



Paid Parental Leave: Normative Foundations for a Sustainable and Just Future

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With many thanks to members of WG1, Cost Action Parental Leave Policies & Social Sustainability

Background

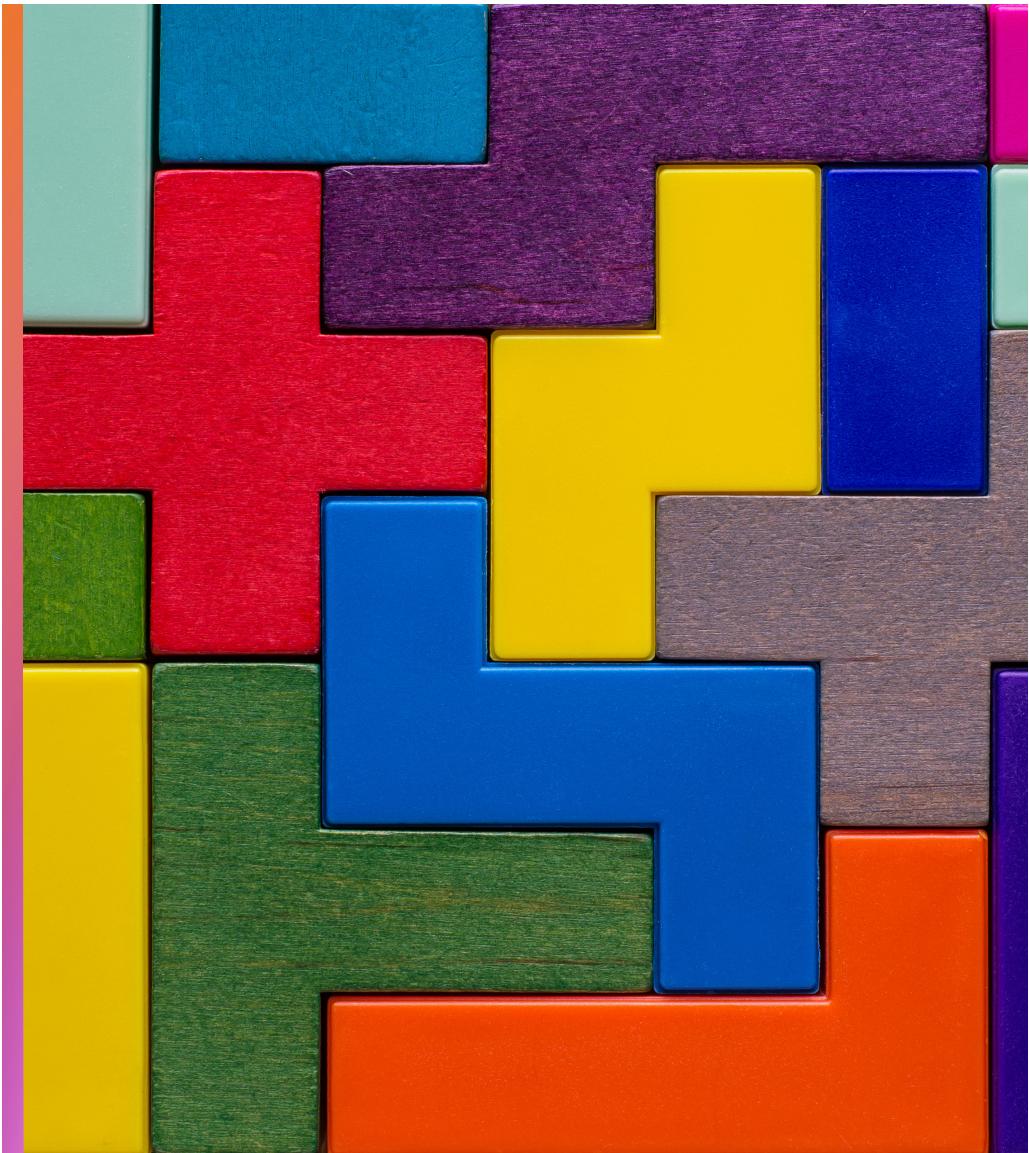
- COST Action Parental leave Policies & Social Sustainability: advance and disseminate research and knowledge about the significance of paid parental leave (PPL) for the social sustainability of societies
- WG1: How do we systemise PPL research employing a social sustainability perspective? → Book project
- Against backdrop of polycrisis, need to question policies (and PPL) in relation to sustainability



Background (2)

- Questioning and exploring the normative foundations of paid parental leave policy (i.e., what it aims to do, for whom, how, and why).
 1. What are the normative foundations of paid parental leave policy?
 2. Given the embeddedness of paid parental leave in a broader web of welfare state and social policy concerns: Are the foundations of PPL broad enough to encompass sustainability goals or must its normative foundations be expanded?
 3. What would an expansion of these normative foundations look like in theory and practice?



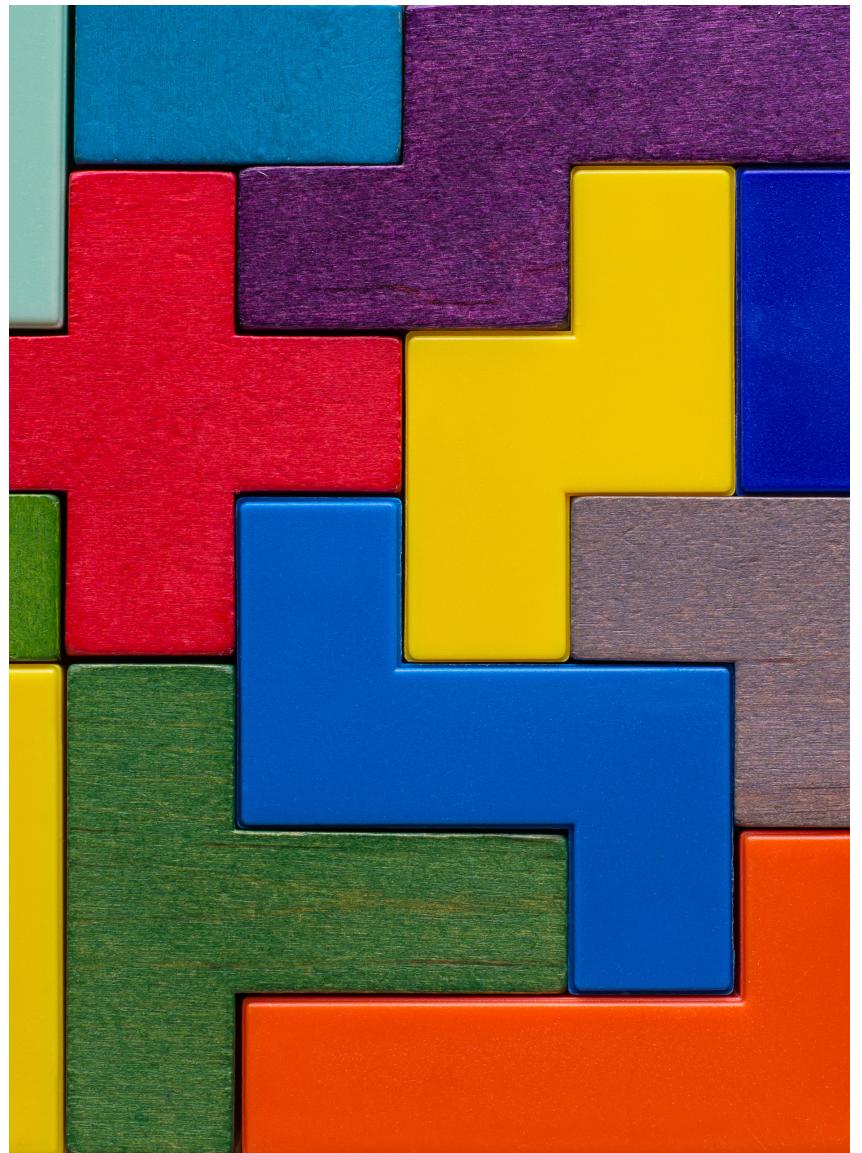


Normative foundations of PPL

- Policies are not value-neutral: founded on normative beliefs of how individuals can and should act, with the intention of shaping behaviour through policy (e.g., Beland; Goerne, 2010, others)
- PPL: strong normative foundation in gender equality, but...
 - Significant cross-country variation (timing, length, generosity, flexibility, etc.)
 - → signals plurality of normative foundations

Normative foundations (2)

- Gender equality AND, for example: supporting caregiving and care receiving (for both parents and children); decommodification; fertility; social inclusion; women's employment; recognizing care work; redistribute and de-gender unpaid care work; promoting 'choice'
- Despite strong gender equality foundation:
 - Concurrent normative foundations → many forms of unpaid leave, gendered uptake, inequality of access
 - Uneven eligibility and uptake highlights limits to PPL in terms of supporting social justice goals → and sustainability?
 - Thus: normative foundations → policy design → outcomes matter for achieving gender equality and gender justice





Connecting to sustainability

- What would it mean to expand the normative foundations of PPL to connect to sustainability (including social, economic, and ecological dimensions of sustainability; Doucet, 2026)?
- What would that mean for parental leave policy research and design?

Connections between social policy scholarship on environmental / ecological issues and aspects inherent in PPL?

Sustainability research includes social, economic and ecological dimensions; parental leave research has yet to explore the ecological dimension in detail

Social policy research: growing focus on climate change, sustainability and ecological dimensions of policy (e.g., Hvinden and Schøyen, 2022; Koch, 2021, 2025; Gough) but scant attention for:

- care (as both paid and unpaid work)
- gender equality in environmental issues
- intergenerational and reproductive aspects of sustainability.

Result? Multiple questions...

If we expand the normative foundation of parental leave policies to include ecological concerns, can we consider and address multiple forms of inequality at the same time?

For example, how do care-related gender inequalities relate to more general care and environmental / ecological inequalities?

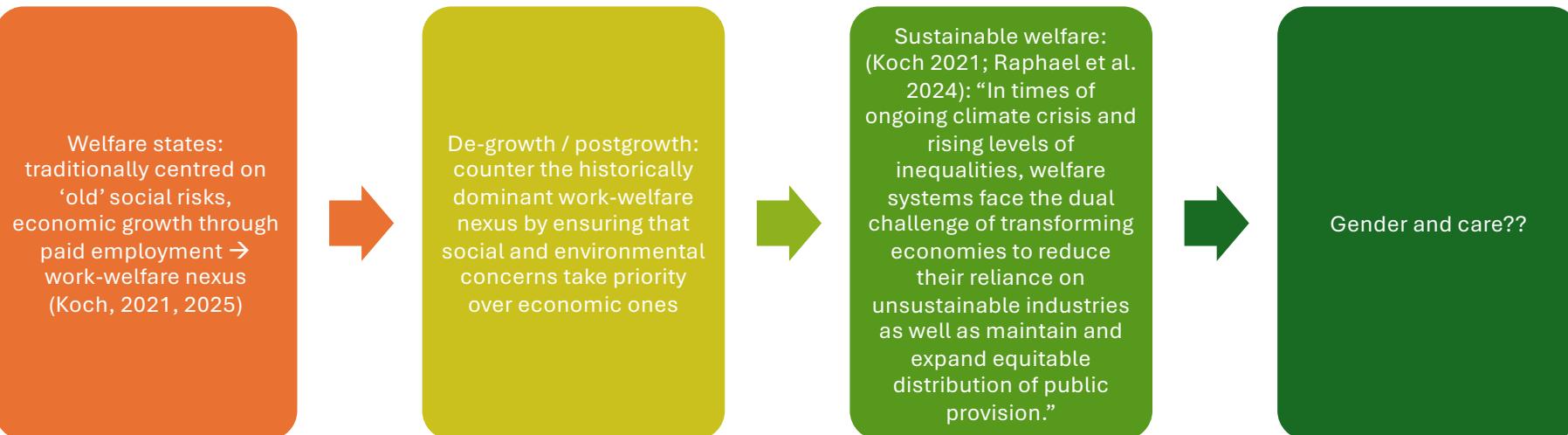
How does the impact of paid parental leave differ in terms of inequality when it is considered from the perspective of a child (as a care receiver) compared to that of a parent (the care giver)?

Does an approach to sustainability that entangles social, economic, and ecological dimensions necessarily challenge dominant social policy narratives centred on economic growth?

Conversely, if we expand the scope of sustainability to include gender equality in relation to care and parental leave, what would that look like?

Would it offer a critical perspective on the work-welfare nexus (Koch, 2022), potentially challenging degrowth or postgrowth reasoning in social policy research?

‘Sustainable’ welfare states



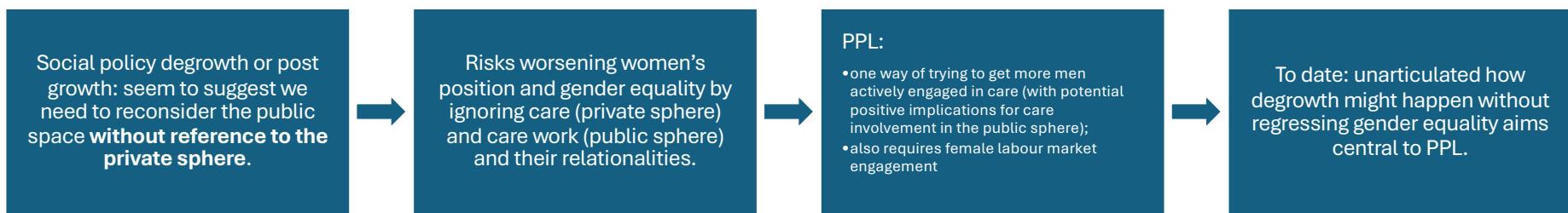
Accounting for gender and care...

Welfare states shape care, the recognition of care, and the extent to which care is valued as paid and unpaid work, also in relation to paid work.

Work-welfare nexus: fails to account for the potential impact on gender equality – with particular emphasis on who cares and how caring happens

Feminist and decolonial perspectives: build on degrowth and post growth arguments to prioritize gender equality and gender justice in the restitution of unpaid care work, community work, and ecological work (e.g., Dengler and Lang, 2022).

...through paid parental leave



Towards transformative and sustainable PPL?

From dominant normative foundations towards transformative ones (questioning its assumptions, binaries, divisions; Doucet, 2026, others)

Challenging in relation to PPL:

- PPL replacement rate higher than 100%?
- Collective PPL?
- Life course-based care leave?

Acknowledging the tensions in practical examples when relating PPL to broader sustainability goals

To be continued...

Thanks for listening!