

**The need for and the societal legitimacy of social
investments in children and their families**

Critical reflections on the Dutch case

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Summary

In Europe, social investments on behalf of children and the families they grow up in have become an important issue in present day social policy debate, with a view on sustaining the European social model. In the present Dutch welfare state debate the issue is only having a modest place, which raises questions about whether and to what degree a revision and extension of existing arrangements would be necessary, and what the societal legitimacy of an extension of arrangements would be. In this paper we discuss the first question by putting the Dutch situation and its policies in an international comparative context. The second question is answered by our analysis of data of a public opinion survey on Dutch popular preferences for the introduction of new childcare and parental leave arrangements. We conclude that extra social investments in children and families would be beneficial for the future sustainability of the Dutch welfare state, but that their societal legitimacy is not that obvious, given that public opinion is divided.

Introduction

The future of western welfare states depends on the size and capacities of the coming generation. This statement summarizes the pleas of Gøsta Esping-Andersen (2004, 2005) since he wrote his contribution to the Lisbon conference. In some countries and increasingly also at supranational level (EU and OECD) it is acknowledged that social investments in children are needed for the sustainability of the welfare state. The arguments are well known and relate to the demographic turn, the demands of the knowledge based economy, the reconciliation of work and care, as well as to upholding the human capital of the European population and the fact that European citizens get less children than they actually want. Never before have worries about the future of the welfare state been so directly related to worries about the future generation.

Traditionally, avoiding child poverty and bridging the income gap between families with and without children have been good enough reasons for state support for children and families in European welfare states, often unfocused by way of child allowances. Nowadays, however, there is more to it. According to family sociologists, social policy scholars and also the OECD the sustainability of European welfare states is best served, in addition to targeted income schemes and allowances, by focused social investments in children and their families. Such a policy will stimulate children's development and well-being and will increase fertility rates as well (e.g. Esping-Andersen, 2005: 35; Künzler, Schulze & Van Hekken, 1999; Künzler, 2002; OECD 2002). It is expected that direct investments will catch three birds with one stone, assuming that:

- Fertility rates will increase when women (and men) experience public investments in good quality childcare, education and healthcare resulting in affordable services for children.
- Women's labour market participation will increase – and child poverty decrease - when reliable, good quality and affordable childcare and education is available.
- The cognitive development and social capabilities of children will increase – and accordingly the foundation for a knowledge based economy - if social investments result in good quality care and education for children.

Clearly, social investments on behalf of children and the families they grow up in, with a view on sustaining the European social model, have become a central issue in the present day social policy debate in Europe. In the Netherlands, however, this new focus on social

investments in children and families was only recently brought to the fore in the context of a debate about the future of the Dutch welfare state, and in this debate it has gained a modest position only.¹ Nevertheless, there are indications that there could be a need for an extension of arrangements. Also in this country child poverty increases, fertility rates decline, too many children leave education as dropouts without diploma, and too many mothers work in small part-time jobs.

In this paper we focus on two questions. One is whether a revision and extension of public support for Dutch children and families would be needed, and another one is whether extension would gain societal legitimacy. To evaluate if revision and extension is needed we will describe and explain various forms of child support in several European countries - on child poverty, fertility rates and inequality between families with and without children - with a special view on the relative position of the Netherlands. To understand if revision would be legitimate we will analyse data of a survey held by the Dutch *Sociale Verzekeringsbank* (a Quango that provides child benefits for all Dutch families: www.svb.nl) in 2005. The data show to what degree Dutch citizens would favour direct investments in childcare and parental leave and what type of factors determines people's preferences. We will also analyse what role for government Dutch people see here: should the state carry the burden, or do have parents the main responsibility? Previous studies have shown that in the Netherlands only a minority of both men and women do favour financial support for childcare for two-earner families (Portegijs, Boelens and Olsthoorn, 2004), which make it not immediately obvious that the Dutch would unconditionally prefer any extra investments or would like to see the state carry full responsibility.

Variation in welfare state support for children and families: the Dutch position

A systematic comparison of child benefit packages in twenty-two countries shows large variation in the way welfare states financially support families with children (Bradshaw and Finch, 2002). First of all, the *level* of public financial support varies enormously. In focusing on the horizontal redistribution, which is the gap in purchasing power of families with and without children that have the same income, Bradshaw and Finch distinguish

¹ Activation policies, as well as the reconstruction of social assistance, disability benefits and early retirement schemes have taken most of the attention in recent years, in addition the Dutch government introduced a life course saving scheme that promotes, with some fiscal support, Dutch employees' own responsibility for balancing, work, care, learning and pensions.

several levels of child benefit package, that is financial support including housing and services for children. Leading countries are Austria, Luxembourg and Finland having rather generous child benefit packages. Average support for families with children can be found in most European countries (France, Sweden, the UK, Germany, Denmark, Norway and at the lower end Italy). The southern European countries (Spain, Portugal and Greece) together with the Netherlands are the laggards in Europe with even a negative package, implying that any financial support they provide for children is cancelled by the charges for services that the children use. Hence the purchasing power of parents is in the Netherlands much lower than that of the people having a comparable income but no children. In contrast to most European countries Dutch parents face a serious loss of purchasing power due to lack of compensation for the costs of children.

Secondly, the *objective* of child support varies. As also Desczka & Einerhand (2005) outline, Anglo-Saxon countries envision child benefits as a means to avoid child poverty, while in continental European countries child benefits are mostly used for avoiding an income gap between families with and without children. Bradshaw and Finch (2002) conclude that public financial support for families with children does significantly decrease poverty rates. Generally, countries providing more public financial support for children and families have lower child poverty rates. In Bradshaw's and Finch's study the Netherlands comes out as an exception, where a low child benefit package goes along with rather low rates of child poverty. However, this is the result of using benefit data concerning the situation in 2000, and poverty data from the year 1987. More recent OECD data (table 1) show a rapid increase in child poverty in the Netherlands since the 1980s and hence that the low level of the child benefit package anno 2000 relates to worrisome levels of child poverty in that same period. Interesting is that in other European countries child poverty rates increased in the 1990s as well, even so in countries with generous child benefit packages, like Austria, but the Dutch rate of change (tripled) is not matched by these other countries.

Thirdly, child support is often *packaged*, consisting of different modules such as child benefits, parental leave, childcare subsidies, tax reduction for working (lone) parents, free education, free healthcare, etc. Comparative studies conclude that the mixture of modules takes very different shape in western countries. The OECD series *Babies and Bosses* (2002) highlights this, by showing that some countries focus on extremely good provisions for child care, while others focus more on generous child benefits or long-term paid maternal leaves. Dutch parents lack each of these social investments; due to the recent

marketization childcare is costly for parents with median incomes and above and its quality is dubious (NCKO, 2005), child benefits are average and parental leaves have, though partly compensated for by tax deductions, to be paid for by private savings. As the OECD concludes, these differences matter not only in their short term effects on fertility rates and women's labour market participation – and by consequence on child poverty rates -, also in the long term they will have their consequences. Current social policy with regard to children has an enormous effect on the life chances of the coming generations, on the cognitive skills of the population, and on the sustainability of the welfare state. That is why social policy scholars (Esping-Andersen, 2005) and also the OECD plea for a life course perspective on social investments that depicts children not as a cost but as an investment.

Table 1 Share of children 17 years and younger living in poor households (equivalised disposable income less than 50% of median income).

Country	mid 1980s	mid 1990s	2000	Population total (in 2000)
Denmark	4,0	1,8	2,4	4,3
Finland	2,8	2,1	3,4	6,4
Norway	3,9	4,4	3,6	10,4
Sweden	2,5	2,5	3,6	5,3
France	6,6	7,1	7,3	7,0
Netherlands	3,3	9,1	9,0	6,0
Germany	5,9	10,3	12,8	9,8
Austria	5,5	7,3	13,3	9,3
Portugal	-	15,6	15,6	13,7
Italy	11,5	18,6	15,7	12,9
United Kingdom	9,7	17,4	16,2	11,4

Source: OECD (2005) Society at Glance Data Chart EQ3.1

However, how do we know what investments guarantee the best outcome in the longer term, and how to avoid trade-offs between the modules of the child support package? One way to do so is distinguishing unfocused financial support from focused (financial) support, or as Künzler, Schulze and van Hekken (1999) label it; ecological from economic support (see also Desczla & Einerhand, 2005). Unfocused financial support exists in money for parents to reduce the costs of children, no matter where they will spend it on. Focused financial support is a financial compensation for services, care, education or activities that children use or undertake. Both kinds of support increase household income,

or in other words; compensate parents for the costs of children. But while unfocused financial support can be spend on anything, focused financial support only compensates for specific costs and as such appears to be more effective social policy tools. This distinction may be helpful to evaluate effects of different mixtures of child support modules.

Following the three characteristics of the child support package mentioned before, we can describe the Dutch child support policy as follows:

1. The child benefit package is at a relatively low level of generosity. By implication the relative costs of children are the highest in the Netherlands (compared to all other European countries except Greece), mainly because of high costs of healthcare and childcare. Given the high average male wages in the Netherlands this did not result in high rates of child poverty till mid 1990s (Bradshaw and Finch, 2002). The risks of this policy have become visible at the end of the 1990s when child poverty rates rapidly increased to 9% according to the OECD criterion of 50% of the median income (see table 1) and even to 16% according to the Dutch Statistics criterion of 5% above the minimum income. Snel et al. (2001) point to the fact that this rise in child poverty levels is the result of increasing numbers of (unemployed) lone parent families and of unemployment among immigrant families, two vulnerable categories of families that aren't able to earn average male wages. Because the Dutch child benefit package assumes such average male wages instead of welfare assistance, children of lone parents as well as children of migrant families without work are badly off.
2. The objective of the Dutch flat rate, universal child benefit, which is the main element of the Dutch child support package, is redistribution of family income by compensating the costs for children. Avoiding poverty never has been an argument for child benefits in the Netherlands, since that purpose is assumed to be covered by other parts of the social security system, such as social assistance (Vonk, 2005). Child benefits are introduced in the Netherlands because children are depicted as a long-term 'social risk' that demands public support. Interestingly, in recent years the flat rate child benefit is slowly on its return while fiscal arrangements such as tax deductions for families with children, lone parent families and childcare are systematically introduced since the year 2001.
3. The Dutch child benefit package today contains the following elements: flat rate child benefits (various amounts per age category) plus (additional) tax deductions for lone parent families and families with two employed parents but also for single

earner families (% of the parents income with a maximum), additions in social assistance for widow(er)s pensions, tax deductions for childcare and recently (since 2006) also free healthcare and free education for children below the age of 18 has been introduced.

This Dutch child benefit package moves slowly into the direction of more focused child support; the child benefit has been frozen since the mid 1990s and been compensated with fiscal compensations for employed parents and for childcare costs. The recent introduction of free healthcare for children and free education for children below the age of 18 are indications too for such a shift. Now and then, like Esping-Andersen, Dutch politicians plea for an even more focused child support system under the condition that general flat rate child benefits totally disappear (Dittrich in Vonk: 115). The argument is that focused child support is a better social policy tool for stimulating children's development via childcare and education, while at the same time better childcare provisions would stimulate mothers to enter the labour market. The latter in effect proves to be the best way forward to decrease poverty, as well as to anticipate on the need for enlarging the working hours of the population at large. According to the OECD, poverty rates among children are very much dependent on the labour market participation of their parents. Mid 1990s 43% of the children of unemployed lone parents and even 51% of unemployed two-parent families in the Netherlands lived in poverty. In contrast, 18% of the children of employed lone parents, 8% of children with two parents of whom one was employed and only 2% of the children with two working parents lived in poverty (Förster and Mira D'Ercole, 2005).

This all is not to suggest that the objectives of declining the purchasing power differences between citizens with and without children, as well as the objective of avoiding child poverty in families without work, would not or no longer be important. For these purposes child benefits are and remain essential. However, especially in the Netherlands there are several good reasons for extending focused public child support. Because of the high proportion of Dutch mothers working in small part-time jobs, decreasing childcare costs might stimulate mothers to get larger jobs and have children as well. Also investments in parental leave could pay off. Given the fact that at present the Netherlands has no paid parental leave still 40% of the mothers of young children is not employed (Portegijs, Boelens & Olsthoorn, 2004). Hence household incomes decline after childbirth, mostly for those who are lower skilled or a lone parent, which increases the risk for child poverty. In addition, if Esping-Andersen's claim is right (on basis of the PISA data) that children who

get a good pedagogical preparation for school via childcare perform better on cognitive skills, the urgency of investing in child care is unquestionable. The more so, since in the Netherlands migrant children and children of lower skilled parents hardly visit childcare and belong to the highest risk categories for dropping out when they are teenagers (Ministerie van OCW, 2006).

Our brief conclusion is that the Dutch welfare state would benefit from an extension of focused social investments in children and families. In several aspects it lags behind in a European context, and there are some specific social problems that ask for new measures. However, the question is whether the Dutch population at large would welcome a more focused public child and family support.

Dutch public opinion on child and family related welfare

As many studies have shown people in the Netherlands are very much supporting the idea of ‘free choice’, also with regard to how to raise and educate children (Knijn and Van Wel, 2001). In particular, results of value studies show that the Dutch population in majority is rather progressive in their opinion on childcare, on working mothers and on equality between the sexes: about 65% does not think it problematic if mothers of pre-school children are employed, and about 70% agrees that employment is no obstacle for developing a good relationship between mother and child (Portegijs, Boelens & Olsthoorn, 2004). Hence, we would expect that one will embrace social policy that supports women’s employment also on behalf of the children. However, the issue is more complicated than these opinions reflect.

Firstly, in the Netherlands, ‘free choice’ does not mean that one embraces every choice a mother makes. Although a majority of the population confirms that family life will not be damaged if a mother has a full-time job, still a majority of the mothers of children below the age of 13 disagrees with that opinion (Portegijs, Boelens & Olsthoorn, 2004). Interestingly, other studies confirm that it is the mothers of young children themselves that prefer combining care for children with a part-time job. For example, for the 1990s, Knijn showed empirically the existence of ‘a strong discrepancy between thinking and doing with concern to individualization of women in the Netherlands’ (1994: 203). Dutch mothers then agreed with so-called ‘individualistic attitudes’ on women’s autonomy, an equal division of housework and caring between the sexes and gender-identity. Nevertheless, the majority of mothers of young children at that time strongly

preferred ‘to accommodate their children’s needs themselves, and they assume that it is in the best interest of the children to be taken care at home, in their own environment, preferably by one of their parents.’ (Knijn, 1994:204). More recent studies confirm that Dutch mothers do attach more value than the population at large to what Knijn and Van Wel (2001) have called a ‘care ethos’ namely taking care for the children themselves for a large part of the week (see also Van Wel & Knijn, 2006; Hakim 2000).

A second reason why it can be expected that the Dutch population will not agree to the full extend with focused child support is that since decades Dutch social policy has presented childcare and parental leave as parents’ own responsibility, and as a second best solution for combining work and care by parents themselves. As Kremer (2005) has analysed, the Dutch cultural ideal is that parents both work part-time and take care for their children themselves. Accordingly the idea of ‘outsourcing’ young and school-aged children to public services always had met political resistance. Kremer also points to the fact that the cultural images conveyed by social policy are not innocent; they find their way to the hearts and the minds of the people and by doing so construct opinions on what will be good for children. A recent study showed, for instance, that even if childcare would be available, affordable and of good quality, Dutch parents will not make more use of it for the reason that they don’t think that it will be good for their children to spend the largest part of the week in a childcare centre (Portegijs, et al., 2006).

Even if a major part of the population would agree with focused child support that is directly used for parental leave, child care, after school care and compensation for educational costs, we can expect another obstacle, not related to the focused child support, but to the redistribution aspect of such support. In some respects the Netherlands indeed show some similarity to the Scandinavian countries in that too high income differences will not be accepted, especially not large differences in income between single and dual earner families. A striking result of a recent study is that 71% of Dutch women, and only 59% of Dutch men agree with paid parental leave, while only one third of all Dutch women (35%) and men (31%) support financial compensation for childcare in case both parents are employed (Portegijs, Boelens & Olsthoorn, 2004). De Jonge (2005) comes to a similar conclusion on basis of the same data as we use in this paper: in a ranking of who deserves financial support for childcare, a family of two working parents who *together* work more than five days a week scores much lower, than a family of parents who *together* work less than five days a week. So, it seems that it is not so much the need for childcare, but the supposed financial need of the parents appears to be the major factor for supporting

compensation for childcare costs. This might mean that either the Dutch favour parental leave over childcare arrangements, or are of the opinion that dual earner families don't need financial support for childcare.

On basis of such findings we can assume that the Dutch population at large will be rather reluctant towards focused state support children, because one assumes that it is the parents' own responsibility to reconcile work and family life. In addition we can assume that financial support for childcare arrangements will be less agreed with than financial support for paid parental leave; the latter facilitates mothers (and fathers) to take care for the children themselves, which is in line with the Dutch social policy as well as with the preferences of a substantial part of the population. Finally, although in particular Dutch women prefer a 'free choice' in either staying at home or being employed we nevertheless expect that they, more than Dutch men, will support social investments in childcare and parental leave. Even if they will not immediately make use of such arrangements themselves, once available such arrangements extends the range of choices mothers can make. In addition, the current pattern of the dominant one-and-a-half earner family type still frees men from the responsibility to reconcile work and family life; we therefore assume that women will have a greater interest in having a wide range of options to solve the combination of work and care.

Results of a recent Dutch survey on new child-related social investments

The *Sociale Verzekeringsbank*, the administrative body for Dutch child allowances, ordered for a survey in 2005 to explore the support of the Dutch population for child related investments such as child allowances, tax credits for childcare, paid parental leave and other elements of what Bradshaw calls the child benefit package. We use the data from this survey, which was carried out among a stratified sample of 1539 heads of household, aged 18 to 65, and taken from a wider NIPO panel sample of 45.000 Dutch households². The sample is stratified according to gender, age, region, social class and the presence of children up to the age of 18.

² NIPO is a market research and survey company, which runs an opinion panel. Its panel members complete interviews through internet. Computers and internet linkage is provided by NIPO for those panel members who did not possess them before participation in the panel. The NIPO panel is representative for the Dutch population, households and individuals. The sample taken from it is representative for Dutch heads of households

Our dependent variables measures support for new child-related social investments. The survey put forward two, non-existent³, options for organising and financing childcare and parental leave. The first option is a contributory system of statutory social insurance compensating for the costs of childcare and parental leave that is paid by people having a work-related income (employees and self-employed) by way of premiums. The second option is a tax-based system where government would give tax credits to parents who use childcare and parental leave. Another question put forward was who should be responsible for the child care and parental leave, parents, government, or both. We will describe and discuss respondent's answers to these questions separately. In order to analyse the determinants of people's support for new social investments we have created a dependent variable consisting of a Likert summation of respondents' highly inter-correlating answers to the questions regarding the introduction of the social insurance and tax credit options for child care and parental leave provision. The summative scale ranges from 4 to 20, and has an alpha-reliability of 0,84.

For a detailed description of our independent variables we refer to their schematized presentation in the Appendix. We have distinguished two groups. Firstly, a series of interest variables that might indicate the utility that child-related social investment may have for people. And secondly, a series of attitudes and beliefs, which may indicate people's cultural position towards such investments. We test two ordinary least square regression models. Model 1 regresses the group of interest variables on people's support for new social investments. In Model 2 the group of cultural position variables is added. In this way it will show which of the two groups is relatively more important in explaining the variance in support, and it will show in addition whether there are seemingly interest-based effects that will disappear after controlling for attitudes and beliefs. We will analyse the models for women and men separately, since we are not only interested in the question whether the support of both gender groups is explained equally well by our variables, but also in the question whether the pattern of determinants is different for women and men. The number of women in our data set is 785, the number of men is 754.

³ That is, with the exception of a tax credit for parents to compensate for the costs of childcare, which was introduced in 2005. As from 2006 employees can privately save money for leave via the Life Course Saving Scheme. If parents use the savings for parental leave they will get tax deduction too.

Relatively low and mixed support for new child-related social investments

Table 2 shows that tax credits meet more support than a statutory insurance paid by the working population. We can only speculate about an explanation. It might be that the term ‘statutory’ is associated negatively with force, leaving no room for personal choice and responsibility. An alternative explanation is that one has the opinion that tax credits are more collectively based and do not go at the costs of social partners only.

Secondly, support for new arrangements among heads of household is not overwhelming. Only 60% of female heads of households would favour tax credits for parental leave. In all other cases, support is less, to as little as 37% in case of male heads regarding a system of social insurance to cover childcare costs. Thirdly, there are significant differences between women and men, with, not surprisingly, women being more in favour of these arrangements than men. But even Dutch women not overwhelmingly support collectively paid investments in childcare and parental leave.

Table 2 Opinions on new social investment measures (%: N=1593)

	A statutory social insurance				Tax credits			
	Child care*		Parental leave*		Child care*		Parental leave*	
	women	men	women	men	women	men	women	men
Very bad idea	11,6	19,1	7,5	13,4	6,1	11,9	5,1	10,2
Bad idea	18,2	19,7	17,0	16,6	13,7	14,3	10,7	12,9
Not bad/not good	26,8	22,1	25,0	26,0	19,8	21,8	20,8	24,6
Good idea	31,7	27,3	38,8	33,8	45,5	36,1	48,3	39,7
Very good idea	9,5	9,5	9,1	8,2	12,4	14,1	12,5	11,2
DK/NA	2,2	2,2	2,6	1,9	2,5	1,8	2,6	1,5
Total %	100	100	100	100	100	100	100	100

*: differences between women and men significant at $p < .001$

One could interpret Dutch people’s opinions on focused collectively financed investments in children as showing certain reluctance against state intervention in the field of child-related schemes and services. But this would not necessarily be the case, since especially regarding collective social insurance one could easily imagine a system where the state has only a small role to play relative to, for instance, social partners.

Our data contain a more direct measurement of people's views on state intervention based on the question who, in the view of respondents, should be most or more responsible for childcare and parental leave, parents or government, or should they share responsibility. Table 3 shows that about a third of the female heads of household, and about a quarter of male heads, regard childcare and parental leave as a responsibility to be equally shared between parents and government. Of the others, clear majorities see more responsibility for parents, partly in combination with some government responsibility, while those who feel that government should have the greatest share of, or even all, responsibility form a minority. All in all, Dutch people put a stronger emphasis on the responsibility of parents, than on that of government when it comes to child-related schemes and services. The table 3 also shows that men stress parental responsibilities more than women do. No less than 27% of them feel that childcare and parental leave should solely be a parental responsibility. This is a bit ironic, since men generally do less child caring and they take up parental leave less, so they indirectly confirm the breadwinner ideology.

To put the opinions on childcare and parental leave into perspective, table 3 also shows people's opinions on responsibilities regarding maternity leave and healthcare for children, which are two issues that relate to more pressing and widely recognized needs. Here we see that both men and women do put more emphasis on government responsibility, especially regarding health care. Regarding maternity leave we see the same pattern, that men emphasize parental responsibility more than women. Regarding healthcare for children, however, men and women feel alike.

Table 3 Opinions on who should be responsible for child related social arrangements
(%: N=1593)

	Child care*		Parental leave*		Maternity leave*		Healthcare for children	
	women	men	women	men	women	Men	women	men
Government	6,1	4,9	9,8	7,2	25,7	21,8	39,8	34,6
Government and parents, but government most	15,1	14,3	14,3	12,1	12,5	12,3	18,0	23,0
Government and parents equal share	33,3	22,8	32,2	26,4	29,4	26,6	20,5	20,7
Government and parents, but parents most	24,3	28,9	22,6	25,3	17,0	21,1	12,3	12,4
Parents	18,7	27,1	17,0	27,0	11,1	15,8	7,3	7,1
DK/NA	2,4	2,0	4,0	2,1	4,2	2,4	2,2	2,2
Total %	100	100	100	100	100	100	100	100

*: differences between women and men significant at $p < .001$

Determinants of support for new child-related social investments

In our analyses of the determinants of support for child-related social investments we tested two regression models: a first model, which contains the group of variables that may indicate people's interest in such investments, and a second model, in which a group of attitudes and beliefs was added. We carried out the analyses for women and men separately.

Comparing the results between models and gender groups, table 4 shows, firstly, that both models do significantly explain parts of the variation in support among women, as well as among men. In both cases model 2 adds significantly to the explanation of variance. Secondly, the group of cultural variables explains relatively more than the group of interest-related variables, again among both women and men. This means that the opinions of Dutch heads of household on focused child-related investments are more a matter of their attitudes and beliefs, than of considerations of utility and personal interest. However, and thirdly, the table 4 shows that this is clearly more strongly the case for men, than for women, since the Rsquare change from model 1 to model 2 is much higher in the group of men where it is .257, compared to the .143 among women. In other words, the

support among women is relatively a bit more determined by their interest position. Fourthly, all variables together explain more of the variance among men (31.4 %), than among women (21.6%).

Table 4 Summary statistics of multi-variate regressions on support for new child-related social investments

Model	R	R Square	Adjusted R Square	Std. Error	Change Statistics				
					R Square Change	F Change	df1	df2	Sig. F Change
WOMEN									
1	,354	,125	,099	3,35663	,106	5,158	114	597	,000
2	,518	,269	,216	3,13029	,143	4,892	23	574	,000
MEN									
1	,321	,076	,076	3,82288	,091	4,294	14	592	,000
2	,600	,314	,314	3,29363	,257	9,939	23	569	,000

In brief, we see that women, who in effect are more caring after children and take up parental leave more than men, in their thinking about child-related investments weigh their personal interest somewhat more. This does not imply that men do not weight their personal interests too, we only can conclude that differences among men relate to attitudes and beliefs more strongly.

What then are the specific interests, attitudes and beliefs of women and men, which influence their support for social investments? The regression results are presented in table 5. When taking 5% as level of significance, the model 1 regression for women shows that only a few of the interest variables are related to women's support for child-related social investments. Such support is somewhat higher among women with a higher education, among women in the lowest income category, as well as among those in the second highest category, while it is lower among those women who do not have children, and would not want to have them. However, model 2 shows that, after controlling for attitudes and beliefs, only the effects of educational level and absent child-wish remain. This means that income has no direct effect. It is especially the women who do not have, and do not wish to have children, who are less supportive, and the higher educated women who are more supportive. All other interest indicators are not related to women's support for child-related

investments. This is rather surprising, because it all regards factors which might make that women would perceive a greater or smaller interest in child-care related benefits and services, like: whether they have a job or not; whether they have a partner or not; whether they have none or a number of children to look after to in their household; whether they have younger or older children; and not even whether they make use of existing services.

If we compare the effects of interest variables among men to the general findings for women, the overall conclusion of remarkable few interest-related effects remains. However, there are three clear differences between women and men. Where among women the effect of education gets a bit stronger when introducing attitudes and beliefs in the equation, the education effect among men disappears. It is especially higher educated women that are most supportive, compared to other women, and compared to men generally. Where among the women, those without children and having no child-wish are less supportive of child-related social investments, among men it is the opposite group that is more supportive, those without children, but with a child-wish. In other words, women who do not want to have children stand out as a group that clearly opposes these investments more, and thus seem not to feel particularly solidaristic towards parents and families with children. Of the childless men, those who would want to have children seem to have a clear eye for their future interests. Furthermore, where there is no difference in support between women who do or do not use child-care and parental leave, such use clearly differentiates supporters from non-supporters among men, again suggesting that current fathers of young children have a personal interest in social investments for children because of the fact that they do not suppose their wives to take the whole burden and cannot or will not take the burden themselves.

As mentioned before, support for focused child-related investments is more a matter of attitudes and beliefs people have, than of their considerations of utility and personal interest, although the relationship between attitudes and interests is not easy to unravel.

Table 5 Regression results for 2 models

	WOMEN				MEN			
	Model 1		Model 2		Model 1		Model 2	
	Beta	Sign.	Beta	sign.	Beta	sign.	Beta	sign.
Interest indicators								
(Constant)		,000		,144		,000		,005
Has a job	,067	,105	,045	,258	-,021	,621	-,042	,263
Marital status (ref. cat.: No partner)								
Married with partner	,030	,593	,040	,460	-,083	,163	-,079	,134
Cohabiting with partner	,073	,153	,055	,263	-,098	,055	-,082	,071
Educational level	,087	,040	,098	,027	-,101	,025	-,010	,815
Household income level (ref. cat: income in highest cat.)								
Income in lowest category	,180	,006	,100	,121	,070	,234	-,011	,827
Income in second lowest category	,122	,070	,060	,360	,068	,277	-,016	,772
Income in middle category	,049	,403	,016	,783	,027	,636	-,032	,534
Income in second highest category	,151	,018	,115	,059	-,005	,927	-,043	,392
Income unknown	,051	,414	,020	,740	-,016	,781	-,060	,236
N children in household	-,134	,272	-,093	,422	-,097	,405	-,099	,337
Age of children in household (ref. cat.: at least one child 18 years or older)								
At least one child 0-3 years	,145	,023	,114	,059	,049	,381	,077	,119
At least one child 4-7 years	-,029	,658	-,024	,700	-,012	,844	-,019	,716
At least one child 8-12 years	-,022	,708	,010	,856	,074	,203	,089	,080
At least one child 13-17 years	,126	,065	,124	,056	,110	,143	,105	,110
At least one child 18+ years	-,058	,278	-,075	,133	,026	,631	,017	,715
Wish to have children (ref. cat.: respondent has child(ren))								
No children but would want to have	,037	,482	,076	,136	,201	,000	,204	,000
No children and does not want to have	-,221	,000	-,135	,008	-,054	,319	,041	,429
Use of child care and/or leave schemes	,070	,106	,060	,145	,190	,000	,145	,000
Attitudes and beliefs								
Positive to children for social relations			,086	,042			,120	,004
Negative to children for cost reasons			-,011	,794			,061	,131
Societal importance of children			,137	,001			,100	,009
Solidarity with low-income families			,129	,001			,218	,000
Benefits effect on self-responsibility			-,010	,817			-,038	,358
Benefits oblige mothers to have a job			,089	,020			,184	,000
Benefits distribute wealth more equally			,085	,043			,080	,045
Benefits have pronatal effect			,079	,046			-,075	,042
Benefits affect childrens' future positively			,075	,074			,081	,035
Perceived % of children living in poverty			,070	,075			,054	,147
Overall solidaristic attitude			-,012	,759			-,119	,001
Political party preference (ref cat: VVD)								
CDA: Christian democrats			,092	,059			-,023	,588
D66: Liberal conservatives			,059	,187			-,046	,220
PvdA: social democrats			,050	,401			-,046	,330
Green Left			,080	,095			,021	,599
Socialist Party SP			,068	,235			-,029	,525
Protestant orthodox parties			-,035	,530			-,126	,002
Extreme right			,019	,678			-,073	,083
Other parties			,026	,489			-,014	,693
Unknown			,011	,867			-,045	,362
Religious denomination (ref cat: no religion)								
Catholic			,021	,594			,055	,148
Protestant			-,113	,009			-,019	,628
Other religion			,027	,530			-,009	,810

The models 2 in table 5 shows which attitudes affect people's support for social investments. Women who support investments more are most notably those who believe that children are necessary for the continuity of society and for solving social cost problems related to the ageing of the population, as well as those who feel a stronger solidarity towards lower-income families regarding their entitlement to public allowances for the costs of raising children. Support is typically lowest among Protestant women. In addition, there are some beliefs with a less significant effect. Support tends to be higher among those women: who believe that children contribute to one's social relations and attachment to society, now and in one's old days; who believe that child and family benefits distribute wealth more equally; who believe that such benefits stimulate people to have more children; and not remarkably, also those who believe that child and family benefits have the effect that mothers feel obliged to have a job. In brief, women's attitudes towards focused social investments are shaped by their views on the societal and personal advantages of (having) children, their ideas about justice, about the need to increase women's labour market participation and, negatively, among Protestant women by their religious norms.

This all is also true for Dutch men, be it with a small deviation: among them it is not Protestants as such who are less supportive, but more specifically those who have a political preference for Orthodox Protestant parties. In addition, there is distinction made in the overall solidaristic attitude of men. Those who generally agree with the statement that everybody should take care for oneself, implying that women should take care for children, are less supporting focused child-related social investments. And lastly, men who see positive effects of child- and family benefits for children's future are more supportive.

Quite remarkable is the fact that political preference plays only a minor role, or none at all. A preference for right or left wing political parties usually affects welfare opinions quite strongly, and also political parties do have different profiles when it comes to issues of work, care and family life. Apparently preferences for family policy are less related to traditional political borderlines, a conclusion that is shared by political scientists who have analyzed the relationship between family policies (Kersbergen, 1995; Bussemaker, 1993)

Conclusions and discussion

In Europe, social investments on behalf of children and the families they grow up in have become an important issue in present day social policy debate, with a view on sustaining the European social model. In the present Dutch welfare state debate the issue is only having a modest place, which raises questions about whether and to what degree a revision and extension of existing arrangements would be necessary, and what the societal legitimacy of an extension of arrangements would be. In this paper we have discussed the first question by putting the Dutch situation and its policies in an international comparative context. The second question is answered by our analysis of data of a public opinion survey on Dutch popular preferences for the introduction of new childcare and parental leave arrangements. We may conclude that extra social investments in children and families would be beneficial for the future sustainability of the Dutch welfare state, but that their societal legitimacy is not that obvious. Overall we see that only about half of the respondents agree with focused social investments in children, although more people prefer fiscal arrangements than collective premiums. By implication the population is divided on the issue and support is not overwhelming. Factors that promote support of social investments are related to perceived self-interest (for instance, higher educated women support more, women without children and no wish for a child support less, while childless men with a child wish support more), but more important still are cultural factors, like people's values and beliefs. In our view, these cultural factors could be taken as foci of attention for politicians who would want to introduce new social investments, for they give clues about how to increase the societal legitimacy of arrangements for childcare and parental leave.

The first thing would be to introduce a discourse that is more positive about children and their role in society, instead of the already too long-lasting disapproval of the young and the youngsters. Our data show that, when people picture children as a positive contribution to social and personal relations, they are more in favour of investments in children. When people picture children as a burden that limits their opportunities and, in addition, costs a lot of money they are not prepared to contribute to the coming generation. Secondly, of importance are the arguments of welfare redistribution, the well being, as well the future of children, and the avoidance of child poverty. People who believe that child-related social investments have positive consequences for children's economic and social situation in future, and thereby for society at large, are more in favour of investments.

Thirdly, any argument that highlights the meaning of children for the sustainability of our society, and for balancing the burden of the greying population will do. People who acknowledge that it is good for society that women are able to combine work with care for children, and those who see that only a capable new generation will support a sustainable welfare state, are in favour of social investments. In other words, those who agree with the fact that children are not only a private, but also a societal good, and those who see advantages of women being fertile, careful and productive, agree more with public social investments in childcare and parental leave.

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Appendix: Independent variables

Independent variables: interest indicators	
<i>Work</i> Do people work in a job or not	no = 0 yes = 1
<i>Marital status</i> Dummies for each category	Dummy1: married with partner Dummy2: cohabitating with partner Dummy3: no partner (ref. category)
<i>Educational level</i> Highest level of education completed with diploma (7 categories)	1 = primary school 7 = university degree
<i>Income level</i> Total annual household income: dummies for 6 categories	Dummy1: income is in lowest category Dummy2: income is second lowest Dummy3: income is middle Dummy4: income is second highest Dummy5: income is highest (ref. category) Dummy6: income is dk/na
<i>Nchildren</i>	Number of children living in the household
<i>Achildren</i> Age of children living in the household: dummies for each category	Dummy1: at least one child 0-3 Dummy2: at least one child 4-7 Dummy3: at least one child 8-12 Dummy4: at least one child 13-17 Dummy5: at least one child 18 and up No children in household (ref. category)
<i>Child(wish)</i> 3 Dummies	Dummy1: respondent has children in household (ref. cat.) Dummy2: no children, but resp. would want to have children Dummy3: no children, and does not want children
<i>Use</i> Resp. makes use of child care services, and/or parental leave, and/or maternity leave and/or parental courses	0 = no 1 = 1 of these services 2 = 2 services 3 = 3 services 4 = 4 services
Independent variables: attitudes and beliefs	
<i>Positive towards having children for social relations</i> Likert sum of answers to statements: - It is nice if there are children to visit me when I am old - Children keep you attached to society - Through children one gets social contacts easier (1.very unimportant 2. unimportant 3.middle 4.important 5. very important 6. dk/na) Scale range 3-15, alpha = .78	
<i>Negative towards having children for cost reasons</i> Likert sum of answers to statements: - I do not want children to constrain my life - You can spend more if you do not have children - Children are too expensive (1.very unimportant 2. unimportant 3.middle 4.important 5. very important 6. dk/na) Scale range 3-15, alpha = .76	
<i>Social importance of children</i> Likert sum of answers to statements: - Children are important for the continuity of society - Without children the future health costs due to ageing of the population cannot be paid - Without children future pension costs cannot be paid (1.totally disagree 2. disagree 3.middle 4. agree 5. totally agree 6. dk/na) Scale range 3-15, alpha = .81	
<i>Solidarity with low income families</i> 'To what degree do you feel that low-income families are entitled to public allowances for the costs of raising children' (1. not at all entitled...10. absolutely entitled)	
<i>Effects: responsibility</i> 'In your opinion, do child and family benefits have the effect that people loose their sense of self responsibility for raising their children' (1.yes 2. somewhat 3. no 4. dk/na)	
<i>Effects: women</i> 'In your opinion, do child and family benefits have the effect that mothers feel obliged to have a job' (1.yes 2. somewhat 3. no 4. dk/na)	
<i>Effects: equality</i> 'In your opinion, do child and family benefits have the effect that wealth is distributed more equally' (1.yes 2. somewhat 3. no 4. dk/na)	
<i>Effects: pro natal</i> 'In your opinion, do child and family benefits stimulate people to have more children' (1.yes 2. somewhat 3. no 4. dk/na)	
<i>Effects: future of children</i> 'In your opinion, do child and family benefits have the effect that children have a better future'	

(1.yes 2. somewhat 3. no 4. dk/na)	
<i>Perceived need</i> 'In your opinion, how many children live in poverty' (1. <1% 2. 1-5% 3. 6-10% 4. 11-20% 5. >20%)	
<i>Overall solidarity</i> Answer to statement: 'Solidarity is nonsense: everybody should take care of him/herself.' (1.totally disagree 2. disagree 3.middle 4. agree 5. totally agree 6. dk/na)	
<i>Political stance</i> 'Which political party has your preference at the moment?'	Dummy1: VVD (conservative right) (ref. category) Dummy2: CDA (christian Democrats) Dummy3: D66 (liberal right) Dummy4: PvdA (social democrats) Dummy5: Green Left Dummy6: Socialist Party Dummy7: orthodox protestant parties (christen unie, sgp) Dummy8: small extreme right wing parties (lpf, wilders) Dummy9: other parties Dummy10: dk/na
<i>Religious denomination</i>	Dummy1: Catholic Dummy2: Protestant Dummy3: other (hindhu, muslim, budhist, other) Dummy4: no religion

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