

A Comparative Study of Female Teachers' Perceptions of Maternity Leave Rights: Zonguldak, Türkiye and Sarajevo, Bosnia and Herzegovina*

Seyithan DEMİRDAĞ, Haris GEKIĆ, Aida Bidzan-GEKIĆ, Tatjana ZORČEC

Abstract

This exploratory small-N study compares female teachers' perceptions of maternity leave rights in two local contexts: Zonguldak (Türkiye) and Sarajevo (Bosnia and Herzegovina). Using the same set of questions, it examines maternity leave as a socially and institutionally constructed experience shaped by legal provisions, administrative procedures, school routines, workplace relations, and social norms. The sample includes 27 female teachers across preschool to higher education and across public and private sectors (Sarajevo n=10; Zonguldak n=17), all with maternity leave or pregnancy-related employment experience. Findings show that perceived adequacy depends less on the existence of legal entitlements than on the length of paid leave. Sarajevo participants generally viewed leave as more adequate and respected, yet still reported administrative frictions and reintegration difficulties. In Zonguldak, shorter paid leave and more frequent unpaid extensions increased work–family conflict and feelings of job insecurity.

Keywords: Maternity leave rights, female teachers, comparative qualitative study, work–family conflict

INTRODUCTION

Maternity leave constitutes a central pillar of labor rights and gender equality frameworks worldwide, reflecting international commitments to safeguarding women's health, supporting family wellbeing, and promoting women's sustained participation in paid employment (International Labour Organization [ILO], 2022). As a policy instrument, maternity leave is intended not only to protect women during pregnancy and childbirth but also to mitigate work–family conflict and prevent occupational exclusion associated with caregiving responsibilities (OECD, 2020). These objectives are particularly salient in the education sector, where women—especially female teachers—constitute a substantial proportion of the workforce and where professional roles are shaped by strong institutional norms, relational demands, and expectations of continuous presence (UNESCO, 2021; Çevik & Duman, 2017; Grönlund & Öun, 2019).

For female teachers, maternity leave extends beyond a temporary interruption of employment for health and caregiving purposes. It is deeply embedded in institutional arrangements governing curriculum continuity, classroom management, student outcomes, and collegial relations, all of which may complicate the exercise of leave entitlements without perceived or actual professional costs (Ceciarini & Heinen, 2017). The extent to which maternity leave is experienced as a supportive right or as a source of vulnerability often depends on school-level administrative practices, leadership attitudes, peer support, and the flexibility afforded during leave-taking and reintegration (Chung & van der Horst, 2018; Çevik et al., 2025).

Although many national legal frameworks formally guarantee maternity protection—such as paid leave, job security, and non-discrimination—the realization of these rights varies considerably across countries and institutional contexts (ILO, 2022; Ray et al., 2009). In practice, maternity leave may be constrained by staffing shortages, bureaucratic complexity, discretionary decision-making, or informal workplace cultures that implicitly discourage prolonged absence (Gatrell, 2013). Such discrepancies between formal entitlements and everyday practice shape how female teachers interpret their rights and make decisions about whether, when, and how to utilize maternity leave.

These experiences are further influenced by gendered cultural norms surrounding motherhood and professional commitment. In many work environments, maternity leave continues to be associated with

* This paper was prepared with the support of a Short-Term Scientific Mission (STSM) grant awarded under COST Action CA21150, Parental Leave and Social Sustainability.

¹ Zonguldak Bülent Ecevit University, Türkiye, seyithandemirdag@gmail.com, orcid.org/0000-0002-4083-2704

² University of Sarajevo, Bosnia and Herzegovina, hgekić@gmail.com, orcid.org/0000-0002-7055-6608

³ University of Sarajevo, Bosnia and Herzegovina, aidabidzan@gmail.com, orcid.org/0000-0002-6822-7450

⁴ St. Cyril and Methodius University, North Macedonia, tzorcec@gmail.com, orcid.org/0000-0002-4956-5163

assumptions of reduced dedication, diminished competence, or limited leadership potential, reflecting enduring ideals of the “unencumbered worker” (Acker, 1990; Kaufman, 2018; Williams, 2010). Within feminized professions such as teaching, these norms may be both normalized and intensified, shaping how maternity leave is perceived, legitimized, or contested (Demir & Çevik, 2025; Hodges & Budig, 2010).

Despite the policy relevance of these dynamics, empirical research that centers on female teachers’ own perceptions and lived experiences of maternity leave remains limited. Existing scholarship has largely focused on macro-level labor market trends or health-related outcomes, with insufficient attention to sector-specific experiences in education (Gornick & Meyers, 2003). Addressing this gap, the present study explores female teachers’ perceptions of maternity leave rights in Türkiye and Bosnia and Herzegovina, examining how legal frameworks, institutional practices, and sociocultural norms intersect to shape awareness, access, and meaning-making around maternity leave within the teaching profession. We argue that maternity leave is not just a formal entitlement but a gendered institutional practice shaped by school routines, administrative discretion, and everyday judgments about what is seen as legitimate or risky in a feminised profession. Comparing two local contexts with different paid-leave time horizons, we show how rights on paper can become conditional in practice—shaping what women feel able and safe to claim, and shifting the practical costs of combining care and work even when policies formally exist. Our contribution is to identify concrete implementation mechanisms—administrative burden, substitution capacity, and reintegration arrangements—through which maternity leave is lived, negotiated, and sometimes constrained.

Theoretical Framework

This study mainly draws on feminist theory and work–family conflict theory to frame maternity leave as a gendered right with concrete effects on everyday work and family life. To explain why formal entitlements can be easy to use in one workplace and difficult in another, we add an implementation perspective, focusing on feminist institutionalism, administrative burden, and street-level discretion. We use organizational support and the motherhood penalty literature only as supporting concepts when interpreting accounts of stigma, career insecurity, and return-to-work experiences, while care-regime and sensemaking ideas provide brief context for comparing Sarajevo and Zonguldak.

Feminist theory provides a foundational framework for conceptualizing maternity leave as a gendered labor right embedded within historically patriarchal structures that undervalue reproductive and care labor (Acker, 1990; Hooks, 2015). Feminist scholars argue that labor policies are frequently constructed around male employment norms and insufficiently account for women’s dual roles in paid work and caregiving (O’Brien, 2009). In the context of teaching—a profession that is both feminized and organizationally rigid—feminist theory illuminates tensions between professional identity, normative expectations of caregiving, and institutional definitions of commitment.

Work–family conflict theory (Greenhaus & Beutell, 1985) further explains how maternity leave is experienced at the intersection of competing role demands. The theory posits that conflict arises when work and family responsibilities are structurally incompatible, producing stress, dissatisfaction, and role strain. For female teachers operating within fixed academic calendars and performance expectations, maternity leave can function either as a mechanism for reducing conflict or as a source of additional stress, depending on policy adequacy and institutional flexibility.

To account for the gap between formal rights and perceived access, the study draws on feminist institutionalism, which emphasizes that formal rules are mediated by informal norms, routines, and expectations that may reproduce gendered inequalities even in the presence of ostensibly gender-neutral legislation (Mackay et al., 2010). This perspective is particularly relevant for understanding how maternity leave policies are enacted within schools, where informal expectations around continuity, dedication, and availability may shape women’s experiences of leave-taking and reintegration.

Administrative implementation theories further clarify how teachers’ perceptions are shaped through everyday interactions with institutional actors. Street-level bureaucracy theory highlights the discretionary power of frontline administrators—such as school principals and human resources personnel—in interpreting and applying policy, thereby influencing actual access to rights (Lipsky, 1980). Administrative burden theory complements this by identifying learning, compliance, and psychological costs that can deter individuals from claiming entitlements, even when they exist in law (Herd & Moynihan, 2018; Kılınc, 2023).

Perceived organizational support theory adds an organizational lens, positing that employees' wellbeing and commitment are shaped by their belief that the organization values their contributions and cares about their welfare (Eisenberger et al., 1986). In maternity leave contexts, such support is manifested through leadership communication, collegial attitudes, substitution arrangements, and reintegration practices. This framework supports analysis of how workplace support influences teachers' evaluations of maternity leave experiences.

The motherhood penalty literature further informs the analysis of perceived career consequences. Research demonstrates that motherhood can trigger assumptions of reduced competence and commitment, leading to disadvantages in hiring, promotion, and job security (Correll et al., 2007). While teaching differs from many labor market contexts examined in this literature, the concept remains relevant for interpreting teachers' narratives about professional trajectories following maternity leave.

At a comparative level, care-regime theory and the concept of familialism highlight how responsibility for care is distributed between the state, the market, and the family, with significant implications for the design and social meaning of maternity leave (Leitner, 2003). This perspective is particularly useful for cross-national comparison between Türkiye and Bosnia and Herzegovina, where care responsibilities are largely privatized and gendered.

Finally, sensemaking theory (Weick, 1995) provides an interpretive layer for understanding how teachers construct meanings around maternity leave under conditions of ambiguity, discretion, and perceived risk. Sensemaking helps explain how informal knowledge, peer narratives, and anticipated consequences shape beliefs about what is "safe" or acceptable to claim. Together, these theoretical perspectives ensure that teachers' perceptions are analyzed not as isolated attitudes, but as socially and institutionally produced interpretations of maternity leave rights.

The Aim and Importance of the Study

The primary aim of this study is to examine female teachers' perceptions of maternity leave rights in Türkiye and Bosnia and Herzegovina by exploring their awareness, lived experiences, and interpretations of maternity leave policies within their professional contexts. Specifically, the study seeks to understand how female teachers perceive the adequacy of maternity leave provisions, the accessibility of these rights in practice, the level of institutional and collegial support they receive, and the perceived implications of maternity leave for career progression and job security.

The importance of this study lies in its focus on the education sector and its centering of women's subjective experiences. Teaching is a highly feminized profession in both Türkiye and Bosnia and Herzegovina, where female educators are often expected to reconcile intensive caregiving responsibilities with professional dedication (ILO, 2022; UNESCO, 2021). Although maternity leave policies are designed to support this balance, their effectiveness is contingent upon institutional implementation, workplace culture, and prevailing gender norms (Grönlund & Öun, 2019; OECD, 2020).

In Türkiye, existing research highlights how patriarchal gender ideologies, a male-breadwinner welfare model, limited childcare provision, and informal employment structures constrain women's labor-market participation and shape the implementation of maternity leave (Acar & Altunok, 2013; Buğra & Yakut-Cakar, 2010; İlkkaracan, 2012; Kagnicioglu, 2017; Kalaycıoğlu et al., 2010; Yılmaz & Zoğal, 2015). Within the teaching profession, the cultural association of women with care work further influences occupational segregation, professional prestige, and expectations surrounding motherhood and leave-taking (Arı et al., 2025; Aydemir et al., 2022; Aydın et al., 2011; Özdemir & Koçak, 2018; Uygun, 2014). In Bosnia and Herzegovina, maternity leave experiences are shaped by a fragmented and decentralized policy framework, uneven benefit levels across regions, and strong familialist norms that place primary responsibility for care on women (Ćeriman et al., 2025; Clavero & Delaney, 2025; Kadić & Hadžić, 2020; Obradović, 2025).

By adopting a comparative perspective, this study contributes to the literature by highlighting both shared and context-specific dynamics shaping female teachers' perceptions of maternity leave. Importantly, it addresses a notable gap in existing research, which has largely overlooked the education sector and has insufficiently examined maternity leave from the standpoint of women's lived experiences (Gornick & Meyers, 2003). Through its theoretically informed and empirically grounded approach, the study offers insights with practical relevance for policymakers, educational administrators, and scholars seeking to design maternity

leave policies that are not only legally comprehensive but also socially legitimate, accessible, and supportive of gender equality and work–family balance (Correll et al., 2007; Leitner, 2003; O’Brien, 2009).

METHOD

METHODOLOGY OF THE RESEARCH

We conducted an exploratory, small-N comparative qualitative study in two local contexts: Sarajevo, Bosnia and Herzegovina, and Zonguldak, Türkiye. The comparison was built into the design from the outset by using the same question set in both settings. The study focuses on perceptions because maternity leave is experienced not only through legal rules, but also through administrative procedures, school routines, workplace relations, and wider social expectations.

PARTICIPANTS and SAMPLING

Participants were eligible if they (a) identified as female, (b) worked as teachers (e.g., preschool, primary, secondary, or higher education; public or private), and (c) had direct experience with maternity leave or with pregnancy/leave-related processes while employed. A total of 27 teachers participated (Sarajevo, $n=10$; Zonguldak, $n=17$).

Recruitment followed purposive and convenience pathways, supported by snowball referrals. Because recruitment took place within two local professional networks (Sarajevo and Zonguldak), the sample reflects these local contexts rather than national teacher populations. Initial contacts were approached through informal professional networks (colleagues, school contacts, and personal/professional acquaintances) and then asked to suggest other eligible participants. Within these constraints, we sought variation in school level and type, years of experience, and employment security. Given the access limitations and unequal sample sizes, findings are presented as qualitative evidence of shared patterns and salient contrasts rather than population-level estimates.

DATA COLLECTION INSTRUMENTS

Data were collected through structured, face-to-face interviews conducted between April and August 2025. Interviews were held in participants’ native languages (Bosnian in Bosnia and Herzegovina; Turkish in Türkiye) and followed the same interview schedule in both countries. The interview schedule covered: (1) awareness of rights and benefits, (2) leave use and any unpaid extensions, (3) administrative procedures and barriers, (4) workplace support and school practices, (5) perceived career and job security effects, (6) social attitudes and gender norms, and (7) overall evaluation and recommendations. Interviews typically lasted approximately (30–45) minutes (range: 20–60), depending on participants’ availability and the extent of probing needed. Interviews were conducted face-to-face using the same structured schedule in both sites, with contemporaneous note-taking and immediate post-interview expansion of notes to capture context, examples, and phrasing. Interviews took place in mutually agreed, private settings (e.g., school offices outside teaching hours or other quiet locations) to support confidentiality and open discussion.

Interviews were not audio-recorded due to field constraints. Instead, responses were written down during the interview on paper forms and subsequently transferred into a digital dataset. This approach allowed consistent coverage of the question set but limited opportunities for probing and may reduce the nuance captured compared with recorded interviews.

DATA COLLECTION AND ANALYSIS

We analysed the dataset using thematic analysis with a comparative logic. We first read and summarised responses within each country to identify recurring concerns and context-specific patterns. We then compared themes across settings to clarify shared mechanisms and points of divergence. Coding was thematic and question-guided: the interview domains provided an initial organising frame, and inductive labels were added for issues that emerged from participants’ accounts. Descriptive counts are reported only to characterise the sample and prominent response patterns; no statistical inference is attempted.

ROLE OF THE RESEARCHERS

The researchers were actively involved in all stages of the study, including research design, participant recruitment, data collection, translation, analysis, and interpretation. Semi-structured interviews were conducted using a common interview protocol in both Zonguldak (Türkiye) and Sarajevo (Bosnia and Herzegovina) to ensure consistency across research settings. During the interviews, the researchers adopted a neutral and non-directive stance, encouraging participants to share their experiences and perceptions

regarding maternity leave rights while minimizing potential interviewer influence. Participants were informed about the purpose of the study, their voluntary participation, and the confidential handling of the data prior to the interviews.

Following data collection, the researchers translated the interview notes into English to facilitate comparative analysis and reporting. The translation process prioritized conceptual and contextual equivalence rather than literal word-for-word correspondence, particularly when participants used culturally specific expressions related to workplace expectations, fairness, or social stigma. To protect participant anonymity, potentially identifying information such as personal names, school names, and institutional affiliations was removed or generalized during data preparation. Throughout the analytical process, the researchers maintained reflective analytic memos and coding notes to document interpretive decisions and enhance transparency. Particular attention was given to preserving divergent and contradictory perspectives in order to provide a balanced representation of participants' experiences across both national contexts.

VALIDITY AND RELIABILITY

Several strategies were employed to enhance the trustworthiness of the findings. First, the same semi-structured interview questions were used in both countries, allowing for systematic comparison across contexts. Although interviews were not audio-recorded, detailed notes were taken during each interview and expanded into comprehensive summaries immediately afterward to reduce information loss. During analysis, coding records and analytic memos were maintained to establish an audit trail linking interpretations to specific segments of the data. Furthermore, the researchers compared findings across participants from different educational levels and employment sectors (public and private) to assess the consistency and stability of emerging themes. Cases that contradicted dominant patterns were deliberately retained and examined, thereby strengthening the credibility of the analysis.

Nevertheless, several limitations should be considered when interpreting the findings. The study relied on contemporaneous written notes rather than verbatim transcripts, which may have limited the capture of subtle linguistic nuances and non-verbal expressions. In addition, the translation of interview notes from their original languages into English may have resulted in the partial loss of culturally embedded meanings despite efforts to preserve conceptual equivalence. The unequal sample sizes between Sarajevo ($n = 10$) and Zonguldak ($n = 17$) reflect practical access constraints commonly encountered in qualitative field research. Given the exploratory nature of the study, the findings are intended to illuminate recurring perceptions, experiences, and underlying mechanisms rather than to provide statistically generalizable conclusions. Therefore, the results should be interpreted as context-sensitive and perception-based evidence regarding female teachers' experiences with maternity leave rights in the two settings.

FINDINGS

This section draws on 27 structured, face-to-face interviews conducted between April and August 2025 with female teachers in two local settings: Sarajevo (City of Sarajevo), Bosnia and Herzegovina ($n=10$), and Zonguldak, Türkiye ($n=17$). Figure 1 summarises the school-level composition of the two samples, which is relevant for interpreting institutional constraints discussed below.

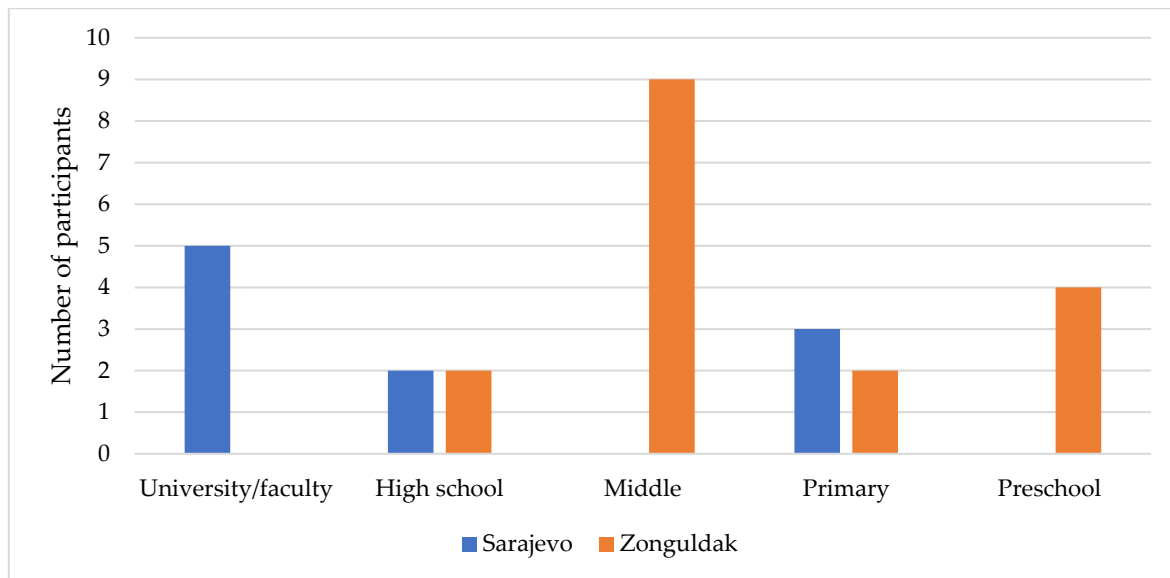


Figure 1. School Level of Participants by Site

Interviews were conducted in participants' native languages (Bosnian in Bosnia and Herzegovina; Turkish in Türkiye). Responses were recorded as contemporaneous written field notes and later translated into English for reporting. Quotations are illustrative excerpts drawn from contemporaneous interview notes and translated into English, labelled with anonymised excerpt IDs (BiH-xx / TR-xx). The translation prioritised semantic equivalence (preserving meaning) rather than word-for-word equivalence; excerpts were lightly edited only for clarity.

In Sarajevo, participants worked across university/faculty (n=5), primary school (n=3), and high school (n=2). Reported paid leave was most commonly 12 months (n=7), with two participants reporting 10 months and one reporting 2 months. Seven participants did not use any unpaid extension, while three reported a short unpaid extension (typically 1–2 months). In Zonguldak, participants were concentrated in middle schools (n=9), followed by preschool (n=4), with smaller numbers in primary (n=2) and high school (n=2). Paid leave most commonly clustered around 4 months (n=10), followed by 2 months (n=5) and 1 month (n=2). Most did not use unpaid leave (n=11), while six reported unpaid leave ranging from 2 to 24 months (including two reporting 24 months). Table 1 summarises these patterns to provide context for the themes below.

Table 1. Sample Composition and Reported Leave-Use Patterns

Location	School level (n)	Paid leave (dominant patterns)	Unpaid leave: none (n)	Unpaid leave: any (n)
Sarajevo (BiH), n=10	University/faculty (5); Primary (3); High school (2)	12 months (7); 10 months (2); 2 months (1)	7	3 (typically 1–2 months)
Zonguldak (Türkiye), n=17	Middle (9); Preschool (4); Primary (2); High school (2)	4 months (10); 2 months (5); 1 month (2)	11	Middle (9); Preschool (4); Primary (2); High school (2)

BiH = Bosnia and Herzegovina; n = number of participants. Leave durations are self-reported.

As shown in Figure 2, the dominant paid-leave durations differed sharply between the two settings.

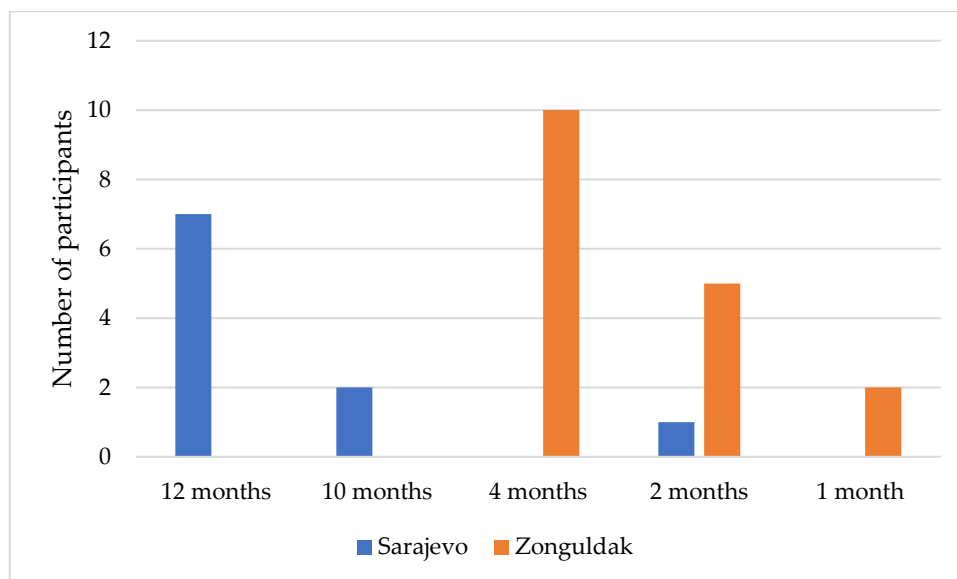


Figure 2. Paid Maternity Leave Duration (Self-Reported) by Site

Figure 3 summarises whether participants reported any unpaid leave extension, complementing the paid-leave distribution shown in Figure 2.

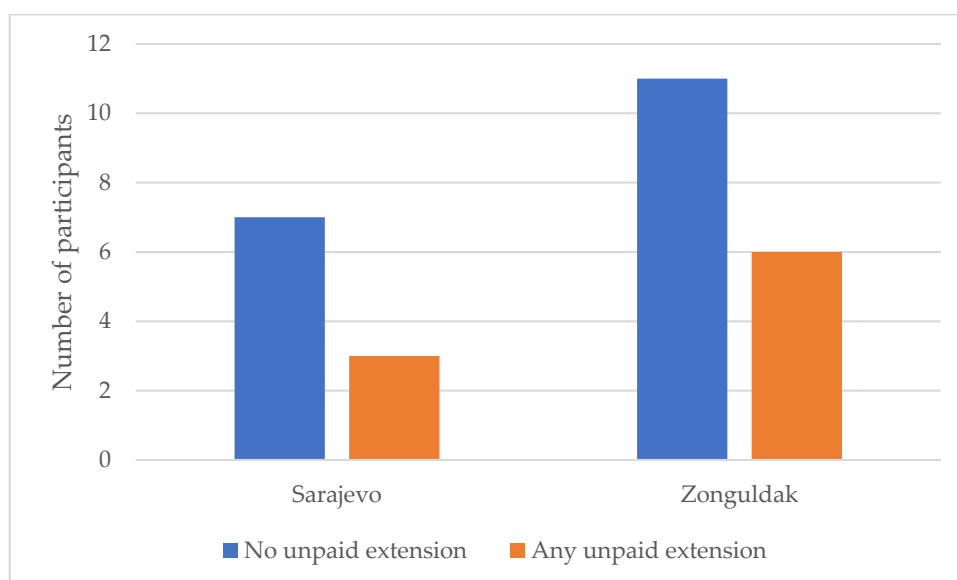


Figure 3. Use of Unpaid Leave Extension by Site

Time as the primary yardstick of adequacy

Across interviews, teachers judged maternity leave first through time: whether the leave window matched recovery, early infant care, breastfeeding, and arranging childcare for return-to-work. In Zonguldak, many respondents described the post-birth period as too short and stressful, especially when reliable care could not be secured quickly: “The leave is too short. It’s hard to find a caregiver or someone trustworthy, and we have to go to work while worrying.” (TR-01). In Sarajevo, the longer paid period often made the first year at home feel feasible, and several teachers evaluated it positively on that basis: “Yes, because a working mother is entitled to a year of leave and is adequately paid for it.” (BiH-01). Even in Sarajevo, however, “having time” depended on the predictability of payments and on whether return-to-work could be managed as a transition rather than an abrupt switch.

Knowing rights versus being able to use them

Teachers in both settings could usually describe core entitlements, but their accounts also showed that awareness does not guarantee smooth access. Sarajevo respondents often spoke about maternity leave as a bundle of protections and related rights: “Compensation during maternity leave and paid contributions, the right to return to work, protection against termination of the contract, breastfeeding break upon return, sick leave of the child and annual leave.” (BiH-02). In Zonguldak, teachers also described the formal structure in detail—especially how weeks can be shifted to extend the post-birth period and how unpaid leave can be used as an extension mechanism: “I know that of the 16 weeks of maternity leave, 5 weeks from the pre-birth period can be transferred to the post-birth period. After that, we can take unpaid leave for up to 2 years.” (TR-02). In both contexts, the difference between “rights on paper” and “rights in practice” became most visible at the level of school routines and administrative handling.

Implementation: Where policy becomes conditional

Implementation was where formal entitlements were either treated as routine or became a matter of discretion. In Zonguldak, several accounts described pressure around the timing of leave and limits on breastfeeding accommodations after return. One participant narrated both dynamics in detail:

“Although I was supposed to go on leave in my 32nd week (which was around the end of February), my principal pressured me to start the second semester. Also, the administration did not allow me to use my breastfeeding break.” (TR-03)

This account points to a practical issue that sits between policy and everyday school functioning: how scheduling decisions and managerial expectations can narrow the usability of formal protections. In Sarajevo, implementation problems were more often described as administrative burden rather than overt denial; one teacher characterised the process as largely clear but paperwork-heavy: “In elementary school in Sarajevo, the procedure was mostly clear, but with a lot of paperwork. Overall, I rate the experience as positive.” (BiH-03). Taken together, these interviews indicate that implementation hinges on ordinary administrative practice (paperwork, approvals, substitutions) as much as on the written rules themselves.

Workplace support and everyday feasibility

Teachers consistently distinguished between interpersonal support and organisational capacity. In Sarajevo, respondents often emphasised collegial help and correct treatment by management during absence and reintegration: “Very great support – colleagues took on some of the responsibilities, and the management was correct and available.” (BiH-04). In Zonguldak, support was also described, but sometimes as constrained by institutional rules and staffing realities: “They supported me as much as they could, but they are also obliged to implement whatever the regulations dictate.” (TR-04). Across both settings, the availability of substitutes and the willingness of colleagues to absorb extra tasks shaped whether maternity leave felt supported or quietly contested.

Career and job security: sector and contract security matter

Career concerns were filtered through employment security, especially the public/private divide. In Zonguldak, participants described private-sector vulnerability in direct terms, linking unpaid leave to replacement practices and the risk of job loss: “In the private sector, when you take unpaid maternity leave, someone else is immediately hired in your place, and you risk becoming unemployed.” (TR-05). Sarajevo respondents similarly emphasised sharp sector differences, with stronger protection in public institutions and greater vulnerability in private employment: “As far as job security is concerned, it is guaranteed in public sector institutions, while it is completely opposite in the private sector.” (BiH-05). These accounts suggest a similar mechanism in both settings: when contracts feel replaceable, leave becomes a calculated risk, and extending time at home can be shaped by fear of job loss as much as by childcare needs (McLoughlin et al., 2023).

Reform priorities: predictability, time, and enforceability

Teachers’ reform proposals closely followed the constraints they described. In Sarajevo, recommendations centred on predictable payments, clearer procedures, and reintegration supports such as reduced hours or a gradual return: “Faster and predictable payouts, a standardized protocol for exchanges, and the option of reduced working hours or a gradual return for the first 3-6 months.” (BiH-06). In Zonguldak, teachers more often called for longer paid leave and enforceable accommodations; one participant put it bluntly, arguing that “improvement policies should not be made by a group of men sitting behind desks.

Experts and women should have a decisive voice in any changes.” (TR-06). Across both sites, the emphasis was less on abstract ‘rights’ and more on making implementation consistent and less dependent on individual discretion.

Social legitimacy narratives and gendered expectations

Teachers also situated maternity leave within social narratives that shape whether leave is treated as legitimate or burdensome in everyday workplace life. In Zonguldak, one participant described stigma directly and tied it to student continuity concerns: “The perception that ‘teachers earn money while lying in bed’ also influences this issue. But ultimately, being a mother is important in our society, so when a teacher is on leave, students only suffer because of the change in teachers.” (TR-07). In Sarajevo, respondents pointed to stereotypes that frame motherhood as a problem for the collective, affecting school atmosphere: “They have a strong influence – there are still stereotypes that motherhood is a ‘problem’ for the collective, which affects the atmosphere in schools.” (BiH-07). These legitimacy frames matter because they influence daily interactions – how managers schedule, how colleagues respond, and how women anticipate judgement when requesting accommodations.

Negative cases and within-country variation

A small number of cases diverged from dominant leave-use patterns and help contextualise the themes. Importantly, these exceptions mirror the wider pattern in the interviews: leave use was shaped not only by formal rules, but also by employment security and the practical constraints of school-level implementation. In Sarajevo, one participant reported a substantially shorter paid leave period (2 months), suggesting that take-up may vary even within one administrative setting. In Zonguldak, two participants reported 24 months of unpaid leave, indicating that unpaid leave can function as a compensatory strategy when paid leave is experienced as insufficient. These exceptions underscore that sector, contract security, and school-level practice can shape experiences alongside the broader policy context.

Cross-case synthesis

Across both contexts, maternity leave emerged in teachers’ accounts as a lived institutional arrangement rather than a single entitlement. Duration set the practical horizon for care, but it did not operate alone: school-level discretion, workplace norms, and contract security shaped whether leave felt usable, safe, and socially legitimate. Sarajevo accounts tended to treat the longer paid period as a stabilising foundation, with concerns clustering around predictability and return-to-work arrangements. Zonguldak accounts foregrounded compressed paid leave and the trade-offs that follow, alongside the ways discretionary practice and stigma can narrow what formal policy promises.

RESULTS, DISCUSSION, and SUGGESTIONS

The findings of this comparative study demonstrate that female teachers’ perceptions of maternity leave rights are shaped less by the formal existence of entitlements than by the duration of paid leave and the institutional conditions under which those entitlements are implemented. Consistent with prior research, time emerged as the primary evaluative yardstick through which teachers assessed maternity leave adequacy, particularly in relation to physical recovery, breastfeeding, and early mother–child bonding (ILO, 2022; OECD, 2020). Teachers in Sarajevo generally perceived maternity leave as workable and legitimate, reflecting longer paid leave periods and comparatively predictable institutional arrangements. In contrast, teachers in Zonguldak frequently described paid leave as insufficient, echoing earlier findings that short postnatal leave intensifies work–family conflict and constrains women’s ability to reconcile caregiving with professional responsibilities (Ceciarini & Heinen, 2017; Greenhaus & Beutell, 1985).

A second major contribution of the findings concerns the distinction between knowing maternity leave rights and being able to exercise them in practice. While participants in both contexts demonstrated awareness of formal entitlements, their experiences confirmed that access is mediated by administrative clarity, discretion, and burden. In Sarajevo, teachers’ generally positive assessments were tempered by concerns over paperwork and payment predictability, aligning with administrative burden theory, which emphasizes learning, compliance, and psychological costs as barriers to effective policy use (Herd & Moynihan, 2018). In Zonguldak, uneven access to information and the need to negotiate accommodations – such as breastfeeding breaks – illustrate how street-level discretion can transform formally guaranteed rights into conditional privileges (Lipsky, 1980). These findings reinforce feminist institutionalist arguments that informal rules and organizational routines substantially shape how gendered policies operate in practice (Mackay et al., 2010).

Workplace support emerged as a critical mediating factor influencing how maternity leave was experienced and evaluated. In Sarajevo, strong collegial support partially compensated for organizational limitations, though participants still identified gaps in managerial capacity and substitution systems. In Zonguldak, support narratives were more fragmented and frequently tied to the personal discretion of administrators, confirming that perceived organizational support is uneven and contingent rather than institutionalized (Eisenberger et al., 1986). These patterns resonate with prior studies showing that in feminized professions such as teaching, informal support networks often substitute for structural solutions, thereby normalizing individual coping rather than institutional accountability (Grönlund & Öun, 2019; UNESCO, 2021).

The findings also provide empirical support for the relevance of the motherhood penalty literature within the education sector. Although outright job loss was not dominant in public institutions, participants in both contexts described slowed career rhythms, disrupted professional continuity, and anxieties surrounding contract renewal—particularly in private employment settings. In Zonguldak, penalties associated with extended unpaid leave, such as interrupted seniority and loss of professional points, were especially salient. These experiences reflect broader evidence that motherhood can function as a signal triggering assumptions about reduced commitment and availability, even in occupations culturally associated with caregiving (Acker, 1990; Correll et al., 2007). The reliance on unpaid leave as a compensatory strategy further underscores how inadequate paid leave can indirectly reinforce labor-market inequalities.

Finally, social attitudes and legitimacy narratives strongly shaped teachers' perceptions of maternity leave in both contexts. Participants' accounts of stigma, resentment, and the framing of maternity leave as a collective burden mirror feminist critique of the "ideal worker" norm, which privileges uninterrupted availability and marginalizes caregiving (Hodges & Budig, 2010; Williams, 2010). These narratives were particularly pronounced in Zonguldak, where contradictory societal expectations simultaneously valorized motherhood and penalized leave-taking. From a care-regime perspective, these findings reflect familialist arrangements in which care responsibilities are privatized and gendered, limiting the transformative potential of maternity leave policies even when formal rights exist (Leitner, 2003). Across both countries, teachers' sensemaking processes revealed how anticipated stigma and institutional ambiguity shaped what they perceived as "safe" to claim (Weick, 1995).

In conclusion, this study examined female teachers' perceptions of maternity leave rights in Türkiye and Bosnia and Herzegovina through a comparative, theory-informed qualitative approach. The findings demonstrate that maternity leave is experienced not merely as a legal entitlement but as a composite of time, implementation, workplace support, and social legitimacy. While teachers in Sarajevo generally perceived maternity leave as more adequate and institutionally respected, their experiences still reflected administrative frictions and reintegration challenges. In Zonguldak, shorter paid leave and greater reliance on unpaid extensions intensified work–family conflict and heightened perceptions of vulnerability. Across both contexts, school-level implementation, substitution capacity, and gendered norms played decisive roles in shaping how maternity leave rights were understood and utilized. These results underscore the importance of moving beyond formal policy design to examine how maternity leave is enacted within organizational and cultural contexts, particularly in feminized professions such as teaching.

Based on the findings, several policy and practice-oriented recommendations can be proposed. First, extending the duration of paid maternity leave—particularly in Türkiye—would better align policy with maternal health, breastfeeding guidelines, and work–family reconciliation goals (ILO, 2022). Second, clearer and standardized administrative procedures are needed to reduce uncertainty, administrative burden, and discretionary disparities in accessing leave benefits (Herd & Moynihan, 2018; Lipsky, 1980). Third, educational authorities should invest in systematic substitution and reintegration mechanisms, such as temporary staffing pools and gradual return options, to reduce the perceived collective burden of leave-taking. Fourth, workplace cultures should be addressed through leadership training and gender-sensitivity initiatives that challenge stigma and normalize maternity leave as a legitimate professional right rather than a personal favor (Acker, 1990; Williams, 2010). Finally, future policy reforms should be informed by women's lived experiences and expert input, ensuring that maternity leave arrangements promote not only legal protection but also genuine gender equality and sustainable participation in the education workforce (Leitner, 2003; O'Brien, 2009).

Declarations

Conflict of Interest

No potential conflicts of interest were disclosed by the author(s) with respect to the research, authorship, or publication of this article.

Ethics Approval

Official ethical approval for the study was received from the Ethics Committee of Zonguldak Bülent Ecevit University.

Funding

This research received no specific grant from public, commercial, or not-for-profit funding organizations.

Research and Publication Ethics Statement

The study was approved by the research team's university ethics committee of the Zonguldak Bülent Ecevit University (Decision dated 08.07.2025 and numbered 2025/5). We, as the authors, assure that the following is fulfilled for this manuscript:

- This article is the authors' original work and has not been previously published.
- The article accurately and completely reflects the authors' own research and analyses.
- The results are appropriately placed within the context of previous and existing research.
- All sources used are appropriately acknowledged.

Contribution Rates of Authors to the Article

1st author contributed 30%, 2nd author 30%, 3rd author 25%, 4th author 15%.

REFERENCES

- Acar, F., & Altunok, G. (2013). The 'politics of intimate' at the intersection of neo-liberalism and neo-conservatism in contemporary Turkey. *Women's Studies International Forum*, 41, 14–23. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.wsif.2012.10.001>
- Acker, J. (1990). Hierarchies, jobs, bodies: A theory of gendered organizations. *Gender & Society*, 4(2), 139–158. <https://doi.org/10.1177/089124390004002002>
- Arı, A. E., Korkmaz, B. C., Özpolat, A. R., & Eşkisü, M. (2025). How do life positions mediate the relationship between cognitive flexibility and teacher subjective well-being? *Transactional Analysis Journal*, 55(4), 382–399. <https://doi.org/10.1080/03621537.2025.2561362>
- Aydemir, S., Öz, E., & Erdamar, G. (2022). Gender in education: A systematic review of the literature in Turkey. *International Journal of Contemporary Educational Research*, 9(2), 232–247. <https://doi.org/10.33200/ijcer.923247>
- Aydın, A., Sarier, Y., & Uysal, S. (2011). The effect of gender on organizational commitment of teachers: A meta analytic analysis. *Educational Sciences: Theory and Practice*, 11(2), 628–632.
- Buğra, A., & Yakut-Cakar, B. (2010). Structural change, the social policy environment and female employment in Turkey. *Development and Change*, 41(3), 517–538. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-7660.2010.01643.x>
- Ceciarini, S., & Heinen, A. (2017). Teachers and parental leave: Exploring the impact of maternity rights on women's teaching careers. *European Journal of Education*, 52(4), 516–530. <https://doi.org/10.1111/ejed.12244>
- Ćeriman, J., Pantović, Lj., & Radovanović, M. (2025). Barriers to work-family balance in Bosnia and Herzegovina: Gender implications. *Stanovništvo*, 63(2), 273–294. <https://doi.org/10.59954/stnv.703>
- Çevik, H., & Duman, T. (2017). Analyzing the effects of e-learning on science education. *International Journal of Instruction*, 11(1), 345–362.
- Çevik, H., Özdemir, O., & Özdemir, M. (2025). Öğretmenlerin eğitsel oyunlara yönelik tutum ve problem çözme becerisi kazandırma yeterliği arasındaki ilişkinin incelenmesi. *Ahi Evran Üniversitesi Sosyal Bilimler Enstitüsü Dergisi*, 11(2), 728–747.
- Clavero, S., & Delaney, C. (2025). Academics' experiences of work-life balance and work-life conflict in a familialist state: The case of Bosnia and Herzegovina (Version 1; peer review: awaiting peer review). *Open Research Europe*, 5, 380. <https://doi.org/10.12688/openreseurope.21781.1>
- Correll, S. J., Benard, S., & Paik, I. (2007). Getting a job: Is there a motherhood penalty? *American Journal of Sociology*, 112(5), 1297–1338. <https://doi.org/10.1086/511799>

- Chung, H., & van der Horst, M. (2018). Women's employment patterns after childbirth and the perceived access to and use of flexitime and teleworking. *Human Relations*, 71(1), 47–72. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0018726717713828>
- Demir, E., & Çevik, H. (2025). E-learning styles as a predictor for attitudes towards distance education: A relational research with the teacher candidates. *Turkish Online Journal of Distance Education*, 26(2), 299–313.
- Eisenberger, R., Huntington, R., Hutchison, S., & Sowa, D. (1986). Perceived organizational support. *Journal of Applied Psychology*, 71(3), 500–507. <https://doi.org/10.1037/0021-9010.71.3.500>
- Gatrell, C. (2013). Maternal body work: How women managers and professionals negotiate pregnancy and new motherhood at work. *Human Relations*, 66(5), 621–644. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0018726712467380>
- Gornick, J. C., & Meyers, M. K. (2003). *Families that work: Policies for reconciling parenthood and employment*. Russell Sage Foundation.
- Greenhaus, J. H., & Beutell, N. J. (1985). Sources of conflict between work and family roles. *Academy of Management Review*, 10(1), 76–88. <https://doi.org/10.5465/amr.1985.4277352>
- Grönlund, A., & Öun, I. (2019). Contested motherhood: Mothers' work–family conflict and the workplace culture of motherhood in different welfare states. *Work, Employment and Society*, 33(4), 561–579. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0950017018760169>
- Herd, P., & Moynihan, D. P. (2018). *Administrative burden: Policymaking by other means*. Russell Sage Foundation.
- Hodges, M. J., & Budig, M. J. (2010). Who gets the daddy bonus? Organizational hegemonic masculinity and the impact of fatherhood on earnings. *Gender & Society*, 24(6), 717–745. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0891243210386729>
- Hooks, B. (2015). *Feminism is for everybody: Passionate politics*. Routledge.
- İlkkaracan, İ. (2012). Why so few women in the labor market in Turkey? *Feminist Economics*, 18(1), 1–37.
- International Labour Organization (ILO). (2022). *Maternity and paternity at work: Law and practice across the world* (2nd ed.). https://www.ilo.org/global/publications/books/WCMS_799247/lang--en/index.htm
- Kadić Abaz, A., & Hadžić, A. (2020). Economic activity of women and young women in Bosnia and Herzegovina under the umbrella of traditional views of women's role in society. *Economic Research–Ekonomiska Istraživanja*, 33(1), 2591–2605. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1331677X.2020.1751671>
- Kagnicioglu, D. (2017). The role of women in working life in Turkey. *WIT Transactions on Ecology and the Environment*, 226(1), 349–358.
- Kalaycıoğlu, S., Rittersberger-Tılıç, H., & Çelik, K. (2010). *Bakım sektöründe kayıt-dışı kadın emeğinin farklı aktörleri ve boyutları* [Different actors and dimensions of informal female labor in the care sector]. World Bank. Retrieved from <https://documents1.worldbank.org/curated/en/525531479491311874/pdf/110382-WP-P146215-PUBLIC-TURKISH-sibelkalaycioglu-R.pdf>
- Kaufman, G. (2018). Barriers to equality: Why British fathers do not use parental leave. *Community, Work & Family*, 21(3), 310–325. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13668803.2018.1462040>
- Kılınç, G. M. (2023). Doğuma bağlı izinler ve kısmi süreli çalışma uygulaması [Birth leaves and part-time working practice]. *Eskişehir Barosu Dergisi*, 8(1), 121–135.
- Leitner, S. (2003). Varieties of familialism: The caring function of the family in comparative perspective. *European Societies*, 5(4), 353–375. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1461669032000127642>
- Lipsky, M. (1980). *Street-level bureaucracy: Dilemmas of the individual in public services*. Russell Sage Foundation.
- Mackay, F., Kenny, M., & Chappell, L. (2010). New institutionalism through a gender lens: Towards a feminist institutionalism? *International Political Science Review*, 31(5), 573–588. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0192512110388788>
- McLoughlin, J., Marko, D., & Skenderović, L. (2023). *Analysis of compliance of the legislation of Bosnia and Herzegovina with Directive (EU) 2019/1158 on work-life balance for parents and carers and repealing Council Directive 2010/18/EU. UNFPA.
- Obradović, N. (2025). Bosnia and Herzegovina. In A. Koslowski, S. Blum, I. Dobrotić, G. Kaufman, & P. Moss (Eds.), *International review of leave policies and research 2025*. Leave Network.

- O'Brien, M. (2009). Fathers, parental leave policies, and infant quality of life: International perspectives and policy impact. *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, 624(1), 190–213. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0002716209334349>
- OECD. (2020). *Balancing paid work, unpaid work and leisure*. <https://www.oecd.org/gender/data/balancingpaidworkunpaidworkandleisure.htm>
- Özdemir, M., & Koçak, S. (2018). Predicting teacher emotional labour based on multi-frame leadership orientations: A case from Turkey. *Irish Educational Studies*, 37(1), 69-87.
- Ray, R., Gornick, J. C., & Schmitt, J. (2009). *Parental leave policies in 21 countries: Assessing generosity and gender equality*. Center for Economic and Policy Research.
- UNESCO. (2021). *The state of gender equality in education: Snapshot from the GEM Report*. Retrieved September 10, 2025, from <https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000375700>
- Uygun, S. (2014). The gender-related role of teaching profession in Turkey. *International Journal of Progressive Education*, 10(1), 46-58.
- Weick, K. E. (1995). *Sensemaking in organizations*. SAGE Publications.
- Williams, J. (2010). *Reshaping the work-family debate: Why men and class matter*. Harvard University Press.
- Yılmaz, M., & Zoğal, Y. (2015). Kadının işgücüne katılımının tarihsel gelişimi ve kadın istihdamını etkileyen faktörler: Türkiye ve Avrupa örneği [Historical development of women's participation in the workforce and factors affecting women's employment: The case of Türkiye and Europe]. *Econ World*, 20, 1-25.