

What it's like to be a mom in “a paradise for sex stereotypes”^[1]

Author: Grose, Jessica

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AVAILABILITY

The sixth article in a Slate occasional series, *child care over there*^[3] that asked parents from around the world to describe their child care

EXCERPTS

We asked working moms and dads from all over the world to tell us their child care experiences. Here is the sixth in our occasional series, from a mother in Athens, Greece.

Name: Zoe Tziakou

Age: 32

Country: Greece

Occupation: Operations manager at a small pharmaceutical company

Partner's occupation: Self-employed

Children: A 1-year-old daughter

Hi, Zoe. What are your work hours?

I work 9-5 every weekday, 40 hours per week. Same goes for my husband.

Who takes care of your daughter while you work?

My parents live a 20-30 minute drive away. My mom takes care of my baby while I work. She uses public transport and there are days that she spends two or two-and-a-half hours commuting. Public transport strikes and public protests are common and often unannounced.

This kind of lengthy grandparental commute is quite common. Family is still the central core of Greek society. Grandmothers are the number one choice for providing childcare. It's also common to see a grandmother relocating and living with her daughter or son's family in order to provide care.

Grandfathers are usually not involved in child rearing. They are good for playing and maybe going for a stroll every now and then, but when it comes to real responsibility, it's all about grandmothers. Men my dad's age come from a generation that would find changing a diaper unthinkable.

How much does day care cost for people who don't have family to care for their children?

Public day cares are state-funded so parents have to pay an average of 70 euros per month (\$89 USD) depending on their joint income. There is a huge waiting list and there are not enough places for kids. One major drawback (for those who are chosen eventually) is that public day cares end at 4 p.m. I cannot think of any employed parent that can leave work, commute, and manage to pick up his/her child at 4 p.m.! So again you have to rely on family or a nanny at least for a few hours.

Private day cares cost 300-500 euros per month (\$379-\$632). The average net salary in Greece is 800 euros (\$1,012), so many women tend to quit their jobs to stay home with the kids.

In recent years, a number of private day cares are subsidized by the state so attending is more or less free of charge. But again, there are not enough places to cover the number of applicants. There is a complicated point system used in order to choose which kids ought to have free care. People claim that the system is unfair. Unemployed mothers have a higher priority in getting free care. Some people argue that since they don't work they don't need any child care.

Another popular choice is having a nanny. It will cost you 400-800 euros (\$506-\$1,012) per month.

There is no government agency that runs checks or provides certifications for private day care centers or nannies. That makes things uncertain; parents rely on friends' experiences when choosing a care provider, cross their fingers and hope for the best.

What happens when children who go to day care are sick?

Sick kids, especially those who run a fever, are not allowed in any day care center.

Are mothers expected to be the "default parent," which is to say, the person who misses work when the kid is sick, or who deals with school events and other organizational tasks?

I'm afraid Greece is a paradise for sex stereotypes. Mothers are expected to deal with child rearing and fathers to be the breadwinners. Occasionally women are encouraged to quit their job-even when they get pregnant. Guys asking for any kind of paternity leave will be frowned upon.

The financial crisis and the steep rise in unemployment have kept a lot of men at home. The bright side is that men are starting to share children caring responsibilities with their spouses. Until recently, if a dad picked up his kids from daycare, people would just assume he is a widower!

How involved is your husband?

My husband is certainly more modern and involved in caring for our daughter than men of our fathers' generation. But they have a long way to go even though things are getting better. My husband helps a lot with chores and with our daughter's upbringing. Still, he (and most of his peers) needs encouragement and lots of guidance; growing up they were assured that this child care stuff is for women, so it takes work to change that attitude.

Did you get maternity leave? And did your husband get paternity leave?

In Greece, eight weeks prior and nine weeks after giving birth is the minimum paid maternity leave. Women get 100 percent of their salary up to a cap, and they are not permitted to work even if they'd like to during this time period.

After nine weeks are over mothers have three possible choices for what's called "flexible working": They can return to work full time at full pay, but are allowed to leave work one hour earlier for 30 months; or they can leave two hours earlier for one year; or they can take an extra three-and-a-half months paid leave-which is approximately the number of hours they would have taken off work, but done in a block of time rather than an hour or two a day.

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