

# Familialization, De-familialization, and Family Policy Change in High-Income Countries

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This article provides country-specific accounts of family policy change in twenty-one high-income countries between 1990 and 2015. It relies on a measure including twelve indicators across three dimensions: financial transfers, childcare services, and leave schemes. Indicators within each dimension are classified using the concepts of (de)familialization, widely employed in feminist social policy scholarship, and two original composite scores—the familialization and de-familialization scores—are constructed to capture the magnitude and direction of family policy change. Against a backdrop of overall policy expansion, the analysis identifies four distinct trajectories mirroring Leitner's ideal-typical "varieties of familialism": explicit familialization, optional familialization, implicit (or partial) de-familialization, and de-familialization. The article further shows that family policy change is largely path-dependent, with countries often undergoing trajectories specific to their family policy regime. In particular, familializing trends are most prominent in Mediterranean and liberal countries, whereas de-familializing trends are observed in social democratic and conservative countries.

**Key words:** de-familialization; familialization; family policy; varieties of familialism; welfare state change.

## Introduction

Over the last decades, broad social, cultural, and economic changes in high-income countries have led to a shift from the male breadwinner model to a variety of adult-worker models (Daly 2011; Lewis 2001), reflecting a new, postindustrial, social order (McDowell 1991) in which both partners are engaged in paid work. To adapt to these shifts, and under the influence of European institutions and international organizations, family policy has

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undergone profound transformations as part of broader processes of welfare state change (Pierson 2001). Despite the prevailing context of “permanent austerity” (Pierson 2002), family policy stands out as an exceptional area of social protection, having experienced significant expansion. However, this expansion has been heterogeneous across countries (Ferragina and Seeleib-Kaiser 2015; Gauthier 2002).

The approach developed in this article builds on the mirror concepts of “familialization” and “de-familialization,” which have been employed to examine the capacity of the welfare state to enhance independence from patriarchal family structures, allowing individuals to maintain an acceptable standard of living without reliance on family relations (Lister 1994; McLaughlin and Glendinning 1994; Saraceno 1997). It also adapts the time-invariant “varieties of familialism” (Leitner 2003; Saraceno and Keck 2010) and “varieties of family policy” (Ferragina and Seeleib-Kaiser 2015; Filetti 2022; Gauthier 2002; Thévenon 2011) to systematically study family policy variation across countries and over three decades of accelerated institutional transformation (1990–2015). Finally, it draws on the concept of path-dependency from historical institutionalism (Mahoney 2000; Pierson 2000; Thelen 2014) to assess the extent to which institutional legacies have shaped family policy development.

Two research questions guide this work: how can family policy trajectories of change be characterized at the country level? Is there a correspondence between countries’ family policy regimes and their specific trajectories of change?

To answer these research questions, the family policy measure proposed in this article incorporates the concepts of “money, services, and time” (Kameran and Kahn 1994) and employs twelve indicators across three dimensions of protection (financial transfers, childcare services, and leave schemes). The financial transfers dimension includes indicators on childcare benefits replacement rates, as well as family allowances and cash benefit spending. The childcare services dimension accounts for the share of children aged 0–2 enrolled in formal childcare and preschool, and public early childhood education and care (ECEC) and in-kind spending. Finally, the leave dimension includes indicators on length, replacement rates, and spending on maternity and parental leave available to mothers, and the length of paternity and parental leave available to fathers. This measure, while parsimonious, makes it possible to capture family policy holistically and to unambiguously frame each policy indicator according to their familializing or de-familializing potential. The study covers twenty-one high-income countries, customarily associated with the social democratic (Denmark, Finland, Norway, and Sweden), conservative (Austria, Belgium, France, Germany, Japan, the Netherlands, and Switzerland), Mediterranean (Greece, Italy, Portugal, and Spain), and liberal (Australia, Canada, Ireland, New Zealand, United Kingdom, and United States) family policy varieties.

This article makes two contributions to the literature. Methodologically, it proposes two original, theoretically driven, composite scores—the familialization and de-familialization scores—designed to assess the depth and characteristics of family policy change in each country. This methodology could be valuable for studying policy change in other areas of social protection as well.

Substantively, this article contributes to the literature by showing how Leitner's (2003) ideal-typical “varieties of familialism” (explicit familialism, optional familialism, implicit familialism, and de-familialism), designed to capture policy variation at a specific point in time, can help understand family policy diversity over time. The familialization and de-familialization scores help identifying four common trajectories of family policy change that align with Leitner's varieties: explicit familialization, optional familialization, implicit (or partial) de-familialization, and de-familialization. The term “implicit (or partial) de-familialization” replaces “implicit familialism” because the analysis shows evidence of the retrenchment of familializing policies, alongside a mild expansion of de-familializing ones, whereas “implicit familialism” would imply limited expansion of both policy types.

The article also demonstrates that family policy trajectories often follow a path-dependent and regime-consistent pattern. With the exception of the optional familialization trajectory, which is a hybrid, there is clear evidence of a correspondence between family policy trajectories and previously established family policy varieties. Specifically, Mediterranean and liberal countries tend to increase familialization, while social democratic and conservative countries are more likely to undergo de-familializing policy changes (whether implicit or not).

## Contextualizing family policy diversity and change

During the post-war period, the organization of economic and social reproduction was built around the male-breadwinner model. The separation between paid work—carried out by men—and unpaid work, which rested mostly on women's shoulders, ensured a certain degree of stability in families, to the detriment of women's independence and their employment prospects (Fraser 1994; Lewis 1992). In this context, the access to “implicit” family policy—that is, the policies aimed at protecting families but related to realms of social policy other than “explicit” family policy (Kameran and Kahn 1978)—was mediated through the breadwinner's eligibility to receive welfare benefits. The shift from the male-breadwinner model to the adult-worker model (Crompton 1999; Daly 2011; Lewis 2001, 2006) took place contextually to the massive entrance of women into the labor force and the normalization of lone parenthood (Esping-Andersen 2002) and contributed to the rise of a “post-Fordist gender order” (McDowell 1991). However, the available schemes proved to be inadequate to cope with mothers' twofold role as

workers and carers, accruing “old” inequalities in the redistribution of unpaid housework (Einstein 2009), and creating new gender inequalities in the labor market. Women, in fact, joined the workforce mostly in the service sector and with atypical forms of employment, such as part-time jobs. These employment schemes were ideated to favor work–care reconciliation, but in reality served as a picklock to institutionalize gender segregation in the labor market—as testified by the dramatic increase of bad-quality jobs among women and their wage penalty (see Ferragina and Parolin 2022 on “reproductive care” jobs).

The potential of the varietal approach (Esping-Andersen 1990) as a heuristic tool for understanding social protection differences across countries led to the extension of this framework to the study of the relationship between paid and unpaid work.<sup>1</sup> Feminist social policy scholars criticized the notion of “decommodification”—on which *The Three Worlds of Welfare Capitalism* were based—for being gender neutral, and proposed its integration with concepts of “familialism” and “de-familialization” (Crompton 1999; Daly 1994; Hobson 1994; Lewis 1992; O’Connor 1993; Orloff 1993; Sainsbury 1994, 1996; Saraceno 1997). Initial definitions of de-familialization were presented in two pioneering works published in the same year by McLaughlin and Glendinning (1994) and Lister (1994). McLaughlin and Glendinning (1994, 65) defined de-familialization as “those provisions and practices that alter the extent to which well-being is dependent on our relationship with the (patriarchal) family,” emphasizing the question of who provides care in relation to the male breadwinner. Lister (1994, 32), drawing from the concept of de-commodification that also refers to the “possibility to uphold a socially acceptable standard of living” (Esping-Andersen 1990, 37), further underscores achieving this independently of family relations. The mirror concepts of familialization and de-familialization have been extensively debated and refined over time (Bambra 2004; Daly 2011; Esping-Andersen 1999; Knijn 2004; Korpi 2000; Kröger 2011; Mathieu 2016; Ostner 2004; Saxonberg 2013). Their application to social policy analysis, however, has contributed to shaping a nuanced understanding of their complementary (though sometimes theoretically conflicting) relationship with institutional varieties.

Leitner (2003) profoundly influenced this debate (see Saraceno and Keck 2010) by applying familialism and de-familialization to the study of the policies supporting (or disengaging) the family in its caring role. The study, which conceptualized the welfare state as inherently complex and allowed for the simultaneous coexistence of combinations of strong/weak familializing and de-familializing policies, identified four ideal-typical models (Table 1).

The explicit familialism model, mixing strong familializing and weak de-familializing policies, reinforces the caring role of the family. The optional familialism model combines both strong familializing and de-familializing policies and partly unburdens the family from caring activities. Implicit familialism, with weak familializing and de-familializing policies, implicitly forces the family to be the main care provider. And de-familialism, where strong

**Table 1.** Ideal-typical combinations between strong and weak familialization and strong and weak de-familialization.

	Weak familialization	Strong familialization
Strong de-familialization	De-familialism	Optional familialism
Weak de-familialization	Implicit familialism	Explicit familialism

Source: [Leitner \(2003, 358\)](#).

de-familializing and weak familializing policies are provided, relieves the family from caring duties.

Building on Leitner's work, this article adopts a conceptualization of familialization and de-familialization that emphasizes their *social* dimension over the *economic* one. (De)familializing policies are understood here as those unburdening (or reinforcing the role of) families—and particularly mothers—of their caring responsibilities ([Leitner 2003, 357](#)). This interpretation aligns with [McLaughlin and Glendinning' \(1994\)](#) focus on who provides care in relation to the male-breadwinner, while diverging from [Lister's \(1994\)](#) emphasis on the economic costs of care (see also [Knijn and Kremer 1997](#); [Kröger 2011](#); [Lohmann and Zagel 2016](#)). However, while Leitner investigated familializing and de-familializing policies holistically—focusing on both childcare and elderly care—this article restricts the analysis to “explicit” family policy only, and conceptualizes them according to “money, services and time” ([Kameran and Kahn 1994](#)). This analysis focuses on three family policy dimensions that have been extensively discussed in the (de)familialization and family policy literature: financial transfers, childcare services, and leave schemes. Although the impact of these policies depends on their configuration (see, e.g., [Schechtl 2023](#)), childcare benefits, cash benefits for families, and family allowances provide means to help families keep up with their financial and caring responsibilities—and for this reason they may be seen as economically de-familializing. However, by incentivizing the internalization of care within the household, they are considered here as familializing ([Saraceno and Keck 2010](#)). Similarly, when childcare services are provided through the market rather than the public sector, the financial burden of care shifts to families, making them economically familializing. This article, however, focuses on public childcare services, which reduce families' (and mothers') involvement in childcare and collectivize the associated costs, and are therefore unanimously regarded as some of the most effective de-familializing policies ([Keck and Saraceno 2013](#); [Leitner 2003](#); [Lohmann and Zagel 2016](#); [Mathieu 2016](#); [Saraceno and Keck 2010](#); see also [Morgan 2022](#)). The de-familializing power of leave schemes remains ambiguous and somewhat problematic to measure ([Ciccia and Verloo 2012](#); [Keck and Saraceno 2013](#); [Saxonberg 2013](#); see also

Dobrotić and Blum 2020). While some scholars (see Leitner 2003; Saraceno 2000; Saraceno and Keck 2010) argue that parental (and maternity) leave schemes reinforce the caring function of the family, other studies suggest that their de-familializing effect depends on their design. In this context, paternity leave and parental leave containing father quotas can be considered de-familializing because they help women return to work and become economically independent (Lohmann and Zagel 2016; Mathieu 2016).

Moving away from the debate on familism and de-familialization and Leitner's ideal-typical take to care policies diversity, over the years, family policy scholars have employed cluster analysis to inductively detect the presence of geographic "families" of family policy, leading to the identification of *at least* four different typologies (Esping-Andersen 1999; Ferragina and Seeleib-Kaiser 2015; Filetti 2022; Gauthier 2002; Mandel and Shalev 2009; Misra, Budig, and Moller 2007; Thévenon 2011; but see also Ciccia 2017 on hybrid typologies): the Nordic (or social democratic) one, characterized by extensive family policy able to boost women's employment favoring at the same time the work-care reconciliation; the conservative cluster, in which the welfare state supports family care through diverse kinds of allowances and ad hoc working contracts; the Mediterranean cluster, with residual family policy generosity, in which women and families are responsible for caring activities; and a liberal cluster in which care is residual and mostly delegated to families and the market.

One notable shortcoming of the debates on familism/de-familialization and institutional varieties is that they both assume a certain degree of institutional stability. In other words, they do not account for the processes of institutional change that have been taking place in high-income countries in the last decades. Family policy, by contrast, stands out as one of the realms of social protection that expanded most during this period, in a context of otherwise "permanent austerity" (Pierson 2002). This expansion accelerated in Europe in the 1990s driven by the 1997 European Employment Strategy and the 2002 Barcelona targets, to (partly, at least) sustain the shift away from the male-breadwinner model. At the aggregate-level, Daly and Ferragina (2018) identified two macro-phases of reform. During the foundational phase (from the 1960s to the 1980s), familializing policies such as maternity leave and family allowances were strengthened. Since the 1980s, instead, family policy consolidated via the creation of newer, de-familializing, instruments—such as paternity and parental leave and childcare services. Despite the overall family policy expansion, however, the reform process has been heterogeneous across countries (Gauthier 2002).

While existing literature acknowledges the overall expansion of explicit family policy and distinguishes between first-, second-, and third-order change (Ferragina and Seeleib-Kaiser 2015), there is a remarkable absence of country-specific analysis regarding family policy trajectories in the debate, particularly in terms of how these trajectories are shaped by initial family policy

endowments. The concept of path dependency is crucial for understanding this relationship. It suggests that institutional legacies shape policy development, and that the costs of deviating from established paths increase over time—what [Pierson \(2000\)](#) terms “increasing returns” (see also [Mahoney 2000](#)). Path dependency has been widely applied in welfare state research to explain time persistent differences across countries. [Thelen \(2014\)](#) extended this approach to show that welfare state change (and, specifically, labor market policy change) is both path-dependent and regime-consistent within classic welfare varieties ([Esping-Andersen 1990](#)). In other words, countries undergo trajectories of change specific to the three worlds of welfare (social democratic, conservative, and liberal).

This article posits that family policy change can be understood through the prism of familialization and de-familialization, and that the ideal-typical framework [Leitner \(2003\)](#) developed to statically understand cross-country variation can be applied to the study of family policy change. Accordingly, countries are expected to be ranked in relation to their (low or high) degrees of change in familializing/de-familializing family policies, and country-specific trajectories to adhere to Leitner’s four ideal-typical combinations (explicit familialism, optional familialism, implicit familialism and de-familialism) (HP1). Moreover, the article suggests that family policy change is path-dependent, and, in line with [Thelen \(2014\)](#), that there is a correspondence between a country’s family policy regime belonging and its specific trajectory (HP2). Hence, countries with residual family policy in 1990 should pursue more familializing trajectories, while those with extensive family policy already in place in 1990 should undergo de-familializing trajectories.

## Data and methods

### Data

The measure of family policy used in this article builds on previous works investigating family policy diversity and change ([Daly and Ferragina 2018](#); [Lohmann and Zagel 2016](#)). It includes twelve indicators across three decades in which family policy change substantially accelerated (1990–2015) and is based on three dimensions of protection: financial transfers, childcare services, and leave schemes ([Table 2](#)). While remaining parsimonious, this operationalization captures family policy holistically and allows for the unambiguous determination of each policy’s familializing or de-familializing capacity.

Data are drawn from [OECD \(2021\)](#), [Gauthier \(2011\)](#), and the Child Benefits Dataset ([Nelson et al. 2020](#)).<sup>2</sup> All the policies in the financial transfers dimension are deemed to support families in their care responsibilities and are therefore considered familializing. Replacement rates of three typologies of childcare benefits—universal, tax-based,<sup>3</sup> and total—are employed, as well as family allowances and cash benefit spending as a share of GDP. Childcare

**Table 2.** Dimensions, indicators, and their relationship with familialization and de-familialization.

Dimension	Indicator	Familialization/ de-familialization	Year	Source
Financial transfers	Replacement rate of universal childcare benefits (% APW wage)	Familialization	1990–2015	CBD
	Replacement rate of tax-based childcare benefits (% APW wage)	Familialization	1990–2015	CBD
	Replacement rate of total childcare benefits (% APW wage)	Familialization	1990–2015	CBD
Childcare services	Spending on cash benefits (% GDP)	Familialization	1990–2015	OECD
	Spending on family allowances (% GDP)	Familialization	1990–2015	OECD
	% of children aged 0–2 enrolled in formal childcare and pre-school	De-familialization	2005–2015	OECD
Leave schemes	Public spending on ECEC 0–2 (% GDP)	De-familialization	1990–2015	OECD
	Public spending on in-kind benefits (% GDP)	De-familialization	1990–2015	OECD
	Maternity and parental leave available to mothers (length, in weeks)	Familialization	1990–2015	OECD
Leave schemes	Paternity and parental leave available to fathers (length, in weeks)	De-familialization	1990–2015	OECD
	Replacement rate paid during maternity leave (as a percent of female wages in manufacturing)	Familialization	1990–2010	Gauthier
	Maternity and parental leave spending (% GDP)	Familialization	1990–2015	OECD

Note: OECD = OECD (2021); Gauthier = Gauthier (2011); CBD = Nelson et al. (2020).

services are measured through data on the share of children aged 0–2 enrolled in formal childcare and pre-school, and public ECEC and in-kind spending as a share of the GDP. These policies are widely recognized in the literature as de-familializing. Leave schemes are more difficult to frame according to familialization and de-familialization due to their ambiguous effects depending on the design of the various leave policies. The parsimonious operationalization of leave schemes presented in this paper helps to overcome this ambiguity. An increase in the length of maternity and parental leave available to mothers, replacement rates paid during maternity leave, and maternity and parental leave spending is considered as familializing.<sup>4</sup> Conversely, drawing on [Lohmann and Zagel \(2016\)](#) and [Mathieu \(2016\)](#), increases in the length of paternity and parental leave available to fathers are considered as de-familializing. [Table 2](#) summarizes indicators and data sources.

The sample includes twenty-one countries customarily associated to the previously identified social democratic (Denmark, Finland, Norway, and Sweden), conservative (Austria, Belgium, France, Germany, Japan, the Netherlands, and Switzerland), Mediterranean (Greece, Italy, Portugal, and Spain) and liberal (Australia, Canada, Ireland, New Zealand, United Kingdom and United States) family policy varieties. Eastern European countries were excluded from the analysis because their data series are incomplete.

## Methods

To measure and interpret family policy change two composite scores are constructed—namely, the familialization and de-familialization scores. While previous works have used familialization and de-familialization scores to assess cross-country variation at a specific point in time ([Bambra 2004](#); [Kleider 2015](#); for a review of the concept and its application, see [Lohmann and Zagel 2016](#)), the scores presented here instead capture variation across both space *and* time. This is done through the widely used *z*-score standardization method; an approach able to handle values that are either (excessively close to) zero or excessively large, simultaneously accounting for differences in policy scales. The construction of our scores followed three steps.

First, *z*-scores are computed for 1990 and 2015 for each policy indicator and each country, using the 2015 sample mean and standard deviations as reference points. The decision to use 2015 as the reference point, rather than 1990, is driven by methodological considerations, although conceptually both approaches are quite similar. *Z*-scores are, in fact, sensitive to outliers, and using 1990 as the reference point (or not using any reference point at all) could have resulted in an overestimation of policy change in countries with residual family policy in 1990 that significantly expanded family policy over time. For example, in countries such as Japan that noticeably expanded its family policy package starting from very residual levels, any increase in family policy generosity would lead to disproportionately high *z*-scores when the 1990 is used as reference point. Using 2015 as the reference reduces the influence of outliers,

thus avoiding distorted analyses. As argued, using 2015 or 1990 as reference point is conceptually similar: instead of measuring how far countries have moved compared to their own values and the sample distribution in 1990, the 2015 reference point assesses the extent to which countries have converged toward the more generous family policy landscape that existed in 2015 compared to 1990.

Second, after computing the 1990 and 2015 z-scores, the 1990 z-score is subtracted from the 2015 z-score. This comparison further isolates the effects of outliers and captures the depth and characteristics of family policy change: a positive difference indicates that the policy has expanded, while a negative difference suggests a contraction.

Third, the z-scores for familializing and de-familializing policies respectively are averaged up to obtain country-specific familialization and de-familialization scores. To systematically assign a country to a trajectory, these country-specific scores are compared to the sample average familialization and de-familialization scores (see the [Online Technical Appendix](#) for details on the score computation).

## Four trajectories of family policy change

Consistent with prior research ([Daly and Ferragina 2018](#); [Ferragina 2019](#); [Ferragina and Seeleib-Kaiser 2015](#); [Gauthier 2002](#)), the analysis shows that, on average, high-income countries expanded family policy over three decades ([Supplementary Tables 2A–5A](#)). Family policy expansion involved both familializing and de-familializing policies—with de-familializing policies experiencing a more conspicuous increase (the z-scores are 0.75 and 0.21, respectively).

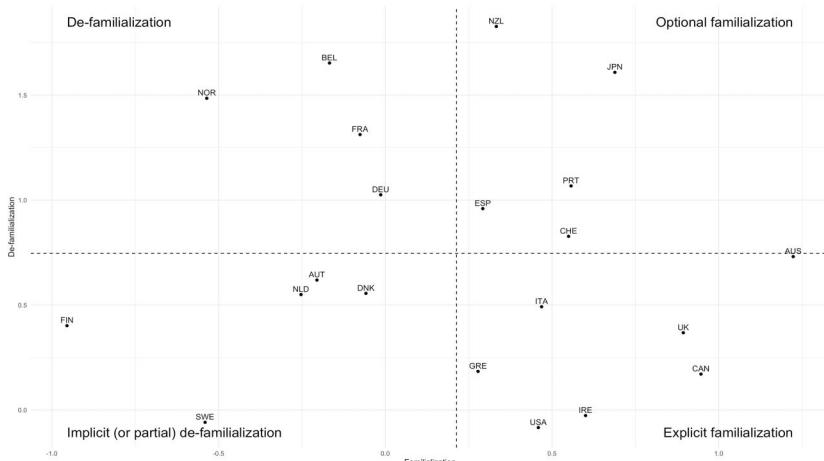
The analysis also suggests that trajectories of family policy change across countries can be interpreted through Leitner's ideal-typical "varieties of familialism" (HP1). Although this framework was originally designed to describe cross-country variation at a specific point in time, it captures combinations of low/high familializing and de-familializing policies, offering valuable insights into the dynamics of family policy transformations. Accordingly, an explicit familialization, an optional familialization, and a de-familialization trajectory are identified. However, Leitner's "implicit familialism" was replaced with "implicit (or partial) de-familialization," as the findings show evidence of the retrenchment of familializing policies, alongside a mild expansion of de-familializing ones, whereas "implicit familialism" implies weak levels of both policy types ([Table 3](#)).

Australia, Canada, Greece, Ireland, Italy, the United Kingdom, and the United States underwent an "explicit familialization" trajectory; Japan, New Zealand, Portugal, Spain, and Switzerland pursued "optional familialization"; Austria, Denmark, Finland, the Netherlands, and Sweden followed "implicit (or partial) de-familialization"; and Belgium, France, Germany, and Norway pursued "de-familialization" ([fig. 1](#); [Supplementary Tables 5A and 6A](#)).

**Table 3.** Four different trajectories combining higher- or lower-than-average changes in familializing and de-familializing policies.

De-familialization	Optional familialization
Higher-than-average expansion of de-familializing policies, retrenchment of familializing policies	Higher-than-average expansion of both familializing and de-familializing policies (in countries with previously residual family policy)
Implicit (or partial) de-familialization Retrenchment of familializing policies, moderate expansion (or moderate retrenchment) of de-familializing policies	Explicit familialization Expansion of familializing policies higher than the average, expansion (or negligible retrenchment) of de-familializing policies

Source: Adapted from [Leitner \(2003\)](#).



**Figure 1.** Familialization and de-familialization scores and countries' trajectories of family policy change.

Note: Author's elaboration on [OECD \(2021\)](#), [Gauthier \(2011\)](#), and [Nelson et al. \(2020\)](#). Dashed lines are the sample averages of the familialization and de-familialization scores. For data limitations, refer to the notes in [Supplementary Tables 3A and 4A](#).

### Explicit familialization

Countries that experienced a higher-than-average expansion of familializing policies and a lower-than-average expansion (or negligible retrenchment) of de-familializing policies underwent a trajectory of explicit familialization.

In explicit familialization, rather than being considered as a collective good (Daly 2002, 2011), care responsibilities are mostly delegated to families and the market through paid carers; consequently, mothers are often held accountable for caring activities. In these countries, paternity leave and childcare services have been only marginally expanded, and start from low levels. By contrast, familializing leave schemes (except for maternity leave replacement rates) and financial transfers experienced more conspicuous increases in generosity and spending (Supplementary Table 6A). This shift leads to a greater involvement of mothers and care workers in childcare, perpetuating gender inequalities.

Countries in this group belong to the liberal (Australia, Canada, Ireland, United Kingdom, and United States) and Mediterranean (Greece and Italy) family policy varieties, showing a clear correspondence between family policy regime type and this specific trajectory (HP2). However, although formally assigned to same trajectory, family policy change differed significantly across regime types. On average, the two Mediterranean countries witnessed increases of similar magnitude in both familializing and de-familializing policies, whereas the five liberal countries increased familializing policies significantly more than de-familializing ones (Supplementary Table 7A). Within familializing policies, countries in both regime types expanded maternity leave length and spending to a similar extent, but liberal countries saw a substantially higher increase in replacement rates for childcare benefits. Within de-familializing policies, Mediterranean countries increased enrolment rates in the 0–2 age cohort (while liberal countries saw a decrease) and expanded ECEC spending to a greater extent. In contrast, liberal countries increased paternity leave length and in-kind spending more than their Mediterranean counterparts. Moving beyond regime-level differences and examining variation at the country-level, there are at least two distinct modalities of family policy change.

The first includes Ireland and the United States, which are the only two countries of the group with (slightly) negative de-familialization scores and above-average familialization scores (fig. 1). In both countries, the negative de-familialization scores are driven by the null  $z$ -scores for paternity and parental leave available to fathers and by the strongly negative  $z$ -scores for enrollment rates in the 0–2 age cohort ( $-1.49$  and  $-0.73$ , respectively).<sup>5</sup>  $Z$ -scores for in-kind spending are instead positive in both countries, with  $z$ -scores for ECEC spending being positive but below the sample average in Ireland and negative in United States ( $-0.16$ ). The United States, exceptionally, is the only country of the sample that overall did not strengthen neither de-familializing or familializing leave schemes—resulting in null  $z$ -scores for the indicators in this dimension<sup>6</sup> (Kameran and Kahn 1997; Woods 2018). Ireland, on the other hand, expanded maternity leave in terms of both generosity (length and replacement rates) and spending. In the financial transfers dimension, the two countries saw a noticeable expansion of childcare benefits replacement rates, with the United States displaying a null  $z$ -score for universal childcare benefits replacement rates and negative  $z$ -scores for cash benefits spending. Ireland, on

the other hand, increased spending on family allowances (0.31), while the United States decreased it (−0.29).

The second group includes Canada and the United Kingdom, both of which expanded familializing policies more than de-familializing ones (Daly 2010; Kamerman and Kahn 1997; Woods 2018). In these countries, familializing leave schemes were expanded in both duration and spending, contrary to maternal leave replacement rates, which show negative  $z$ -scores. Similarly, all the policies in the financial transfers dimension (except for universal childcare benefits replacement rates in the United Kingdom) expanded over the observed period. The mild expansion of de-familializing policies was mainly driven by the increase of ECEC and in-kind benefits spending levels. In the United Kingdom, enrollment rates for the 0–2 age cohort decreased, and paternal and parental leave duration increased only slightly (in the United Kingdom) or not at all (in Canada).

Australia and Greece, instead, underwent two spectacularly different trajectories. In Australia, the expansion of de-familializing policies is close to the sample average, while familializing policies expanded significantly above average (Brennan 2007). For this reason, the country is placed at the far-right of [figure 1](#), bordering the optional familialization quadrant. Familializing leave schemes were expanded over twenty-five-years in both the duration and spending,<sup>7</sup> and all the indicators of the financial transfers dimension—apart from universal childcare benefits replacement rates, which were retrenched by −1.03—witnessed a spectacular expansion. De-familializing policies, though moderate, expanded the most within the explicit familialism group, primarily driven by increases in spending levels—which are well above the sample average. Conversely, in Greece, the expansion of familializing policies is similar in magnitude to the group average, while de-familializing policies expanded far less (Papadopoulos and Roumpakis 2013). This places Greece more at the bottom and toward center of [figure 1](#), bordering the implicit de-familialization quadrant.  $Z$ -scores for paternity leave length and enrolment rates for the 0–2 cohort are, in fact, substantially null. In contrast, familialist leave policies, cash benefits, and family allowances spending were instead expanded comparatively more, with all showing higher-than-average  $z$ -scores.

Italy, along with Spain (optional familialization), Denmark (implicit (or partial) de-familialization), and Germany (de-familialization), experienced expansion comparable to the sample average, placing it closer to the center of [figure 1](#) (León et al. 2021; Naldini and Jurado 2013; see also Estévez-Abe and Naldini 2016). The country expanded familializing leave schemes (in particular maternity and parental leave spending), as well as generosity and spending levels in the financial transfers dimension<sup>8</sup>—with cash benefits spending showing among the highest increases of the sample. It only mildly expanded de-familializing policies (and starting from low levels in 1990), with only ECEC spending exceeding the sample average  $z$ -score.

### Optional familialization

Countries that underwent a higher-than-average expansion of both familializing and de-familializing policies underwent a trajectory of “optional familialization.” Although the expansion of de-familializing policies was greater than that of familializing ones—contributing to a narrowing of the gap between the two—these changes occurred in traditionally familialist (or market-based) countries, where the male-breadwinner was dominant and mothers or care workers were the main providers of care. Moreover, by 2015, de-familializing policy generosity remained low in absolute terms (Supplementary Table 2A). Therefore, despite three decades of policy change having provided families with more options to ease the caregiving burden, care remains significantly familialized and continues to be disproportionately skewed toward mothers.

These countries span three different regime types—conservative (Switzerland and Japan), Mediterranean (Spain and Portugal), and liberal (New Zealand)—making this trajectory somewhat hybrid in nature. As a result, a clear correspondence between regime type and trajectory cannot be established, and the second hypothesis cannot be confirmed. Nonetheless, patterns of family policy change within this trajectory appear more internally consistent than in the previous one. Across all three regime types, the expansion of de-familializing policies was significantly greater than that of familializing ones, and was primarily driven by broad-based expansions in all de-familializing indicators—except for paternity leave length in New Zealand. Familializing policies witnessed increases in maternity leave length, replacement rates, and spending, although considerable variation emerged in childcare benefit replacement rates (Supplementary Table 7A). Conservative and Mediterranean countries also increased spending on cash benefits and family allowances (with conservative countries showing greater expansion).

Portugal, Spain, and Switzerland display similar and close to the sample average familialization and de-familialization scores, placing them together in figure 1 toward the center. The three countries expanded all de-familializing policies (Estévez-Abe and Naldini 2016; Wall and Escobedo 2009), with the  $z$ -scores for the duration of paternity and parental leave reserved to fathers in Portugal, and enrolment rates in Spain being among the highest of the sample. Switzerland did not expand paternity leave duration but shows highly positive  $z$ -scores for childcare services. Familializing leave schemes were expanded in all the three countries, but in different ways. While Switzerland increased maternity leave length, replacement rates, and spending, Portugal only expanded length and spending, leaving replacement rates unchanged. Spain expanded the replacement rate but decreased spending, while leaving duration unchanged. All three countries also expanded total childcare benefits replacement rates, cash benefits, and family allowances spending, while universal childcare benefits replacement rates were substantially retrenched.<sup>9</sup>

New Zealand and Japan expanded de-familializing policies significantly more compared with familializing ones, positioning them in the top-center of figure 1 (Fleckenstein and Lee 2017; Kamerman and Kahn 1997; Seeleib-Kaiser and Toivonen 2011). New Zealand has the highest de-familialization score of the sample, driven by a remarkable increase in enrolment rates for the 0–2 age cohort and spending levels, all more than three times higher than the sample average.<sup>10</sup> Japan, instead, only mildly expanded childcare services, but experienced an unparalleled extension of the duration of paternity leave length, with a *z*-score of 4.06 (the sample average is 0.64). The two countries reformed familializing leave schemes similarly, expanding both length and spending while keeping generosity constant, but underwent quite different changes in cash benefits. While Japan expanded childcare benefits replacement rates<sup>11</sup> and increased spending levels, in New Zealand spending levels decreased overall, though tax-based and total childcare benefits replacement rates increased.

### **Implicit (or partial) de-familialization**

Countries that underwent a retrenchment of familializing policies and a mild expansion (or mild retrenchment) of de-familializing policies followed a trajectory of “implicit (or partial) de-familialization.” Unlike Leitner (2003), we do not refer to this trajectory as “implicit familialization,” as this would imply a modest expansion of both policy types, thereby implicitly reinforcing the family’s role in caregiving, particularly mothers. The overall expansion of de-familializing policies, albeit modest, coupled with the retrenchment of familializing ones (with the exception of maternity leave length) (Supplementary Table 6A), thus implicitly—or partially—sustains the shift away from the male-breadwinner model. The fact that this shift occurred predominantly in countries that already had generous family policy in 1990 (Supplementary Table 2A) suggests a further step toward a more gender-equal redistribution of care work.

Countries in this group are typically associated with the conservative (Austria and the Netherlands) and social democratic (Denmark, Finland, and Sweden) family policy varieties. Therefore, there is a correspondence between the countries’ regime types and this trajectory. As in the optional familialization trajectory, there is relatively high internal consistency, with the two groups displaying a similar dynamic of decreasing familialization and increasing de-familialization (Supplementary Table 7A). The retrenchment of familializing policies was, however, more pronounced in social democratic countries, while the expansion of de-familializing policies was stronger in conservative ones. Minor differences remain: in conservative countries there was no significant change in maternity leave length or replacement rates, while tax-based benefit replacement rates increased—driven primarily by Austria. In contrast, social democratic countries saw an increase in maternity leave length. The expansion of de-familializing policies in the two groups was

predominantly driven by the increases of enrolment rates, which were higher in conservative countries. ECEC spending decreased overall in social democratic countries and significantly increased in conservative ones; however, the decline in the former is largely attributable to Sweden, as shown below.

Austria, Denmark, and the Netherlands scored similarly in both de-familialization and familialization, with de-familialization *z*-scores being slightly below the sample average (fig. 1; [Abrahamson and Wehner 2008](#); [Blum 2014](#); [Lewis et al. 2008](#)). However, changes in de-familializing policies vary significantly across the three countries. Austria expanded the duration of paternity leave above the average, alongside a more moderate expansion of childcare services. Denmark and the Netherlands, on the other hand, made no changes in their de-familializing leave schemes (with *z*-scores that are substantially null), and the positive de-familialization scores are mainly driven by the expansion of childcare services, both enrollment and spending.<sup>12</sup> Moreover, while Austria and the Netherlands kept the regulation of familializing leave schemes unchanged, they decreased (Austria) and increased (the Netherlands) the associated spending. Contextually, in Denmark maternity leave length increased noticeably, but replacement rates decreased, despite stable spending levels. All the three countries decreased spending levels in the financial transfers dimension, with contrasting changes in childcare benefit replacement rates. Austria reduced the universal component, but expanded the tax-based and the total ones. Denmark slightly increased all three replacement rates, while the Netherlands decreased the universal and total replacement rates, leaving the tax-based replacement rate unchanged at zero ([Supplementary Table 2A](#)).

Finland and Sweden occupy a more peripheral position in the plot, standing out as the two countries—along with Norway (which, however, experienced a sustained expansion of de-familializing policies)—that retrenched familializing policies the most ([Rønsen and Sundström 2002](#); [Wells and Bergnehr 2014](#)), with the exception of Finland’s maternity leave duration and Sweden’s maternity leave replacement rates and tax-based childcare benefits, which remained relatively stable over time. Sweden is the only country of our sample to display negative scores for both familialization and de-familialization. In contrast to Finland, the country retrenched all de-familializing policies except the length of paternity and parental leave available to fathers (which shows a 0.67 score, against a 0.64 sample average). However, because Sweden was one of the countries with the most comprehensive family policy in 1990, its protection levels remained relatively high in 2015 ([Supplementary Table 2A](#)).

## De-familialization

Finally, countries that experienced a higher-than-average expansion of de-familializing policies alongside a retrenchment of familializing ones underwent a trajectory of de-familialization. From a gender perspective, this implies that

such countries have enhanced their emancipatory capacities. This type of change has enabled mothers to reduce their involvement in childcare and has contributed to the institutionalization of a more balanced redistribution of care responsibilities within households. Paraphrasing [McLaughlin and Glendinning \(1994\)](#), this shift increases the potential for independence from patriarchal family structures, easing the care burden traditionally placed on mothers.

Countries within this trajectory are associated with both the conservative (Belgium, France, and Germany) and the social democratic (Norway) family policy varieties ([Daly and Scheiwe 2010](#); [Ellingsæter 2003](#); [Fleckenstein 2011](#); [Lewis et al. 2008](#); see also [Seeleib-Kaiser and Toivonen 2011](#)). Like the explicit familialization and implicit (or partial) de-familialization trajectories, the de-familialization trajectory also aligns with specific family policy regimes. This result also confirms [Fleckenstein \(2011\)](#) “path-deviating” family policy change argument for the case of Germany and extends it to most other conservative countries: despite being historically committed to the male-breadwinner model, conservative countries have largely pursued de-familializing trajectories (whether partial or not). Family policy change across the two regime types has been homogeneous in terms of overall direction, but slightly different in magnitude. The retrenchment of familializing policies was more pronounced in Norway, and less so in conservative countries. A similar pattern applies to de-familializing policies, which expanded more significantly in Norway than in the conservative countries on average ([Supplementary Table 7A](#)).

France scored the second highest *z*-score for the length of paternity and parental leave available to fathers, while Belgium had the highest *z*-scores for ECEC and in-kind spending ([Supplementary Table 6A](#)). Familializing leave policies expanded in Belgium and Norway, while Germany decreased maternity leave length and France reduced maternity and parental leave spending. In addition, all countries in this group saw a retrenchment of financial transfers, although there were increases in tax-based childcare benefits replacement rates—Germany had the highest in the sample, while Belgium’s score is significantly below—and in cash benefit spending in France.

## Discussion and conclusion

Family policy scholarship has long recognized the heterogeneity of change across high-income countries in recent decades. Yet, to date, no country-specific analysis of family policy trajectories has been available, nor an examination of how these trajectories relate to classic family policy typologies. This study fills this gap by offering a new and systematic analysis of trajectories of family policy change across twenty-one high-income countries and three decades of sustained institutional transformations (1990–2015).

The analysis presented in this article is grounded in the twin concepts of “familialization” and “de-familialization” from feminist social policy scholarship, understood here primarily in their social—rather than economic—dimension. These provide a unique lens for understanding how welfare state change contributes to moderating (or reinforcing) gender inequalities in the redistribution of care responsibilities, and in the labor market. Moreover, bridging classic typologies with accounts of change through the concept of path-dependency helps shed light on the persistence of institutional models, offering insights into broader dynamics of welfare state transformation. The article shows also that policy change can be analyzed in a systematic and comparative manner using *z*-scores, which provide information both in absolute terms—by capturing the magnitude of policy change within each country—and in relative terms, by ranking countries with respect to one another.

To assess this, the proposed family policy measure incorporates the concepts of “money, services, and time” (Kameran and Kahn 1994) across twelve indicators and three dimensions—namely, financial transfers, childcare benefits, and leave schemes. To capture change, and building on the (de)familialization debate, policies were assigned to either familialization or de-familialization categories and composite scores were constructed for each category.

The paper suggests that Leitner’s (2003) four ideal-typical “varieties of familialism” (explicit familialism, optional familialism, implicit familialism, and de-familialism), originally ideated to capture static cross-country differences, can also help understand variation in family policies over time (HP1). The analysis identifies four distinct trajectories of family policy change, mirroring Leitner’s typologies: explicit familialization, optional familialization, implicit (or partial) de-familialization, and de-familialization. Explicit familialization involves a greater expansion of familializing policies than de-familializing policies, reinforcing gender inequalities. Optional familialization combines higher-than-average expansion in both policy types and mainly occurred in countries with minimal family policy in 1990. Despite the overall family policy expansion, care remains skewed toward mothers and care workers. Implicit (or partial) de-familialization involves the retrenchment of familializing policies alongside the mild expansion (or mild retrenchment, as in the case of Sweden) of de-familializing policies. Family policy change in this case suggests a more balanced redistribution of care responsibilities, with positive implications for gender inequalities. Finally, de-familialization involves the expansion of de-familializing policies and the retrenchment of familializing ones, significantly reducing the involvement of families and mothers in childcare.

Moreover, the study shows that there is a correspondence between countries’ family policy regimes and their specific trajectories of change (HP2). Or, to put it otherwise, that in the case of family policy, institutional legacies heavily shaped policy development. At one extreme, countries with residual family policy in 1990 largely increased their familialization levels.

Mediterranean (Greece and Italy) and liberal (Australia, Canada, Ireland, United Kingdom, and United States) countries only, in fact, pursued explicit familialization. At the other extreme, social democratic countries, that already had generous family policies in 1990, underwent de-familializing family policy changes. Among these, Norway followed de-familialization, while Denmark, Finland, and Sweden followed implicit de-familialization. Interestingly, conservative countries, where the male-breadwinner model has historically been ideologically dominant, largely underwent de-familializing trajectories as well, with Austria and the Netherlands pursuing implicit de-familialization, whereas Belgium, France, and Germany followed de-familialization. This result confirms previous findings about Germany's "path-deviating" trajectory of family policy change (Fleckenstein 2011) and extends it to the majority of other countries in this group. The only trajectory not clearly linked to any family policy typology is optional familialization. This stands out as a hybrid path, incorporating countries from conservative (Japan and Switzerland), Mediterranean (Portugal and Spain), and liberal (New Zealand) regimes that all significantly expanded their family policy packages despite being traditionally familialist (or market-based).

This article has, however, both methodological and substantive limitations. First, due to the lack of comparable data for all country-years, the analysis is limited to the period up to 2015. While most indicators are available from the OECD for more recent years, the Gauthier database ends in 2010 and the Child Benefit Dataset in 2015. The year 2015 was chosen to strike a balance between data availability and analytical relevance, allowing for the observation of family policy change during a period of sustained transformation. This, however, comes at the cost of overlooking reforms implemented after 2015. Nevertheless, given the path-dependent nature of family policy change discussed throughout the article, and the additive structure of the familialization and de-familialization scores—which average z-scores across multiple indicators—the overall country rankings should not be heavily affected. Second, the analysis focuses on policies implemented and administered at the national or federal level, which may underestimate important subnational variations. This is particularly relevant for federal countries such as Canada—where Quebec has a different family policy framework—as well as the United States. Third, data on paternity leave uptake were not included due to the limited availability across all country-years. Although provisions in many countries may appear generous, actual uptake often remains low (as in France, see Périvier and Verdugo 2021). Fourth, the analysis does not account for flexible or nonstandard forms of parental benefits use—for instance, Sweden's recent reform allowing grandparents to use part of the parental benefits entitlement (Swedish Social Insurance Agency 2025).

Finally, the empirical strategy employed in this study does not allow for a causal explanation of why family policy change is largely path dependent, unlike the more radical processes of institutional transformations observed in other areas of the welfare state—namely, labor market and pension policies

(see [Ferragina and Arrigoni 2021](#) and [Filetti 2022](#)). This divergence may reflect the central role of labor market and pension reforms as key instruments for addressing macroeconomic imbalances during turbulent times. Historical process-tracing of specific case studies might help to capture the complex interplay between endogenous (such as politics, culture, or the macroeconomic context) and exogenous (i.e. international pressures for reforms) factors driving both family policy and labor market change, and could help uncover the mechanisms behind these divergent paths. This remains a task for future scholarship.

## Notes

1. Among other social policy realms, such as education or healthcare (see [Busemeyer and Nikolai 2010](#) and [Bambra 2005](#); for an up-to-date review, see [Ferragina and Filetti 2024](#)).
2. Due to the high number of missing values, had to be manually imputed for specific indicators and years (see [Supplementary Table 1A](#)).
3. This indicator is the sum of tax allowance, tax credit, and tax rebate replacement rates (see [Daly and Ferragina 2018](#)).
4. The “effective parental leave” measure implemented by [Saraceno and Keck \(2010\)](#) and [Plantenga et al. \(2007\)](#) was considered, which weights the length of maternity and parental leave available to mothers by the replacement rate. However, data on replacement rates for paternity and parental leave available to fathers was not available. To maintain consistency in the proposed measure, maternity leave replacement rates and length were analyzed separately.
5. However, it is worth pointing out that, due to missing values, the enrollment rates in the 0–2 age cohort z-scores in Ireland and the United States might be biased. In the first case, the z-score is computed only with reference to the 2015, as data for 1990 are missing. In the second, the z-score refers to 1990 only, as data for 2015 are missing. For more detail on data limitations, see the note in [Supplementary Table 5A](#).
6. But data on maternity leave spending are missing.
7. But maternity leave replacement rate displays a zero z-score.
8. Universal childcare benefits replacement rates and spending on family allowances are an exception, as they display null (childcare benefits replacement rates) and negative (family allowances spending) z-scores.
9. Switzerland displays a null z-score for universal childcare benefits replacement rate, while Portugal an almost-null family allowances spending z-score ( $-0.05$ ).
10. However, the country did not expand the duration of paternity and parental leave available to fathers (the z-score for this indicator is zero).
11. Except for the replacement rates for tax-based childcare benefits.
12. However, the score for enrollment rates in the 0–2 cohort in Denmark and the Netherlands might be overestimated, as data for 1990 are missing and the z-scores are computed on 2015 only.

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## Supplementary material

Supplementary material is available at *[Social Politics]* online.

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## Data availability

The datasets were derived from sources in the public domain:

- OECD Family Database. Available at: <https://www.oecd.org/els/family/data-base.htm>
- Comparative Family Policy Database, Version 3 [Computer File]. Available at: <https://www.demogr.mpg.de/cgi-bin/databases/FamPolDB/index.plx>
- The Social Policy Indicators (SPIN) Database. Available at: <https://www.suse/social-policy-indicators-database/data>

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