

# Germany debates plan to pay stay-at-home moms <sup>[1]</sup>

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## EXCERPTS:

Germany's conservative coalition, led by Chancellor Angela Merkel, is planning to pay mothers who stay at home to care for their children.

The draft law has touched off debate between those who see this as offering more people the option of staying at home and those who see it as a missed opportunity to expand access to affordable child care outside the home.

Private daycare or nannies are uncommon in Germany, and most often only chosen if government-funded or church-funded daycare is not available.

But the government system struggles to handle the demand, especially in large cities like Berlin, Munich, or Hamburg, where parents scramble to register for daycare even before their child is born. Private daycare for little children is on the rise, but expensive.

The proposed law, which is scheduled to be debated for a second time in parliament at the end of August, might ease some of the burden on the system. Women would receive 150 euros [EUR=X 1.2468 -0.0002 (-0.02%) ] per month (about \$190) if they decide to look after their children ages 1 to 3 at home rather than sending the child to government-funded daycare.

Generally, parents can take up to three years off and still have their jobs guaranteed. During these years off, if the employer doesn't pay the parent, the parent can receive money from the government for up to 14 months, with the amount based on their previous salaries. The planned 150 euros per month would go on top of that.

Critics of the plan argue that the money could be better spent shoring up the gaps in publicly funded daycare. "The estimated costs of 1.2 billion euros a year should be spent on providing high quality early childhood daycare," says Katja Dörner, spokeswoman for family issues with the Green Party.

Starting next year, parents will be legally entitled to affordable daycare for their 1- to 2-year-old children. But current estimates indicate a shortage of 150,000 to 170,000 places.

Chancellor Merkel denies that the proposed payments to stay-at-home moms are a way to get around the government's shortfall of trained daycare professionals and facilities. Still, the government would gain time to build up the daycare infrastructure.

Dorothee Bär, spokeswoman for family issues within Merkel's Christian Democratic Party (CDU), denies that that is the intent of the draft law: "We do not want to force a particular childcare model on parents."

But critics fume that it takes an antiquated view of women's role in society, betting that women would prefer to stay home rather than keep a career if there were some money to facilitate that choice.

"The childcare allowance is contrary to modern family politics," says Ms. Dörner of the Green Party. The center-left opposition is determined to stop the law's passage. Even with the ruling CDU and its liberal coalition party FDP, the law is unpopular with some politicians.

## Choice for families

Mrs. Bär calls the draft law an important step in family politics. "It will make sure that families can choose if they want to give their children to daycare or educate them at home," she says.

A number of studies point to the influence of available daycare on women's working choices. The national education report of 2012, written by scientists and promoted by the government, shows that women with children three years old or younger are more likely to be unemployed. And those who do work are more likely to do so part-time. The study shows that the number of women going back to work increases significantly as soon as the children are three years old and can go to daycare.

And data from the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) show that taking care of children at home reduces their chances of a good academic and social outcome within immigrant families. "Children of immigrants would also especially benefit from a larger participation in kindergarten before the age of four, the age-range for which provides strong disincentives to send children into early childhood educational institutes," it says in a report on working immigrants in Norway.

A study conducted by the nonprofit, left-leaning German political foundation "Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung" says that in Sweden, Norway, and Finland, payments for women to stay at home with their child had negative effects on their employment. In Norway parties now are

discussing ending the child allowance.

But Merkel has been quoted by German media saying that childcare allowance is part of the government's family politics strategy as well as the effort to invest in daycare facilities. Merkel had to silence the critics in her own party because the law is very important to the CDU's Bavarian sister party, the Christian Social Union (CSU). The CSU has threatened to leave the already fragile and shaken coalition if the childcare allowance fails. A second debate in parliament is scheduled for the end of August.

-reprinted from CNBC

**Region:** Europe <sup>[2]</sup>

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