

“How Caregiving Shapes Women’s Workforce Experiences: A Comparative Study of the United States and Germany”

John J. McCloy Fellowship Final Report

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The McCloy Fellowships on Global Trends are supported by the [American Council on Germany](#), an independent, nonpartisan nonprofit organization. The views expressed in reports are those of the authors and are not meant to represent the views of the Council.

The COVID-19 pandemic sent shockwaves through the global economy and fundamentally reshaped work as we once knew it. As day care centers and schools shut down or turned virtual, parents across the globe – especially mothers – found themselves juggling work and family in an unprecedented way. These impacts sparked larger conversations around how policymakers can provide the critical supports needed for workers, especially women, to better navigate the demands of work and family.

Germany offers a compelling case study because over the past several decades the country has built one of the most robust systems of family supports in the world, featuring generous parental leave, subsidized child care, workforce protections, and flexible employment provisions. On the global stage these policies are often viewed as a model for how to help parents, especially mothers, balance work and caregiving responsibilities.

As part of the American Council on Germany's McCloy Fellowship on Global Trends, I traveled through several cities in Germany and conducted conversations with researchers, child care providers, advocates, and working mothers. Through these conversations I sought to better understand what Germany's family policy framework looked like in practice. Specifically, I wanted to learn how working mothers felt about the system and any challenges they may be facing – and to be able to highlight key lessons for policymakers in the United States.

What emerged from these conversations was a more nuanced picture than policy descriptions alone would suggest. Germany's experience shows that comprehensive family supports are necessary, but not sufficient, in ensuring families get the help they need to thrive. The effectiveness of family policy depends not only on the benefits provided, but also on implementation and cultural expectations surrounding caregiving. These impacts are especially significant for working mothers. In many cases, the line between a policy's success and failure was not about whether the support or benefit existed, but whether families could access and utilize it in a way that aligned with their lives.

The following report explores Germany's family policy framework, the gaps that I found most interesting between policy design and lived experience, and the lessons these findings may provide U.S. policymakers. Ultimately, Germany's experience reveals that supporting families necessitates more than just generous benefits alone. Effective family policy depends on policy design, implementation capacity, and cultural norms working in tandem.

Germany's Family Policy System on Paper

Before delving into analysis on the gap between Germany's family policy design and the real impact of the policies, I want to first highlight the major supports that comprise the foundation of Germany's family policy system. In the past few decades Germany has been a leader in family policy supports, including developing an extensive parental leave system, guaranteeing universal child care, and implementing workforce protections aimed at helping parents balance employment and responsibilities at home. These policies play a critical role in supporting the healthy development of children, increasing labor force participation, driving economic growth, and ensuring economic security for families across the nation.

Parental Leave and Job Protection

Germany's parental leave system is granted to mothers and fathers to take care of their young children. Collectively, each parent can take up to three years of job-protected leave per child. For mothers, this includes the six weeks of legally prescribed leave before the birth of a child, as well as a required eight weeks after birth. Parents are allowed to take leave continuously or break it up into multiple parts.

During this time parents are not generally paid by their employer but receive a parental allowance from the state, called Elterngeld. This allowance covers between 65 percent and 67 percent of net income, with maximum pay of 1,800 euros per month. The allowance is paid for a period ranging from 12 to 14 months (also known as the 12+2 model) where parents can share up to 14 months of paid leave, or receive up to 12 months if just one parent is taking leave. There are three types of Elterngeld available:

- **Basiceelterngeld:** Up to 12 months for one parent, or a combined 14 months if parents share.
- **ElterngeldPlus:** For parents who want to return to part-time work, one month of basic parental allowance equals two months of ElterngeldPlus. The benefit period is up to 28 months, with parents receiving up to 900 euros a month.
- **Partnerschaftsbonus** (Partnership Bonus): Encourages both parents to share child care responsibilities while working part time. Each parent can receive an additional two to four months of the ElterngeldPlus if they work between 24 and 32 hours a week. Single parents can also claim this if they meet criteria.

Child Care Infrastructure

How the system works: Since 2013, children over the age of one are entitled to a place for child care, whether that be via a day care setting or more flexible care conducted by a designated “child minder.” The term Kita (short for Kindertagesstätte) broadly refers to child care offerings for children before they enter school, although care can be delivered via public or private providers, or via this more flexible type of home-based or one-on-one care. In Germany, the federal government is largely responsible for financing and structuring the system, but states and municipalities are the ones to handle implementation.

Germany’s child care system emphasizes that child care is both an educational support and a critical piece of economic infrastructure. Affordable and accessible child care offerings help support children’s development, but also help parents, especially mothers, participate in the workforce. Germany’s expansion of child care infrastructure over the past two decades is a reflection of those goals. But even as federal policy focuses on this, Germany’s child care system is directly impacted by the country’s divided history. In the former East Germany, child care infrastructure was built around the idea that mothers would work outside the home, often full time. While in the former West Germany, policy and cultural norms steered mothers towards remaining home with young children. Although policy, including child care policy, has evolved significantly since unification, these historical differences certainly shape the experiences of working mothers throughout the country.

This historical context is significant for Germany’s child care system as it helps us understand the existing barriers families face, even with the promise of a very robust, comprehensive level of support. Legal entitlement and affordability do not always guarantee that care is available when and where families need it.

Labor Market Structures

German policymakers have implemented several policies and programs aimed at helping parents remain connected to the workforce while they navigate caregiving responsibilities. Beyond generous paid leave offerings and employment protections, employees in Germany have the right to flexible work arrangements, such as part-time employment and reduced-hour scheduling. These policies reflect larger efforts to prevent parents from leaving the workforce during periods of significant caregiving. This is especially significant for working mothers and can often ease the transition from parental leave back to a full-time role.

One of the most distinct German policies targeting working mothers is their “mini-job” system. Mini-jobs encompass a category of employment that caps an employee’s earnings, keeping hours limited, and thus focus on fostering part-time work. Mini-job workers are also typically exempt from taxes and social security contributions. However, mini-jobs are often very low-wage jobs with limited growth opportunities.

Collectively, these labor market structures aim to provide families with more flexibility and autonomy in how they balance work and care responsibilities. Yet while these arrangements may help parents remain connected to the workforce in the short term, they have longer-term impacts on working mothers' earnings and economic security that are explored in more detail below.

The Gap Between Policy and Practice

Access Does Not Always Mean Availability

While child care in Germany is designed to provide families with affordable care, conversations with parents, providers, and researchers highlighted that availability was often much more challenging than affordability. Germany's child care guarantee is facing significant challenges in making that promise a reality. Care is not always available when and where families need it.

Differences between work and child care schedules: One theme that came up continually in my conversations with working mothers was that the structure of child care in Germany often came with early pick-up times, significant holiday closures, and the expectation that some days centers may be closed for staff or child illnesses. Some mothers noted to me that even when they picked their child up by 4-4:30 p.m., before closing time, their child may be the last one at the center. Additionally, holiday closures for Kitas may be different than those of schools.

It is important to note that even amongst conversations around the difficulties Kita closures and limited operating hours caused, many mothers highlighted that German work culture is often encouraging of flexibility and time off.

Impact of falling fertility rates: The mismatch between supply and demand is also impacted by changes in birth rates. For instance, some researchers noted that while child care slots were harder to find several years ago, that is no longer the case. Others noted that there had actually been closures of child care centers or Kitas due to declining demand for enrollment. These fluctuations speak to a key policy tension in creating a universal child care system that is able to meet changing needs over time. Kita closures mean the loss of jobs and support, but not having enough slots makes lives harder for working parents and prevents children from receiving the developmental benefits such programs provide.

Differences between East and West Germany: In East Germany, child care infrastructure was built around expectations that mothers worked. In West Germany, policies and norms more often favored mothers staying at home to raise children. Although unification expanded child care access nationwide, distinct cultural and structural differences have permeated. How employers, parents, and even policymakers view child care availability and access is shaped in part by this East-West divide.

Families may be leaving cities: Several conversations highlighted the differences in child care availability when comparing cities to surrounding communities. Rising housing costs in urban areas mean that families may find it more affordable to choose homes or apartments farther away into areas where access to child care supports may be more limited. Broader affordability challenges can shape families' ability to benefit from child care policies.

Conclusion: Collectively, these conversations helped me to better understand that the success of child care policy hinges on much more than making it affordable and guaranteeing access. Families experience child care in the broader context of their working and personal lives. Where they live and when they work, coupled with the changing demographics or capacities of their regions, directly shape parents' access to their preferred care. Building a universal child care system is step one on a longer road to ensuring that child care is affordable, accessible, and responsive to changing family and societal needs.

Flexibility and Long-Term Economic Tradeoffs

Germany's approach to supporting families includes an emphasis on flexibility. Part-time work arrangements, parental leave offerings, mini-jobs, and job protection laws are all policy efforts that aim to help families balance the demands of work and care. Yet in talking with practitioners, working mothers, and other researchers it became apparent that this promise of flexibility wasn't always aligned with economic realities. Although these policies can help parents, especially mothers, navigate caregiving demands in the short term, they also may undermine financial security and workforce opportunities for them in the long term.

Leave and workforce attachment: The 12+2 model of Germany's parental leave system attempts to promote a more gender equitable system of leave – by baking in two months of leave as the minimum fathers can take without it cutting into their partner's leave amount. Yet throughout my conversations some women noted returning to work earlier than 12 months often was met with surprise, confusion, or even negative comments. One woman even noted her boss had asked her why she was already coming back part time around the 6-month mark. On the contrary, their male partners who were taking leave beyond their 2-month portion were met with similar surprise to hear they would be out of the workplace longer.

The curse of mini-jobs: While mini-jobs were designed to promote labor force participation, particularly among women, researchers have found these roles act more like a trap than a bridge to economic opportunity. These positions may provide women with flexibility and supplemental income, but they also provide limited advancement opportunities, low wages, and minimal benefits or protections. Long-term reliance on mini-jobs is found to reduce earnings growth, weaken retirement security, and increase economic vulnerability later in life.

The “husband tax” trap: Germany's tax structure can reinforce these dynamics. Since mini-jobs are untaxed and exempt from social security (or pension) contributions, it can incentivize women in married households to remain in these lower-paying roles so their household can reap larger tax benefits. Right now, if one partner in a household earns the equivalent of \$60,000 a year, and their partner earns nothing, the household is taxed as if they earn \$30,000. As soon as a mother returns to work, the entire household's tax burden is higher. This tax structure is shown to disincentivize women from returning to the workforce, as many may feel the opportunity cost due to what they will need to pay in taxes isn't worth it. The effective tax rate for the second earner in a marriage, usually the woman, is found to be 46 percent in Germany compared to 26 percent in the U.S. Other countries, like Sweden, have reformed their tax systems to address these gendered negative consequences.

Additionally, in instances of divorce, women are in much worse financial setups due to working less and having been taxed according to the earnings of their household. Although pension entitlements are divided in divorce, women often enter separation with weaker employment history and lower earning potential. The rates of older-age poverty for women in Germany are significant as a result.

Workforce supports work: However, there are policies and programs that are designed to help women navigate the demands of work and caregiving more easily. One example of this is *power_m*, an initiative run by the City of Munich that helps people who are reentering the workforce after family leave, whether for child care or elder care. It primarily has supported mothers to find full-time employment in their chosen field after having a child. The program brings together a consortium of training and professional development institutions to help upskill these women and place them in their chosen industries. It helps connect them to child care providers as well. Perhaps most importantly the project provides these women with a strong sense of community and connection, helping them to learn from one another and grow their confidence.

Conclusion: German policymakers have made a clear effort to prioritize flexibility and support for working parents, especially mothers. Yet many of these pathways of support can also limit mothers' earning growth and career

advancement, and undermine long-term financial security. Helping families better balance work and caregiving needs is an essential part of successful and sustainable family policy efforts. But it needs to be done in a way that does not penalize women's economic security in the short and long run.

Cultural Expectations and the Burden of Care

One theme that emerged throughout my conversations in Germany is that family policy and cultural expectations don't always move in unison. Germany has developed a series of robust supports for working families—including generous paid leave, job protections, and a child care entitlement. Yet even with this support many mothers discussed feeling like they were still expected to be the primary caregiver for their children. Although less visible than clear policy barriers, these cultural norms show up in many places, from conversations with Kita providers to comments from other parents. The ability for parents, especially mothers, to benefit from Germany's generous family policy offerings is shaped by cultural expectations and norms.

Gendered expectations of care: Throughout my conversations during my time in Germany, the stigma or shame around working mothers not paying enough attention to their children came up time and time again. Even when mothers work, there is an underlying assumption that they are the primary parent and must cover the care duties when required. One mother I spoke with noted that her husband's job afforded more flexibility at the current moment, and as such he covered more of the pick-up and drop-off duties. Yet whenever the Kita needed something, they called her first. This was even after she expressed that her husband could more easily address any issues, such as early pick-up, etc. While not intentionally exclusionary, these interactions reinforce the expectation that mothers serve as the default parent.

Recognizing the value of working mothers. In talking with many mothers who utilized more robust forms of care for their younger children, several noted that they had received comments from other parents, and even sometimes providers themselves, about how much time their children were not spending with them at home. Inherent to many of these comments was the implication that children are better off being cared for by their parents most of the time than providers. Such comments overlook the developmental and social benefits associated with high-quality child care. Several mothers with older children also emphasized to me they see their child as exercising more independence than some of their peers – taking the bus or making themselves food without help.

The lunchtime paradox: The role of lunchtime in child care settings, and what it revealed about care expectations, I found to be particularly interesting. Many Kitas or other child care providers offer the option for parents to pick up their child for lunch, with parents either keeping them the rest of the day or returning them after lunch for a few short hours. Interestingly, one mother told me that only recently did her Kita set a designated lunch space within the center to allow for children with food packed from home to eat. So many parents were picking up their children for lunch that the center didn't provide space for children who were staying through lunchtime. For working parents, the ability to pick up at lunch is impractical and these expectations can create an additional source of judgment for families utilizing full-day care.

Default parent problem: The examples above may seem small in isolation, but taken together they illustrate the societal expectations that mothers remain the primary parent, regardless of their employment status or household preferences. Throughout my conversations, many mothers described an underlying assumption that they would manage the logistics of family life – from coordinating pick-up and drop-off to handling unexpected child care changes. These expectations create invisible labor for mothers, especially working mothers, that is difficult for policy efforts to directly address. Cultural norms continue to play a distinct role in shaping the day-to-day experiences of working mothers.

Conclusion: These conversations reinforced for me that policy alone can't reshape caregiving as we know it. Germany has invested heavily in family supports, yet many mothers still carry the disproportionate share of caregiving responsibilities. Well-crafted family policies can create more opportunities for working mothers by providing pathways back into the workforce and caregiving supports. But broader cultural shifts are necessary to fully ease the burdens and barriers working mothers in the country face. Ultimately, supporting working mothers requires more than formal policy supports. It also requires challenging cultural norms around caregiving, who manages family responsibilities, and how we define successful caregiving.

When National Guarantees Meet Local Capacity

Germany's family policy framework is built upon a series of ambitious commitments at the national level. Yet through this fellowship I learned a lot about how the federal government's promise is only one part of the policy equation. The effectiveness of these commitments for the lives of working families depends heavily on whether local governments, providers, and institutions have the resources and tools they need to deliver on them. This means that families' experiences with family policies in Germany are shaped by local implementation as much as, if not more than, by the policy's design nationally.

Entitlement vs. capacity: Child care provides the clearest example of this tension. While in Germany families are legally entitled to child care for any child over the age of one, researchers and providers noted that fulfilling this guarantee is challenging for many communities. Staffing shortages, enrollment fluctuations, and funding resources play a role in whether or not families can secure their preferred form of care. Even when they do secure care it may be far from work or home, or not aligned with their work schedule. The legal entitlement to child care in Germany does not ensure families are able to receive the support they need; infrastructure at the local level is needed to meet these needs.

Staffing and service delivery: Many interviewees pointed to workforce shortages as a key driver of local child care supply struggles. Providers pointed to difficulties recruiting and retaining staff, while researchers highlighted that staffing shortages can limit enrollment and contribute to classroom closures or a reduction in operating hours. This all reinforces a cycle of scarcity that is hard to address. These workforce shortages are very reminiscent of issues American child care providers face. While the countries have very different family policy landscapes, these struggles in Germany illustrate that the success of these policies depends heavily on the infrastructure supporting the child care workforce.

Regional variation: Several conversations also highlighted the meaningful regional differences in child care infrastructure and experiences. These variations may be driven by historical divides between East and West Germany and growing costs in urban areas, and demographic shifts – such as declining birth rates – can create uneven demand for child care across the country. What this means is that while some areas of the country continue to struggle with waitlists and staff shortages, other areas are actually closing child care centers due to low demand. The varying experiences highlight that while family policy must be a national priority, families experience these supports much more at a local and regional level. It therefore becomes important to find ways for policy supports to be reactive to changing demand and needs in response to these shifts.

Conclusion: These observations reinforce the idea that policy implementation is just as important as, if not more than, policy design. Providing an entitlement to child care is only the first step in helping families access and afford the care they want and need. Germany's challenges in this space are especially relevant for U.S. policymakers, as current family supports are already provided through a mix of federal, state, and local systems. A policy is only as effective as its ability to meet people where they live and work.

Lessons for the United States

Lesson 1: Policy Design Matters as Much as Policy Adoption

Family policy succeeds or fails not only because of the benefits it provides, but also because of the systems built to effectively deliver those benefits. Policymakers should view implementation as a policy choice rather than an administrative afterthought. Investments in benefits need to be paired with investments in the institutions, administrative systems, and workforces that deliver them.

To be clear, Germany's family policy system is far and away much more robust than anything that exists in the United States. Many of the mothers I spoke with emphasized how grateful they were for the supports they were able to access, and highlighted that if they lived in the United States they weren't sure how they would be able to navigate care needs and employment. But these conversations illustrate that for U.S. policymakers, paying attention to service delivery and implementation is essential when thinking about building a sustainable agenda on family policy. The lesson is clear: Policy ambition and implementation capacity must grow together. Family supports are only as effective as the systems responsible for delivering them.

Lesson 2: Flexibility Must Include Long-Term Economic Security

Family policy should help parents navigate caregiving responsibilities without undermining long-term economic security. Germany's experience demonstrates that workforce flexibility is not enough. Researchers and practitioners pointed to the long-term consequences associated with workforce interruptions, prolonged part-time work, and labor market programs that can limit earnings and career growth. The challenge for policymakers is ensuring that flexibility supports workforce participation without creating new economic vulnerabilities.

Policymakers should evaluate family supports not only by whether they increase workforce participation, but also by whether they help preserve long-term earnings growth, retirement security, and financial independence. Flexibility is valuable, but it should not come at the expense of economic security. Policies should support career advancement, retirement planning, and smoother transitions back into the workforce after periods of caregiving. Programs like power_m show how workforce supports can help mothers stay connected to employment without undermining their long-term economic security.

Lesson 3: Care Infrastructure Must Reflect Real Family Schedules

Germany's experiences illustrate that child care systems need to be designed around how families actually live and work. Access to care is one thing, ensuring parents can realistically use it is another.

Differences between school schedules, child care provider calendars, and enrollment timelines demonstrate how even well-backed systems can still contain challenges for families. These barriers highlight the importance of ensuring institutions and supports are well-coordinated with the realities of family life.

The University of Hamburg's Family Policy office specifically provides supportive services to help students and staff navigate these unexpected scheduling challenges. They have created spaces on campus that are equipped with beds and changing tables, but also include designated workstations. Students and faculty can reserve these rooms when they may need to unexpectedly bring their child to campus with them. Additionally, the office helps students navigate balancing their studies with caregiving responsibilities, providing access to resources and supports for student parents. These types of initiatives and programs help reduce the barriers student parents face.

Policymakers should measure child care systems not only by affordability and enrollment rates, but also by their usability. If care is unavailable during working hours, hard to access when parents need it, or poorly coordinated with school schedules, families may still struggle to make it work.

This lesson is especially relevant in the United States, where many parents work nontraditional hours and face long child care waiting lists. Ensuring access to affordable child care also means policymakers have to think about operating hours, workforce capabilities, transportation barriers, and coordination across child care and education systems. Child care infrastructure needs to be not just available, but usable for all families.

Lesson 4: Cultural Expectations Shape Policy Outcomes

Mothers don't encounter family policies in a cultural vacuum. Rather, their experiences are shaped just as much by societal norms and expectations as policy infrastructure. Many mothers still describe feeling an expectation from others that they are the primary parents responsible for managing their child's care. These expectations were both explicit, sometimes via direct comments made to these women, but also implicit in the assumptions of providers around who should be handling lunchtime routines or pick-ups.

The persistence of caregiving norms in Germany underlines an important reality for policymakers. Even the most comprehensive family policies can't undo the impacts of ingrained beliefs about gender roles and the division of parenting labor. These beliefs also have a noticeable impact on mothers who are not only typically carrying a greater share of the physical responsibilities of child care but also the emotional burden of navigating what "good parenting" looks like.

The lesson for policymakers is that family policies do not operate independently from cultural norms. Efforts to promote shared caregiving responsibilities must also address the cultural expectations that impact how families utilize policy supports.

Lesson 5: Families Need Systems That Adapt Over Time

Policymakers should design family support systems with adaptability in mind. Demographic shifts, workforce changes, and evolving family structures can alter demand for supports, mandating that policymakers continually evaluate and adjust programs. Just as family structures and labor market conditions evolve over time, so too should policies.

At the same time, demographic and economic shifts are putting new pressures on family policy systems. Germany, like many developed countries, faces declining birth rates and changing workforce expectations. These trends impact the demand for family supports and the capacity of institutions to provide them. Core to this tension is that these problems look different from community to community: Some are facing declining enrollment while others grapple with shortages. Policymakers both in Germany and the U.S. are trying to establish systems that can quickly adapt to changing conditions – and that is not easy.

For U.S. policymakers Germany's experience emphasizes that family policies need to be flexible and sustainable. Helping families is not just about passing a big new benefit or program. Rather, it requires legislators to develop support systems that can evolve alongside ever-changing family and economic needs. Strong family policy efforts not only address today's challenges but prepare to respond to tomorrow's as well.

Closing Reflections

The greatest part of this fellowship was the opportunity to move beyond reading about policy design on paper and delve into how these systems function in everyday life. Conversations with researchers, policymakers, providers, and parents revealed the strengths of Germany's family policy framework, and highlighted the challenges that remain. It also reinforced a lesson that extends well beyond Germany's borders, which is that supporting families is an ongoing process that requires policies to adapt alongside families' changing needs and realities.

I am deeply grateful to the American Council on Germany for the opportunity, and to the many wonderful researchers, mothers, and providers who generously shared their time and perspectives. Their insights shaped the findings of this report and deepened my understanding of these issues.

At a pivotal time in larger global conversations around economic security and the future of work, opportunities to engage in transatlantic exchange are invaluable. Learning from other countries' experiences and challenges helps our own efforts become stronger and more effective.