

parental leave may also be granted either as a single block or in discrete parts.<sup>23</sup>

In various countries, parental leave can be taken on a part-time basis, which gives the parents the option of reducing their working hours while their children are young. In Belgium, employees can choose to take leave for a continuous period of four months, or by reducing their working time by half over eight months, or by one-fifth over 20 months if they work full time. In the Netherlands, take-up of long periods of parental leave by both women and men reflect the option to take part-time parental leave over several months. On average, mothers and fathers work 27 and 37 hours per week, respectively, during the parental leave period. The use of parental leave by men increased from 15 per cent in 2003 to 27 per cent in 2011 (den Dulk, 2013). In Japan, the employer of a worker who takes care of a child under 1 year of age, but who does not take childcare leave, must, at the worker's request, reduce his or her working hours or take other steps to make childcare easier.<sup>24</sup>

In some countries, the provisions on maternity, paternity and parental leave are integrated within a single system. Under Norwegian law, maternity, paternity and parental leave are treated as one system of "parental leave". In the United States, 12 weeks of unpaid leave are afforded by the Family and Medical Leave Act. No distinction is made between maternity and paternity leave. An employee can, among other reasons, take leave for the birth and care of a newborn child.

Other countries employ innovative policies in order to promote women's return to work while fulfilling childcare responsibilities. In Italy, for example, from 2013, mothers who choose to go back to work after maternity leave, instead of opting for parental leave (six months paid at 30 per cent of previous earnings) can claim a voucher to pay a babysitter or a childcare centre. The voucher is set at around US\$ 400 (in 2013) per month, for a maximum of six months following the end of maternity leave. This measure is expected to significantly increase access to formal childcare, from 1 million children in 2011, to 1.4 million in 2016/17 and thereby promote women's labour force participation (ILO, 2014).

In Estonia, a 2011 reform of parental leave allows parents to receive the full parental leave benefit (around US\$ 270 per month in 2014), regardless of the number

of hours worked or level of earnings. If they opt to work, parents have to ensure regular care for their child by relatives, other persons or in formal childcare centres. In addition, parents may choose to exchange the parental benefit for childcare benefit, which is provided to working or studying parents with children under the age of 3. The childcare benefit is intended to cover part of the documented childcare costs, up to a ceiling of around US\$ 315 per month and per child where the childcare service is provided by a recognized institution or registered childminder (or almost US\$ 60 per month and per child if childcare is provided by relatives or another person who is not registered) (EU, 2014).

Research shows that family-friendly working arrangements for both women and men, as well as the availability of accessible, affordable and quality childcare services, play a key role in facilitating the return to work of mothers in particular after childbirth-related leave. Employment services providing vocational training, retraining and skills upgrading for parents after leave periods (as in the Russian Federation) or childcare services for jobseekers (such as in France) are also critical in supporting those workers with family responsibilities to reintegrate into the workforce following care-related interruptions. In labour market contexts where conditions for part-time jobs are, for the most part, poor and where childcare provision makes a return to full-time work difficult, available evidence shows that mothers are likely to be penalized where they seek to combine paid work at reduced hours with childcare responsibilities at home (Grimshaw and Rubery, forthcoming). For instance, according to the survey "The social use of leave in Spain, 2012", after leave, all men returned to a full-time job, as opposed to only 55 per cent of women, with 35 per cent returning to part-time work or taking part-time leave and 7 per cent giving up paid work altogether or losing their jobs (3 per cent) (Escobedo and Meil, 2013).

While noting the importance of family-friendly working arrangements to assist workers to reconcile work and family responsibilities, the ILO Committee of Experts has repeatedly exhorted governments to ensure that these work-family measures do not, in practice, result in reinforcing traditional roles and stereotypes, including that women are solely responsible for the family or that they should be confined to certain types of jobs, thus further limiting their access to