Public policy—the collection of laws, policies, measures, and actions taken by governments on a particular issue or topic—both influences and is influenced by national and regional cultures. For example, laws regarding marriage, child custody, legitimacy, citizenship, and property are a reflection of cultural norms, or how we, as a society, think of families. At the same time, these rules and regulations also shape our behaviour. When we look to mothering, public policies play a similar role. They are a product of society’s beliefs about the role of mothers in caring for and raising children. However, the existence of maternity and paternity leaves, publicly funded quality child care, and economic incentives also influence the choices of women (and families more generally) when it comes to how they engage in the practice of mothering, providing care for their children, and balancing their work and family lives.

The welfare state—the combination of policies and programs aimed at providing health and economic services for all members of society—also reflects assumptions about families and parenting. The welfare state emerged in most developed countries in the period following the Second World War and is linked to the idea of the male breadwinner family, namely, a family consisting of a married mother and father with children. The father was envisioned as the breadwinner, who left the home for paid employment, while the mother was responsible for the unpaid care of the home,
family, and children. This model was not unique to the postwar period. Economic philosophers Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, for example, wrote *The Origin of the Family* in 1884, which argued that the economy is dependent on the unpaid reproductive labour of women at home. Neither was this the only type of family that existed in postwar Europe, Canada, and the US. In fact, families have always existed in various forms, depending on culture, class, ethnicity or race, and social circumstances. However, public policy is shaped around the idea of an average person or, in this case, family, so employment insurance schemes, health care, pensions, and various forms of “mother’s allowance” were developed based on the assumption that the breadwinner family—where one parent (the man) worked and the other (the woman) provided unpaid care—was the recipient of benefits.

Over the course of the 20th century, however, families and society’s ideas about what constitutes a normal family changed quite dramatically. More women continued working outside of the home following the birth of their children. Men became less likely to earn a family wage and families increasingly needed two incomes to attain a desirable standard of living. More marriages now end in separation and divorce, more children are born outside of marriage, and more children are raised in single-parent homes, predominantly headed by women. These changes in families spearheaded changes in policy, for example, through demands for the right to childbirth and maternity leave, high-quality and affordable child care, and pay equity. At the end of the 20th century and the beginning of the 21st century, cultural norms around men and fathering were also changing—partially in response to women’s increased participation in the workforce and partially because of changing gender norms—and we have seen the emergence of parental leaves, among other policies, that aim to recognize and encourage the active role of fathers in the care of young children.

This chapter explores the current policies in place in several countries around the world in order to assess the state of family policy and how well these policies enable women’s equality. We begin with a discussion of the global gender gap, followed by an explanation of the types and developments of the welfare state. The second half of this chapter assesses family policies in developed countries in three areas of interest to mothers: maternity leaves, child care, and economic supports for families.
GLOBAL GENDER GAPS

The World Economic Forum (WEF), a non-profit organization of economic and political elites from around the globe, releases an annual Global Gender Gap Report that ranks individual countries based on gender disparities in four key areas: health, education, economy, and politics. The results of the report are often surprising, but they reflect the national cultural norms surrounding gender and the public policies in place within individual countries. The report employs neoliberal language, focusing on the potential for economic returns from investments in women and promoting women’s equality via their participation in the workforce in the name of national economic prosperity. For example, the Report states that “empowering women means a more efficient use of a nation’s human talent endowment and . . . reducing gender inequality enhances productivity and economic growth. Over time, therefore, a nation’s competitiveness depends, among other things, on whether and how it educates and utilizes its female talent” (Hausmann, Tyson, & Zahidi, 2012, p. 29). Ultimately, however, this report sends a strong message to political and economic actors that investing in women is worthwhile and, furthermore, requires investment in social programs and family-oriented policies.

Table 4.1  WEF’s Global Gender Gap Rankings

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Country</th>
<th>Overall Ranking (Actual Rankings)</th>
<th>Economic Participation and Opportunity</th>
<th>Educational Attainment</th>
<th>Health and Survival</th>
<th>Political Empowerment</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Belgium</td>
<td>12 (0.7652)</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>67</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Canada</td>
<td>21 (0.7381)</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>70</td>
<td>52</td>
<td>38</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>France</td>
<td>57 (0.6984)</td>
<td>62</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>63</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Germany</td>
<td>13 (0.7629)</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>83</td>
<td>52</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Italy</td>
<td>80 (0.6729)</td>
<td>101</td>
<td>65</td>
<td>76</td>
<td>71</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
As Table 4.1 demonstrates, success in one category does not determine success in another. For example, women in the US largely achieve the same levels of education as men and have a significant presence in the workforce; however, the US ranks quite low among developed countries in terms of health and survival and political empowerment for women. Canada tends to pride itself on the level of equality enjoyed by its citizens; however, we are ranked 21st overall. While the actual numerical difference between the levels of rankings can be quite small in some of the categories, the report is successful in presenting a clear picture of the challenges women still face. The success of the Scandinavian counties—with Iceland, Finland, Norway, and Sweden repeatedly being ranked in the top four positions—is often linked to the highly developed welfare states in those countries combined with strong social and political support for women’s equality and equal participation in the workforce.

**THE WELFARE STATE**

The Welfare State is the combination of state policies related to health care, families, social assistance, and employment insurance that aim to promote equality and ensure a minimum standard of living for the inhabitants of a country. Welfare states take many different forms around the world, but all represent a compromise between the principles of equality and social solidarity, liberty, government intervention, and the free market.

Sociologist Gøsta Esping-Andersen (1990), in his seminal book *The Three Worlds of Welfare Capitalism*, argues that there are three ideal types of welfare...
states: the social-democratic or Nordic model; the Christian-democratic model; and the liberal model. Each type can be differentiated from the others by the level of state intervention in the market—also called decommodification, or the degree to which service provision is free from the market—the level of services provided or their universality, and the role of ideology. Table 4.2 outlines the three ideal types, their main characteristics, and where the case study countries from this chapter fit.

Table 4.2 Esping-Andersen’s Three Ideal Types of Welfare States

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Characteristics</th>
<th>Examples</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Social-democratic</td>
<td>Sweden</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Universalism: access to benefits and services is based on citizenship; Limited reliance on families and markets; Low level of stratification</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Christian-democratic</td>
<td>France, Belgium, Germany, Italy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conservatism, corporatism, subsidiary provision, social insurance schemes; High level of stratification</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Liberal</td>
<td>Canada, USA, UK</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Market dominance and private provision; High level of stratification</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Esping-Andersen, 1990

It is important to note that these are ideal, not real types. Ideal types are categorical boxes with characteristics that are used to create broad categories for the purpose of understanding trends and generalizations. In the real world, very few countries would fit perfectly within any of these types. In fact, Esping-Andersen (1990) has been criticized for the simplicity of his model and its exclusion of non-Western models as well as a Mediterranean model (Ferragina & Seeleib-Kaiser, 2011). However, Ferragina and Seeleib-Kaiser demonstrate that, overall, Esping-Anderson’s model works. By grouping welfare states according to type, we gain a general understanding of the characteristics of each and the relationships between them.
Figure 4.1 places the countries explored in this chapter along a spectrum, according to the level of decommodification, or state control of services. As we can see, Sweden and the US are at the opposite ends of the spectrum, with the remaining countries ranging throughout the middle. Sweden embodies the purest form of the social-democratic welfare state, with high levels of taxation to support government-funded programs aimed at providing a high level of universal coverage to all citizens of the state. The US, on the other hand, embodies the purest form of the liberal welfare state, in which most programs and benefits are provided through the market. This approach reflects the emphasis in American political culture on freedom from state interference and taxation, versus the political culture of Sweden, which is focused on social solidarity, equality, and universal access to programs.

Why is this important to the study of family policy? Family policies, including maternity leaves, child care programs, and economic supplements for families, fall largely within the domain of the welfare state. Different types of welfare states are more or less likely to have strong family policies, and the policies themselves are likely to be influenced by the political culture of the state as well as by cultural norms around family and mothering (Pfau-Effinger, 2012). Thus, dominant cultural models of the family influence women’s behaviour and choices regarding the care of their children and combining paid employment outside of the home with family responsibilities.

Family policies shape the framework within which families live, care, and work. For example, the availability of affordable child care will influence a family’s decision regarding whether one or both parents should work outside the home. Ferragina and Seeleib-Kaiser (2011) argue that the
relationship between care and welfare is a core element of the modern welfare state. Furthermore, “demographic trends and the difficulty for parents to reconcile work and care further demonstrate the importance of this nexus. Many authors have argued that the future of welfare state systems will be dependent on the ability to balance work and family life” (Ferragina & Seeleib-Kaiser, p. 597). Many questions remain, however, regarding the role the state should play and the costs and benefits of these programs. These debates are further complicated by gender stereotypes and our personal and cultural ideas about what is best for children and families.

Neoliberalism and the Welfare State

Over time, the character of the welfare state has changed, influenced by economic events and political trends. Neoliberalism emerged in the late 1970s, pushed forward by UK Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher and US President Ronald Reagan. Although neoliberalism emerged in the UK and US, it has influenced the economic and governmental practices of most states, to one degree or another. The ideological shift represented by neoliberalism was a backlash against the welfare state of the postwar period and argued for more market freedom and less government and state interference (both in markets and in individual lives). With regard to the welfare state, neoliberalism is particularly important because of its emphasis on rolling back social programs, reducing government spending, and the responsibility of individuals and families for their own economic success and security, rather than dependence on state programs. As Clarke (2010a) notes, “For market enthusiasts, there was no domain of social life that could not be improved by its engagement with market dynamics. While this was perhaps most visible in relation to state-related practices, such as social welfare or public service provision, it was claimed to extend to questions of sexual relationships, partner choice and household organization” (p. 376). Ultimately, neoliberalism refers to the general processes of “subjecting or subordinating social and political domains to the logic of the market and/or capital” (Clarke, 2010a, p. 385). Whereas the Keynesian welfare state of the postwar period advocated the political control of markets, neoliberalism aimed for market control of politics (Fraser, N., 2009). The assumption underpinning neoliberalism was that states are inefficient distributors of
social goods; markets can do it better and cheaper and without creating intergenerational dependence on social programs.

Neoliberalism impacts women in unique ways. Dobrowolsky (2009) notes that neoliberalism often meant the off-loading of responsibilities from the state to families. Often embedded in this was the assumption that women would fill the gaps created by the elimination of political, economic, and social supports. Under neoliberalism, Western states, such as Canada, the US, and the UK, saw an increase in the feminization of poverty, defined as “the fact that women who support themselves or their families are becoming the majority of the poor” (Goldberg & Kremen, 1990, p. 2). In the UK, for example, single female pensioners and female lone parents are both more likely to be in low-income households than their male equivalents, but there is no gender difference for working-age singles without children (Palmer, 2013). As well, women tend to rely more on government programs, such as child care and mother’s allowances, or be employed by the shrinking government departments that provide them, and therefore feel the impact of these cuts to a greater extent (Dobrowolsky).

Social Investment

In the late 1990s in English America and most of Europe, a shift occurred within neoliberalism towards a social investment model. Instead of talking about taxation and spending, governments began talking about strategic social investments in areas where the possibility of social and economic returns exists (Dobrowolsky, 2009). Ultimately, this model focuses on employability and creating a knowledgeable, skilled workforce (Dobrowolsky). The state, or government, was seen as taking a more active role in the economy and society than under earlier neoliberalism, but without returning to the perceived excesses of the postwar welfare state. The goals of the social investment perspective are increased social inclusion, minimizing intergenerational poverty, and preparing individuals for likely job conditions, such as decreased job security and an aging population, while overall allowing “individuals and families to maintain responsibility for their well-being” (Jenson, 2009, p. 447).

According to many social policy analysts, the social investment perspective recognizes the contribution of women to society and the benefits of helping women enter the workforce, as is argued by the WEF’s Global
Gender Gap Report (Hausmann, Tyson, & Zahidi, 2012). Esping-Andersen, Gallie, Myles, and Hemerijck (2002) argue that the social investment perspective is helping women attain “life course masculinization” (p. 93) within which women’s life and career trajectories would more closely mirror those of men.

Jenson (2009), however, argues that this new approach continues to marginalize women by, first, making them invisible as policies shift to a focus on children rather than mothers (children, arguably, offer potentially better return for the investment) and, second, by denying the reality of systemic barriers to women’s equality on the demand side of the market equation. Furthermore, this approach does not challenge the normative status of the male career path and its dependence on the caring work of women in the private sphere, and thus militates against the creation of policies that allow men and women a different life path that better balances work and family responsibilities. Ultimately, Jenson argues, although the social investment state demonstrates an awareness of issues pertaining to gender equality, something has been “lost in the translation” and the advancement of women’s equality is often undermined.

Austerity or a Return to Social Security?

The economic crisis of the early 21st century, sparked by the popping of the US subprime mortgage bubble, led to new challenges for public policy. The global economic recession placed additional pressures on governments as they faced decreased revenues and increased costs, along with demands from citizens for government’s assistance in recovering from the crisis. Nancy Fraser (2009) suggests that the economic crisis presents both a significant challenge to neoliberal capitalism and an opportunity for reimagining the relationship between capitalism, liberation, and social justice. Although global capital has arguably recovered much of its influence in the past few years, the economic crisis did lead to two distinct responses to the previous welfare state models. First, there has been a return to the idea of the state as the protector of the people. As Clarke (2010a) notes,

This is the return of an older discourse of security, sometimes known as ‘social security’: the collective provision by the state of resources that protect individuals, families and whole societies from the vagaries and vicissitudes of markets, whose profound and unpredictable dynamics
Once persuaded people that they could not be trusted to guarantee economic and social security or human welfare. (pp. 388–389)

Second, we are witnessing the emergence of austerity as the governing principle for public policy and social programs, particularly in Europe, where countries such as Greece and Ireland have had austerity measures imposed on them by the European Union in exchange for the financial investment necessary to save the countries from bankruptcy. In this sense, austerity appears to be a throwback to the language and the extremes of neoliberalism. Put simply, this approach blames the excessive spending of states, particularly that related to the welfare state, for their current economic woes. Advocates of austerity measures argue that the remedy is to be found in drastically reducing the size and scope of the state, government, social programs, and public policy (Busch, Hermann, Hinrichs, & Schulten, 2013). Busch and colleagues argue that the economic crisis in several EU countries has led to attacks on wages, social services, and public ownership, putting trade unions and left-wing parties under extreme pressure. The consequences of this are potentially quite dangerous for women. A report by the Women’s Budget Group in England argues that, in particular, female single parents and pensioners are impacted negatively by the cuts to benefits and public services (McVeigh, 2013). Specifically, “public sector cuts have reduced job opportunities for women and are making it harder to combine earning a living and taking care of families, and also making it more likely that the gender pay gap will widen” (McVeigh, para. 5).

So, What Does All of This Have To Do With Mothering?

As mentioned at the beginning of this chapter, culture plays an important role in shaping the public policy framework within individual states. Countries such as Sweden, with a strong history of social democracy and investment in the welfare state, were less influenced by the neoliberal shift, whereas countries with stronger classical liberal roots felt the influence of neoliberal policies most strongly. The following section explores three key areas of policy related to mothering—maternity and parental leaves, child care, and economic incentives—in order to show the variety of policies that exist and how these policies are, for good or bad, linked to national cultures and norms around mothering, as well as shifts in the global economy and its underpinning ideologies. Following the cross-national comparison of these
three policy areas, this chapter concludes with a discussion about the ability of these policies to enable women’s equality as mothers.

FAMILY POLICY

More women today than ever before are going to college and university, obtaining diplomas and degrees, and working after marriage and children. The middle-class male breadwinner family model, while only ever available to a certain class of people, is in decline. Today’s families are multifaceted, complex, and diverse and require a new policy and work environment that meets the needs of parents and children.

Family itself is a constructed concept, not a natural phenomenon. Therefore, the policies that fall within the domain of family policy are structured to support specific forms of families, as defined by the state and the policies themselves (e.g., Newman & White, 2006). Harder (2011) argues that the nuclear family is a result of the Industrial Revolution and varies from country to country. In Canada, this ideal of the family has been reinforced historically by laws related to custody, punishment of adultery, inheritance, adoption, and so forth. Budig, Misra, and Boeckmann (2012), for example, argue that “work-family policies are replete with gendered meanings about the role of women in employment and families” (p. 165). However, they suggest an interdependent relationship between culture and policy, in that the culture itself leads to the creation of specific family policies and affects the level of individual take-up of policies and programs through societal and cultural expectations about the role of women and mothers. These expectations influence women’s decisions about working and how employers understand and treat mothers in the workplace (Budig, Misra, & Boeckmann). This is evident in Canada when we examine differences in policy practices at the provincial level, particularly between a province like Quebec, which sees a strong role for the state, and a province like Alberta, dominated by social conservatism, neoliberalism, and an accompanying suspicion of state interference in the private sphere of families.

This section focuses on government policies directed at families and employment. At the same time, we need to recognize that many other factors influence the ability of parents to balance their work lives with their commitment to their families, including: divorce, custody, and child support arrangements; social norms and the prevailing culture of work; the
structure of the economy; individual levels of education and experience; and, as well, individual employment choices (although these are likely to be limited by the above factors).

As discussed in other chapters, the situation of women has changed dramatically over the past 40 years, as evidenced by the increasing levels of employment and education among Canadian women. There is also a decreasing disparity between men and women in terms of employment, education, family responsibilities, and unpaid work; however, significant gendered differences remain. As mentioned in an earlier chapter, whether married women work outside of the home or not, they still tend to perform the bulk of the work within the home (e.g., household labour, child care, emotional support functions) while enjoying less and poorer quality “free time” than their male counterparts (Lee & Waite, 2005; Mattingly & Sayer, 2006; Sayer, 2005). As well, both working and stay at home mothers perform far more of the child care responsibilities than fathers and continue to perform the role of family managers and organizers (Asher, 2011).

For women working in Canada, Newman and White (2006) identify a few trends. As discussed above, most work within the home continues to be done by women and is largely unpaid, and women continue to be paid less on average than men for similar work and face fewer opportunities for advancement within the workplace (Newman & White). However, these authors also suggest that the equality of women in the workplace is closely related to the available policies and programs that support working families, such as child care, and the societal position of women, particularly the predominance of single women and the correlating feminization of poverty. Thus, the availability of social programs that enable parents, particularly women, to balance their work and family lives is integral to the pursuit of gender equality. The areas of maternity and parental leaves, child care, and economic supports for families are key to achieving gender equality and a better balance between work and families.

Maternity and Parental Leaves
Maternity and parental leaves are seen as essential for recovery from childbirth and the health and development of the child (for example, through the ability of mothers to breastfeed). Maternity leaves are also seen as the cornerstone of family policies aimed at gender equality, as they enable
women to take time off from the paid work force with both remuneration and job security. The time given for maternity leave, the levels of remuneration, and the availability of leave for fathers all vary considerably between countries.

Sweden offers one of the most comprehensive programs. Parents are eligible for 480 days (16 months) of shared parental leave, 60 days of which must be taken by the father or lost, and during which they receive approximately 82% of their annual salary. The leave can be distributed until the child turns eight or finishes the first year of schooling, whichever occurs latest. For example, it can be taken one day a week by each parent as they return to work part-time. There is also an “equality bonus” for shared leave so that the closer the parents are to equally sharing the leave, the more money they are given (Försäkringskassan, 2013a).

At the other end of the spectrum is the United States. The Family Medical Leave Act (FMLA) entitles eligible employees of covered employers to take unpaid, job-protected leave for specified family and medical reasons. Eligible employees are entitled to 12 weeks of leave in a 12-month period for the birth or adoption of a child and to care for a newborn child (United States Department of Labor, 2016). Some state-level policies offer additional leave benefits, including paid leaves in California, Rhode Island, and New Jersey (Whitehouse, 2016). While their jobs are protected, the lack of remuneration and the limits on leave time make it difficult for women to take time off work and to return to work, unless they can find care for their young children.

France, on the other hand, offers only 16 weeks of paid leave for mothers and 11 consecutive days for fathers (Centre des Liaisons Européennes et Internationales de Sécurité Sociale: CLEISS, 2014). However, up to 104 weeks of unpaid leave can be shared between the parents. The UK offers 52 weeks of Statutory Maternity Leave made up of 26 weeks of Ordinary Maternity Leave and 26 weeks of Additional Maternity Leave, with up to 39 weeks paid (pay ranges from 90% of weekly salary during the first 6 weeks and a maximum of £136.78 or 90% of average weekly earnings [whichever is lower] for the next 33 weeks) (Gov.UK, 2013b). In addition, mothers who do not qualify for the above program are eligible for the Maternity Allowance.

Canada offers the best maternity leave of the liberal welfare states. There, parental leave is available to biological and adoptive parents from
the date of the child’s birth or placement and is available to both parents for a combined total of 35 weeks within the initial 52-week period. In addition, mothers who give birth are eligible for an additional 15 weeks. The rate of reimbursement is 55% of weekly insurable earnings to a current (2016) maximum of $537 CAD per week. Low-income families (with a net family income of $25,921 or less per year) are eligible to receive the EI Family Supplement (Service Canada, 2016).

Child Care

De Henau, Meulders, and O’Dorchai’s (2010) study of the impact of public policy on mothers in Europe finds that the most influential policy is public child care. They conclude that “when it comes to securing equal labour market access and conditions for mothers of young children and non-mothers, public child care provision has the strongest impact. In the absence of public child care, not even the most highly educated mothers can cope” (p. 43). The availability of affordable child care is even more important for working and middle-class parents who have less disposable income to pay for privatized forms of child care. Similarly, Budig, Misra, and Boeckmann (2012) found that the level and cost of child care is strongly associated with women’s employment.

The types of national child care programs available vary even more than maternity leave policies and tend to be more reflective of national cultures and assumptions or beliefs about the importance of mothers taking primary responsibility for the care of very young children, as well as differences between private (for profit), private (non-profit) and state-run child care centres. Sweden, again, offers the most comprehensive program. All children are entitled to a child care space, and the cost is heavily subsidized by the state. As well, part-time child care is readily available. This corresponds with their parental leave programs, which offer a high level of flexibility. Overall, this can be understood within the context of the social commitment to gender equality through participation in the workforce that exists in Sweden.

Alternatively, France and the UK both operate on a voucher or subsidy model. In France, the “supplement for free choice of child care” is paid to a couple or parent using the services of a registered child-minder, a child-minder in the home, or a private child care facility. In France, there
is also the option of non-means-tested supplements intended to allow a parent to stop working or to work less in order to care for their child until age three (CLEISS, 2014). This model reflects both the reality of working mothers and a preference for mothers to stay at home until the children are three years of age.

The UK developed a new program in 2013 under which parents are eligible to claim a portion of child care costs as tax relief, replacing the previous child care voucher programs (Edenred, 2012; Ball, 2013). Similarly, in Canada and the US, there are no national child care plans or funding, although child care expenses can be claimed against federal taxes (Internal Revenue Service, 2013). In Canada, provincial subsidies may be available to eligible lower-income families, but Quebec is the only province with a comprehensive, low-cost child care program. In addition, in Canada, parents of children under the age of six receive the monthly Universal Child Care Benefit ($100 taxable income) (Department of Finance Canada, 2013).

The problem with these models is that although they offer minimal economic supports for parents to make child care more affordable, they do not guarantee access, leaving much of the service provision to the private sector. In Canada, for example, it is difficult to find child care, particularly for young children. The Universal Child Care Benefit (UCCB) was introduced by Stephen Harper’s Conservative government in 2006 as a replacement for the Liberal government’s proposed national daycare plan; however, it fails to address both the lack of child care spaces and the high costs of child care. According to the Caledon Institute, because the UCCB is taxable, the effects are less than they first appear, and it is actually upper-class families with a stay-at-home parent that benefit the most, netting approximately $970 per year (Mahon, 2009). This policy shift from a national plan and bilateral agreements to a monthly stipend that is far below the actual cost of child care for young children (approximately $5,000–12,000 per year) (Mahon) reflects an ideological emphasis on the part of the Conservative party. While the purported aim of the policy was to offer all families a monthly benefit with which they could do with whatever they saw fit, the reality is that the policy does very little to help working parents with the costs of child care. In doing so, the policy prioritizes the nuclear, one-breadwinner model of family.
Economic Supports for Families

This third category of policies and programs recognizes the challenges faced by families and attempts to provide economic assistance in response to them. These programs may be used to encourage families to have more children (e.g., for reasons tied to nationalism). They can be universal or based on income. Generally, these policies reinforce particular ideas about families and mothering.

Many countries offer means-tested economic supports for lower-income families. The UK, for example, offers a Child Tax Credit, a Working Tax Credit, and Income Supports. In addition, the £500 Sure Start Maternity Grant is available to help offset the costs of having a first child (Gov.UK, 2014). Finally, a child benefit is paid in the amount of £20.3/week for first child and £13.4/week for subsequent children (Gov.UK, 2013a).

In Canada, the universal child tax benefit, tied to family income, with a maximum of $1462 per year per child, is paid to parents, and the National Child Care Benefit Supplement is also available for low-income families, with a maximum of $2118 per child per year (Government of Canada, 2011, 2013).

Some countries also offer universal supports. For example, in Sweden parents receive a tax-free child allowance (“barnbidrag”) of approximately 1000 SEK/month (around $150 USD) for all children under the age of 16, or up to the age of 20 if the child still lives at home. If the child leaves home, this allowance is turned into a study allowance paid to the child (Försäkringsskassan, 2013a).

France is a particularly interesting example, as the economic benefits for families are directly tied to a state policy of encouraging families to have more children. The child benefit is only paid to families with two or more dependent children living in France. It is neither means-tested nor related to previous employment periods. Additional economic supports for low-income families include the birth adoption grant to cover the costs, the basic allowance, and back to school allowance (CLEISS, 2013).

Discussion and Conclusions

As the previous section demonstrates, there is a great variety in the availability of and governmental support for family policies among Western, developed countries. In the area of family policy, Sweden represents a benchmark for policy excellence, especially in policy geared towards
achieving gender equality as measured through women’s participation in the workforce. This model reflects Sweden’s cultural emphasis on treating everyone the same. In some ways, this amounts to women adopting a more masculinized life-course. However, the incentives for fathers to take parental leave does offset this to an extent. The other potential weakness in their policy framework is the lack of provision for having one parent stay at home during the early years of a child’s life. As Sweden becomes increasingly multicultural, this may prove to be a source of cultural conflict. In spite of these limitations, the Swedish model arguably goes the furthest towards enabling gender equality.

The US does the least to enable women’s equality. This reflects that country’s political culture of individualism and aversion to government interference in private life. The consequences of this are significant for women’s equality in both the short and long term, and even more so for lower-income and racial minority families.

The other countries examined in this chapter fall in the middle. France, for example, has fairly generous and comprehensive benefits, but they are clearly influenced by the cultural norms around the “good mother” and designed to encourage women to both have multiple children and to stay at home during the early years. The UK has limited maternity leave and few universal policies but does offer quite a lot of support for low-income mothers and families. Finally, in Canada, the supports are largely based on tax credits combined with a maternity leave policy (covered by a social insurance plan) that is relatively generous in terms of weeks of paid leave, but with fairly low levels of compensation and providing little incentive for fathers to become more engaged in the care of very young children.

Figure 4.2 Norms, Policies, and Choices
Together these policies reflect the breadth of options available to mothers in developed countries, as well as changing ideas about families. The policy frameworks and options available to mothers clearly reflect cultural norms and social and political values, whether they concern individualism or equality, women’s participation in the workforce, or the importance of having mother at home. As Figure 4.2 suggests, taken together, social norms and culture, family policy, and the choices of women and families all impact each other and combine to create the context for mothering within the specific country. This context, in turn, both enables equality to varying degrees and limits the options and choices of women.

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