role in leave decisions and experiences, resulting in a perpetuation of gender inequalities. As Maja (employed part-time, took 15 and 24 months leave) claimed, "parental leave is great in terms of the money that it gives you but the support that you get from your employer…is actually much more important," both in terms of positive and negative impacts. This is a gendered aspect that fits very closely with expected roles of mothers and fathers and results in a motherhood penalty and fatherhood premium (see Chapter II.2).

To begin with, expectations within the company can play a large part in whether parents feel comfortable taking time away from work for childcare. Whilst there is an established model for the mother taking a significant leave, it is much less normalized for fathers taking leave. This may lead to pressure from the employer on the father to not take leave. While Lena and Will (Austrian and US-American, working in the field of non-profit management) cited several other

criteria for the mother taking a long leave and the father not taking any, one aspect they brought up was a lack of precedent in the company for fathers taking leave, and knowledge of a male colleague who had been encouraged not to take leave. This kind of culture creates significant pressure to stick to the male breadwinner role rather than follow their desire to be involved in raising their children, and they may be unwilling to risk negative repercussions. It additionally provides an excuse for fathers who do not wish to share the care, leaving their partners fully responsible. In contrast, positive examples of fathers making use of the leave system can encourage others to do the same. Liam (employed full-time, US-American, senior executive of a non-profit) was the first man in his company to take parental leave and he noticed that "other colleagues then… felt more comfortable to take parental leave as well." This is evidence of the fatherhood premiums, as discussed in Chapter II.2, and fits with Bygren and Duvander's (2006) findings that "fathers considering parental leave may be influenced not only by colleagues in the closest work environment but also by superiors in influential positions" (p. 371). Since Liam was in a leadership role, his example of taking parental leave had a significant impact on other fathers within the company. Similarly, Lukas and Jakob (Austrian and German foster parents, employed at a university and in a city agency) noted that they both work in a field in which it is normal for men to go on parental leave, and thus they did not face any problems or negative consequences for doing so.

Additionally, there is the factor of reconciling professional work and care following the leave period. Several mothers, who had previously worked full time, experienced difficulties returning to part-time work after taking leave. Lena (Austrian, program manager in a non-profit organization, took leave 2010-2014) shared frustrations about her colleagues' comments:

> Till today it's tough working 20 hours.…A lot of people say, 'oh, you can go home again' and 'you can go home and relax the whole day.'…I didn't get the understanding that I sometimes would have wished for. People just thought, 'she has such an easy life because she only works the 20 hours.' That was really, really tough for me and that made me angry.

Maja (Polish, at the time a project manager in a non-profit organization) had a similar experience, but with more subtle comments from her colleagues: "It was always done in a very lovely way like, 'oh, you have the kids so you're very tired,' but actually I constantly felt like it's not okay to have them." She spoke of being categorized as a "mother who only looks after her children," and thus no longer felt valued by the company she had previously enjoyed working for. These findings fit with Mauerer's (2018) assertion that "returning mothers sometimes had to insist on further acceptance as responsible and loyal workers at the workplace, who still identified with the company or organization after having become a parent" (p. 16), representing effects of the motherhood penalty. On the contrary, Liam, Lukas, Jakob, and Max drew attention to the praise they received as fathers who were taking leave and involved in childcare, evidence of the fatherhood premium in effect. As Max (took 18 months leave for both children, worked part time in sales at the time) exclaimed, "it's of course a bit unfair, everything a mother does, if you do it as a man you get twice the compliments and the praise for how great it is that you do that." While the mothers faced their careers being negatively affected by taking leave, Liam (US-American, took 3 months leave) actually received a promotion while he was on leave, returning to a senior executive position in the company. This is further evidence of the fatherhood premium and motherhood penalty.

III.2.2.c Expectations of a Good Mother

It was clear in my interviews that mothers were largely conforming with the societal expectations of what it means to be a 'good mother' within Austria. Two examples exemplify the ways in which this can influence women's decision making. Firstly, the idea that putting your child in kindergarten or childcare too early makes you a bad mother abandoning her child (Sophie, US/German, took 15 months leave). Rosa (Honduran, took 20 months leave) remembered her family questioning the decision to take their daughter to kindergarten so early: "Their exact words were, 'you're brave to leave your kids with a stranger.'" While Rosa and Diego did not let this affect their plans, the expectations of what it means to be a 'good mother' can be a very persuasive factor in women's decisions about length of leave. On the contrary, when Lukas and Jakob (same-sex

foster parents) told a female friend that their daughter was going to start kindergarten at the age of one, she replied, "of course…you have to work." Lukas said it was clear from her response that she felt this way because they are men, and therefore there was no question that they would return to work.

Balancing the earnings of working part time with the costs of the required childcare to be able to do so has become a common justification for women's employment choices after childbirth. They feel that, if all the money earned goes towards childcare, then what is the point in working. Lena (part-time employed, Austrian) confirmed this in talking about her decision to take two years leave rather than returning earlier to part-time work: "If you work half time, you pay so much for [childcare] that you ask yourself, 'why do I even go to work, because I spend so much money [on childcare]'." Similarly, her husband Will (full-time employed, US-American) claimed:

> In [her] case, she wasn't making that much money, that coming back 20 hours a week, probably if you were to really look at it, it didn't make sense. The amount she actually ended up keeping after childcare was deducted wasn't really that much to probably make it worthwhile.

I argue this kind of rhetoric is a result of the gendered expectations that are so much a part of Austrian society. It is interesting, however, that these childcare costs are always balanced against the woman's salary, not the man's. According to Pfau-Effinger's (2018) research, only 2.0 percent of people in Austria "think that women with children under school age should work full time" (p. 176), and about half of the population think they should stay at home (p. 177). As Morgan & Zippel (2003) claim, "the decision of whether or not to leave paid employment rests overwhelmingly with mothers" and "as long as men earn more than women do, it is logical…for women to sacrifice their earnings" (p. 72). The prevalence of these cultural ideals and gendered expectations of mothers and fathers plays a significant role in decision making. Furthermore, the outcome results in a perpetual cycle of gender inequality, as the female is then stuck in the role of caregiver, reducing employment opportunities and, in the case that the couple has another child, is then in a cycle of longer leave and lower payments due to being ineligible for the income-based model and likely

earning less during the maternal protection period. Thus, systemic inequality perpetuates the gendered division and lack of opportunities for people based on gender and class.

III.2.2.d Family Examples

Two interviewees cited their extended family's arrangements as either an influence on their own division of responsibilities or as a factor that impacted the perception of this division. Liam (US-American, took three months leave), for example, spoke about his brother's arrangement in which he works part time and takes care of the children while his wife works full time. This precedent within the family meant that there was familial support of sharing care and, if anything, Liam felt his extended family wished he had taken a longer leave. Similarly, Maja (Polish, took 15 and 24 months leave) spoke about the inevitable influence of her father's, and her husband's father's, involvement in childcare. Describing them as "invested fathers," she noted that her dad spent more time with her due to her mother's employment. Maja felt these experiences:

> Formed us as people who do share responsibilities because that's how it was done in our house.…The professional arrangements made both our fathers very active and that made me expect my partner to be active and [made] him [be] active.

These examples show the impact that role models have, especially when they are friends and family.

III.2.3 System Complexity and Confusion

As discussed in the policy analysis chapter (Chapter II.3), the Austrian parental leave and childcare allowance systems are extremely complicated and presented in such a way that easily causes confusion and misunderstanding. This analysis was consistent in my interview findings, as it was clear that the options available had not always been evident to my interviewees, and several of them raised complexity as a barrier to free choice that perpetuated inequalities. While analyzing my interviews, I identified three areas of concern resulting from this complexity:

1. Inability to access the policies as intended,
2. Tendency to direct towards more traditional models rather than allow for freedom of choice,

3. Despite complexity, the policies still do not fully address the complex variety of parental situations and circumstances.

III.2.3.a Accessibility and Presentation of Information

Numerous interviewees cited problems with accessing information on the options available to them. These accessibility issues can be broken down into two factors: language and complexity. Not being able to understand the system for oneself, it is more likely that people will choose the same model as their friends and colleagues, which, in Austria, tends to be the traditionally gendered male breadwinner/female (part-time) caregiver roles (see Chapter I.4). I therefore argue that improved accessibility of the policies through clarity of presentation and a more diverse range of languages is crucial to promoting equal access to benefits irrespective of nationality, class, sexuality, and gender, and the intersections of these.

The availability of parental leave and childcare allowance information in other languages, as well as the complexity of the system and formulation of the options are covered in more detail in Chapter II.3. Nevertheless, I would like to highlight here a few examples from my interviews in which participants spoke of their own experiences with language and complexity and expressed their opinion on how this could be limiting to certain groups of people. Interviewees cited having to go to outside organizations for advice.[34] Oliver's (British, had 2-3 weeks leave granted by his employer) company organized a meeting in English for him and his wife, Louise (French, stay-at-home mother), with an advisor from the Chamber of Labour, however they misunderstood the option to share childcare allowance and as a result Oliver was unable to take the two months of state-funded, protected leave as intended. While Oliver made it clear they viewed this as their own fault for (a) not knowing German well enough and (b) not asking the right questions, I argue it is still the responsibility of the government to provide full and accurate information and ensure

[34] One example was Aktion Leben Österreich (https://www.aktionleben.at/), which describes itself as an "independent, non-profit, and state-recognized association which is financed primarily through donations." Despite the fact that Rosa highlighted how willing the staff there were to offer consultations in a number of languages, their website is only available in German and shows no signs of other languages being possible for communication. Thus, not all parents may realize that this is actually an optional source of information and advice for them.

people understand their options. Julia and Abdul (Austrian/US American and Bangladeshi respectively) also highlighted problems with language, even as a native German-speaker Julia found the information very confusing. Abdul noted, "it was very complicated…if you don't speak German natively, I would say it would be impossible to figure it out." Furthermore, the fact that English is the only second language available, if at all, does not fit with the fact that most non-Austrian residents were born in non-English speaking countries.[35] As Julia pointed out, this caters to the migrants who are considered 'expats,' bringing with it a certain favoritism of more privileged nationalities from higher classes, further perpetuating class and nationality inequalities.

Sophie considered the impact this might have on people from different classes and with different levels of education. For her, with a PhD and native German skills, "the process of navigating this system and thinking through these decisions is relatively complicated, and so I wonder the extent to which people who maybe have less education are sort of not able to make as well-informed decisions." Similarly, Lukas and Jakob indicated that even though they are both native German speakers, both well educated, and both used to working in bureaucratic systems, they nevertheless faced difficulties and stress with the system. Connected to a complex bureaucracy was a delay in receiving the childcare allowance, an issue also cited by other interviewees. This delay has a disproportionate adverse impact on lower-income workers. The combination of language accessibility, complex options, complicated formulation of information, and a confusing and stressful process presents problems and barriers for all, but the effects of which are intensified for those who fit within the intersecting identities of non-German speakers, lower-income classes, and less educated. The content and equality of the policies themselves becomes irrelevant if they are not reaching all groups in an equal manner.

[35] In 2018, the highest number of non-Austrian residents were born in Germany, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Turkey, Serbia, and Romania (Statistik Austria, 2020b).

III.2.3.b Complexity begets Traditional

Many interviewees praised the number of options the Austrian system presents and thus the opportunity, to a certain extent, to individualize a parental leave model that fits with their own circumstances. I discuss this, and whether or not it is indeed successful, in the next subsection. Firstly, however, I highlight an unintended consequence of these options that was commented upon in many interviews. By creating several options, Austria has created a complex system that is hard to understand, and several of my interviewees mentioned that this complexity can increase the likelihood that conservative models will be adopted. Lukas (Austrian, same-sex foster parent) made the following statement:

> When you break out of the conventional models, it means that you constantly need to discuss and agree on your rules. And that is extremely demanding and…we both found that very, very tiring.…I must say that, being a parent, I have much more understanding for people who choose the traditional model, because the traditional model is very efficient in…that you need not discuss and bargain your rules in the relationship.

Noting the effect these discussions and negotiations had on their relationship, Lukas highlighted that becoming parents, especially for the first time, is an overwhelming and significant change to life and to a couple's relationship, adding another dimension of decision making and organization to the mix has the potential of being too much for many couples. Lacking energy and time to assess all of the available options often results in simply choosing the male breadwinner/female caregiver model that they already see in much of Austrian society and among their colleagues and friends. Additional factors such as class, nationality differences, and flexibility of employment can intersect and add to the likelihood of choosing this traditionally gendered model, thus further perpetuating the cycle of inequality.

Similarly, Julia (Austrian/US-American, job-searching, 12 months leave) observed that this complicated system, with a number of different options and stipulations, "ends up really discouraging women from working and from pursuing opportunities, the fact that there are so many conditions upon it." The less conservative the family is in terms of how it wants to divide leave, the more discussion there needs to be and the more eligibility requirements there are to be

met; thus, the more strain it places on the parents both individually and as a couple. Ironically, it appears that the complexity involved with offering progressive parental leave options may in fact result in a default to the traditional setting. Thus, the policies need to be formed and presented in such a manner that does not reinforce the male breadwinner/female caregiver role or perpetuate gender and class inequalities.

III.2.3.c Complex and Customizable or Just Confusing?

I now turn to the question of whether the complexity of the parental leave and childcare allowance systems allows for individualization and thus to the fulfillment of parents' ideal situations in terms of leave, or whether it just leads to confusion and reinforces a conservative model, as suggested in the last subsection. Having completed all the interviews, there were a few couples that were very satisfied with their decisions and with the ensuing outcomes. The majority, however, felt that they made the best decisions they could in their situations, but that the outcome was different from what they desired or anticipated. Diego, who would have liked to take parental leave for one year but was unable due to financial constraints, noted, "unfortunately, in the end, it worked out that way, but it was not because we wanted it that way…rather that the circumstances drove us to that scenario." While the couples did not want to fulfill the gendered roles of male breadwinner and female caregiver, in the end they did. Liam asserted that he and Sophie "never wanted to fall into the sort of stereotypical gender stereotypes of me working full time and her dealing with the kids and all the rest, but that is in large part how things have worked out for us." Two interviewees, Julia and Oliver, pointed out the connection between the policies and the fulfillment of these gendered roles. Julia, a self-identified feminist who previously worked on gender issues, identified how to her friends "it might be slightly surprising that we've fallen into what's a really traditional...division of who's working and who isn't….[it] fits into this Austrian model." Oliver argued:

> In many ways we have behaved in a very gender typical or stereotypical manner around this, that I've been at work and [she's]been a stay-at-home mum. In that way we kind of fit

within the kind of model that the system is designed to support or the kind of challenges that it's designed to perpetuate.

These examples show two key points: (1) the couples faced barriers, whether obviously recognizable or not, in achieving their desire for more equitable sharing of leave and childcare responsibilities, and (2) they deemed the roles they have fallen into to be fitting with the conservative Austrian model that they feel the policies aim to achieve. While there was a strong desire from most of the men I interviewed to be involved in their children's lives, and several of them expressed a wish to have been able to take more leave, several circumstances were cited as reasons why this was not possible. These circumstances included finances, employment, recent moves, uncertainty about future employment or moves, and bad timing. While it is obviously not feasible for the policies to take into account every potential situation, there are certain core issues that are commonly encountered, and the policies should be structured to cater for these. In the next section on flexibility, I outline some of these issues and the desires my interviewees had for an improved parental leave system which, had it been available when they took leave, would have created greater equality in their roles and potentially improved career opportunities for the mothers.

III.2.4 Flexibility or Lack Thereof

Many interviewees expressed appreciation for the system and the way it offers opportunities for support and financial backing during the first few years of child raising. Nevertheless, it was a very common theme that despite the potential for individualization provided by the options, it is still not enough and the lack of flexibility in a number of areas prevented these parents from sharing leave or holding employment in the ways they would have wished. In the following subsections I outline the positive results of the flexibility that the system does currently provide, as well as highlight the areas where greater flexibility and individualization is required. This topic is divided into flexibility with regard to the system options, parents' decisions, childcare, and employment. All four of these realms affect how parents do or do not benefit, and should work

together to form a supportive system of valued childcare and equal labor opportunities. As Diego (Costa Rican, financial constraints on taking leave) asserted, Austria does have a good system, nevertheless there is a lot of improvement necessary "in order to make it fair and human."

III.2.4.a Flexibility within Parental Leave and Childcare Allowance Options

Several interviewees praised the Austrian system for the possibility to individualize the length and division of parental leave or childcare allowance. Maja (Polish, employed part time, took 15 and 24 months leave), for example, explained how she "used the system twice being in very different life phases and also financial positions, and it worked really well for me both times." Rosa (Honduran, took 20 months leave) was grateful she "didn't have that pressure and stress [of returning to work quickly]. It's hard enough being a new mom. Having to go back to work would have been very stressful." Despite the ability for certain parents to benefit and have positive experiences through the parental leave system, this is not true for all parents. Additionally, all my interviewees, even those that were satisfied with their options and decisions, still believed there were improvements that could be made, most of which referred to increased customizability.

One factor that was identified as a barrier to fathers taking leave was the option to change who takes the leave only twice. Since the first leave is generally taken by the birthing mother, this means that when shared the leave periods for heterosexual couples are taken by the mother, then the father, and then the mother again, allowing only one leave period for the father. Liam, however, did not feel comfortable taking six months consecutive leave from work, he suggested that allowing him to take two periods of three months would have enabled him to take a more equal share of the leave. Having fallen into distinct gendered roles, with a significant stalling of the mother's career following leave, Oliver (British, employed full time, unable to take state leave) argued:

> The more flexibility there can be within it, the better the system and hopefully the more progressive and the fewer the ways in which what is supposed to be a kind of state support system inadvertently ends up perpetuating long-term inequalities.

By allowing more flexibility in sharing leave, each partner will be taking less consecutive time away from their jobs, resulting in a closer connection to the job and the office and thus alleviating

concerns about too much distance and losing control over their tasks. As Ciccia and Verloo (2012) highlight,[36] "flexibility in uptake is another feature of parental leave that can potentially raise fathers' leave use by contrasting fears of being disconnected from the workplace and negative attitudes of employers" (p. 519). Removing this risk will, therefore, hopefully in turn mitigate barriers to the father taking leave and reduce the normalization of a male breadwinner and female caregiver model.

Two interviewees suggested further possibilities to combine leave with work, allowing both parents to take leave and claim childcare allowance at the same time. Lukas (Austrian, employed full time, took 4 months leave) argued, "the fact that [leave] can only be taken for one person, and that means that the other person has to work full time, is a very political position from the Austrian state." Diego (Costa Rican, employed full-time, took no state leave) supported the idea of an "option for both parents to stay a certain amount of time at the same time at home…raising a kid is not the job of one person.…'It takes a village to raise a child.'" I argue allowing both of these benefits in combination – both parents working part time and at the same time both parents receiving childcare allowance – would alleviate discrepancies in access based on class and gender.[37] Thévenon (2018) confirmed, "for parents who may be unwilling or unable to stop work completely, flexible or part-time leave arrangements may also provide a solution…Employers may benefit too if they don't have to go to the expense of finding and hiring a replacement worker when the employee is on part-time leave" (p. 136). From the gender perspective, it would provide greater opportunities for parents to share leave and for both parents to continue pursuing some kind of employment. Szikra and Győry (2014) note that "reforms of family policies that would allow for more flexibility and choice for parents of small children would help overcome obstacles of maternal employment" (p. 37), therefore contributing to breaking the perpetual cycles of inequality around women's jobs and income. Furthermore, if it were normalized for both fathers and mothers to take

[36] Citing Brandth and Kvande, 2001 and Leira, 2002 (Ciccia & Verloo, 2012, p. 519).
[37] Portugal, for example, has seen significant improvements since its 2009 reform in which it "offered substantial incentives to share leave (one bonus month) and to choose part-time over full-time leave (12 part-time or 3 full-time months)" and enhanced flexibility (Ciccia & Verloo, 2012, p. 522).

leave and reduce their hours, this would lessen the motherhood penalties that women currently face in the labor market (see Chapter II.2). From a class perspective, this would support parents who rely on both parents' salaries for monthly costs. They would still be paid by their employer for part time, and the amount for the missing hours would come from the childcare allowance system. At the same time, they would have the capacity to look after their children themselves at home rather than having to pay for childcare outside the state-funded hours, as will be discussed in an upcoming subsection. This is a privilege that only parents with higher income can afford currently. As Maja (Polish) claimed:

> I think it should be as flexible as possible because it's always a different story in different families, with different support systems and different arrangements between partners, and different career paths.

It is vital to take into account all groups of people when creating such policies and the best way to do so is by making them as flexible and customizable as possible while still maintaining some sense of criteria and process for governance. Furthermore, the policy makers should ensure that flexibility within the policies is followed through to implementation; otherwise, they risk "a lack of plausible positive development in the actual outcomes" (Szikra & Győry, 2014, p. 38).

III.2.4.b Flexibility after Initial Decisions

As outlined in Chapter II.1, parents must decide in the initial application which system of childcare allowance they will choose: income-based or flat-rate. Following this, within the flat-rate system they may change the length of their leave or allowance claims once. Several interviewees argued that they found this pressure to choose in the beginning stressful and that it is not conducive to the reality of having a baby. It takes a certain amount of time with the baby to see what it requires in terms of parents' attention and time and to see how the parents feel about the situation. Anna (Austrian, took 24 months leave with one child and her partner, Marie, took 24 months with the other child), for example, highlighted how "the one child needs more support, the other less," and therefore it is impossible to tell in the beginning whether the system or the length chosen will be enough or too much. Similarly, Lukas and Jakob (Austrian and German, foster parents) pointed

out how much children change within the first year and therefore it is impossible to tell what they may need or want in the future. Specifically with regard to foster parents, they often do not know anything about the child, including even their age until very late in the process (Jakob). Thus, it is even harder to make a decision at the beginning in terms of how long the child might need parental care for.

Furthermore, Sophie (German/US-American, employed part time, took 15 months leave) noted that with her previous leave period taken in London, she had not felt ready to return to work at the point she did after nine months. While Sophie acknowledged this could in part have been because she had twins, this nevertheless informed her decisions around length for her second leave in Austria. This is evidence, however, that the parents do not always know how they will feel after having been on leave for a certain amount of time. Lukas (Austrian, employed full time, took 4 months leave, would have liked to work part time and be on leave part time with his partner) argued:

> This law is written very much with the idea that there is a fight between the employer and the employee. And of course, you need regulations for that kind of situation, but you should also have regulations for a friendly relationship.

Therefore, if there could be more flexibility around being able to change the chosen model and length more than once, in agreement with the employer, it would be beneficial to many parents and, rather than having to choose a long model from the beginning to be on the safe side, they could decide throughout and women could potentially return to work earlier than they are doing now. This flexibility should, however, be very well designed so as not to reinforce the complexity covered in the previous section.

III.2.4.c Flexibility in Childcare

Through my interviews it became clear that it is not just the parental leave system itself which influences parents' decisions, but also the availability of childcare services; several parents I interviewed indicated the inflexibilities of childcare within Austria and how it perpetuates inequalities based on class, nationality, and gender. As Morgan and Zippel (2003) point out, "the

low benefit amount and frequent lack of childcare alternatives diminish the degree to which parents have real choices in how to balance work and family life" (p. 76). This is in line with Austria's publicly funded childcare only being open until noon or early afternoon, which then requires a parent or supporting family member to be available in the afternoon to pick the child up and take care of them (Hagemann, 2006). This creates more stress and puts greater demands on parents from low-income families and on couples with no extended family support and reinforces gendered roles. In the case of low-income families, it is likely that both parents have to be working to cover their monthly costs and they do not have the disposable income to pay for childcare outside the hours of the state-funded options. This puts them in a very stressful and uncomfortable position in terms of childcare. Additionally, the nationality of the parents plays a role since the system currently relies on family members, such as grandparents, who can support the childcare while parents work. Since most non-Austrian couples, and some Austrian couples, do not have a local familial support system, interviewees identified this as another dimension that puts further stress on families and does not allow them to benefit from the system equally. These findings fit with Sardadvar and Mairhuber's (2018) research; they state, "a combination of paid work and informal care is largely only possible with the support of a personal network and/or some working time reduction – and it is extremely stressful" (p. 69). The intersection of low class and non-Austrian only adds further barriers to parents being able to combine paid work with childcare responsibilities and further reinforces gendered roles.

This system of limited state-funded childcare services is based on the male breadwinner/ female (part-time) caregiver model (see Chapter I.4 & Pfau-Effinger, 2018), which relies on a 'housewife' who is available to take care of the children all or most of the day, thus her employment opportunities are highly restricted to part-time work at most. Having experienced this, Liam (US-American, employed full time) noted, "the Austrian school system I think also, in many ways, perpetuates the gender stereotypes as much as, if not more than the leave system." Thus, the limitations of childcare hours is a very classed and gendered issue and the current Austrian model

is aimed at middle- to upper-income families with a female caregiver, male breadwinner, and extended family nearby who are available to support childcare efforts. This conservative system should be improved to instead provide for families in a variety of employment and family situations and to avoid maintaining existing inequalities.

Another issue is that of the ability to access state-funded kindergarten or day care. In Vienna, parents can send their child to state-funded playgroups or kindergarten below the age of three only if both parents are either working or completing their studies (Stadt Wien | Kindergärten, n.d.). If one parent, often the mother, is not employed then they are ineligible for state-funded options and need to find other forms of childcare, which prevents the unemployed parent from finding the time or energy to look for and apply for jobs. This perpetuates the cycle of mothers staying at home for extended leave periods. Lukas told me an interesting story he had heard regarding this rule in practice:

> Two working parents are a precondition to get a place at the public kindergarten, and we easily got a place. Two couples told us, parents often need to put pressure on the city and the civil servants there reportedly accept that men need to go back to work, but tell women they need to stay home longer.

This shows further gendered expectations and barriers to placing young children in childcare and women being able to pursue employment.

The Austrian government appears to be working on improvements for childcare services, aimed at several measures, including the following that are relevant to my interview findings: extending childcare options for children before the age of 3, increasing opening hours, and further funding (Bundeskanzleramt, n.d.-b). Nevertheless, it is not clear what exactly will be changed, whether the plans for 2018/19 and 2019/20 have already been finalized and implemented, or what the status of the 2021/22 plans are. It is therefore uncertain whether these changes will be implemented as indicated.

III.2.4.d Flexibility in Employment

Given the current COVID-19 pandemic and associated working from home (WFH) protocols, this was a key theme in many of my interviews. Several of the fathers working full time expressed the way WFH allowed them to be more involved with childcare and spend more time with their family than they had previously. It has highlighted the fact that WFH can provide more equality in terms of sharing responsibilities as well as improve a working parent's relationship with their child. It will be interesting to see whether employers realize this too and therefore allow for greater work schedule flexibility and an increase in WFH allowance in the future.

The couples that cited the most equality in childcare and household responsibilities were those that had extremely flexible work schedules. This was in line with the findings of Oláh et al. (2018) that "more favourable working conditions…increase fathers' involvement in family life" (p. 56). I therefore argue that employers play a vital role in providing families with the capability of combining childcare and employment and thus should be incentivized to allow for greater flexibility in terms of working hours, location, and time; essentially alleviating further barriers to a more gender egalitarian sharing of paid and domestic labor. Furthermore, the workplace culture should be cultivated to support, value, and respect parents who take leave or adjust their hours around childcare. As Thévenon (2018) argues, there are "limits of what can be achieved by laws if societal values, workplace cultures and practices are not ready to encourage fathers to make use of their rights" (p. 136). This support could reduce inequalities, allowing parents to organize their life as they desire and as their child needs, and will foster a more supportive work environment. One element of achieving this means providing employees who are not parents with similar flexibility, to avoid creating a divisive atmosphere between parents and non-parents and an unpleasant work culture.

Having argued for flexibility in the workplace, I would like to clarify that this remains a very classed topic, as it is mainly middle- to upper-class office jobs that can offer this kind of flexibility and employment type to its employees. Lower-class jobs and positions are ones that, due

to the nature of the work, cannot always provide employees with flexibility. Thus, there needs to be special governmental benefits in place to provide further support to these parents.

In the next chapter, I summarize the key findings from my interviews and outline the benefits of the current system as well as the ways it reinforces the conservative male breadwinner/ female caregiver model and perpetuates inequalities based on class, gender, and nationality. Furthermore, I speak about my findings with regard to sexuality.

Chapter III.3: Conclusion of the Interview Findings and Analysis

The interviews I conducted with parents living in Vienna and Salzburg provided extremely valuable insights into Austria's parental leave and childcare allowance systems. From reactions of genuine satisfaction and gratitude to feelings of frustration, there was a broad range of experiences among my interview participants. While no one was completely dissatisfied, there were several couples who expressed satisfaction with the decisions they made at the time considering the circumstances, but nevertheless articulated disappointment that the options they desired were not feasible for them or displeasure with the conservative and gendered outcomes of their leave taking. These barriers to access became clear through the cultural expectations parents faced, the complexity of the systems, the confusing presentation of the available options, and the lack of flexibility, despite the ability to individualize to a certain extent. In the last chapter, I utilized an intersectional feminist critical framework to outline the numerous ways in which these dimensions both reinforce a traditionally gendered male breadwinner/female (part-time) caregiver model and perpetuate inequalities based on class, nationality, gender, and the intersection of the three.

With regard to sexuality, my interviews revealed very little about potential barriers same-sex couples may face. The two same-sex couples I interviewed were very satisfied with their leave decisions and felt they faced no discrimination throughout the process. While these are very positive results, I also argue that the fact they were middle- to upper-class Austrians and Germans in full-time work with very supportive employers at the time of taking leave affected their positive experiences. It is possible that the intersection of sexuality with low-class or non-Austrian parents could have resulted in a different outcome and increased barriers. Nevertheless, there are two points I would like to highlight. First, at the time when Anna and Marie took leave, same-sex marriage was not legally recognized in Austria; therefore, Marie took 24 months leave as the birth mother with their first child and Anna did the same for their second child. As their relationship was not legally recognized, they were unable to share the leaves. Fortunately, this is no longer a barrier parents should face, as same-sex marriage has been legal in Austria since January 1, 2019

(Oesterreich.gv.at, 2021b). Whether or not same-sex couples face cultural expectations and pressure from their employers or friends with respect to parental leave is something that needs to be further researched. Second, Lukas and Jakob spoke about the extensive advice they received from family, friends, and even neighbors they did not really know, regarding how to care for their child. This example is evidence of a negative impact on men from the traditional male breadwinner role: it is assumed that men do not know how to take care of children without a woman. Furthermore, Lukas and Jakob faced instances in which certain societal aspects of caring for a child were not available to them, such as the lack of changing tables in men's toilets. While not directly related to parental leave, this is evidence of the heteronormalizing of parenthood within Austrian society, which could then lead to expectations that affect same-sex couples' access to parental leave options. Further research with a more intersectional group of same-sex couples is required to determine how the intersection of same-sex parents' identities affect their access to and use of parental leave in Austria.

In conclusion, it is clear that, while progress has been made over the years in terms of Austria's parental leave and childcare allowance systems, moving towards greater gender egalitarian policies (Pfau-Effinger, 2018), it is still not enough and further improvements are needed, and soon. As my interviewee Max highlighted, "all those little symbolic gestures are not going to solve the problem" and "more radical solutions" are needed, otherwise we will "go about this another 30 years before we get to equality." Only by making stronger incentives for both parents to take leave and for employers to support leave, as well as by providing targeted benefits to those who need extra assistance to reach the same outcomes, can prevalent inequalities in our societies based on gender, class, and nationality be resolved. Therefore, in Chapter IV.1 I provide policy recommendations for how Austria's current parental leave and childcare allowance systems could be reformed and improved to alleviate the barriers parents currently face and to work towards greater equality.

Part IV: Conclusion

Chapter IV.1: Policy Recommendations

Within this chapter I outline my policy recommendations based on the results of my policy and interview analyses. The recommendations are grouped into key issues, and I have included references to the relevant chapters and sections that provide background information and arguments for the importance of the respective recommendation.

IV.1.1 Larger Incentives for Fathers

Recommendation 1: Make the daddy month mandatory and fully paid.

See II.3.2 and III.2.1

Recommendation 2: Reserve a larger portion of the shared childcare allowance models for the non-birthing partner, to increase the length of time fathers take off.

See II.1.5, II.3.2, and III.2.1

IV.1.2 Increased Financial Benefits

Recommendation 3: Increase the amount of the childcare allowance so it represents more of a wage replacement for many families.

See II.2.1, II.3.2, and III.2.1

Recommendation 4: Provide a greater sharing bonus for equal division of leave.

See II.2.1 and II.3.2

Recommendation 5: Grant more significant supplemental benefits to low-income families.

See II.2.1 and III.2.1

IV.1.3 Greater Flexibility

Recommendation 6: Allow parents to switch who takes leave and receives childcare allowance more than twice; and incentivize this for both parents, not just the fathers.

See III.2.4.a and III.2.4.b

Recommendation 7: Allow both parents to collect childcare allowance at the same time and to work part time simultaneously; and incentivize for both parents.

See III.2.2b

Recommendation 8: Provide publicly funded childcare services to all parents during full-time working hours.

See III.2.2.c and III.2.4.c

IV.1.4 Onboard the Employer

Recommendation 9: Incentivize employers to enable and encourage their employees to take leave and divide childcare responsibilities more equally.

See III.2.2.b and III.2.4.d

Recommendation 10: Encourage employers to provide greater flexibility where possible to allow parents to combine work and childcare responsibilities. At the same time, provide this flexibility for all employees, not just parents, to avoid hostile working environments.

See III.2.2.b and III.2.4.d

IV.1.5 Improved Statistics

Recommendation 11: Provide more comprehensive and detailed statistics on parental leave users and childcare allowance recipients per month and per year.

See II.2.1

Recommendation 12: Disaggregate data on parental leave, childcare allowance, and employment by sex, gender, sexuality, income level, and nationality.

See II.2.1

Recommendation 13: Present statistics in a user-friendly and comprehensible manner – through both overviews and more detailed data.

See II.2.1

IV.1.6 Enhanced Presentation of Information

Recommendation 14: Ensure information about parental leave and childcare allowance is presented in a user-friendly and understandable manner, uniformly across all governmental websites and brochures.

See II.3.1, III.2.3.a, and III.2.3.b

Recommendation 15: More clearly lay out the variety of options available to parents, so they can make more informed decisions and utilize non-traditional models.

See II.3 and III.2.3

Recommendation 16: Utilize more gender-inclusive language to normalize all parents taking on childcare responsibilities.

See II.3.2 and II.3.3

Recommendation 17: Improve the policy information in English and introduce other languages, for example the largest minority languages in Austria.

See II.3.1 and III.2.3.a

Recommendation 18: Ensure information provided in other languages besides German remains: consistent with the German information, up to date, more widely available, comprehensible, and presented in a user-friendly manner.

See II.3.1 and III.2.3.a

Chapter IV.2: Final Remarks

This thesis has examined Austria's parental leave and childcare allowance policies as well as parents' experiences with the system. By analyzing them through an intersectional feminist critical framework, I was able to identify a variety of ways in which the policies perpetuate inequalities based on gender, class, sexuality, and nationality, with the support of evidence from policy documents, eleven interviews and official employment, income, and leave statistics. Furthermore, issues in areas such as childcare, employment opportunities, salary differences, and so on were alluded to and the way in which they are intricately intertwined with the parental leave and childcare allowance systems was highlighted. As a conservative welfare state, it became clear that Austria still upholds and reinforces the ideal of the male breadwinner and the female (part-time) caregiver. This is evident in its leave and allowance policies, the presentation of such policies, and the availability of childcare services. Statistical data and qualitative results from interviews have provided evidence of this. From the interviews it was clear that, while many of the parents were happy with the ability to individualize their leave decisions to a certain extent, they still desire greater flexibility in the options. Furthermore, most of the interviewees would have preferred not to fall into stereotypically gendered roles with respect to division of labor, but did so due to a variety of circumstances. Finally, the complexity of the policies and the confusing ways in which the information is presented only result in more traditional models, of mothers taking longer leaves and fathers either short or no leaves, being chosen out of ease or lack of knowledge of other options.

Following the presentation of these policy and interview findings, as well as evidence from literature and statistics, I provided a list of policy recommendations that take into account the results of the thesis and aim to remedy the inequalities that are currently perpetuated by the policies. In the remainder of this chapter, I outline the limitations of this research as well as suggestions for future research that could ultimately promote greater equality in terms of parental leave and childcare allowance in Austria.

Considering the limited number of interviews conducted, I recognize that this research is simply an entry point into a much larger and longer research project. While I did attempt to create an intersectional pool of participants for my interviews, this could indeed be improved in future research with a greater diversity and increase in numbers. Further research might focus on the specific influences of employment and income on leave and vice versa. Additionally, if the country were to provide improved data disaggregated based on sex, gender, sexuality, nationality, and income level, it would be possible to do a large and comprehensive analysis of how these different factors play a role in parental leave usage and childcare allowance consumption in order to determine if the current policies are equally accessible to all parents or if some are falling through the cracks.

Further research could additionally explore Austrian leave from the employer viewpoint and tackle what can specifically be done to incentivize employers to facilitate and encourage leave for all parents. As Bygren and Duvander (2006) explore from a Swedish perspective, it is vital to recognize that "actors other than parents, such as employers, are important for understanding the gender-based division of child care" (p. 371). The government should evaluate how it can incentivize companies to foster an atmosphere in which it is normalized for men to be fathers and in which parents are not treated differently or negatively due to their home-life demands. Moreover, it will be interesting to see short- and long-term effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on parents' use of parental leave and, particularly, on fathers' participation in childcare responsibilities. Several interviewees cited the COVID-19 working from home situation as conducive to flexible reconciliation of work and home responsibilities and noted they had been able to take over more household duties due to these conditions. It will be interesting to see if working from home possibilities become more of a norm and thus produce greater flexibility for working parents to take on childcare responsibilities without taking parental leave or changing to part-time contracts.

In conclusion, this thesis represents the first intersectional analysis of Austria's parental leave and childcare allowance systems, exploring them in connection with gender, sexuality, class,

and nationality. Numerous important findings have been identified through both the policy analysis and the qualitative interview results, and recommendations for adapting the policies based on these findings have been outlined. Through further research and continued analyses in the future, it will hopefully be possible for Austria to break the perpetuation of these inequalities, to provide equal access to all parents, and to reach greater gender equality by interrupting the tradition of a male breadwinner/female (part-time) caregiver model and moving towards the universal caregiver ideal. I hope policy makers will soon realize that "bringing up a child is not really just a task of one person" (Diego).

Appendix 1: Interview Questions

Questions were asked in a non-structured way; thus, they were asked in an order that fit with the flow of conversation and some were omitted or others added if the researcher deemed this appropriate.

Beginning
- Do you have any questions about the consent form or research?

Background Info
- Tell me a bit about yourself: where you're from, where you've lived, how long you've been in Austria?
- Which citizenship(s) do you hold?

Work
- What is your employment status? What type of employment are you in?
    - Part time or full time?
    - Short term or long term?
    - How flexible are your working hours?
- In which field do you work and what is your position?
    - Are you in a management role? Or have you been previously?
- Do you consider your salary to be reasonable, high, or low for your field of work?
    - Which partner earns more?

Family/Private Life
- How many children do you have?
    - How old are they?
    - What level of education are they currently enrolled in?
- Do you follow a religion?
- How do you divide household responsibilities? Why do you divide them in that way?
- What type of childcare do you use?
    - Were there any limitations or requirements associated with this childcare?

Parental Leave Decisions
- What is your opinion of Austria's current parental leave policies?
- Were you both eligible to take Austrian parental leave?
    - If yes, which kind of leaves?
- Which of you went on leave and for how long?
    - What kind of leave?
    - What years?
    - What kind of criteria did you take into account when deciding?
- What kind of issues influenced your leave-taking decisions? What criteria did you take into account?
    - Did friends/family influence this decision?
    - Did personal characteristics (gender, religion, nationality, ethnicity, profession, age) influence your decision?
    - How much did your salaries affect your decision in taking leave?
- What was your employment situation before leave and after leave?
- Did you utilize the option of parental part-time work?
    - If yes, which parent and for how long?
- Have you heard of the new 'Papamonat' (daddy month)?

    - Had this been an option when you had kids, would you have used it? Why would you have made this decision (whether yes or no)?
- How satisfied are you with your parental leave decision? Your partner?

Parental Leave Impacts
- Did taking leave affect your career trajectory? If yes, in which ways?
- Did taking leave affect your income after returning from leave?
- In taking parental leave, did you face any kind of barriers?
    - Was there anything you were ineligible for due to your gender, ethnicity, sexuality, or income-level?
    - Was there any situation you recall in which you felt unwelcome or discriminated against because of your parental status?
- Would you say your personal characteristics (gender, religion, nationality, ethnicity, class, age) makes any difference in how people perceive your decisions in comparison to others?

Parental Leave Opinions
- What do you think is the ideal amount of time parents could take off? Why?
- How do you believe parental leave should be divided between mother and father? Why?
- What do you think of the idea of implementing mandatory paternity leave? (Given there is 16-weeks mandatory maternity leave)
    - What do you think would be the impact of this for you? For your partner?
- What changes would you implement to the current policies?

Final
- Do you think the policies discriminate against any specific groups? In what ways?
- Is there anything else you want me to know about your experiences?

Appendix 2: Overview of Interviewees

Interview	Pseudonym	Gender	Nationality	City	Current Employment	Position
1	**Anna**	f	Austria	Vienna	Full-time	Manager in insurance
	Marie[38]	f	Austria		Full-time	-
2[39]	**Liam**	m	USA	Salzburg	Full-time	Senior executive
3[37]	**Sophie**	f	USA/Germany		Part-time	Lecturer at a polytechnic
4	**Lena**	f	Austria	Salzburg	Part-time[40]	Program manager
	Will	m	USA		Part-time employed, part-time self-employed	Teaching, consulting, projects
5	**Oliver**	m	UK	Salzburg	Full-time	Program director
	Louise	f	France		Unemployed[41]	Stay-at-home mother[42]
6	**Julia**	f	USA/Austria	Vienna	Full-time previously, then on educational leave[43]	International development
	Abdul	m	Bangladesh		Full-time, remotely from the US	University assistant professor
7	**Tobias**	m	Austria	Vienna	Parental part-time employed, part-time self-employed	Project manager; Consulting and personal coaching
	Emilia	f	Austria		Part-time self-employed	Online marketing
8	**Lukas**	m	Austria	Vienna	Full-time	Deputy secretary general
	Jakob	m	Germany		Parental part-time	Customer service
9	**Diego**	m	Costa Rica	Vienna	Full-time	Conference manager
	Rosa	f	Honduras/Spain		Part-time, < 10 hours /student	Private tutoring
10	**Maja**	f	Poland	Salzburg/ Vienna[44]	Part-time	University staff
	Antoni	m	Poland		Full-time	Musician
11	**Max**	m	Austria	Vienna	Part-time	Marketing
	Sarah	f	Austria		Full-time, self-employed	Advertising

[38] The greyed-out rows refer to people I did not interview directly, but the partner provided me with certain information.
[39] This couple were interviewed separately, thus 11 interviews were conducted altogether with parents from 10 couples.
[40] Previously parental part-time, but after the 7-year limit she continued on a part time contract.
[41] Previous employment in other countries included: Civil servant, economist, charity work, teacher.
[42] Will figure out what she wants to do and start job searching once the oldest child is settled in school and the youngest begins kindergarten.
[43] Will look for a new job after leave, rather than returning to previous employer.
[44] First leave was in Vienna, second in Salzburg, and they are back in Vienna now.

Interview	Pseudonym	Leadership role	Children	Leave/allowance length in Austria[45]	Allowance system	Approx. leave years/ childcare allowance	Reduced hours because of children?
1	**Anna**	Yes[46]	2	24 months[47]	Flat-rate	2007-2009	1 month
	Marie	-		24 months[40]	Flat-rate	2005-2007	Yes
2	**Liam**	Yes	3[48]	3 months	Flat-rate	2015	No
3	**Sophie**	No		15 months allowance	Flat-rate	2014-2015	Yes
4	**Lena**	No	2	24 months; 24 months	Flat-rate	2010-2012; 2012-2014	Yes
	Will	No		No leave, but 3 weeks holiday after birth	-	-	No
5	**Oliver**	Yes	2[46]	2-3 weeks leave from employer[49]	-	2020	No
	Louise	-		No leave, but claimed allowance for 12 months[50]	Flat-rate	2019-2020	Yes
6	**Julia**	-	1	12 months allowance	Flat-rate	2020-2021	No[51]
	Abdul	No		2 months allowance	Flat-rate	2020	No[49]
7	**Tobias**	Sometimes	1	3 months (+ 1 month holiday after birth)	Flat-rate	2021	Yes[52]
	Emilia	Sometimes		12 months allowance	Flat-rate	2020-2021	Yes
8	**Lukas**	Yes	1[53]	4 months	Income-based	2017	Yes
	Jakob	No		10 months	Income-based	2016-2017	Yes
9	**Diego**	No	1	No leave, but 2 weeks from employer and 2 weeks vacation	-	-	No
	Rosa	No		20 months	Flat-rate	2019-2021	No[54]
10	**Maja**	No	2	15 months; 24 months[55]	Flat-rate	2013-2015; 2016-2018	Yes
	Antoni	-		3 months	Flat-rate	2017	No
11	**Max**	Unclear	2	18 months; 18 months[56]	Flat-rate	2012-2013; 2013-2014	Yes
	Sarah	Unclear		6 months; 6 months[54]	Flat-rate	2011-2012; 2012-2013	No

[45] If not specified whether leave or allowance, then it is both combined.
[46] Obtained the leadership position a few years after taking leave.
[47] Both as birth mother, with the two respective children.
[48] Only the last child was born in Austria, thus previous leaves were taken outside the Austrian system.
[49] Leave was provided by the employer rather than taken through the Austrian system. Originally wanted to share leave 14+2, but they misunderstood the system and this became unfeasible.
[50] Not eligible for leave due to unemployment status.
[51] As the baby is still one-year old, it is difficult to determine whether hours will be reduced in the future.
[52] He is now on parental part-time (from 35 down to 20 hours) and plans to use it till the end, but can change once if he desires more hours.
[53] They are foster parents.
[54] Still on parental leave, planning on looking for a part-time job after.

Interview	Pseudonym	Age children started attending regular childcare or kindergarten?	Family nearby?	Household Labor	Career impact?	Flexible employer?[57]	Main deciding criteria[58]
1	**Anna**	2 years, 4 months & just under 2 years; had family help before	Yes	Childcare 50/50	No	Very	Children[59]; one parent works and one cares; money
	Marie		Yes		No	Very	
2	**Liam**	3 years for kindergarten, before that in childcare a few mornings a week	No	Woman does significantly more; gendered division	No	Yes	Employment; money; children; opportunity
3	**Sophie**		No		Yes	Somewhat	
4	**Lena**	3 years and childcare twice a week before; childcare at 17 months	Some	Divided evenly; but mother does childcare	Yes	Very	Employment positions; children; comparison with US friends; opportunity; money
	Will		No		No	Very	
5	**Oliver**	Will start kindergarten at 3 years, maybe childcare before	No	Fairly evenly; mother takes on more of the childcare, but it is still shared	No	Very	Employment; children; money
	Louise		No		Yes	-	
6	**Julia**	Began childcare at 5 months	Yes	Divided evenly and share tasks	Yes	-	Employment; money; uncertainty about future moves
	Abdul		No		No	Unclear	
7	**Tobias**	Will go at approx. 17 months	Yes	Shared	Somewhat	Somewhat; yes	Children; biological (recovery from birth and breastfeeding)
	Emilia		Yes		Not really	Very	
8	**Lukas**	1 year	Somewhat	More less equal division	No	Yes	Money; employment; positions; early childcare; sharing
	Jakob		No		Yes	Yes	
9	**Diego**	18 months	Yes	Divided 50/50	No	Sometimes	Money; employment; child
	Rosa		No		Yes	Very	
10	**Maja**	Childcare at 11 months	No	Divided	Yes	Very	Money; employment; children
	Antoni		No		No	Unclear	
11	**Max**	3 years	Yes	Split according to who was working and who was on leave	No	To some extent[60]	Employment; children; positions; money
	Sarah		Yes		No	Somewhat	

[55] Plus 3 months unpaid leave from her employer while the father was on parental leave using the system. The 24 months leave was initially supposed to be one year, but she extended due to problems settling the child in childcare.

[56] Did not stay away completely from the job, still worked one day a week during leave. (Except the mother did not work for the first 3 months of leave.)

[57] The ratings here are my subjective opinion given the information interviewees provided me with.

[58] These are the criteria I ascertained from their answers, and I ordered them based on the importance they seemed to place on them.

[59] Children refers to the desire to stay home with children for a certain amount of time for their own wellbeing.

[60] The hours themselves were not flexible because it was a sales job, however the employer was flexible in terms of leave.

Interview	Pseudonym	Happy with leave decisions	Happy with outcome	Ideal length	Ideal split	Awareness of the impact of upbringing and social environment?
1	**Anna**	Yes	Yes	2-3 years	Individual decision	No
	Marie	-	-	-	-	-
2	**Liam**	Yes	Somewhat	Individual, flexibility	50/50	Yes
3	**Sophie**	Yes	No			Yes
4	**Lena**	Yes	Yes			Somewhat
	Will	Yes	Yes			Somewhat
5	**Oliver**	Yes	Yes	Individual, flexibility	Individual, flexibility	Yes
	Louise	Yes	-	-	-	-
6	**Julia**	Somewhat[61]	Yes and no	14 months	60/40 due to breastfeeding	Yes
	Abdul	Yes	Unclear	1 year	50/50	Somewhat
7	**Tobias**	Yes	Yes		50/50, but individual	No
	Emilia	-	-	-	-	-
8	**Lukas**	Yes	Yes	-	-	Somewhat
	Jakob	Yes	Unclear	-	-	Unclear
9	**Diego**	Somewhat	Unclear	Both parents >1 year together	50/50	Unclear
	Rosa	Yes	Unclear	Individual	Individual	Yes
10	**Maja**	Yes	Yes	Individual, flexibility		Yes
	Antoni	-	-	-	-	-
11	**Max**	Yes	Yes	2-3 years	50/50	Unclear
	Sarah	Yes	-	-	-	-

[61] Unhappy with the available options, but given those options, there was no other choice they could have made.

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