

Changing policies, changing minds: Using public policy to transform gender stereotypes



Efforts to promote gender equality often focus on the workplace and the pay gap between men and women, but as [Valerie Frey](#) and [Francesca Borgonovi](#) write, gender stereotypes can also perpetuate inequality at home. They highlight imbalances in care-giving and housework between men and women, and suggest that priority should be given to policy initiatives, such as paternity leave schemes, that can promote a more even share of responsibility.



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The OECD's motto is that [better policies lead to better lives](#), but policies often don't go far enough in the fight for gender equality. Public attitudes towards the roles of men and women [have changed very slowly over time](#) in OECD and developing countries. The OECD's new report [The Pursuit of Gender Equality: An Uphill Battle](#) explores how gender stereotypes and inegalitarian norms contribute to different expectations and unequal outcomes for girls, boys, women, and men, even when the "right" policies and economic incentives are in place.

Educational choices are a classic example. The science, technology, engineering and math (STEM) fields tend to pay higher salaries than "softer" fields, but – despite this economic incentive – women remain highly underrepresented in STEM. [Data from our new report reveals](#) that while women are more likely than men to obtain a bachelor's degree, on average across OECD countries, women make up fewer than one in five entrants in computer science and engineering programmes. Similarly, young men are much less likely than young women to work in the health and education sectors, even though jobs in these fields are increasingly in demand and offer good opportunities.

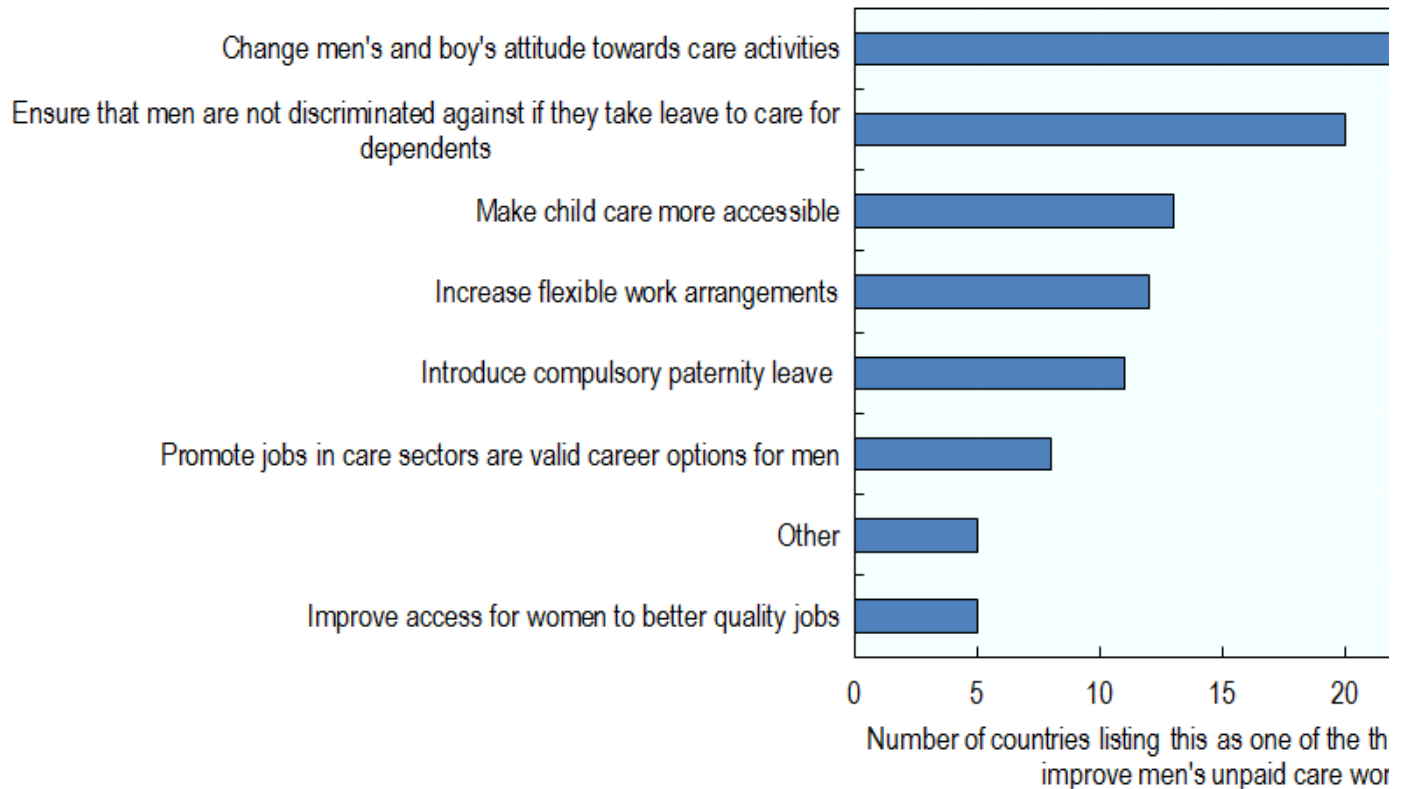
Stereotypes take hold early in life and are hard to move. By age 15, [OECD data show](#) that boys and girls expect to pursue careers in stereotypically gender-specific fields, even if they are equally proficient in academic subjects like maths, reading and science. Unfortunately, these expectations align with gender stereotypes at home. OECD PISA data show that many parents still hold different expectations for their sons and daughters' future careers. In Chile, for example, 50% of parents expect their 15-year-old sons to work in STEM, while only 16% of parents expect their 15-year-old daughters to do so. To combat stereotyping, national ministries of education are increasingly prioritising getting girls into STEM. In Mexico, for example, the Secretaría de Educación Pública and the OECD [recently launched](#) the NiñaSTEM Pueden initiative, which matches high school girls with female role models in STEM.

Parents' behaviours drive and reinforce gender stereotypes beyond field of study, of course. A big driver of gender inequality is women's disproportionate responsibility for unpaid caregiving and chores. Across OECD countries [women do more unpaid work than men](#), but in Korea, Japan, Mexico, Portugal, Turkey and Italy the gaps are especially large, with women carrying out more than 75% of all unpaid tasks. An old-fashioned economist might argue that this division of unpaid work reflects women's lower average wages and an "efficient division of labour" at home, but this is increasingly a hard case to make given women's gains in education. Even female breadwinners – those women who earn more than their husbands – [do more unpaid housework and childcare than their partners](#).

Changing norms around unpaid work means changing both men's and women's behaviours, and governments are increasingly pushing men to do their part at home. In a survey carried out for *The Pursuit of Gender Equality*, the OECD found that the unequal sharing of unpaid work between men and women was one of the top three most important gender equality issues in member countries. (The other two were violence against women and the gender wage gap.) When asked how best to increase men's hours of unpaid care work at home, countries' [most common answers](#) were changing boys' and men's attitudes towards caregiving and ensuring that men do not experience discrimination when they take leave from work to care for dependents.

Figure: Country priority rankings: Getting men to spend more time on care activities

Number of adherent countries to the 2013 Gender Recommendation listing the following as one of the ways to improve men's unpaid care work at home



Note: There were 35 countries that responded and each country could select up to three strategies. **Source:** OECD Employment, Labour and Social Affairs Committee (ELSAC), Questionnaire on Progress in Implementing the 2013 Gender Recommendation.

Countries are increasingly [targeting inequalities in unpaid work](#) (and implicitly supporting maternal employment) through the use of fathers' paid leave programmes, which incentivise fathers to care for their young children. Fathers' take-up of paternity and parental leave is important in the short-term and long-term: parenting behaviours established at childbirth tend to persist as children age, with important implications for mothers' and fathers' later paid and unpaid work responsibilities. Parents' behaviour, in turn, is a strong predictor of an individual's gendered behaviours and expectations, as research shows that adult children tend to mimic (in attitudes and action) how their parents shared paid and unpaid work.

Although many countries offer paternity leave for a few days around childbirth, leave periods must be longer to establish more equal long-term caregiving. Since 2000, ten OECD countries have begun offering fathers strong financial incentives to take parental leave for at least two months. Nordic countries often reserve parts of the parental leave period for the exclusive use of each parent for a few months, and both Japan and Korea provide mothers and fathers with around one year of non-transferable paid parental leave each. Germany offers a "bonus period", where a couple can qualify for extra weeks of paid leave if both parents use a specified amount of shareable leave.

Policies like these are steps in the right direction, but they're not enough. For fathers' leave to change behaviours and attitudes, fathers need to actually take the leave for which they're eligible. Leave programmes need to offer a suitable wage replacement rate to ensure take-up, and workplaces need to normalise leave-taking by men so that fathers who do take leave are not stigmatised. Programmes aimed at getting more girls into STEM should be accompanied by programmes aimed at getting more boys into health and education, as well as early school interventions that challenge gender stereotypes in educational and occupational choice among young children. Several countries, too, have run [awareness-raising campaigns to challenge gender stereotypes](#). Many of these programmes are innovative and show promise, but must be evaluated rigorously to understand their effects. For better policies to lead to better lives, better policies also need to help change minds.

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Note: This article gives the views of the authors, not the position of EUROPP – European Politics and Policy or the London School of Economics.

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