

By Marion Ronit Munk and René Rückert

To work or not shouldn't be a question

We are a two-scientist couple, an Austrian and a German, both with experience working in the United States. So we read with great interest the Working Life story in which Michelle Gabriele Sandrian, an American, shared her experience working as a postdoc in Austria while starting a family. (You can read it in *Science* at <http://scim.ag/EuropePostdoc>.) Sandrian was happy to start a family in a place where she and her husband could take time off to care for their new baby. Sandrian and her family had a positive experience—we're glad about that—but that doesn't mean Austria's policies are good for women's careers.

In Austria—Germany is much the same—many people don't have kids. Professional women tend not to have children, and women who do have children tend not to work or to work only part time. Men who have kids often have wives who stay at home.

Austria ranks 68th in equality of economic participation and opportunity in the World Economic Forum's *Global Gender Gap Report*, below Russia, Kazakhstan, and Brunei. In the United States, which ranks fourth, 3.2% of corporate CEOs are women—hardly impressive, but that's well above Europe's 2.4%, as reported in 2013 by the European Commission. As of 2012, when the data for the commission's report were collected, no major corporation in Austria had a woman as CEO. Not one.

Why are women leaders so rare in a society with such generous family-leave policies? Austria's conservative culture is partly to blame, but the blame should be shared by the policies. For women, the *Elternkarenz*, which pays parents to stay home for up to 3 years in Germany and up to 2 years in Austria, is the best career killer one could imagine. And child care for young children is hard to find and usually covers only part of the day. My sister working in Germany may have to give up a career in surgery because her day care recently decided to close at 3:30 p.m. She has no alternatives.

Long absences from work make women less competitive. They return to the office or the lab after a long leave to find that former colleagues have left them far behind.

These policies affect all women, not just those who take long leaves. During the paid absence of a young parent, no employer may hire a permanent replacement. Because women are much more likely than men to take long parental leaves, employers have a strong incentive to hire men. Europe's equal-employment laws make such discrimination



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illegal, but employers discriminate anyway, as many young women in science and medicine can attest.

How can the situation be improved? Women should continue to have sufficient time off, with pay, as they adjust to being mothers. But parental leaves need not last for years; Sandrian took just 5 months off before going back to work. Policies should encourage or require fathers to do their share; Norway, one of the most successful countries in Europe in terms of women's advancement, expects fathers to take off at least 10 weeks. More men taking more time off should reduce hiring bias and, as a bonus, encourage fathers to take on a greater share of the domestic burden, yielding benefits for wom-

en's careers for years to come.

Most importantly, mothers need to be able to return to work sooner without having to worry about their babies, so high-quality subsidized, flexible, full-day child care needs to be more widely available for younger children. Part-time work arrangements should be available, too, but the laws should strongly encourage men to take equal advantage.

If we wish to facilitate equal success for women in science, medicine, and other careers, changes in society are needed. Both women and men should demand policies that support mothers who choose to work and encourage their partners to take on their fair share of the domestic load. Time off is not the issue; we need to put policies in place that help women work. ■

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