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Take it or leave it: how maternal leave duration affects societal perceptions of women in Germany and Israel

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ABSTRACT

This research investigates how the duration of parental leave taken by working mothers influences 'ideal worker' and 'good mother' norms perceptions in two distinct cultural and policy contexts: Germany ($N = 262$; main activity: 65.9% university students, 26.7% paid work) and Israel ($N = 504$; main activity: 100% university students, of whom 79.0% also engaged in paid work). In experimental online studies, participants evaluated a fictitious mother based on a vignette. Leave length was experimentally manipulated across four conditions: 4, 6, 12, and 36 months (the latter only in Germany). The results yielded similar trends in both countries. Mothers are more likely to be viewed as better parents if they take the longest leave offered, and as better workers if they take short periods of leave. Nevertheless, our results show that in both countries, the decision to take parental leave of any given length does not substantially harm evaluations toward working mothers.

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Introduction

Parental leave policies provide crucial support for working mothers during the transition to parenthood, offering essential time for physical recovery, bonding with the newborn, and adapting to new caregiving responsibilities. More broadly, research consistently shows that by enabling women to maintain their paid labor force participation, paid parental leave promotes gender equality in the workplace and contributes to overall economic stability (Earle et al., 2025).

Working mothers must navigate a complex landscape of normative expectations, where any choice carries potential benefits and penalties in both the work and family spheres. In the workplace, women are expected to demonstrate unwavering commitment and competence as 'ideal workers' (Acker, 1990), a norm historically modeled on the male breadwinner that assumes employees devote themselves fully to their jobs, work long hours, and sustain uninterrupted careers unencumbered by caregiving duties. Embracing

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this image is very rewarding, particularly for people in professional and managerial jobs, as advancement and other rewards accrue to those perceived to best embody this image (Reid, 2015). At home, women are still expected to be the primary caregivers. They are expected to embody the role of ‘good mothers’ by adhering to the ideology of ‘intensive motherhood’ (Hays, 1996), which prescribes a selfless, time-consuming devotion to children, where maternal competence and worth are measured by a mother’s total investment in her children’s well-being (Morgenroth & Heilman, 2017; Petts et al., 2023). These normative constructs create a double bind for working mothers. Conforming to the ‘ideal worker’ norm may lead to perceptions of deficiency as a mother, while conforming to the ‘good mother’ norm may lead to perceptions of inadequate commitment at work (Morgenroth & Heilman, 2017). Working mothers may not use the full amount of leave they are entitled to for fear of stigma and penalties (Petts et al., 2022), such as lower work-related evaluations (Morgenroth & Heilman, 2017).

While some studies have investigated the effects of maternal leave choices, most have been conducted in the United States (e.g. Petts et al., 2023, 2025), which has no national parental leave policies. Outside the United States, permitted leave durations vary widely between countries, ranging from a few weeks to several years (Dobrotic et al., 2025). While there are several comparative studies that have examined parental leave and its association with gender equality (e.g. Kaufman, 2020), to our knowledge, no experimental studies with a cross-national focus have examined whether cultural variations, combined with specific national policies influence the relationship between maternal leave length and societal perceptions of the ‘ideal worker’ and ‘good mother’ norms. To address this gap, we capture societal-level perceptions and deviations from societal norms by asking participants to indicate how they believed others in their society would assess the woman described in the vignette they read. Understanding these societal-level perceptions is essential, as they can shape women’s career trajectories, workplace treatment, and societal attitudes toward working mothers (Correll et al., 2007).

The present research addresses this gap, examining how women’s decisions regarding the duration of maternal leave affect ‘ideal worker’ and ‘good mother’ norms perceptions in two distinct socio-cultural and policy contexts: Germany and Israel. Specifically, we analyzed perceptions of societal norms toward women who take leaves of varying lengths (4, 6, 12, and 36 months, with the latter only in Germany), using online samples. Germany and Israel present an interesting comparative case, as they differ significantly in their leave policies and work – family integration patterns.

Germany offers one of the longest legally protected parental leave periods in Europe (up to 3 years), reflecting its historically conservative approach to maternal employment and childcare (Gangl & Ziefle, 2015). Israel provides shorter leave periods (up to 1 year) (Perez-Vaisvidovsky, 2018).¹ Despite its modern economy and western style of living, Israeli society is known for its ‘familialism’ (e.g. Fogiel-Bijaoui, 2002). Family and motherhood remain central social anchors and expectations at both the individual and collective levels, reflected in Israel’s relatively high rates of marriage and fertility compared to other industrialized countries, including Germany (see Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development [OECD], 2025). Within this cultural framework, women’s paid employment in Israel is frequently viewed as a secondary contribution to the household budget (Fogiel-Bijaoui, 2002). At the same time, Israel exhibits notably high levels of female labor force participation, and studies show that Israeli mothers of preschool-aged children are

more likely to be employed than their counterparts in many other industrialized countries (Mandel & Semyonov, 2006). In Israel, there are only small differences in maternal employment rates by the age of the youngest child (0–2 years: 75.1%, 3–5 years: 76.4%). In Germany, by contrast, employment rates differ considerably by the age of the youngest child and are much lower among mothers of a youngest child aged 0 to 2 years (61.7%) compared to mothers of a youngest child aged 3 to 5 years (74.1%; OECD, 2025).

The societal perception of working mothers in Germany has been strongly shaped by the traditional male breadwinner/female homemaker model, which emphasizes mothers as primarily responsible for childcare. Although policies supporting working mothers have advanced, normative support for maternal employment remains only moderate. Ambivalent institutional incentive structures and societal ideals contribute to mothers interrupting and reducing their employment for their children. A male breadwinner/female part-time worker model has become the dominant family model (Trappe et al., 2015). Whereas maternal part-time work is particularly common and socially accepted in Germany, more than two-thirds of all employed mothers in Israel do work full-time (OECD, 2025). Because of these differences, the expectations placed on mothers in terms of the ‘ideal worker’ and ‘good mother’ norms should vary in their magnitude in these contexts.

We propose two hypotheses regarding the relationship between chosen leave duration and societal perceptions of leave-taking mothers in the work and family domains. First, in the family domain, in both countries, we expect that mothers who take longer leaves will be more likely to be viewed as better parents (H1). Second, in the work domain, in both countries, we anticipate that mothers who take shorter leaves will be more likely to be viewed as better workers (H2). We do not formulate specific hypotheses regarding the cross-country comparison but explore how the two policy and cultural contexts shape the effects of leave duration on perceptions of societal norms toward working mothers.

Method

We conducted online studies separately in Germany and Israel using an experimental vignette methodology with between-subjects designs to examine how leave duration influences societal perceptions of women in both the work and family domains. We received ethics approval from The Open University of Israel and RWTH Aachen Research Ethics Boards (protocol numbers: Faculty 18-4-23 and 2023_05_FB7_RWTH Aachen). Participants provided informed consent. The samples primarily consists of university students and other convenience groups. The analyses are based on 262 participants in Germany (75.6% women, 22.5% men, 1.9% other/prefer not to say; main activity: 65.9% students, 26.7% paid work; average age: 27.3 years, $SD = 13.1$) and 504 participants in Israel (61.2% women, 38.6% men, 0.2% other/prefer not to say; main activity: 100% students, of whom 79.0% also engaged in paid work; average age: 28.3 years, $SD = 8.6$). Each participant was presented with a vignette describing a fictitious woman who became mother, took parental leave and then returned to work, with the leave duration manipulated across four conditions: 4, 6, 12, and 36 months (the latter only in Germany). Each condition detailed the leave length and its related financial implications, based on the regulations in the relevant country. Participants then filled in a questionnaire containing the study measures. We report all manipulations and measures in the online supplement.

Measures

Dependent variables

Each of the two variables was measured using 6 items assessing perceived conformity, based on Morgenroth and Heilman (2017). Both scales included items relating to commitment and competence. Sample items: 'She is family-oriented' ('good mother' norm); 'She is career-oriented' ('ideal worker' norm). To capture perceptions on a societal level, participants were instructed to indicate how they thought other people in society would respond to each item, on a scale from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). Higher ratings reflect the perception that the woman fulfills the respective societal norm, while lower ratings reflect the perception that she deviates from it.

In Germany, all 262 participants filled in both sets of measures (order randomized between participants, i.e. either the items measuring 'good mother' or 'ideal worker' norm perceptions were presented first.) In Israel, respondents were randomly assigned to answer questions about either the 'good mother' norm ($n = 248$) or the 'ideal worker' norm ($n = 256$).

Cronbach's alpha for the 'good mother' norm perceptions scale was .80 for both countries, indicating satisfactory reliability. Reliability analyses of the work-related items showed that internal consistency for both the German and Israeli data was better when the reversed item 'Her job is not a high priority for her' was excluded ($\alpha_{\text{Germany}} = .83$ vs. .86; $\alpha_{\text{Israel}} = .78$ vs. .84). We therefore dropped this item, leaving 5 items in the 'ideal worker' norm perceptions scale.

Covariate

Participants' gender-role attitudes (GRA) were considered as a covariate. These attitudes were measured with 5 items from the International Social Survey Programme (Braun, 1999). Items were rated from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree), with higher values representing more traditional attitudes (Germany: $\alpha = .75$, $M = 1.7$, $SD = 0.7$; Israel: $\alpha = .71$, $M = 2.3$, $SD = 0.7$).

Analytical strategy

We calculated one-factor analyses of variance (ANOVA) for the dependent variables separately for the German and Israeli data. Levene's tests showed that equal variances could be assumed for all ANOVAs except the one testing the impact of length of leave on 'good mother' norm perceptions in Germany ($p < .001$). Post-hoc analyses (Bonferroni post-hoc analysis when variance homogeneity was assumed, Games-Howell post-hoc analysis when not) were used to test differences in perceptions between leave conditions.

In ancillary analyses, we tested whether the results were comparable when participants' GRA were considered as covariates. In exploratory analyses, we further examined whether societal norm perceptions vary by participants' GRA and tested interactions effects between leave conditions and GRA.

Results

The mean values for 'good mother' and 'ideal worker' norm perceptions across leave conditions in each country are displayed in Table 1 and Figures 1 and 2. Simple calculations

Table 1. Means and standard deviations for the dependent variables, ANOVA and post-hoc test results.

Evaluation Dimensions	Parental Leave Condition (Months of Leave)								F	df	p	η^2_p
	4		6		12		36					
	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD				
'Good mother' norm perceptions – Germany	3.6 _a	0.8	3.5 _a	0.8	3.8 _a	0.6	4.1 _b	0.5	10.2 ¹	3, 140.0	<.001	.08
'Good mother' norm perceptions – Israel	3.9 _a	0.6	4.1 _{a, b}	0.5	4.3 _b	0.6	–	–	5.8	2, 245	.002	.05
'Ideal worker' norm perceptions – Germany	3.9 _a	0.7	3.9 _a	0.7	3.6 _{a, b}	0.8	3.3 _b	0.8	8.0	3, 258	<.001	.09
'Ideal worker' norm perceptions – Israel	3.8 _a	0.6	3.7 _{a, b}	0.7	3.6 _b	0.7	-	-	2.7	2, 253	.035	.02

Note. One-tailed *p* values. Means in the same row that do not share the same subscript (e.g. a) differ at *p* < 0.05 based on post-hoc tests. ¹Welch *F*.

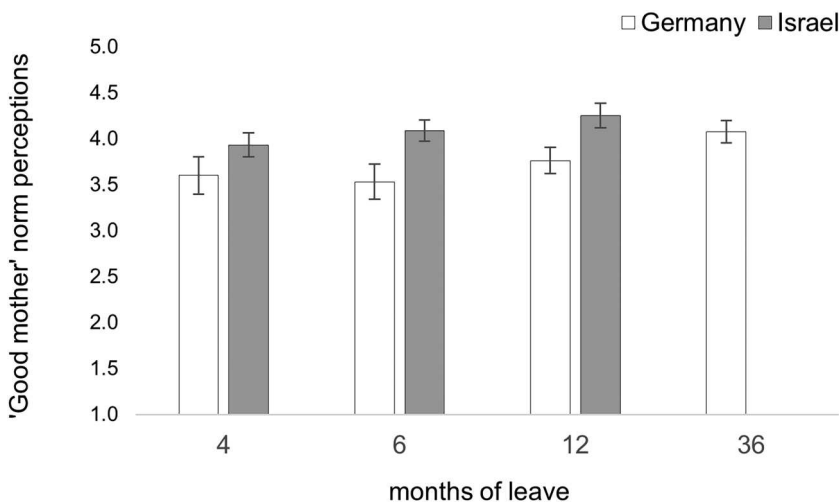


Figure 1. Means and 95% confidence intervals for 'good mother' norm perceptions across leave conditions and by country.

show that the mean values for the 'good mother' norm were 3.7 in Germany and 4.1 in Israel on a scale from 1 to 5. For the 'ideal worker' norm, the mean values were 3.7 for both countries.

Main analyses

The findings are presented in Table 1. As hypothesized, leave length significantly influenced 'good mother' and 'ideal worker' norm perceptions in both countries. In Germany, a woman taking 3 years of leave received higher ratings on 'good mother' norm perceptions compared to all other experimental conditions. There were no significant differences between the other conditions. In Israel, a woman taking 1 year of leave received higher ratings on 'good mother' norm perceptions than a woman taking 4 months. There were no significant differences between the 4 and 6 months conditions, or between the 6 months and 1-year conditions.

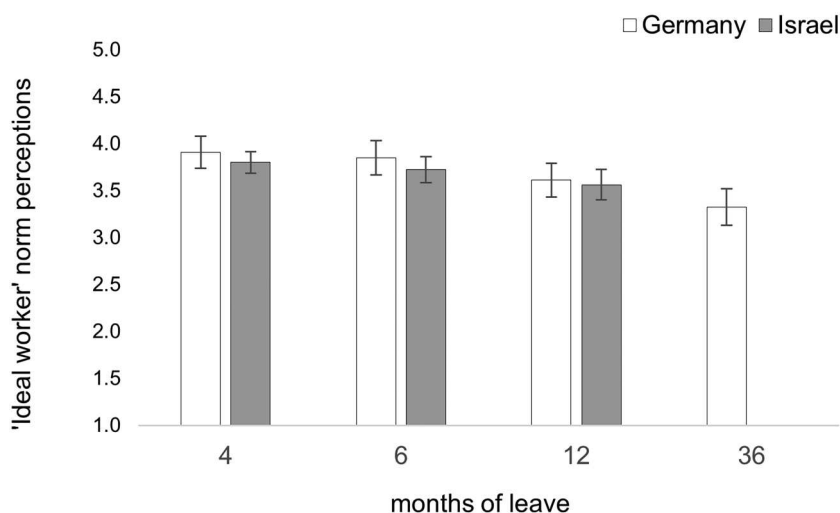


Figure 2. Means and 95% confidence intervals for ‘ideal worker’ norm perceptions across leave conditions and by country.

For ‘ideal worker’ norm perceptions in Germany, a woman taking 3 years of leave received lower ratings than one taking 4 or 6 months. A woman taking 1 year of leave was not rated differently than one taking 4, 6 months, or 3 years of leave. In Israel, a woman taking 1 year of leave received lower ratings on ‘ideal worker’ norm perceptions than one taking 4 months. Again, there were no significant differences between the other conditions (4 vs. 6, and 6 months vs. 1 year).

Ancillary analyses

Analyses including the covariate (participants’ GRA) resulted in findings consistent with the main analyses (see online supplement, Table S1). We did not detect any significant interactions between leave conditions and GRA in Germany or Israel (p -values of interaction effects: .249-.976)

Discussion and conclusions

This study investigated how length of leave taken by working women influences ‘ideal worker’ and ‘good mother’ norms perceptions in two distinct cultural and policy contexts: Germany and Israel. The findings revealed similar trends in both countries. Mothers are more likely to be viewed as better parents if they take the longest leave offered, confirming Hypothesis 1. Likewise, they are viewed as better workers if they take short periods of leave, confirming Hypothesis 2.

‘Ideal worker’ norm perceptions revealed a non-linear pattern in both countries: taking 6 months in Israel or 12 months in Germany (i.e. more than the minimum but less than the maximum permitted) resulted in ratings that do not differ significantly from those for women taking shorter or longer leaves. Thus, in both countries, extending one’s leave beyond the minimum does not incur penalties for working mothers – but only up to a

certain point. In Israel, this pattern also applied to ‘good mother’ norm perceptions, showing that women are not penalized for taking shorter leaves. In contrast, in Germany only very long leaves (3 years) led to a perception of greater conformity with the ‘good mother’ norm. Notably, the average leave taken by mothers in Germany is 14 months (Statistisches Bundesamt, 2025), meaning that three-year leaves do not represent the actual norm. Our findings indicate that mothers whose leave length aligns more closely with the actual norm – i.e. around 1 year – are perceived more strongly as deviators from the ‘good mother’ norm. This reveals ambivalent societal expectations: despite progress in policies and societal views supporting working mothers, women who take longer-than-average leaves are still perceived as best conforming to the ‘good mother’ norm.

However, the relatively high mean values in both countries indicate that the decision to take parental leave of any length does not substantially harm either family-related or work-related societal evaluations of working mothers. Participants’ ratings of work-related societal norms may have been influenced by the wording of our vignette, which described the woman as having earned a master’s degree before working in the same firm for 5 years – potentially suggesting strong professional development. This limitation should be addressed in future research. Nevertheless, we showed that in both countries leave decisions affect societal perceptions even for successful women. Moreover, while our convenience samples allow for causal inference, they do not permit estimating population averages or cross-country comparisons of means, highlighting the importance of employing more representative samples in future research (cf. Mize & Manago, 2022). Importantly, our vignette was conceptualized in such a way that the fictitious woman described had already returned to the workforce after taking leave. Based on the mean values across leave conditions for ‘good mother’ norm perceptions and from a purely descriptive perspective, reentering the labor market as a working mother is viewed more positively in Israel than in Germany. One reason for this could be that mothers in Israel are expected to be in paid work to a greater extent than in Germany. Indeed, this is evident in the leave options offered, with Israeli mothers entitled to a maximum leave of 1 year, compared to 3 years in Germany, but also in the employment rates of mothers with young children, which are higher in Israel than in Germany (OECD, 2025).

To conclude, understanding how mothers’ leave decisions shape people’s perceptions of societal norms of women as parents and workers is key for assessing the potential impact of leave policies on broader gender norms. Our results suggest that cultural differences and national policies significantly shape these perceptions and thus affect gender inequality (Earle et al., 2025). Future research should continue to consider societal norms and explore the mechanisms through which they operate.

Notes

1. In Germany, mothers must take 8 weeks of paid leave after childbirth. Besides, each parent is entitled to up to 3 years of optional, dismissal-protected parental leave, whereby parental allowance is not paid for 3 years. Under current regulations, mothers can receive up to 22 months of paid leave after childbirth (including the mandatory 8-week period) if only the mother claims parental allowance and chooses Parental Allowance Plus.

In Israel, it is obligatory that mothers take 15 weeks of paid leave after childbirth. Unpaid leave duration depends on how long a woman has worked with her employer or at the same

workplace. The length of unpaid leave the woman is entitled to take is one quarter of the period she has worked for the same employer or at the same workplace, and no more than one year from the day of birth.

Disclosure statement

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Data availability statement

De-identified data used for this study are available at <https://doi.org/10.17605/OSF.IO/VSUGZ>.

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