

## The International Corner

### Work and Family in Austria

By Barbara Haas



**Barbara Haas**

**Bio:** Barbara Haas is a lecturer at the Institute for Sociology and Social Research, at the Vienna University of Economics and Business (WU). Her research topics are gender and employment studies, work-care-balance and time-use with a focus on life course changes, care policies and welfare state comparisons. From a methodological perspective she is interested in mixed methods research.

Topics of previous projects were: the relationship between households, work and flexibility, cross-national comparisons of time-use over the life course, monitoring quality of life and waged domestic help.

The actual international research project she is working on is called WORKCARESNERGIES. This EU-funded project aims to integrate and disseminate main findings of EU (FP5/6/7) and related research to policy makers and other potential user (please see: [www.workcaresynergies.eu](http://www.workcaresynergies.eu)).

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Austria is a comparably wealthy European welfare state that has witnessed substantial growth in female employment in recent decades. In 2008, about 69% of women (ages 15-64, including those on parental leave) were employed, compared to 81% of men. The unemployment rate is rather low, between 5 and 10%, depending on the definition. Similar to other countries, there is a growing importance of the service sector (69% of total employment and 82% of female employment), which is still low compared to Northern European countries but high in comparison to other countries worldwide.

The labour market is strongly gender-segregated, with a large gender pay gap. On average, women earn 20-25% less than men. This can be traced back to the fact that although women have enormously increased their educational attainment since the 1970s, they still don't show a record of entering more successful labour market careers compared to men. Although the great majority of women with children under age 15 are employed (72%, including those on parental leave), labour market participation of mothers strongly varies over the life course. Their participation can be plotted on an M-shaped curve, and even women with high levels of education are at the bottom in the middle of the curve during childbirth and child-rearing years.

Currently, men in their 30s and 40s (the prime child-rearing years) are at the peak of their labour market careers and working long hours (in 2008: 42 hours per week on average). For women of this age group,

reductions in paid work hours are a widespread, often welcomed and affordable way of reconciling work and family management. In general, about 41% of employed women work part-time (fewer than 35 hours), compared to 7% of the male workforce.

Considering family time from a dynamic perspective shows interesting results. First, we witness that women postpone and sometimes even reject parenthood; in 2008, the average age of first birth was 28 years, the fertility rate is 1.4 per woman. Second, there are more multigenerational relationships today than in previous decades, owing to increased life expectancy (77 years for men, 83 years for women). However, the “sandwich generation”—mainly mothers but increasingly also fathers—have to meet the conflicting expectations of work, family, and personal interests.

A range of policies are explicitly aimed at increasing options for different types of work-care arrangements: With regard to parental leave, five different models are currently in force in Austria. To give two examples: In total, paid parental leave (at 436 Euros per month) allows for 36 months of leave if both parents participate (6 months cannot be transferred to the other parent). In a new model in effect since 2010, parents may also opt for an income-based parental leave scheme. They are granted 80% of their former wage for 12 months, plus 2 months that are non-transferable to the other partner (at least 1,000 Euros up to a maximum of 2,000 Euros per month). Besides this leave, a range of universal family benefits are available: tax deductions for single earners and for childcare costs, a free-of-charge part-time care facility for children at the age of 5 (since 2010), or financial support for private eldercare.

The state favours private care but also shows a commitment to encouraging female employment participation. For instance, there is an individualized income tax system, and firms may compete for the label “most family-friendly workplace.” But the most important challenge of the future will probably be overcoming the lack of high-quality childcare and eldercare facilities. In fact, in 2008 only 16% of children under 3 years old were cared for in institutions, whereas children aged between 3 and 5 years were more likely to attend preschool (88%). And, of course, there is a mismatch between the amount of school holidays (about 15 weeks per year) and the 5 weeks of paid holidays available to employees.

In general, the Austrian model is typical of a conservative European welfare state that has placed a strong focus on generous financial benefits for families that help to protect lower-income households from poverty. Nevertheless, the educational and employment systems are still stratified by gender, social class, ethnic background, and immigration status; there is still a long way to go before gender equality prevails in the labour market and in society in general.

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