













## RESEARCH ARTICLE

# The disabling effects of enabling social policies on organisations' human capital development practices for women

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## Abstract

Paid parental leave and externally provided childcare are social policies designed to enhance parents' labour force participation. These policies influence not only men's and women's

**Abbreviations:** 5C, Cross-Cultural Collaboration on Contemporary Careers; BIC, Bayesian information criterion; HCDPs, human capital development practices; HR, human resources; HRM, human resource management; ICC, intra class correlation; ILO, International Labour Organization; ISCED, International Standard Classification of Education; ISIC-Rev. 4, International Standard Industrial Classification of All Economic Activities - Revision 4; ODMs, organisational decision makers; OECD, Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development; UN, United Nations; UNICEF, United Nations Children's Fund.

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decisions regarding their labour market activity but also organisational decision makers' (ODMs) expectations about their employees' availability to work and thus, their willingness to invest in their employees' human capital. Using a sample of over 13,000 individuals from 19 countries, we investigate the interaction between gender and social policies on human capital development practices. In line with statistical discrimination theory, which suggests that ODMs hold different expectations about female and male productivity, we find that paid parental leave and externally provided childcare are negatively associated with the provision of human capital development for women but not for men.

**KEYWORDS**

childcare, contextual HRM, gender, human capital development, parental leave, statistical discrimination

**Practitioner notes****What is currently known**

- Social policies and human capital development practices (HCDPs) are put forward to enable human capital acquisition and use.
- Social policies affect individual decisions about labour market participation and childcare.
- In general, women rather than men are expected to reduce their labour market participation due to childcare responsibilities.

**What this paper adds**

- The paper empirically investigates HCDPs provided to women and men under varying socio-political conditions.
- Socio-political conditions do not only affect individual career decisions but also organisational decisions regarding investment in women's and men's human capital.
- Policies on paid parental leave and externally provided childcare are both negatively associated with developmental practices organisational decision makers (ODMs) provide to women but not to men.
- Social policies enabling the integration of work and family life do not necessarily support gender equality.

**The implications for practitioners**

- Discriminatory human resource management (HRM) decision-making based on gender stereotypes is still very common in countries worldwide.
- Even widespread externally provided childcare provision is not associated with increasing developmental opportunities ODMs provide to women.
- (Social) policies and organisational initiatives should target altering ODMs' stereotypical expectations about women's productivity for more equality in the workplace.

## 1 | INTRODUCTION

Governments around the world strive to create conditions that allow all members of society to attain and maintain meaningful employment. In line with this universally shared objective, the United Nations has identified 'Decent work and economic growth' (i.e., 'promoting sustained, inclusive and sustainable economic growth', 'full and productive employment and decent work for all men and women') as one of the UN sustainable development goals (United Nations, 2021). To achieve this goal, governments promote the labour market utilisation and optimisation of the competencies and skills of all their citizens. However, most countries face unequal labour market participation of men and women (OECD, 2020; Ortiz-Ospina et al., 2018).

To rectify this, countries have designed and implemented policies targeted at enhancing gender equality by enabling women's equal labour force participation and attainment of leadership positions (Korpi et al., 2013). Such policies are in place in most industrialised countries but vary in their nature (e.g., anti-discrimination legislation vs. investment in affordable childcare) and extent (e.g., length of parental leave entitlements) (OECD, 2016). Gender equality enabling social policies are costly and often at the heart of political debate and election promises in countries worldwide and in supra-national organisations (The Liberal Party of Canada, 2021; United Nations, 2021). Examining the full range of their impact to inform future governmental decisions and initiatives is thus pivotal.

Labour economists have explored how such 'enabling' national policy initiatives relate to labour market outcomes. This research, however, is limited to macro level outcomes notably; female labour market participation and gender wage gaps (Hegewisch & Gornick, 2011). Theoretically, studies rest on the assumption that labour market participation is primarily driven by decisions of individual employees (or households) (Daly, 2011). Typical studies assume that an individual aims to maximise a production function subject to budgetary and time constraints, costs, wages, and availability of childcare (e.g., Connelly & Kimmel, 2003; Michalopoulos & Robins, 2002).

While such research has generated important insights, it has failed to explore the full range of impacts social policies might have. This is mainly because it has not considered the role of organisations and decision makers within organisations as important actors providing access to employment opportunities. Our paper thus focuses on organisational decision makers (ODMs) reactions to social policies in terms of the development practices provided for men and women. Specifically, we examine how gender equality 'enabling' social policies are related to access to and participation in organisational human capital development practices (HCDPs)<sup>1</sup> (Jiang et al., 2012) and whether this relationship differs between men and women.

Employment decisions are highly dependent on the opportunities afforded to individuals by their previous, current and potential future employers. We maintain that social policies aiming to enable gender equality not only influence individual employees but can also affect how ODMs perceive these employees. Organisational decision makers' perceptions may in turn influence their decisions regarding employees, including whether and what development opportunities to make available to them. Human capital development practices are provided by organisations and designed to develop employee knowledge, skills, and abilities. We choose this outcome, as it is access and participation in such developmental opportunities, that is, at the heart of ensuring one's professional growth, and thus continued and productive employment.

In terms of 'enabling' social policies we focus on paid parental leave and externally provided childcare. These two social policies are widely used across countries (UNICEF, 2019) and are recognised as critical for shifting a view of work-life balance not as an individual but as a shared responsibility of governments, private sector employers and families. They have further been identified as policies that are necessary for societies to thrive (UNICEF, 2019).

Our core theoretical perspective is provided by statistical discrimination theory. The theory posits that when making allocations for access to job-related resources (e.g., HCDPs), ODMs want to provide more access to employees with the greatest expected productivity (Baumle & Fossett, 2005). When future employee behaviour (particularly in relation to productivity or organisational attachment) cannot be predicted, ODMs turn to more easily accessible information to estimate such future behaviour. One dominant source of information is membership in social groups. Once an employee is viewed as a member of a group (e.g., women), their future behaviour is expected to be in line with previous behaviour of the members of the group to which they belong (Tomaskovic-Devey & Skaggs, 1999).

Social policies can also serve as a salient source of information. Policies designed to enhance gender equality (especially those targeted at eliminating barriers to participation in the labour market by providing opportunities to reconcile work and family) can influence ODMs' stereotypical expectations towards women's availability to work for the organisation and, subsequently, can impact the decisions made regarding investing in employees. We expect that ODMs use both sources of information in a way that creates differences in developmental opportunities provided to women and men.

Using a large sample of respondents ( $n = 13,588$ ) from 19 countries (Table 1), we find that both paid parental leave and externally provided childcare are negatively associated with the provision of HCDPs for women but not for men. This counterintuitive finding suggests that social policies designed by governments to accelerate gender equality at the workplace may backfire by reinforcing stereotypes about women's (lower) productivity and result in fewer opportunities for women to participate in HCDPs than men. The finding that externally provided childcare can have unintended effects when organisational practices instead of macro-level outcomes are examined further underlines the importance of considering decision processes and practices in organisations. Our study contributes to understanding the full range of effects gender equality 'enabling' social policies can have informing governmental initiatives to target inequality in the workplace.

Further, we contribute to advancing a contextual perspective of human resource management (HRM). In line with Vincent et al. (2020) conceptualisation of context as a 'system of interacting and refracting influences that affect ... the practical agency of HRM' (p. 467), we go beyond the study of singular contextual factors to examine the *combined* effect of national level social policies *and* statistical information about gender. Our study provides an example of how the same national-level policies may produce unequal outcomes for members of different social groups, and as such, it is an illustration of how influence of context can itself be further 'contextualised.'

By suggesting social policies as a source of contextual information that interacts with group membership to reinforce or inhibit stereotypes and statistical discrimination based on them, we also contribute to the development of

TABLE 1 Country information

	Paid parental leave full rate equivalent	Share of children 0–2 enrolled in externally provided childcare
Australia	5.1	39.00
Austria	35.2	20.20
Belgium	3.5	59.80
Canada	19.2	
Finland	28.3	30.50
Germany	28.6	37.30
Greece	0.0	11.50
Ireland	0.0	16.60
Italy	7.8	35.50
Japan	26.4	
Mexico	0.0	2.50
Norway	32.2	55.30
Portugal	14.4	36.30
Slovenia	33.4	38.70
South Korea	14.8	
Switzerland	0.0	
Turkey	0.0	0.30
UK	0.0	31.50
USA	0.0	

Source: OECD (2016).

statistical discrimination theory. Work on discrimination has acknowledged that discrimination is based on behavioural assumptions about members of particular groups derived solely from the factual behaviour of group members. Our study tests whether assumptions about the behaviour of individuals in a particular group are additionally indirectly derived from and reinforced by contextual factors, such as social policies. What contributes to biases that inform decisions that produce discrimination remains an open question, and research that 'attempts to model the formation ... of stereotypical beliefs into a statistical discrimination framework' is still in high demand (Sevilla, 2020, p. 10).

## 2 | HUMAN CAPITAL AND HCDPs

The role of human capital for organisations is indisputable. A core premise of the resource-based view of the firm is that a firm's human capital pool can provide competitive advantage (Jiang & Messersmith, 2018; Wright et al., 2001). Leveraging their workers' human capital, organisations can achieve desirable outcomes, including and above all, organisational performance (Lepak & Snell, 1999). Organisations invest in human capital through HCDPs which usually include career counselling, succession planning, training, assessment and development centres, performance appraisal, mentoring and networking, job posting, developmental assignments, job rotation and lateral moves (Jiang et al., 2012) all of which are designed to provide employees with differentiated knowledge, skills and information. Exposure to a variety of different practices is believed to be more beneficial to enhancing individual human capital than repeatedly experiencing the same practice (Ployhart et al., 2014).

Decisions regarding which HCDPs to offer and to whom are made at the organisational level, by different ODMs. The variety and range of HCDPs available are defined by top decision makers such as the human resources (HR) director and other senior managers (Beatty & Schneier, 1997). Individual line managers play a role in whether employees have access to particular HCDPs and are responsible for encouraging them to take part in such activities (Whittaker & Marchington, 2003). Most organisations differentiate between groups of employees, taking into account the perceived value and uniqueness of their human capital, and deploy different HR approaches to manage different groups (Lepak & Snell, 1999). Line managers and HR managers share the responsibility for employees' development (Gooderham et al., 2015). For example, Cascón-Pereira et al. (2006) showed that, while line managers might identify development needs in their employees, the decision of which opportunities to provide to employees was made by their directors in response to line managers' recommendations. In the case of performance appraisal, line managers have a pivotal role in providing information on employees' achievements and behaviours, whereas HR and senior managers define the scope and the type (e.g., peer, subordinate appraisal) of the system (Boswell & Boudreau, 2002). Participation in assessment centres is influenced by supervisor recommendations and HR managers' suggestions, based on performance appraisal information, test data, interviews and/or biographical data (Spychalski et al., 1997).

We note here that while ODMs select employees to whom they offer HCDPs, there is discretion on the side of the individual employee as to whether to accept them. Having said this, given the benefits of opportunities for training and development and the possible sanctions of not taking part in formal processes (like appraisals) or turning down development offers refusing participation in HCDPs<sup>2</sup> is likely to be rather unusual (Stahl et al., 2002).

## 3 | HCDPs IN THE CONTEXT OF VARYING GENDER EQUALITY ENABLING POLICIES

Decisions regarding investments in employees through HCDPs will only be prudent if they render positive returns. Predicting the returns on investing in any individual, however, is fraught with many uncertainties. One of the key factors ODMs are likely to consider is the employees' continued availability for organisational employment. It has long been recognised that this availability can be affected by individual roles outside the labour market and the (non-work) responsibilities they entail (Hegewisch & Gornick, 2011). Across societies, a core non-work responsibility is the provision of childcare. As caring responsibilities commonly rest with women (e.g., Daly, 2011; Leopold et al., 2018), they are more likely to go through periods during which they do not use their human capital to create value for organisations.

To rectify such issues many governments have put in place social policies that can enable combining care work with labour market participation. Key among these are externally provided childcare for young children and parental leave. Parental leave policies allow mothers and fathers who had been employed before the birth of a child a period of job-protected leave and a certain level of income replacement during this leave. Childcare policies make non-parental childcare available, either by directly providing public childcare programmes or by subsidising paid care that parents select (Waldfogel, 2001).

There is a wide variation in the benefits such social policies offer. Labour economists and public policy scholars have provided plentiful evidence of such benefits, generally pointing to the association of more equal labour market participation rates of women and men with externally provided childcare for young children (e.g., Bauernschuster & Schlotter, 2015), as well as less equal labour market participation and wage penalties with the length of parental leave (e.g., Morgan & Zippel, 2003).

A common point of departure in a lot of the extant research is that the impact of social policies is largely due to the choices individuals or families make in response to social policies (e.g., take none, some, or all of the parental leave allowed; stay home to care for one's child(ren) or take advantage of externally provided childcare). These choices, in turn, shape labour market outcomes. In contrast, how such policies may affect other actors with the power to influence employment is hardly investigated. One such group of actors is ODMs. Organisational decision makers are important to examine as they hold gatekeeping positions allowing them to make decisions, such as choosing who gets to participate in HCDPs.

Decisions about investing in employees through HCDPs are made in conditions of imperfect information, as it is difficult to know how long employees will stay with an organisation or to predict their future productivity. In the presence of such ambiguity, ODMs are likely to base their decisions about HCDPs on their *expectations* of employee's future behaviour (Tomaskovic-Devey & Skaggs, 1999). Statistical discrimination theory maintains that decision makers 'use all the information available to them' (Bertrand & Duflo, 2017, p. 311) to form these expectations. In situations where 'person-specific information is limited, group-specific membership may provide additional valuable information about expected productivity' (Bertrand & Duflo, 2017, p. 311). Gender is one readily available characteristic that can provide information about the employee. Statistical discrimination theory suggests that ODMs (e.g., line manager, HR manager) use their beliefs about the productivity of a group (women as a whole) as a source of information for everyone with that group's attributes. If ODMs' expectations of group future productivity are low, they are likely to invest less in the human capital of individuals belonging to the group (Baumle & Fossett, 2005). Investment in the human capital of women is commonly perceived as riskier, based on prevalent *beliefs* that women will become mothers and prioritise their family above their work. Such beliefs can be held by ODMs irrespective of women's *actual* childbearing and child caring preferences (Vinkenburg et al., 2012).

Another piece of easily available information used by ODMs are social policies such as parental leave and externally provided childcare designed to facilitate combining care work with labour market participation. Different social policy arrangements across countries provide the beneficiaries with choices regarding fulfilling their family roles. These may impact ODMs perceptions of their productivity and attachment to an organisation. We argue that there is an interaction between two sources of information that ODMs consider, that is, gender and social policy, to produce varying levels of investment in HCDPs for men and women. We suggest that the social policies of different countries not only provide ODMs with information on different scopes of action for individuals on how to combine care work with labour market participation, but that ODMs also hold different gender-specific beliefs regarding the uses of these possibilities. The presence of social policies aiming at facilitating the reconciliation of work and family will especially inform expectations of women's productivity, due to the prevalent stereotypes of women as primary caregivers (Korpi et al., 2013).

#### 4 | LEAVE POLICIES, EXTERNALLY PROVIDED CHILDCARE AND HCDPs

Leave policies provide individuals with family responsibilities opportunities to stay with their children and reduce or interrupt their work activities. Considering leave policies and the possible parental leave employees may take, ODMs may anticipate that they must wait longer for the return on their investment in human capital. They may also consider the risks that their investment will underperform due to the obsolescence of acquired human capital over time (Evertsson & Grunow, 2012). Thus, based on the policy's signal, ODMs are likely to invest less in HCDPs for employees whom they expect to take (long) leave.

The presence of a short-term leave policy encourages women to return to paid work shortly after childbirth (Morgan & Zippel, 2003). Such behaviour increases the perception of women's agency (i.e., being assertive, career-oriented) in ODMs' eyes and signals women's commitment to their job, which makes it more likely that investment in HCDPs will yield returns (Hideg et al., 2018). In contrast, the availability of long leave provisions may be at the heart of *assumptions* that women will take long breaks from employment, thus increasing the view of women as employees unlikely to make their human capital fully available to the employer (Evertsson & Grunow, 2012; Waldfogel, 2001). In other words, in countries that offer long periods of well-paid parental leave, ODMs—considering gender stereotypes and data that may reinforce them—*expect* women to take full advantage of such leave. This, in turn, is associated with lower *perceived* work commitment, lower availability and hence, lower productivity, and decreased opportunity to fully use their human capital to advance organisational ends (Evertsson & Grunow, 2012). In contrast, expectations for male employees who become fathers include that they work even longer hours as they must 'provide' for their family (Gatrell & Cooper, 2008) and they may even receive a 'fatherhood bonus' in earnings (Hodges & Budig, 2010). We therefore expect that the same national paid parental leave entitlement will bear negative consequences for women but not men in relation to the HCDPs invested by ODMs. Specifically, we advance the following interaction hypothesis:

**Hypothesis 1** *Availability of paid parental leave (full rate equivalent) is negatively associated with HCDPs for women but not men.*

In contrast to leave policies, generous external childcare provision (especially for very young children) is associated with shorter stay-at-home time of employees (Valentova, 2016) as providing alternatives to taking care of children at home could decrease time away from paid work in organisations. Providing external childcare can signal to ODMs that workers are available to use their human capital to create value for organisations as it enables them to continue to work in organisations (Brandl et al., 2008). The defamilisation (extent to which the state rather than individuals takes on caring responsibilities) literature argues that externally provided childcare reduces family care responsibilities (e.g., Leitner, 2014) and higher levels of defamilisation correspond with reduced gender inequalities in work–family reconciliation due to less care work for women (Korpi et al., 2013). Organisational decision makers expect primarily women to take over childcare, especially when it comes to routine tasks, while fathers' schedules are not expected to be significantly influenced by day-to-day childcare activities (Craig & Mullan, 2011). Thus, large shares of young children in externally provided childcare will signal that *women* have more time to devote to paid work in organisations. As men are not expected to have the responsibility for day-to-day childcare activities when they become fathers, having more children in externally provided childcare will not be associated with less care work for them. Thus, for men, investment in HCDPs is expected to be independent from externally provided childcare. Such arguments are expressed in our second interaction hypothesis:

**Hypothesis 2** *Prevalence of externally provided childcare for young children is positively associated with HCDPs for women but not men.*

## 5 | METHODOLOGY

### 5.1 | Sample

We used primary individual-level data and secondary country-level data. Primary data was collected within 5C (Cross-Cultural Collaboration on Contemporary Careers), a research collaboration aimed at enhancing understanding of careers around the globe. The 5C project began in 2004 with a qualitative research phase. Building on the qualitative findings a questionnaire was designed, translated and back-translated to the local languages of all participating countries (Brislin, 1970). Data were collected in 2015 and 2016 following a stratified purposive sampling strategy (Kothari, 2004). Country representatives created national samples of at least 400 individuals with two or more years of work experience which were gender balanced, had almost equal age distribution and represented four occupational categories: managers, professionals, clerical/service workers, and skilled workers.

From the 30 member-countries, we included those 19 countries for which sufficient primary individual and secondary data were available. Of the 13,588 participating individuals, 51% were women, 37.7% were managers and 51% had completed tertiary education. Their average age was 41.09 years; the average work experience was 17.41 years.

### 5.2 | Measures

#### 5.2.1 | Access to and participation in HCDPs

Our dependent variable was an additive index of nine practices (maximum = 9, minimum = 0): formal education, internal job posting, lateral moves, written personal career planning, performance appraisal, career counselling, assessment centre, mentoring and/or networking, peer and/or subordinate appraisal. We asked individual respondents if they had experienced each of these practices at some point during their careers (1 = yes, 0 = no). An exploratory factor analysis for categorical variables in Mplus 8 (Muthén & Muthén, 2017) revealed that these practices form one factor with loadings ranging from 0.58 to 0.75.

#### 5.2.2 | Gender

For capturing gender we used the sex respondents reported on a categorical scale (1 = male, 2 = female).

#### 5.2.3 | Availability of paid parental leave

We measured this variable at the country level with secondary data retrieved from the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) family database (OECD, 2016). Following an approach established by OECD, we use availability of paid parental leave in weeks, full rate equivalent, that is, job-protected care leave entitlement in weeks weighted by the proportion of previous earnings replaced by the benefit over the length of the paid leave entitlement as in place by the time of data collection.

#### 5.2.4 | Prevalence of externally provided childcare (for children 0–2 years of age)

This variable too was measured at a country level with OECD data (OECD, 2016). We used the share of children 0–2 years old enrolled in early childhood education and care services (International Standard Classification of



Education [ISCED 2011] level 0)—a very commonly used proxy for childcare availability (e.g., Budig et al., 2016; Pettit & Hook, 2012).

### 5.2.5 | Control variables

Based on literature on individual level factors related to HCDPs we used the following control variables at the individual level of the respondents: *age* (at the time of the survey) calculated based on year of birth; *educational level* (1 = primary education to 7 = doctorate) (Hansson, 2007); *current employment status* (full time = 1, part time = 2) (Arulampalam & Booth, 1998); *size of current employing organisation* (1 = fewer than 10 employees to 6 = more than 5000 employees) (Brunello & Wruuck, 2020); having *children* (2 = yes, 1 = no) (Cuddy et al., 2004); and *gender composition of industry* using International Standard Industrial Classification of All Economic Activities - Revision 4 with a threshold of 60% (Welpel et al., 2015), that is, 1 = female dominated = >60% women, -1 = male dominated = >60% men, 0 = gender neutral = between 60% and 40% women (Wotschack, 2019). Information on women and men per industry was retrieved from the International Labour Organization (ILO) database (ILO, 2016).

## 6 | RESULTS

Table 1 provides an overview of the countries' social policies and reveals the variation in both availability of paid parental leave and externally provided childcare—ranging from 0 to over 35 weeks for availability of parental leave, full pay equivalent, and from below 1 to almost 60% for the share of 0–2 year olds in externally provided childcare.

Descriptive statistics (means, standard deviations and bivariate correlations) for individual and country level variables are displayed in Table 2. On average, respondents were exposed to about half of the nine HCDPs of the index. People with higher education levels tend to experience more HCDPs than those with lower levels; part-time employees tend to receive fewer HCDPs than full-time employed. Women on average experience fewer HCDPs than men. Having children and age are significantly positively related with HCDPs experienced. The share of children in externally provided childcare is a little over 30% on country average, and the mean length of available parental leave measured in full rate equivalents is almost 15 weeks.

We used Mplus 8 (Muthén & Muthén, 2017) to estimate our models. Since our hypotheses included cross-level interactions between gender and country level social policies, we had to assess the level of variability across countries of our dependent variable, HCDPs, first. The estimate of intra-class correlation (ICC (1) = 0.127) for HCDPs indicates that 12.7% of the variance of this variable can be attributed to country-level differences and suggests that multilevel modelling is appropriate. We then estimated separate cross-level models for social policy due to the small sample size at the country level.

The null model, with only country random effects included (Table 3, Model 1), yielded a significant intercept, within and between country variances (intercept = 4.274,  $p < 0.001$ ;  $\sigma_{\text{within}} = 6.438$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ;  $\sigma_{\text{between}} = 0.939$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ). Model 2 with individual level control variables shows age, education and organisation size being significantly related to HCDPs, while having children, working in female dominated industries and employment status are not related to HCDPs.

In Models 3a and 3b, we examined the hypothesised cross-level interactions between gender and social policies. The results indicate that gender moderates the relationship between paid parental leave and HCDPs: in countries where more weeks of parental leave are available, female employees experience fewer HCDPs compared to men ( $\gamma = -0.018$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ).

The interaction effect is depicted in Figure 1. At each level of paid parental leave (full rate equivalent) available, women experience fewer HCDPs compared to men, with the difference between the genders growing as leave becomes longer. Further analysis confirmed that, for male employees, parental leave provision in their country is not

TABLE 2 Descriptive statistics and correlations

	M	SD	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9
Level 1											
1. Age	41.09	11.48									
2. Education	4.38	1.43	-0.041 <sup>b</sup>								
3. Organisation size	3.55	1.69	-0.024 <sup>b</sup>	0.150 <sup>b</sup>							
4. Employment status	1.15	0.35	0.032 <sup>b</sup>	-0.047 <sup>b</sup>	-0.117 <sup>b</sup>						
5. Children	1.72	0.449	0.355 <sup>b</sup>	-0.035 <sup>b</sup>	0.032 <sup>a</sup>	0.081 <sup>b</sup>					
6. Gender	1.51	0.50	-0.042 <sup>b</sup>	0.011	-0.018 <sup>a</sup>	0.224 <sup>b</sup>	-0.071 <sup>b</sup>				
7. Industry	-0.16	0.837	0.063 <sup>b</sup>	0.173 <sup>b</sup>	-0.083 <sup>b</sup>	0.120 <sup>b</sup>	-0.036 <sup>b</sup>	0.236 <sup>b</sup>			
8. HCDPs	4.19	2.69	0.023 <sup>a</sup>	0.170 <sup>b</sup>	0.199 <sup>b</sup>	-0.084 <sup>b</sup>	0.059 <sup>b</sup>	-0.069 <sup>b</sup>	0.006		
Level 2											
9. Paid parental leave (full rate equivalent)	31.63	16.27	0.147 <sup>b</sup>	0.059 <sup>b</sup>	-0.023 <sup>a</sup>	-0.069 <sup>b</sup>	-0.156 <sup>b</sup>	0.084 <sup>b</sup>	0.130 <sup>b</sup>	-0.182 <sup>b</sup>	
10. Externally provided childcare	14.94	13.99	0.121 <sup>b</sup>	-0.144 <sup>b</sup>	-0.023 <sup>b</sup>	-0.072 <sup>b</sup>	-0.013	0.045 <sup>b</sup>	0.050 <sup>b</sup>	-0.096 <sup>b</sup>	0.215 <sup>b</sup>

Note: Individual level  $n = 8619$ – $12,619$ ; country level  $n = 19$ . Variable coding: (4) Employment status (1 = full-time; 2 = part time); (5) Children, (1 = no; 2 = yes); (6) Gender (1 = male, 2 = female); (7) Industry (1 = female-dominated, 0 = neutral, -1 = male dominated). Bold values concern hypotheses.

Abbreviation: HCDPs, Human capital development practices.

<sup>a</sup>Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed).

<sup>b</sup>Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

TABLE 3 Estimation of two-level models predicting human capital development practices (HCDPs)

	Model 1 (Null)	Model 2 (Controls)	Model 3a (cross-level interaction) Paid parental leave	Model 3b (cross- level interaction) External childcare
Intercept	4.274*** (0.224)	3.956*** (0.365)	4.264*** (0.330)	4.440 (0.397)
Level 1				
Industry (gender composition)		-0.067 (0.040)	-0.021 (0.035)	-0.049 (0.031)
Age		0.012* (0.006)	0.011* (0.006)	0.014** (0.005)
Education		0.300*** (0.049)	0.296*** (0.048)	0.314*** (0.059)
Organisation size		0.271*** (0.023)	0.272*** (0.024)	0.267*** (0.026)
Employment status		0.097 (0.247)	-0.007 (0.243)	0.005 (0.243)
Children		0.214 (0.116)	0.186 (0.117)	0.122 (0.114)
Gender			-0.247* (0.141)	-0.246 (0.163)
Level 2				
Social policy			0.001 (0.018)	0.008 (0.019)
Cross-level interaction				
Gender*social policy			<b>-0.018** (0.007)</b>	<b>-0.019** (0.007)</b>
Variance components				
Residual variance (within)	6.438*** (0.327)	5.849*** (0.289)	5.791*** (0.288)	5.665*** (0.278)
Residual variance (between)	0.939*** (0.243)	0.878*** (0.231)	0.702** (0.265)	0.736* (0.314)
Slope variance ( $\tau_{11}$ )			0.086* (0.037)	0.059 (0.052)
Intercept-slope covariance			-0.183 (0.190)	-0.064 0.107
BIC	58,126	34,625	24,411	19,616
n level 1	12,345	8376	8364	6780
n level 2	19	19	19	14

Note: Unstandardised coefficients are reported with standard errors in parentheses.

Abbreviation: BIC, Bayesian information criterion.

+ $p < 0.10$ ; \* $p < 0.05$ ; \*\* $p < 0.01$ ; \*\*\* $p < 0.001$ .

related to the level of HCDPs (estimate = -0.205,  $p = 0.419$ ). In contrast, for female employees, the two variables are negatively associated (estimate = -0.476,  $p = 0.008$ ). These findings support Hypothesis 1.<sup>3</sup>

The results in Model 3b also show a significant interaction effect between the availability of external care for children aged 0–2 years and HCDPs. Contrary to our expectations, in countries where this social policy is provided at higher levels, organisations invest *less* in female compared to male employees ( $\gamma = -0.019$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ). The interaction effect is depicted in Figure 2. In countries with lower childcare availability, women experience slightly more HCDPs compared to men, but at the higher levels of the social policy they experience significantly fewer HCDPs compared to men. Further analysis confirmed that, for men, availability of external care for young children in a country is not related to HCDPs (estimate = -0.240,  $p = 0.521$ ). In contrast, for female employees, the level of the availability of external care for young children in a country is *negatively* related to HCDPs (estimate = -0.500,  $p = 0.049$ ).<sup>4</sup> These findings are in contrast to Hypothesis 2.<sup>5</sup>

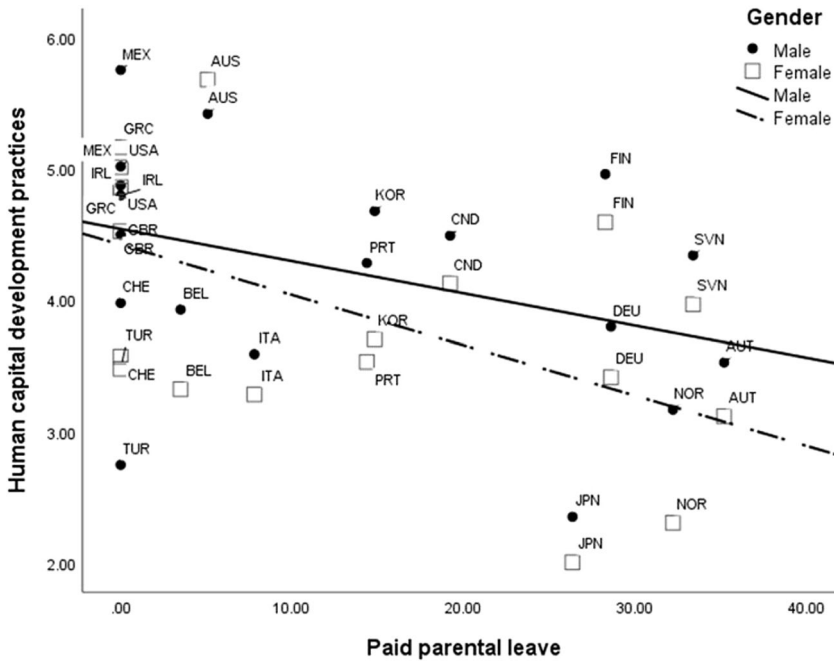


FIGURE 1 Cross-level interaction plot of paid parental leave and gender on human capital development practices (HCDPs)

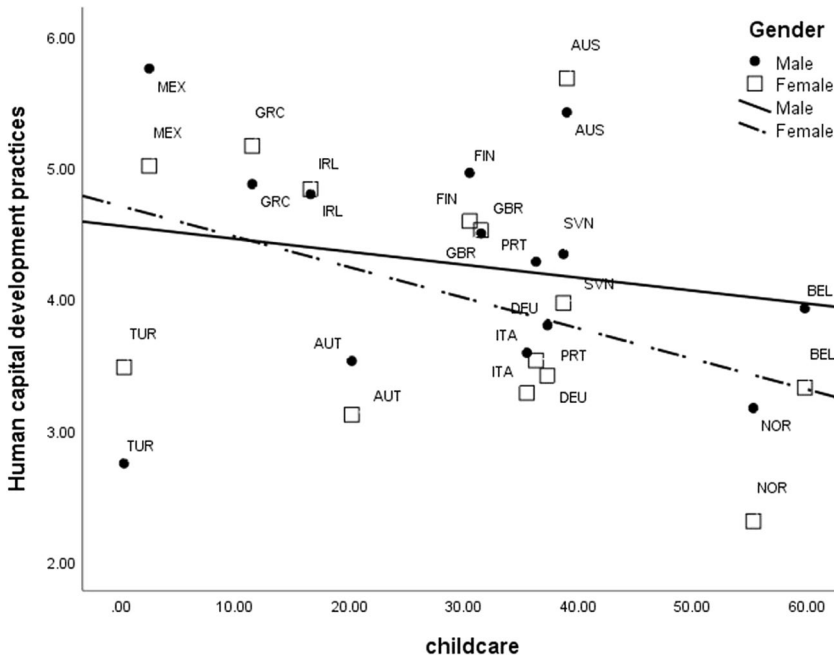


FIGURE 2 Cross-level interaction plot prevalence of externally provided childcare and gender on human capital development practices (HCDPs)

## 7 | DISCUSSION

The aim of the present study was to examine the interaction between national social policies regarding parental leave and externally provided childcare and gender and assess how this affects women's and men's access to and participation in organisational HCDPs. The findings indicate that both length of paid parental leave (full rate equivalent) and the prevalence of externally provided childcare in a country interact with gender in a way that both social policies have a negative relationship with HCDPs for women but no relationship for men. These results stand in sharp contrast to the gender equality enabling spirit in which governments develop these policies, to provide career support for women and achieve decent work for men and women alike. They underline the importance of considering organisational decisions and practices as they suggest discriminatory mechanisms in organisations that cannot be diminished by gender equality enabling social policies. On the contrary, the social policies even enhance unequal access to developmental opportunities among women and men. These findings point to organisational mechanisms as possible explanations of social policies not always producing expected macro-level effects and can thus inform future governmental and organisational initiatives.

Our findings yield important theoretical contributions for both statistical discrimination theory and the contextual perspective of HRM. Statistical discrimination theory maintains that discrimination is rooted in limited information about a (future) employee. As more information signalling future desirable behaviour should reduce statistical discrimination, a number of experimental studies has examined discrimination when person-specific information signalling future productivity was added. In some cases this additional information did reduce discrimination between social groups (Kaas & Manger, 2012), but in other instances scholars found that additional productivity signals were interpreted differently for different social groups (Bertrand et al., 2005). Our study takes the literature on statistical discrimination forward by suggesting that contextual factors such as social policies act as such productivity signals for decision makers when there is limited information on future behaviour of employees. These are, indeed, interpreted differently for different social groups. Specifically, our empirical results support this suggestion as we find relationships between contextual information and HCDPs. These effects are, however, interaction effects, supporting experimental results that suggest multiple sources of information interact with each other to reinforce stereotypical beliefs about the future behaviour of certain groups (e.g., Bursztyjn et al., 2018). These theoretical contributions respond to recent calls for modelling of stereotype formation within a statistical discrimination framework (Sevilla, 2020).

In particular, we find that both paid parental leave and the prevalence of externally provided childcare interact negatively with (female) gender when it comes to women's access to and participation in HCDPs. While for parental leave this finding is in line with our theoretical reasoning that longer paid parental leave policies fuel expectations that women will take longer leave, decreasing their availability for work and thus their overall productivity, we—surprisingly—found the same effect for externally provided childcare. We expected that if statistical discrimination against women is taking place (as ODMs expect less availability and productivity due to childcare obligations) then contextual information signalling availability to work for organisations because of externally provided childcare should weaken this effect and discrimination should decrease (Brandl et al., 2008). Our results suggest that large percentages of young children in external childcare facilities do *not* signal higher availability and thus less risky returns for investing in women's human capital but on the contrary seem to signal lower availability. This is a surprising and novel result, which is in sharp contrast to macro-level studies in labour economics where these negative effects of externally provided childcare on desirable national level equality outcomes are unknown.

One viable explanation here is that as care responsibilities are stereotyped as female, generous childcare policies act as a situational cue (Deaux & Major, 1987) that makes the stereotypical role of women as caregivers more salient to ODMs. Specially, this salient role might manifest beliefs for ODMs about women disproportionately managing child-care responsibilities (Emerson & Murphy, 2014) and trigger a preference to invest in employees that represent a lesser perceived risk in terms of productivity. The strong association of women with childcare independent of actually having children is also mirrored in our finding from a robustness check that there is a negative association

between being a woman and HCDPs even in a sample of people who do not have children. The significantly negative interaction between externally provided childcare and HCDPs for women points to stereotype reinforcing processes. Further research should examine explicitly if and how contextual factors, such as social policies, act as situational cues that can make stereotypical assumptions even more salient.

Our study also makes important theoretical contributions to contextual HRM. Research on international comparative HRM has provided empirical evidence on the systematic differences in HRM practices between varying national contexts and has generated a number of contextual HRM frameworks depicting contextual factors at various levels (Mayrhofer & Reichel, 2008). Our findings contribute to contextual HRM by advocating for the examination of more complex influencing patterns (Vincent et al., 2020) and for the need to 'contextualise context' by considering the interaction effects between social policies and gender. The contextual factors of leave and childcare policies do not have significant direct (universal) effects on HCDPs, rather the same policies might produce unequal outcomes for members of different social groups. Their relevance for HCDPs only manifests when they are contextualised with gender. These results underline the importance of studying the interactions of contextual factors.

## 7.1 | Study limitations and suggestions for future research

Our study is not without limitations. We capture investment in human capital via an additive index of the various developmental practices (HCDPs) individuals have experienced. As such, HCDPs do not provide a 'pure' measure of human capital investment. A high score on HCDPs indicates that a respondent has had access to and has participated in many HCDPs. As such, it provides a reflection of what has been made available to individuals as investment in their development. We note that our measure does not allow differentiation between access provided by organisations and actual participation. The HCDPs included are, however, practices that are either usually introduced without asking for individual employees' consent (e.g., performance appraisal) or clearly beneficial to employees (e.g., mentoring). In light of this, we believe it is plausible to expect only a few people will consistently resist participating in beneficial practices or practices that are normally decided by ODMs without consultation, especially given that there may even be negative sanctions associated with refusing to participate. Our aggregate measure is a function of the complex research design of large-scale cross-national studies that create the necessity for trade-offs between precise and detailed measurement and collecting data across dozens of countries. Nevertheless, future research should differentiate between access to and participation in HCDPs.

Such research can also ascertain whether or not there are systematic gender differences in refusing HCDPs offered. A more-fine grained measure may uncover women's participation decisions, a topic of substantial interest given that extant research has suggested two possible alternatives. On the one hand, women may decline developmental opportunities either due to personal constraints or because they feel they are not the right ones to be invested in (Chaudhuri & Sethi, 2008). On the other hand, women could accept all offers for development (Renaud et al., 2004) because of internalised beliefs about stereotypical female behaviour that makes them feel turning down opportunities is inappropriate (Crampton & Mishra, 1999). Since the majority of studies on training and development in organisations (e.g., Dieckhoff & Steiber, 2011) only ask about participation in training and do not differentiate between access and choosing to participate, this issue needs to be resolved in future research.

Information on HCDPs comes from employees rather than ODMs themselves. Given that recall is never perfect, there is a chance that employee-provided data may not always be perfectly accurate in all cases, an issue that can be rectified by accessing objective records of HCDPs participation. We contend that asking ODMs about HCDPs presents similar issues of recall and may indeed introduce additional bias when ODMs report investments in male and female employees due to social desirability and the partly subconscious nature of stereotypes. One possible way future research could circumvent this may be by tapping into secondary databases (e.g., HR analytics data).

Our study uses cross-sectional data. The social policies investigated, however, tend to represent certain welfare regimes and vary little over time within a given country (OECD, 2016). Although there is an arbitrary time lag between social policy data and HCDPs, given policy stability over time, such a lag would not affect our results. In order to isolate the effects of particular gender enabling social policies, future research should take advantage of the rather rare occurrences of significant policy changes and investigate whether and how such changes affect organisational practices. Combining such a longitudinal design with a more fine-grained measure of HCDPs that allows differentiating between employees' and ODMs' (re)actions to policy changes would allow the capture of a dynamic process. As significant policy changes are mostly not synchronised between countries such longitudinal studies, however, tend to forfeit the multi-country comparison.

Finally, we focus on two specific policies as they are very common across industrialised countries. Given that gender equality is likely to remain a goal to which many aspire and given that longer paid parental leaves as well as generous external childcare opportunities do not provide information contributing to less discriminatory decision making, future research should especially focus on identifying contextual signals capable of reducing stereotypical expectation of lower productivity and attachment of female employees. Future research can follow socio-political developments—as suggested above—and other institutional level indicators, including policies going beyond relieving the burdens of combining work and parenthood. Field experiments in various context or laboratory experiments, where contextual information is manipulated, could also help identify contextual information that has the potential to decrease statistical discrimination.

## 7.2 | Practical implications

These insights have highly relevant practical implications. In line with statistical discrimination theory, the most important lever for neutralising the 'disabling effects' of what should be enabling social policies seem to be addressing the stereotypical expectations of ODMs about men and women's availability to work for the organisation. Stereotypes are most likely to be challenged when people are confronted with behaviour that does not fit their stereotypes (Rudman & Fairchild, 2004). Social policies can help accomplish this but it seems that they have to strongly incentivise fathers to take paternity leave or even sanction parents where this is not the case. If men take just as much time off from work as women when they become parents, stereotypical expectations about childcare will be challenged as both men and women will be equally available to work, which will then shift perceptions about the returns of investing in their human capital.

Organisational practices, too, can challenge stereotypes. One option is educating ODMs about their (subconscious) stereotypes. Another is introducing practices that reduce the likelihood of ODMs even forming stereotypical perceptions regarding women's agency and work plans in the first place. One example is introducing corporate programmes that enable women to stay in touch with their workplace while on maternity leave, as such programmes have been associated with increased perceptions of women's agency and expected job commitment (Hideg et al., 2018). Another example could be the introduction of control mechanisms where ODMs keep a log of developmental opportunities they provide to their male and female employees and discuss results of these audits with senior managers.

## 8 | CONCLUSION

This paper provides evidence that questions the assumption that social policies designed to provide career support for disadvantaged groups (in this case women) improve (gender) equality in the workplace. Specifically, rather than being associated with more equal investment in HCDPs for men and women, these social policies appear to disadvan-

tage women when it comes to HCDPs. Using statistical discrimination theory, and a large-scale cross-country survey, we show that country-level availability of paid parental leave and childcare for young children can have a negative effect on the degree to which women experience HCDPs. Our paper thus makes an important contribution to our understanding of how contexts might interact, so that the impact of contextual factors is different for different social groups. We also contribute to statistical discrimination theory by providing evidence that social policies can give social cues that make group membership more salient, and therefore actually reinforce rather than address, stereotypes and discrimination against disadvantaged groups.

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## CONFLICT OF INTEREST

We have no conflict of interest to declare.

## DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

Country level data available in article. For individual level data, authors elect to not share data.

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## ENDNOTES

- <sup>1</sup> For the sake of brevity, henceforth, we refer to our main dependent variable, 'access to and participation in human capital development practices', as 'HCDPs'.
- <sup>2</sup> We measure HCDPs as the number of HCDPs employees have experienced. This captures both access to HCDPs and participation in HCDPs. While the individual employee has some discretion when it comes to deciding about *participation* in HCDPs, *access* comes first, as one cannot participate in a practice to which they do not have access. Access is determined by ODMs, such as top, line and HR managers. As such, the variable HCDPs is a broad proxy for organisational investment in employees.
- <sup>3</sup> As a robustness check paid parental leave was used in two inverted U curvilinear multilevel models; in one as a predictor of HCDPs and in the other as interacting with gender on HCDPs (i.e. moderated relationship). In neither case were the estimates significant.
- <sup>4</sup> To test for the robustness of these results we ran a model without interaction effects in a sample of people without children only. In this model too being a women had a significant negative effect on HCDPs.
- <sup>5</sup> As another robustness check we additionally tested for potential moderating effects of female dominated industry and having children. None of these interaction effects turned out to be significant.



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