

# Conciliation of Motherhood and Career among Cypriot Women

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## Abstract

*The purpose of this paper is to examine the degree to which it is possible for young Cypriot mothers to conciliate motherhood and career and investigate if the employment conditions help them in their dual roles. The results from survey data show that, although women appear to be career-oriented, they face many problems to this end. The Maternity Law of Cyprus does not seem to satisfy their needs and work arrangements for new mothers are at a minimum level. Significant differences exist between subgroups, especially when divided by income or labour sector, in terms of maternity leave, job security after pregnancy, and workplace facilities. The paper shows that a work environment supportive of family life influences a woman's commitment to the workplace positively. It becomes obvious that measures need to be taken, to retain pregnant employees and young mothers and support work-family balance.*

**Keywords:** work-life balance, employment conditions, work-family culture, Maternity Law, maternity leave

## Introduction

Over recent years, important advances have been made with regard to the employment situation of European women, where the rate of female employment has risen sharply. This progress, however, should not obscure the clearly unfavourable situation of women in the labour market, where major gaps and inequalities persist in working arrangements in relation to men (Plantenga, Remery and Rubery, 2008). Although the participation of women in the labour market continues to rise, it is still affected by their predominant role in the care of children, added to which the presence and the number of children, as well as the age of the youngest child can have a marked influence on female employment rates (Bosch, Margherita and O' Dorchai, 2009). Furthermore, due to a lack of care services, inflexible working arrangements, the persistence of gender stereotypes and an unequal share of family responsibilities with men, women are often obliged to choose between having children or a career (Plantenga *et al.*, 2008).

In March 2006, a European Pact for Gender Equality was adopted by the European Council which took a dual-track approach (specific actions and gender mainstreaming). This Pact encourages Member States to promote women's employment, reduce gender gaps, make the welfare system more 'women's employment friendly' and adopt measures to support a better work-life balance for all (*ibid.*).

In effect, Cypriot society has seen many structural changes as well, including a continuous increase in the number of women actively joining the country's workforce. Access to education and paid employment is now recognised in Cyprus to be a woman's right in the same way that it has always been a man's. Cyprus is not an exception: what is under debate is a woman's simultaneous role as both mother and employee. Cypriot women are struggling to earn the right to become mothers without this affecting their professional lives, and without their professional paths affecting the development of a family. The balance between family and work is a dilemma that working women face every day. Their decision to work has an impact on the institution of family: on one hand, the home is still mainly dependent on the woman, but on the other hand, the Cypriot family structure is still characterised by patriarchy.

This paper aims to provide additional insights into the working conditions of young mothers in Cyprus in order to gain an understanding of how motherhood is accepted in society, and especially in the micro-society of the workplace. It investigates whether the Maternity Law of Cyprus incorporates the requirements of working mothers and whether it interrelates with the decision to become a parent. More specifically, this paper aims to provide new information regarding the extent to which employed mothers are aware of their rights, as stated in the Maternity Law in Cyprus, and enquires how this law is applied in all labour sectors and whether employers abide by this law.

Additionally, this study aims to offer new insight into employment conditions after childbirth compared to conditions before and during pregnancy and to also consider the needs and expectations of new mothers from their working environment. For example, it will be examined whether women who return to their workplace after the maternity period are subject to latent 'penalties' and decreased job security. Moreover, the study aims to shed light on whether Cypriot employers provide young mothers with the necessary facilities that will enable them to remain productive and not overly stressed.

### **The Maternity Law**

The member states of the European Union have various provisions for maternity leave (see Haussman, Tyson and Zahidi, 2010). Some states have incorporated the minimum requirements of the European Parental Leave Directive of 1996, while others offer more to working mothers, either through longer maternity leave or paid parental leave. The minimum maternity leave in the European Union is currently 14 weeks (since the 1992 Maternity Leave Directive, *Directive 92/85/EEC*). The European Commission has proposed extending it to 18 weeks to improve work-life balance. Over and above that the European Parliament triggered many debates and concerns from European ministers when it went a step further on 20 October 2010. It suggested that the minimum maternity leave in the European Union should be extended from 14 to 20 weeks with full pay, but allowing for some flexibility for countries which already have a form of family-related leave.

Sweden is the country with the most generous parental leave: all working parents are entitled to 480 days (16 months) paid leave per child, with the cost being shared between the employer and the state. To encourage greater paternal involvement in child rearing, a minimum of two months out of the sixteen is required to be taken by the father. The states with the most beneficial maternity leave include the United Kingdom (UK), where, since April 2010, all female employees are entitled to 52 weeks of paid maternity leave, with the first six weeks paid at 90% of full pay and the remainder at a fixed rate; Denmark with 52 weeks of paid maternity leave, two of which should be taken by the father; Slovakia and the Czech Republic grant 28 weeks of maternity leave; and Ireland 26 weeks, partially subsidised by the state. The European states with, seemingly, the least beneficial maternity leave are Malta, with 14 weeks and Germany whose policy extends maternity leave from 14 to 18 weeks in the event of a multiple birth.

The maternity rights of women in Cyprus are stated in the 'Maternity Protection Law' of 1997 (Republic of Cyprus, 1997), amended in 2002, where maternity leave was legally set at 16 weeks (four months) of which nine weeks had to be taken at the beginning of the second week before the expected date of confinement, and six weeks of compulsory leave were taken after childbirth. This means in practice that two weeks were taken prior to childbirth (which could be extended to a maximum of six weeks), one week when childbirth takes place and six weeks after childbirth, making a minimum of nine compulsory weeks of maternity leave. New amendments of the Maternity Law in 2007 increased maternity leave to 18 weeks beginning between the sixth and second week before the expected week of confinement or the week of delivery. The maternity grant is a lump sum payable upon birth.

The main provisions of the maternity law state that during maternity leave, the employed woman is entitled to a grant by the Ministry of Labour and Social Insurance. This monetary allowance is determined on the basis of the weekly average of the woman's paid and insurable earnings in the previous contributions year. Maternity allowance is comprised of a basic allowance and a supplementary allowance. The weekly amount of the basic allowance is equal to 75% of the weekly average of the woman's basic insurable earnings in the previous contributions year. The weekly amount of the supplementary benefit is equal to 75% of the weekly average insurable earnings of the woman in excess of the basic insurable earnings. Where the insured woman receives part of her remuneration from her employer (usually 25%), the allowance is reduced so that the total amount of the allowance does not exceed her standard remuneration.

The employed woman must present a medical certificate to her employer stating the expected date of delivery. This acts as a legal shield and protects her against termination or notice of termination of employment from the period in which she notifies her employer until three months after maternity leave. According to the 2002 law, in the case of an employer being found guilty of violating provisions regarding maternity rights, the employer is liable to a fine up to a maximum of €1,700. The 2007 amendment has increased the fine to a maximum of about €7,000.

All EU Member States have statutory parental leave provisions for the period following maternity leave which are guaranteed by the minimum requirements set out in the EU directive

on parental leave. Parental leave constitutes a major measure aimed at reconciling work and family life for parents with young children; however, there are marked variations across countries regarding the statutory leave provisions; in terms of the duration of leave, financial support and flexibility options offered to parents. There are also national differences in the proportion of employees who use parental leave ('take-up rates') and in their employment patterns once the number of leave days runs out (Bruning and Plantenga, 1999; Moss and Deven, 1999; Fagan and Hebson, 2006; Plantenga and Remery, 2005; Anxo, Fagan, Smith, Letablier and Perraudin, 2007).

Evidence in Anxo *et al.* (2007) shows that besides Sweden, the only other countries which offer a high or moderate earnings-replacement rate are Denmark, Finland, Slovenia and Hungary. In seven of the countries surveyed, namely Cyprus, Greece, Ireland, the Netherlands, Portugal, Spain and the UK, the statutory entitlement is unpaid.

The parental leave law in Cyprus, namely 'Parental Leave and Leave on Grounds of Force Majeure Law of 2002' (Republic of Cyprus, 2002), has been in effect since 1 January 2003. Any employed parent is entitled to (unpaid) parental leave of up to thirteen weeks in total, subsequent to the birth or adoption of a child. Leave may be taken within the period commencing on the day after the expiration of the maternity leave and ends on the child's sixth birthday. An employee may take parental leave for a minimum period of one week and a maximum period of four weeks, per year. When both maternity leave and parental leave have expired, the employee may return to work at the same or a similar position to the one held before taking parental leave. Compared with other European countries, Cyprus is ranked last based on the extent of financial support given to parents on parental leave (Fagan and Hebson, 2006; Plantenga and Remery, 2005; Rubery, Grimshaw, Figueiredo, Smith and Donnelly, 2005; Anxo *et al.*, 2007). In addition, the majority of EU countries make some provision to permit part-time parental leave. Cyprus, together with the Czech Republic, Italy, Latvia and Poland, are exceptions to this (Anxo *et al.*, 2007).

Additional evidence in Anxo *et al.* (2007) shows that only seven of the European statutory parental leave systems provide incentives for fathers to take parental leave through an individual entitlement to paid leave or a reserved portion of a joint family entitlement to parental allowances. Of the seven, the most generous leave provisions are in Sweden, the other six countries are Finland, Austria, Italy, Belgium, Luxembourg and Slovenia. In five of the countries surveyed, namely Cyprus, Greece, Ireland, the Netherlands and the UK, the parental leave entitlement is individual but unpaid for both parents. In a further seven countries – the Czech Republic, France, Germany, Hungary, Latvia, Poland and Spain – all of the joint leave allocation can be taken by the mother (Anxo *et al.*, 2007).

Finally, in some countries, certain provisions exist in the law which aim to help new mothers when they return to work after childbirth, such as accommodating flexibility in the work schedule to provide for breastfeeding. According to a comparative study by Petroglou (2000), the mother's right to breastfeed her new-born is protected under the law in most of the European Union countries with some exceptions such as Denmark and Finland. In practice this right is translated into a minimised working day where the mother may go to work later, leave work earlier, or leave

the workplace for a specified time. This period of absence is considered working time. The shortest period of time is one hour (Cyprus, Spain) and the longest is two hours (Italy, Portugal). The time limit of this provision varies within the EU. For example, in Spain this right may be used until the child reaches the age of nine months, while in Greece it may be used (by public sector employees) until the child is four years old. In Cyprus, the right of one-hour flexibility for breastfeeding is protected by law, and was increased with the July 2007 amendments from six to nine months.

### **Theoretical Framework**

Many studies agree that maternity leave and family life are usually considered by employers and colleagues of the leave takers as obstructions which negatively affect the female employee's performance, and therefore, act as an impediment to advancing a woman's career. According to Miller, Jablin, Casey, Lamphear-Van Horn and Ethington (1996), maternity leave takers worry about convincing their peers and employers with regard to two things: first, that they will return to the workplace after their pregnancy and, second, that their contribution to the work unit both before and after the period of leave will not dissipate. Similarly, mothers who want to take parental leave can also face obstacles or fear they will incur career penalties afterwards by using the 'mummy track' (Lewis, 1997; Moss and Deven, 1999).

Miller *et al.* (1996) argue that even though there are similarities between maternity leave and other kinds of organisational leave (e.g. for work-related injuries), the process of negotiating maternity leave is characterised by extensive bias on the part of employers and colleagues. They conclude that in order for the maternity leave negotiation process to run smoothly, managers must rid themselves of all stereotypes concerning the performance of pregnant women and mothers.

Work-family conflict is aggravated when there is no support between spouses, no flexible work schedules and no or minimal day care facilities (e.g. Kim and Ling, 2001). The above three factors have been examined in related literature.

### ***Work-family Conflict: The Role of Spouses***

With regard to support from spouses, evidence suggests that even though men are trying to help out more at home, women still spend twice as much time on domestic work (Newell, 1993). Dean (1992) found that although the great majority of women in her sample were engaged in paid employment, heavily disproportionate amounts of the work involved in everyday family life, fell on their shoulders. Schedule conflict occurs because women have to tackle tasks beyond their workplace, such as shopping and cooking that need to be adjusted around their working hours (Pleck, Staines and Lang, 1980). On top of this, a mother's job description now includes being chauffeur and manager of her children's busy schedule. Women are still considered to be the primary caretakers of the home and family, therefore the strain of balancing work and family falls heavier on them. In Plantenga *et al.* (2008) evidence shows that this is especially true in Cyprus, Malta, Spain and Italy.

As Hochschild (2003) explains, women can be considered to be stuck in a 'stalled gender revolution'; most mothers now do paid work outside the home – that is the revolution. But the jobs they go out to and men they come home to have not changed as rapidly or deeply – that is the stall. Hochschild (2003) explores how couples divide up the emotional as well as the physical work of making a home feel like a home, and traces links between a couple's division of labour and their underlying 'economy of gratitude'.

In all European countries, it is primarily the women that use parental leave. This gender asymmetry is rooted in economic conditions and cultural norms. In dual-earner couples it means that earnings by the household over the short term are minimised, particularly when the parental leave provides limited or no payment. Cultural norms mean that it is usually the mother who makes the main adjustment to her working time to accommodate care responsibilities (Anxo *et al.*, 2007).

In policy debates, this gender asymmetry is often regarded as 'natural' or as an unproblematic realisation of private choices made by parents in light of their economic situation or values concerning parenting roles. However, gender inequality in the take-up of parental leave represents a public policy problem. If it is mainly women who take long parental leave periods, this perpetuates gender-related, stereotypical assumptions about the domestic responsibilities of men and women and aptitudes for employment. Such assumptions can fuel employment discrimination against the recruitment and promotion of women which runs counter to the policy objective of improving gender equality, as stated in the 'Gender Equality Pact' adopted by the EU Member States in 2006. Conversely, gender stereotypical ideas about care roles can make it more difficult for fathers to take parental leave because this conflicts with workplace cultures and expectations concerning the appropriate behaviour for men (Brandth and Kvande, 2006). A comparative survey of Anxo *et al.* (2007) showed that establishments that are most likely to report fathers taking parental leave, are located in Sweden, Slovenia and Finland. Contrary to this, few or no establishments have witnessed men taking parental leave in Cyprus, the Czech Republic, Germany, Hungary, Latvia, Poland and Spain.

### ***Work-family Conflict: Work Flexibility***

Lack of flexibility in the schedule has been proven to be a significant factor that increases work-family conflict (see Kim and Ling, 2001; Arora, Hartman and Stoner, 1990; Aryee, 1992). Lyness *et al.* (1999) suggest that overall work-family culture, as well as specific work-family culture dimensions (i.e. managerial support, fewer negative career consequences for utilising work-family benefits, and fewer organisational time demands) are related to pregnant women's organisational commitment, planned timing of maternity leave and return to work after childbirth. More specifically, Lyness *et al.* (1999) in their study that included pregnant women, found that women who perceived more supportive work-family cultures were more committed to their organisations and planned to return to work more quickly after childbirth than women who perceived less supportive cultures.

Greenstein (1989) and Werbel (1998) have linked the return to work following maternity leave with a woman's income. They suggest that women with high earnings go back to work earlier than women with lower incomes. On the other hand, the studies of Lyness, Thompson, Francesco and Judiesch (1999) and Klerman and Leibowitz (1994) did not reveal a relationship between wages and a return to the workplace post maternity leave.

Nevertheless, having children seems to have a negative impact on a woman's wages. Edwards (2006) found that in Australia, women that are eligible for maternity leave have lower earnings than those who are ineligible, and Gustafsson, Wetzels and Vlasblom (1996) revealed that childbirth moderated the wages of women, especially in Germany, where earnings of women dropped by 33% after giving birth.

Averett and Whittington (2001) have discovered that even though women, before joining a firm, do not take into consideration whether or not it offers maternity leave, once they are employed the probability of pregnancy increases if the workplace offers this benefit. This is especially so for women who have at least one child prior to entering the company's workforce. Fertility rates, thus, seem to be affected by the laws on maternity leave.

Cross-country differences appear to exist in how the new mothers experience their return to the workplace. Newell (1996), in a study on British and Danish maternity leave takers, found that around 30% of British women had returned to a job of lower status than before their maternity leave, while only 1% of Danish women reported such a change. She further mentions that most of the Danish women conveyed that their return to work was trouble-free, which was not true for most of the British women.

A suitable working environment for young mothers is beneficial for both employee and employer. Rapoport, Bailyn, Fletcher and Pruitt (2002) suggest that when work and family life are integrated then gender and diversity issues are addressed and employees are more effective contributors to their organisations. Contrarily, when it is not integrated, the management frequently experiences costs without productivity gains, and employees often feel that work/family initiatives have not been successful. In Cyprus, the only type of flexible work arrangement that currently exists is part-time work and this is also viewed as the most popular (Plantenga and Remery, 2005). Yet, fewer men compared to women take part-time employment (Plantenga *et al.*, 2008).

### ***Work-family Conflict: Childcare Facilities***

The level of childcare facilities also aggravates work-family conflict (Kim and Ling, 2001). The decisions by mothers to work or not, and the way they make use of their parental leave entitlement are influenced not only by the number of children, but also by the availability, quality and cost of childcare facilities, in addition to the operating times of the national school system and the prospects of special working time arrangements granted by the employer (Bosch *et al.*, 2009; Plantenga and Remery, 2005). In countries where childcare is limited, expensive, or the opening

hours of childcare facilities are incompatible with working hours, mothers may have to take longer periods of leave. This may also mean that extended leave becomes an exit route from the labour market rather than a bridge for resuming employment (Plantenga and Remery, 2005).

In the European Union, childcare is recognised as a critical factor in meeting its goal of full employment and a concrete way of eliminating barriers to women's participation in the labour market. At the Barcelona summit in 2002, EU governments set childcare targets for the year 2010 as follows: 33% coverage for children under three years of age and 90% coverage for children between the age of three years and compulsory school age. However, in terms of public childcare coverage rates, only a limited number of European countries have reached the Barcelona targets, namely Belgium, Denmark, France, the Netherlands and Sweden (*ibid.*).

The cost of childcare in some countries, even when subsidised, absorbs a large part of parents' budgets which can act as a disincentive towards utilising formal childcare (Bosch *et al.*, 2009). One such example is Cyprus, but similarly there are other countries including the UK, the Netherlands and Ireland (*ibid.*). Comparative research between thirty European countries has shown that Cyprus has limited provision of childcare, limited public funding, and no company involvement in childcare facilities (Plantenga and Remery, 2005). While public childcare is quite affordable in Cyprus, private childcare is expensive. Because public care is unavailable in many instances, parents are obliged to pay the full cost of private day care facilities. Greece, Spain, Hungary, Lithuania, Poland, Estonia and Slovakia are similar to Cyprus in this respect (Plantenga and Remery, 2009). Cyprus could be considered a country where it does not make much sense for low-income mothers to be in paid work (Bosch *et al.*, 2009).

Although the European Commission committed to support the efforts of Member States to improve care services, developments in Cyprus are extremely limited, verging on virtually non-existent (Plantenga *et al.*, 2008; Plantenga and Remery, 2009). The attitude in Cyprus (and similarly in Germany, Austria and Italy) is that children should not attend childcare facilities until they are at least two or three years old (Plantenga and Remery, 2009). Leave of absence or informal arrangements with a family member (usually the grandmother) are preferred instead. And, in addition to grandmothers, there is an influx of domestic workers from countries like Sri Lanka and the Philippines who play a key role in the care of children in many medium- to high-income households (Plantenga and Remery, 2005). Subsequently, the main wedge to improving childcare services in Cyprus is lodged at both the political level as well as in the cultural expectation that grandparents will replace the state's lack of provisions (Plantenga and Remery, 2009). It could, additionally, be argued that, although domestic workers can also be thought of as obstacles to improving childcare services, they, however, enable the Cypriot mother to work, as opposed to mothers in other European countries, where the maid system does not exist.

The provisions of parental leave schemes and the availability of childcare facilities or of other measures to reconcile work and family life, affect the employment patterns of mothers following maternity leave. Another reason why parental leave results in women exiting the labour market is that employers may be resistant to reintegrating mothers at the end of the leave period (Plantenga



and Remery, 2005; Anxo *et al.*, 2007). Whereas in Nordic countries mothers have high employment rates with most mothers taking parental leave and resuming employment afterwards, in Germany the contrasting return rate is rather low at 50%, and many mothers who resume employment switch to part-time work. Return rates are high in Austria, the Czech Republic and the UK, with 75% of mothers resuming work following parental leave (Plantenga and Remery, 2005).

Anxo *et al.* (2007) surveyed managers in 21 European countries, and asked them to specify the typical employment patterns of their female employees following parental leave and to identify the most frequent behaviour of mothers who take their entitlement:

- Do they resume employment afterwards to the same extent as before?
- Do they resume employment but request reduced working hours? or
- Do they not return to the company?

Cyprus ranked third among the 21 countries in terms of women resuming work to the same extent as before (75% of mothers). Additional evidence in Plantenga *et al.* (2008) illustrates that in 13 out of 21 EU member states the employers stated that the first choice of women returning to work after maternity leave is to have the same schedule as before.

## Data and Methodology

The research population of the study included women who had given birth to a child in the previous three years and were employed at the time of their pregnancy and returned to work after the child's birth. Moreover, women who were self-employed at the time were excluded. The sample was selected using a combination of stratified random sampling and snowball sampling, and the participants were asked to base their responses on their last pregnancy.

Prior to data collection the following concerns were addressed:

- ethical issues were taken into consideration;
- participation in the study was voluntary;
- anonymity and confidentiality were secured;
- permission was obtained from employers where necessary;
- all respondents signed informed consent forms.

Data collection using the final questionnaire was undertaken during face-to-face interviews to ensure high quality and reliability in the responses.

A pilot questionnaire was prepared and handed out to eighteen women who satisfied the inclusion criteria in order to obtain feedback and acquire initial reactions in relation to the results. The respondents' comments and opinions were then used to make changes to the original questionnaire so that the final survey form could be produced.

The questionnaire was created based on related literature so that the socio-economic aspects of pre- and post-childbirth conditions could be examined. The objective was to obtain new insight into the topic by testing whether or not factors such as the employment sector, income and number of children in the family make a difference in the implementation of maternity leave and the choices of new mothers in Cyprus. In addition, the needs of young Cypriot mothers were studied. The topic was surveyed from the perspective of young mothers. The first part of the questionnaire reviewed the Maternity Law along with employment conditions during pregnancy and maternity leave. The second part of the questionnaire scrutinised employment conditions after childbirth and prospects for improvement according to the needs of working mothers. Needs were ranked according to their means, where all the statements were rated on a Likert scale, from one (not important at all) to five (very important).

The Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) was used to analyse the data and various statistical methods were implemented for the analysis in order to test all hypotheses of interest properly. These included descriptive statistics, such as means and percentages, chi-square tests, independent samples t-tests, one-way ANOVA tests and post-hoc Bonferroni pairwise comparisons.

The final sample size was 54, corresponding to a response rate of 77%. The data were obtained from Nicosia, Larnaca, Limassol and Paphos (with a higher proportion from Nicosia), in an attempt to mirror the general Cypriot reality. It should be noted that Government employees (who work in Nicosia), do not necessarily reside in Nicosia, since the distances between most towns allow for commuting.

## **Empirical Results**

### ***Demographics***

Socio-demographic results for the age of the sample showed that 40% of the respondents were between the ages of 20 and 29 and 60% were 30 to 39 years of age. Most women (98%) were married or cohabiting with only 2% divorced. In addition, 52% of the women had one child, 35% had two children and 13% had three children.

The women in the sample had varied financial and educational levels. Their labour sectors will be divided into 'public' and 'private'. The 'public' sector includes government, semi-government, and bank employees, because these three groups have similar working schedules and benefits in Cyprus.

Regarding the sample's financial status, 11% of women received a monthly income of under €850, 45% received between €850 and €1,500, and 44% received over €1,500. Moreover, about 40% of the respondents were employed in the private sector and the remaining 60% in the public sector.

*The Maternity Law and Employment Conditions during Pregnancy and Maternity Leave*

Most of the respondents (83%) stated that they are familiar with the maternity law of Cyprus. A chi-square test showed that there is a marginally significant relation between the labour sector and knowledge of maternity law ( $X^2=3.684$ ,  $p\text{-value}=0.055$ ). It appears that of those who were not aware of the law, the majority belonged to the public sector (88.9%). Respondents largely (75.9%) believed that their place of employment had a maternity leave policy, however only 62.5% had been officially informed by their employer of this policy. Most of the respondents whose place of employment has a maternity leave policy (85.4%) replied that its policy is applied fairly to all women within the company. Furthermore, 45.1% said that health insurance at their workplace covers pregnancy and motherhood; whereas 37.3% stated that there is no such provision. A significant 17.6% did not know whether or not such provision existed, which is quite puzzling considering that, as new mothers, they could have benefited from it.

Results showed that most women take all the paid maternity leave weeks that they are entitled to. About one-third of the respondents extended their leave beyond the originally agreed days (the extension mean was 3.74 weeks), and for 52.6% of them this extended leave was unpaid. An independent samples t-test revealed that there is no significant difference in the total weeks of maternity leave between respondents in the public and private sector ( $p\text{-value}=0.401$ ).

A one-way ANOVA test determined that there is a difference in the weeks taken before childbirth between different income groups ( $F=3.112$ ,  $p\text{-value}=0.035$ ). More specifically, post-hoc Bonferroni pairwise comparisons showed that women with lower income take fewer weeks of maternity leave before childbirth. In addition, one-way ANOVA exposed that there is a difference in the weeks taken after childbirth between different income groups ( $F=5.041$ ,  $p\text{-value}=0.004$ ), where post-hoc Bonferroni tests indicated that women with higher income returned to work more quickly after childbirth. Moreover, results showed specified that there is a difference in those weeks with paid maternity leave according to the number of children, where women with fewer children take more weeks of paid maternity leave; post-hoc Bonferroni pairwise comparisons showed that a statistically significant difference existed between women with only one child and women with three children ( $p\text{-value}=0.049$ ).

The employer's reaction to the announcement of the employee's pregnancy was measured on a Likert scale from one (very negative reaction) to five (very positive reaction). Results disclosed that employers generally reacted in a positive manner at the announcement of the employee's pregnancy, since the mean rating was 4.1. Only 3.9% of the respondents stated that their employer's reaction was 'negative' or 'very negative' and about half of the respondents (49%) said that their employer's reaction was 'very positive'. No connection was found between the labour sector during pregnancy and the employer's reaction to pregnancy ( $p\text{-value}=0.301$ ). Additional evidence from one-way ANOVA exposed that the more negatively the employer reacted, the more weeks of maternity leave a woman took ( $F=3.957$ ,  $p\text{-value}=0.026$ ).

The respondents' job responsibilities were generally left unchanged due to their pregnancy (as stated by 86.8%). Of those who experienced a change, only 16.7% had not personally requested it. Moreover, 83% of respondents replied that they had not feared losing their job due to their pregnancy: only 19% of private sector employees stated that they had felt insecure due to their pregnancy, 10% of bank employees and 21.1% of government employees. The rather high percentage for government employees is surprising given that in Cyprus governmental positions are considered to be very secure. It could, however, be explained by the fact that there were some non-permanent governmental employees in the sample. Nonetheless, the differences regarding job security fears between the private and public sectors were not found to be statistically significant ( $p\text{-value}=0.745$ ).

Finally, 42% of respondents stated that they experienced problems carrying out their work responsibilities during their pregnancy, but the number of maternity leave weeks taken before childbirth was not statistically related to problems regarding carrying out work ( $p\text{-value}=0.685$ ).

### ***Working Environment for New Mothers***

To determine whether some women had to leave their jobs due to their pregnancy, an investigation took place initially to find out if new mothers were still working for the same organisation that employed them during their pregnancy. It was discovered that about 9% of the respondents had changed their employment but there was no linkage of the change with the pregnancy or the maternity leave. It transpired that for 75.5% of the respondents the return to the workplace was characterised as either easy or very easy. The above finding agrees with the majority (69.8%) who stated that there was no change in their job duties postpartum.

About 63% of the respondents indicated that there were no special arrangements available by their employer to help in their dual role as working mothers. Of those who specified that some arrangements existed, 50% revealed that this understanding permitted leaving work when the child was ill. Another 24.1% stated that this agreement was a more flexible time schedule. It appears that women in the private sector can leave their work more easily if their child is ill as most of those who were unable to leave work for this reason were mothers who worked in the public sector (74.1%). The relation between the employment sector after pregnancy and the ability to leave work when a child is ill is, in fact, statistically significant ( $X^2=3.82$ ;  $p\text{-value}=0.05$ ). As regards the differences between labour sectors and income levels presented above, a summary of the most important results appears in table 1.

**Table 1: Results from Independent Samples t-tests (t), One-way ANOVA (F) or Chi-square Tests ( $X^2$ ), for Differences between Labour Sectors and Income Levels**

Statement	Factor	Test Statistic	p
1. Knowledge of maternity law	Labour sector	$X^2=3.684$	0.055 <sup>*</sup>
2. Total weeks of maternity leave	Labour sector	$t=0.847$	0.401
3. Maternity weeks taken before childbirth	Income	$F=3.112$	0.035 <sup>**</sup>
4. Maternity weeks taken after childbirth	Income	$F=5.041$	0.004 <sup>***</sup>
5. Employer's reaction to pregnancy	Labour sector	$X^2=4.872$	0.301
6. Fear regarding job security	Labour sector	$X^2=0.105$	0.745
7. Ability to leave work when child is ill	Labour sector	$X^2=3.820$	0.050 <sup>**</sup>

\* Difference is statistically significant at the 10% level of significance

\*\* Difference is statistically significant at the 5% level of significance

\*\*\* Difference is statistically significant at the 1% level of significance

The needs of working mothers were also deliberated in order to gauge the prospects for improvement. All the questions in the survey were rated on a Likert scale from one (not important at all) to five (very important). The request that was rated most highly in rank order was the appeal for a more flexible time schedule during breastfeeding (mean 3.75), where 62.3% of the respondents value this option as 'important/very important'. The second most popularly requested 'need' is for on-site childcare facilities (mean 3.30). All of the respondents indicated that there is no childcare provision at their place of employment, and 56.6% rated the necessity for this as 'important/very important'. Working from home when a child is ill, was rated third (mean 2.89) in importance, and access to a refrigerator for the storage of breast milk was considered to be the fourth 'need' in terms of importance, and classified as 'important/very important' for 37.7% of the respondents.

As regards cutting out some responsibilities at work, 45.3% of the respondents never considered a gradual return to their full duties at work, and this particular 'need' was rated least important for young mothers (mean 2.38). In relation to this, when asked if they would quit their jobs in order to raise their children, if, in the case of their company, the maternity policy was not flexible, only 22.2% would definitely do so. In table 2 (p. 160) the needs of working mothers are shown in order of importance according to the survey.

**Table 2: The Needs of Working Mothers in Cyprus, in Ranking Order of Importance**

Need	Not important	A little important	Moderately important	Important	Very important	Mean
More flexible time during breastfeeding	11.3%	94%	170%	170%	453%	3.75
On-site childcare Facilities	20.8%	151%	75%	26.4%	30.2%	3.30
Working from home when child is ill	28.3%	18.9%	151%	11.3%	26.4%	2.89
A refrigerator at work for storage of breast milk	41.5%	57%	151%	94%	28.3%	2.77
Gradual return to full duties	453%	13.2%	18.9%	11.3%	26.4%	2.38

As previously mentioned, the law for parental leave in Cyprus currently offers to each parent an additional thirteen weeks of unpaid leave for each child, with a minimum of one week and a maximum of four weeks per year until the child reaches the age of six years (Republic of Cyprus, 2002). The survey results revealed that most respondents (66%) were not aware of this provision.

Respondents were also asked whether they would accept unpaid maternity leave, provided they could retain their jobs. The majority of respondents (76.9%) stated that they would accept more unpaid maternity leave. While it is interesting to note that about 43% of the women believed that their husband/partner would agree to take paternity leave in order to care for the child if paternity leave was paid, only 3.9% accepted if the case was different and paternity leave was unpaid (given that the woman continued to work). In fact women felt much more strongly that their husband/partner would 'definitely not' accept unpaid paternity leave (70.6%).

Finally, a hypothetical question was posed regarding the thoughts of these women on having more children, in relation to the maternity leave law and their working environment. About 15% of the sample said that their decision to have another child would be contingent on their company's maternity policy.

## Discussion

The aim of this study was to examine how easy it is for Cypriot women to maintain a balance between motherhood and career. The working environment of new mothers was examined, along with the maternity law in Cyprus, to see whether there are prospects for improvement based on the stated needs of the survey respondents.

First, this research showed that most women in the study were not well informed about the maternity law and their rights. The fact that a significant percentage of women did not know whether their health insurance covered pregnancy and motherhood indicates that their employer, on the one hand, had not informed them of this, and that they, on the other hand, did not personally know their rights and could, therefore, not react in cases where these rights were ignored by employers.

Moreover, results showed that although most women took all the paid maternity leave weeks they were entitled to, most respondents were not familiar with the provision in the law (Republic of Cyprus, 2002) for extended unpaid parental leave until the child reaches the age of six years. Informal data from other European countries similarly suggest that the provision for unpaid leave is rarely used and female employees will, at most, take what is considered to be the maximum paid leave provided by law (Plantenga and Remery, 2005).

This study has provided new insight regarding the factors that affect the duration of maternity leave among Cypriot women. First, most employers greeted an employee's pregnancy with positive remarks. Having said that, the duration of the maternity leave was found to be significantly influenced by the employer's behaviour towards the employee, where, and as a consequence, the more negative the employer's reaction to an employee's pregnancy, the more weeks of maternity leave a woman took. These findings are consistent with Lyness *et al.* (1999) who suggest that work-family culture is related to pregnant women's organisational commitment, planned timing of maternity leave, and return to work.

Second, the duration of maternity leave was significantly related to earnings. More specifically, results showed that the lower the income, the fewer weeks of maternity leave a woman took before childbirth. On the other hand, women with higher incomes returned to work more quickly after childbirth compared to women who received less. This finding concurs with previous studies (e.g. Werbel, 1998) and could be due to the fact that women who earn more are either career-oriented to a greater extent and aim to succeed professionally, or that a higher salary is usually related to an elevated managerial position, which involves more responsibilities that cannot easily be allocated to other employees. A further explanation may be related to the fact that women with higher incomes can afford to employ domestic workers, who enable these new mothers to return to their jobs more quickly and, potentially, to have better career chances compared to women in other countries where the maid system is non-existent.

Third, it was found that women with fewer children took more weeks of paid maternity leave. The explanation for this might be because the employer is more willing to pay part of the maternity allowance when a woman gives birth to her first child, but when more children come along the willingness disappears. Taking it from the mother's perspective, when a woman gives birth to her first child she probably feels less secure and becomes more protective, hence fuelling the desire to stay at home longer with her baby. On the other hand, women with more children may not wish to claim an allowance from their employer because as years go by their wages are

either higher and the allowance received from the state is sufficient, or because they are afraid to ask for a maternity allowance again, as indicated in literature (Miller *et al.*, 1996). The results of the current study are in line with those of Bosch *et al.* (2009) and Plantenga and Remery (2005) in relation to how the number of children affect women's decisions to work or not. They are also in accord with Eurostat figures of 2009 which show that employment rates of Cypriot women decrease after the first child (78% for women without children to 75.5% for women with one child) but then increase for women with two children (77.4%).

A large percentage of women stated that they had problems carrying out their work responsibilities during their pregnancy, which intimates that women are pressured to work when pregnant and prefer to take the largest part of their maternity leave postpartum. Their anxiety over leaving or being accused of abandoning unfinished projects, together with the fact that new mothers want to spend more time with their baby and the length of maternity leave is short in Cyprus, are possible reasons why women do not take more maternity leave before childbirth. It should be noted here that the European Union leans towards amending the maternity law with a view to banning the dismissal of pregnant workers and to ensuring the entitlement of women to return to their jobs or 'equivalent posts' as occupied prior to their maternity leave.

The working environment after the women's return to work was also examined. The majority of respondents indicated that there were no special arrangements available from their employer, which would help smooth the progress of their dual role as mothers and employees. Of the few who declared that some kind of arrangement existed, some stated that their employer allowed them a more flexible time schedule. However, this might also point to the respondents' ignorance of their rights, since one-hour less work time to facilitate breastfeeding after maternity leave is obligatory by law. In fact, as indicated by the survey, when considering the needs of young mothers, their first need is a more flexible timetable during breastfeeding. In cases where respondents were aware of the one-hour flexibility arrangement but still required a more fluid schedule, it is probably because in practice it is hard to see the convenience of being allocated one extra hour to facilitate breastfeeding. Within one-hour the employee must leave work, reach home, feed the child and return to work. An improvement in the Cyprus law for maternity might, therefore, be to extend the time allowed for breastfeeding. Another solution might be to have facilities at the workplace, such as a refrigerator for the storage of breast milk. This idea was ranked fourth among the needs of young mothers and presupposes that a woman who needs to express milk at the office can do so in private and that this would be socially acceptable. Hofvander (2003) concludes that prolonging the period of maternity leave may increase the prevalence and duration of breastfeeding because in countries where women are given longer paid maternity leave, breastfeeding is more widespread. Other studies have shown that more flexible working conditions may work favourably towards increased breastfeeding (see Scott, Binns, Oddy and Graham, 2006).

All the respondents indicated that there was no type of on-site childcare at their place of work. Furthermore, the survey indicated that having on-site childcare facilities was ranked second in order of 'need' importance for young mothers. Grandparents in Cyprus are traditionally heavily



involved in raising their grandchildren. If a young couple cannot rely on such support, their options become quite limited and expensive. In the workplace there are basically two types of measures which can help employed mothers to cope with their childcare responsibilities: measures which have a bearing on the working conditions of mothers so that they can either take care of their children themselves when they need attention, or use measures which enable mothers to access care by others (see Hein and Cassirer, 2010). An on-site childcare centre is a favourable corporate solution, which is beneficial both for the employee and the employer. It is a fact that some employees consistently arrive at work late and leave early due to a disparity between day-care centres' opening hours and their own office hours. Other employees are becoming even less dependable because they are forced to take days off to stay at home with their children when the day-care centres are closed. This poses a threat to employee job security and minimises promotion possibilities.

An on-site childcare centre could offer the working mother a guaranteed place at the facility, thus minimising the travel time between work and the childcare centre and allowing the mother to continue working without having to leave the office to drop off or pick up her children. As a consequence, by minimising distractions the worker becomes more efficient and consistent – a benefit for employers.

In many countries (e.g. the UK, France, Switzerland, Australia, Canada, Singapore and the USA), companies, government departments, universities and other organisations have adopted measures to help their workers with childcare. For example, corporations that value keeping employed parents satisfied offer childcare at the workplace, while governments encourage and help employers to provide some form of childcare support, backed, in some cases, by incentives (*ibid.*). Similar measures could be taken in Cyprus, especially as evidence from Europe suggests that where governments support the costs of widely available childcare, these countries tend to have lower gender inequality, a higher rate of women's labour force participation and higher fertility (Del Boca and Locatelli, 2007; Den Dulk and Van Doorne-Huiskes, 2007). Additionally, since low fertility is a problem in Cyprus, it is worth stressing that a relation has been found between fertility rates and the provisions and benefits of maternity leave (Averett and Whittington, 2001). Our results provide new information in relation to this: the financial burden brought about by limited childcare facilities together with the psychological and physical burden engendered by new, maternal experiences, make the decision to have another child a difficult one to make. A quite significant percentage of women in the sample said that their decision to have an additional child would be contingent on their company's maternity policy.

Of the few respondents who stated that some special arrangements did exist for young mothers, some specified that this special arrangement allowed mothers to leave work when a child is ill. Moreover, working from home when a child is ill was ranked by the women in the sample as the third 'need' in order of importance. On-site childcare centres can satisfy this need as well. During work time the mother can be at ease knowing that her children are nearby and she can quickly be with them if an emergency occurs. If necessary, the mother can take her child to a

medical centre faster. It is not yet common for businesses in Cyprus to use flexible work arrangements such as job sharing or telecommuting, even though there are some considerable benefits to this work option too. In Cyprus, despite the fact that women employed in the private sector earn, on average, lower income compared to the public sector, this research has shown that communication lines between employee and employer seem to be more open in the private sector. This study has indicated that women in the private sector could more easily leave their work when their child is ill and, additionally, they are more frequently informed by their employer concerning the corresponding maternity policy. A possible explanation for the less flexible working environment for public sector employees is that their work rights are regulated by law, which makes it more difficult to leave work without an official request.

In relation to the above results, Cypriot parents still face a problem of incompatibility between their working hours and the opening hours of childcare services, which is problematic for both public and private sector employees as most public schools close at one o'clock in the afternoon. Given that the decisions of mothers – whether or not to work in addition to the way they make use of their parental leave entitlement – are influenced by the operating times of the national school system (Bosch *et al.*, 2009; Plantenga and Remery, 2005), this issue presents food for thought.

The 'need' rated least important for new mothers was for a gradual return to their full working duties. This was indicated by a high percentage of respondents who considered it least important and by a low mean score, below the average of 'moderately important'. As illustrated in another question of the survey, only a small percentage of women would relinquish their jobs in order to raise their children. It is clear that women do not want to cut down on work duties or sacrifice their career. It appears that for young mothers, other work arrangements are considered much more important to them than cutting down on their work. If a working mother is compelled to resign because of a lack of affordable childcare and then does not work for a lengthy period, she will experience difficulty returning to work, particularly at the same level as when she left. Measures regarding childcare support can actually help mothers by ensuring continuity in their careers. Previous evidence of the employment patterns of Cypriot women following parental leave in relation to their resumption of employment to the same level as before has been obtained only from either the manager's or the employer's point of view (Anxo *et al.*, 2007; Plantenga *et al.*, 2008). The current study has, therefore, provided new information on Cypriot women's behaviour after parental leave, by taking it from the perspective of the young mothers themselves.

Respondents were negative about their husband taking unpaid leave to help in child rearing, but were somewhat more positive if the leave was with pay. This outcome is not surprising, from either a financial or a social perspective: financially, it is a fact that in the Cypriot labour market men on average receive higher wages than women, and thus become the main income providers of the household. Socially, in the eyes of Cypriots, the upbringing of children has traditionally been considered to be a woman's job. In principle, even though the policy environment has shifted from its assumption of male breadwinner to dual earners, in practice Cypriot women appear to have

limited choices, and are constrained by social policies which offer piecemeal support for working mothers. Shared parental leave could be a solution. The fact that women in the current research believe that their husbands might accept paid paternity leave, suggests that younger generations accept the father's role as more important compared to previous generations.

This survey has provided new insight in relation to how income, the number of children, the sector of employment, extended parental leave and the working environment of young Cypriot mothers affect their efforts to conciliate motherhood and career. We acknowledge that a sample of 54 young mothers is relatively small and presents limitations in terms of statistical analysis and generalisability. Since budget and time limitations did not allow for a larger sample, this study can be considered preliminary and suggestive. Taking into account that it is impossible to draw systematic international comparisons of parental leave usage by eligible individuals because data are not available (Anxo *et al.*, 2007), it can, however, be stated that this study has added some new evidence on this issue regarding young Cypriot mothers. Undoubtedly, further research with a larger sample should be undertaken on this issue, and the husband's perspective should also be considered to complement the mother's point of view.

What the current results show is that a work environment, supportive of family life, influences a woman's commitment to the workplace. Organisations that are interested in supporting and retaining pregnant employees and young mothers should, therefore, be encouraged to provide family-responsive benefits and ensure that their cultures support work-family balance. Work and personal life are complementary, even synergistic, rather than adversarial (Rapoport *et al.*, 2002). By challenging the assumptions in which current work practices are embedded, the goals of both business productivity and employees' family and community concerns can be met in ways that are equitable for men and women. Businesses cannot expect employees to bring all their passion to the workplace if they do not legitimise and value their passion for their personal and family life (*ibid.*).

Family stress resulting from the 'second shift' needs to be addressed on many levels. Husbands and families can help alleviate stress at the home level, whereas society, businesses, and organisations can help mothers at an overhead policy level. Companies must communicate with their employees, creating awareness of work-family policies and programmes and enforcing them, integrating this support into the organisational culture (Burke, 2006).

In its Roadmap for equality between women and men the European Commission set as key priorities the economic independence of women and men and the reconciliation between work, private and family life. To this end, the European Commission is committed to monitor and strengthen the gender aspect in the strategy for growth and jobs, and to adopt a Communication to tackle the gender pay gap and to support Member States efforts to improve care services (Plantenga *et al.*, 2008). This may be considered a step forward towards an improvement in all the pillars where the provisions are limited for Cypriot working mothers.

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