

Institutional Child Care in Belarus

by

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study on Belarusian child care policy was two-fold: 1) to explore the extent to which the state in Belarus shares in and supports familial child care and, 2) to explore the alignment between current child care policy and parental preferences. The former is achieved by an examination of Belarus' child care policies through the lens of Leitner's model of familialism varieties. The latter is achieved through conducting a qualitative study with 13 Belarussian mother with pre-school children using a focus group method. My analysis showed that Belarus' policies differ between children under 3 years old and children of 3 to 6 years old. For the former group, Belarus' policies are characterized by optional familialism, while for the latter age group they are de-familialistic in nature.

Using latent content analysis, I found that overall, Belarussian mothers are satisfied with the current public child care system inherited from the Soviet times with its focus on quality and affordability and view it as an appropriate function for the state. However, women are not satisfied with the environment of optional familialism in the form it is implemented in Belarus. Although women like the option of caring for their young children at home while on parental leave, they would have liked to use the option of state child care sooner. I conclude that the optional familialism that is apparent in the current child care policy encouraging mothers to stay at home with their young children does not align with the preferences and values of mothers, particularly those from higher socio-economic strata. By and large, Belarussian mothers support de-familialism. Further studies of parents' experiences with child care should include fathers and parents of a lower socio-economic status.

PREFACE

This thesis is an original work by Iryna Hurava. The research project, of which this thesis is a part, received ethics approval from the University of Alberta Research Ethics Board, project Name “Child Care Policy and the Experiences of Employed Belarussian Parents with Pre-School children”, No. Pro0003908, June 18, 2013.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Purpose and Justification of the Study

Paid employment has implications for personal autonomy and gender equality (Orloff 1993), which on a societal level lead to economic and political implications. Supporting and increasing female employment is important because it enables women's command of their economic resources independently of their familial reciprocities, and enables them to establish "autonomous households" (Orloff 1993, p. 323)", which is essential in the struggle against child poverty (Esping-Andersen, 2002). Female employment also reduces benefit dependency of single mothers and low-income parents, and promotes better social inclusion.

However, women's access to independent income is still influenced by their roles as carers, which is still not a typical role for men (e.g. Lewis, 1992; Orloff, 1993). There is a vast body of research that has shown that "female employment rates generally drop subsequent to childbirth and that, in general, mothers of young children are economically disadvantaged across countries (Javornik, 2012). The employment behaviour of women with young children is largely influenced by child care policies and cultural norms. This thesis will focus on the role of the state in the provision of publicly funded/subsidized child care services and paid leave for child care.

In contemporary industrialized societies, where female employment is culturally expected and female employment rates are high, child care arrangements that enable mothers to "delegate" care for their pre-school children become very important. Unlike in traditional cultures, where child care arrangements with extended family are common, in industrialized societies child care is a nuclear family's responsibility. Parents with young children who want to participate in the

labor market usually must rely on non-parental child care for their children while they are at work. This care may take various forms ranging from institutional child care (day-care centers) funded by the state or provided by the market to paid or unpaid care by relatives, friends, or nannies.

Alternatively, parents of young children, typically mothers, can stay at home to provide parental child care. In Canada, for instance, many women with young children do not stay at home past the duration of their paid leave, as the recent statistics suggest. In Canada, 66.9 % of mothers with children under six years old are employed (Liu, 2012). Considerable variations exist among societies as to the participation of family, the state, and the market in the provision of child care (Mahon, 2002). For instance, child care for pre-school children in Canada has been largely a family responsibility. However, a sizable private market, has evolved over the last twenties years for non-family child care in response to the demand for child care due to increasing women force participation. According to Statistics Canada there has been an increase in the employment rate of women with children in the past three decades. In 2010, the employment rate for women with children under six years was 66.9 percent, up from 31.4 percent in 1976 (Liu, 2012). This has been accompanied by an increase in the supply of child care spots. In 2012, there were 811,262 regulated child care spaces across Canada, an increase of 612,269 in the 20 years since 1992 (Liu, 2012).

Also, until recently, the prevailing attitude to institutional child care in North America was that it is a poor substitute for parental care (Cleveland & Krashinsky, 2003). In contrast to the Canadian approach, which has placed responsibility for child care largely on families, Belarus, a former Soviet republic in Eastern Europe, historically has had a well-developed state-funded institutional child care system. Also, there was a wide acceptance of child care as an

appropriate function of the state, in fact it was a cultural norm. However, with the transition from a planned to a market economy in the early 1990s, after Belarus became an independent state, Belarus' child care policies have changed.

After the collapse of the Soviet Union, the government reduced funding for social security programs, such as universal health care, the pension plan, and universal child care. The state's inability to continue being a main welfare provider, due to financial constraint has led to the increase of the family's role in care-giving in general, and child care in particular. One of the policies that reflected this trend was introduction of an extended parental leave for women in 1992. Thus, after 1991 more families began to rely on family-provided child care compared to previous generations that relied on non-familial, state child care. It is unclear how individuals experience this increased expectation for familial care.

There is limited information as to how the current child care policies relate to maternal employment. Yet, we know that that 76% of Belarussian mothers with children under 6 years old are employed (Belarus Telegraph Agency, 2012). Also, it is not clear whether over two decades after the Soviet Union have changed the societal view of institutional child care as an appropriate function for the state.

Within this context, the purpose of this study on Belarus's child care policy is two-fold: 1) to explore the extent to which the state in Belarus shares in and supports familial child care, 2) to explore the alignment between the current child care policy and preferences of mothers with pre-school children.

Child care policy, and family policy in general, is inextricably linked with national identity, labor markets, gender equality, and economics, thus revealing a complex mixture of factors and ideals that combine to form family policies (Martin 2007; Mickucka 2008). Child

care policy research is part of family policy research (Bogenschneider, 2002) and falls under gendered welfare state research, which looks at the distribution of roles between the family, the state, and the market through a gender lens (Baker, 2007; Bogenschneider, 2002). There is an interest on the part of academic researchers to understand the commonalities and differences between different countries in terms of their family policies because that allows for uncovering the underlying gendered ideologies.

To understand the impact of child care policy, we must situate it within a broader conceptualization of family policy. The exploration of how the roles of the state, the market, and the family are played out in various jurisdictions in various time periods has resulted in a multitude of empirical and theoretical studies, leading to the development of a number of theoretical concepts and frameworks. Most of this body of academic work has been conducted on Western countries, primarily those that are part of the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) (Arts & Gelissen, 2002; Baker, 2007; Esping-Andersen, 1990; Hantrais, 2004; Fenger, 2007; Lewis, 1992; Mandel & Semyonov, 2005, Orloff, 1993; Pascall & Manning, 2000). Some research exists on the post-socialist countries of the Eastern bloc, but it still an insufficiently explored area (Javornik, 2014; Robila, 2012; Saxonberg & Sirovatka, 2006; Szelewa & Polakowski, 2008). Of the Eastern bloc countries, the former USSR republics have had the least amount of academic attention (Deacon, 2000; Fenger, 2007; Rys, 2001; Teplova, 2007). Although there are a few studies on Russia' and Ukraine' family policies (e.g. Teplova, 2007; Welosowski & Ferrarini, 2012) no studies have been conducted on any aspect of family policy research in Belarus. This study will start to fill this gap by focusing on Belarus' child care policy.

While it is important to examine child care policies from the standpoint of their impact on maternal employment, it is also necessary to examine how the current child care policy which was shaped during the transition from a planned to market economy in the 1990s, is experienced by individuals, specifically mothers with young children. From the perspective of families with children, child care policy should work to improve the condition of families with young children, and mothers in particular. By looking at how child care policy is incorporated into the everyday lives of men and women, we can explore an alternative account of the functioning and effects of child care policy. We need to understand whether or not these policies meet the needs of women with young children, not just employment needs, but other needs and values. This is an important question from a human ecological perspective, which prioritizes human wellbeing and betterment and looks at the complex interplay of individuals, families and their physical and social environments (Lokteff & Kathleen, 2012; Westney, Brabble & Edwards, 1988). This understanding will allow us to determine whether the current child care policies need to change to better meet the needs of families, particularly mothers, with pre-school children. There is limited information on the level of satisfaction of parents with these policies. Surveys of this type are not conducted in Belarus. In the absence of surveys, a qualitative inquiry is a good start. However, there has been no academic research into the perspective of parents in Belarus with regards to current child care policy provisions and how they are experienced by families with young children.

Structure of the Thesis

This study will include two parts, theoretical and empirical. First, I will analyze the policy environment of Belarus' child care policies since 1991. The theoretical inquiry will be guided by the following question: What type of familialism does Belarus' child care policy exhibit? The empirical part of the study will consist of an exploration of the lived experiences of Belarussian mothers and their experiences with the current child care system and child care policies. This will be achieved through conducting in-person focus groups with a sample of 13 Belarussian mothers. The focus group data will be analyzed for themes, and the discussion will explore ways in which the experiences of mothers shed light on whether current child care policy in Belarus meets the needs of mothers as workers and carers. More specifically, this qualitative inquiry will be guided by two research questions: 1) What does institutional child care mean to mothers of pre-school children?; Specifically, do mothers see child care as an appropriate function of the state? 2) What are the mothers' experiences with institutional child care? Specifically, are mothers satisfied with state child care services?

In Chapter 2, I review the literature on (gendered) welfare state concepts, with a focus on familialism. In Chapter 3, I describe the methods I used to analyse Belarus' child care policy and to explore Belarussian mothers' experiences with the current child care policy. In Chapter 4, I report the findings of the study, in Chapter 5, I discuss the findings and note contributions of the study to research, and comment on the limitations of the study.

CHAPTER 2

LITERATURE REVIEW

The purpose of this literature review is (1) to describe child care policy of the former USSR, (2) to describe the state child care system of Belarus; (3) to review gendered welfare state theory and applied research based on those theories, and (4) to explicate the connection between child care policies and female employment.

Child Care Policies in the Former USSR

Since Belarus' child care policies are greatly informed and influenced by the Soviet legacy, a brief review of the USSR child care policies is in order.

According to the original Work Code of the USSR issued in 1946, besides the regular annual vacation, working women were entitled to a maternity leave of thirty-five days before birth and twenty-eight days after birth, with full pay. Women working for collective farms were entitled to one month's maternity leave before giving birth and one month after, during which time they received their average monthly earnings (Pichugina, 1939). Although maternity leave was short, women could add on annual holidays to stay home for a few months after giving birth. After women returned to work they were expected to use public childcare services provided either by the workplace or by the state – though, in reality these were insufficient (Schurko, 2013).

In the 1950s maternity leave provisions were expanded: all working mothers were granted a fully paid maternity leave of 56 days before and 56 days after the birth, with extra leave of 14 days for births with complications or for multiple births. Further leave was added in 1959, giving mothers a right to 6 months of unpaid 'childcare leave' after maternity leave. Trade unions could give permission for the unpaid leave to be extended up to a year. However,

maternity leave was in fact quite short, allowing only 56 days before childbirth and 56 days following the childbirth is not a very long leave. The logic was simple: the role of women in industrial production had to be maximized.

The USSR's Family Law of 1968 confirmed the central role of women in the family, defining it as providing the necessary social conditions for a happy combination of motherhood with increased active and creative involvement in industrial socio-political life (Ginsburg, 1983). It was not until the 1980s that Soviet mothers were granted extended leave for childcare until the baby was 18 months old, although this leave remained unpaid. At the end of the 1980s, the leave was extended to 3 years. Thus, by the end the Soviet era women in the USSR, had a long maternity and childcare leave with relatively generous benefits, although the leave was available only to mothers. Improving leave policies and benefits was the state's way of expressing care for children, mothers and families and represented an overall increase in welfare (Nirk, 1989). It was also financially possible for the state to pay higher benefits. Nevertheless, providing such long leaves for women could be seen to contradict the Soviet ideology of full employment and gender equality. Little is known about the reasons behind this policy shift, for instance why a regime committed to full employment suddenly provided a long childcare leave, allowing mothers to stay away from the labour market for several years. One assumption is that reducing the number of women in the labour market was an attempt to deal with an emerging scarcity of jobs.

Historically, the former USSR had a universal child care system for pre-school children, including very young children. There, polices and services were created to facilitate the participation of citizens in paid employment, including state-funded pre-school child care and education, as well as secondary, post-secondary and advanced education, care of the elderly and health care (Burckley, 1981; Teplova, 2007). The Soviet State passed regulations, standards, and

guidelines on state child shortly after it was formed: "Declaration on preschool education", 1917; "The program of work of the child care centers", 1934; "Guidelines for child care teachers", 1938; "A typical program of education in child care center, 1984 (Schurko, 2013). These documents set out the basic principles of the Soviet preschool education: free and accessible public education of children of preschool age.

By the 1960s, in the USSR, publicly funded institutional child care and education provided by skilled staff was available to children starting at the age of two months (Teplova, 2007). This system allowed women to return to full-time paid employment shortly after giving birth. In the USSR, women's employment rate was very high. For example, in 1928, women made up 24% of the labour force, while in 1981 the figure was 51% (Pankratova & Iankova, 1978 as cited in Buckley, 1981). The uptake of the state-funded child care, both for nurseries and child care for children aged three to six, was proportionate to the employment rate; in other words, it was almost universal (Teplova, 2007). Just before the dissolution of the USSR, in 1990 there were 5,350 child care centres in the former USSR republic of Belarus, 70.1% of pre-school children in the republic were enrolled in these facilities (Belarusian Statistical Yearbook, 2001). After the dissolution of the USSR, the former USSR republics took different directions in terms of state child care provision.

Belarus' Current Child Care System

The majority of child care centres in Belarus accommodate children from three to six years old, where child groups are organized by age. A standard child care centre will offer care for three groups of 3 to 6 years old. The basic structure of a child care centre involves three main groups. The "junior group" accommodates children three to four years old. The "middle group" provides child care to children who are four to five years old. The "preparatory group" includes

children five to six years old, which most closely resembles the North American concept of kindergarten in that it prepares children for school. Some child care centres are nurseries, designed solely for children aged 2 months to three years old (The Regulation of Early Childhood Education and Care in Belarus, 2011). The services and programs are tailored to different age groups. Child care centers are equipped according to statutory standards. Primary health care is a very important feature of child care institutions (see Appendix D for details). State child care center staff are required to have at least a college degree in Education (The Regulation of Early Childhood Education and Care in Belarus, 2011).

To date, according to the Code of the Republic of Belarus on Education (updated in 2013), early childhood education and care in Belarus is free of charge and is funded by the state. Child care institutions receive their funding from local budgets and the local authorities decide independently how much money to allocate for each child care centre. Typically, local governments operate under tight/deficit budgets. However, some municipalities have stronger budgets than others, depending on the economy of the region. The cost of a child care space to the government is \$215 USD per month, including the cost of utilities and consumables, depreciation of equipment, and salaries for child care staff (Vorobei, 2012; Vorobei, 2013). Officially, parents are only responsible for the cost of food which is 26% of the total cost of child care (equivalent of \$40 USD) (Vorobei, 2013). The amount of \$40 USD represents 7.5% of the net average monthly income in Belarus (Belarus Statistics, 2013). Of note, this fee covers the cost of four meals: breakfast, lunch, afternoon snack, and dinner. Frozen food or fast food is not allowed. However, additional services such as dance lessons, foreign language lessons, and martial arts, which are not covered by the formal pre-school education curriculum, are explicitly a parental responsibility. Those fees depend on two factors: 1) how many additional classes a

child attends and 2) the rate charged by service providers. Private services typically cost more than those provided by state-funded organizations.

According to the Regulation of Early Childhood Education and Care in Belarus issued in 2011 by the Ministry of Education, pre-school education and care are governed by the sanitary and epidemiological standards that include requirements for the building, its lighting and heating, equipment (including the requirements for children furniture), outdoor playgrounds, and meals (The Regulation of Early Childhood Education and Care in Belarus, 2011). Each group of about 25 children is allotted their dedicated space which consists of a playroom, a bedroom, a classroom and a bathroom.

Welfare State Theory

Since the underlying focus of the study is the roles of the state and individuals in the provision of care for pre-school children, one needs to review relevant schools of thoughts on the topic. I will start with a review of theories that focus on the roles of the state and individuals in individuals' welfare and then more narrowly, in the provision of welfare for those unable to provide for themselves (e.g., children) and, the provision of welfare for those whose ability to provide for themselves is limited due to caring for others (e.g., mothers with young children). The relevant theoretical schools are welfare state theory and gendered welfare theory.

Esping-Andersen's welfare state model

Most discussions of welfare regimes begin with Esping-Andersen's welfare state theory. Esping-Andersen's theoretical framework serves as a starting point in analyzing the distribution of responsibilities among the state, the market, and the family and its implications for gender relations. His work, *The Three Worlds of Welfare Capitalism*, (Esping-Andersen, 1990) has greatly influenced comparative studies of modern welfare states in the last two decades (Baker, 2006; Fenger, 2007; Pascall & Manning, 2000). The central argument of Esping-Andersen

(1990) is that welfare states cluster around three distinct welfare regimes. He distinguished between the three regimes by the degree of de-commodification. De-commodification represents the extent to which social welfare policies allow individuals and families to maintain a normal and socially acceptable standard of living regardless of their performance in the labour market (Esping-Andersen, 1990).

Western Welfare States

Based upon the degree of de-commodification Esping-Andersen distinguished between liberal, conservative-corporatist and social-democratic welfare states (1990). Esping-Andersen (1990) argued that liberal welfare states such as the UK, Canada, the USA, Australia, and New Zealand are characterized by means-tested assistance, modest universal transfers, or modest social insurance plans. Liberal states invest relatively little public money in social programs and provide benefits mainly to low-income individuals or families. Thus, liberal regimes are marked by the lowest level of de-commodification.

The conservative-corporatist type, represented by the continental European countries, is characterized by a moderate level of de-commodification. The direct influence of the state is restricted to the provision of social insurance benefits related to occupational status. In countries with conservative welfare regimes, such as the continental European countries, employers' groups, with trade unions and governments, create social insurance programs. Social insurance benefits are typically generous for employees with moderate incomes who work full time and contribute the maximum amount to the fund. Those outside the labour force are often excluded from social insurance. This type of welfare state traditionally discourages women from labour force participation (Arts and Gelissen, 2002; Baker, 2007; Esping-Andersen, 1990).

In countries with social-democratic welfare regimes, such as the Scandinavian countries, the level of de-commodification is high (Esping-Andersen 1990; Fenger, 2007). Social programs are designed to prevent poverty and inequality by offering universal services to all citizens and by redistributing income through a progressive income tax system. These regimes have also made serious efforts to create jobs for everyone (including mothers with young children) and to establish relatively generous benefits regardless of household income or labour force attachment. In social democratic nations citizens pay high income taxes. However, employees with children are supported by public child care services, extended parental benefits, and leave for family responsibilities.

Welfare States of the post-socialist countries

Welfare state typologies such as Esping-Andersen's have mainly focused on affluent capitalist countries and have ignored other countries that do not belong to this bloc. In particular, post-socialist countries were often excluded from their analysis because of different historical and economic development as compared to the capitalist countries. However, some researchers have recently included post-socialist countries in welfare state comparative analysis. They pointed out that these countries provide an interesting environment for testing various theories and hypotheses because of their vast difference from Western countries and also among themselves (Aidukaite, 2004; Deacon, 2000; Fenger, 2007; Rys, 2001; Teplova, 2007).

To grasp the scope of the changes in welfare models during the transformation period in post-socialist countries, it is useful to start with a review of studies that analyze the specific elements of the welfare state during the Soviet period (Fajth 1999; Hartl & Vecernik, 1992; Manning & Shaw, 1998; Titmuss, 1974; Wilensky, 1975).

The most recognisable welfare typologies that included socialist countries were developed by Titmuss (1974) and Wilensky (1975). The typology of social policy developed by Titmuss (1974) placed the Soviet Russian model of social welfare in the Industrial Achievement-Performance model of social policy together with Germany and France. He claimed that Soviet Russia had developed a model of social policy that is based on the principles of work-performance and achievement, in which social needs were met on the basis of merit and productivity. Titmuss (1974) saw social policy as a substantial intervening variable that was capable of influencing people's choices and their behavior. A few researchers (Hartl & Vecernik, 1992; Poldma, 1999) have identified the negative side of former social welfare policy in communist countries, such as no indexation of benefits, poor quality of health care, and housing shortages. In contrast, other studies have pointed out the advantages of the welfare systems of the post-socialist countries. For instance, according to Deacon (1993), there was job security for many in the socialist countries, worker's wages represented a high percentage of the average wage and cheap or free housing and free health care were available to all. Manning and Shaw (1998), in their comparison of the Scandinavian and State Socialist models in relation to Finland and Estonia, have indicated that, despite some disadvantages of the socialist model that were undemocratically imposed upon Estonia, there was a general commitment to equality in the system as evidenced in free housing and low prices for consumer goods and services (e.g. food).

Welfare States of the post-socialist countries after the transition

After the collapse of the socialist regime, many Eastern and central European countries began their transition from the Soviet type of welfare state towards new welfare regimes. Some of them adopted neoliberal ideas and others moved to a mix of neoliberal ideas and the Soviet model of welfare regime (Aidukaite, 2004; Teplova, 2007). Welfare scholars have been trying to

place the post-socialist countries into existing welfare models or form an alternative typology with distinct groups for them based on analysis of changes that have been taking place in these countries during the transition period.

Deacon (1993) emphasized that the collapse of the communist regime put an end to not only a particular type of political and economic system, but also a specific type of welfare system. In 1993, he predicted that Eastern European countries would develop their welfare policies into distinct regimes that may lie outside the welfare typology described by Esping-Andersen. For instance, he labelled the social policy of Bulgaria, Poland, Romania, Serbia, and the Soviet Union as a post-socialist conservative-corporatist welfare regime. Other post-socialist countries, according to Deacon (1993), will gradually develop into one of the regimes delineated by Esping-Andersen. Hungary and former Yugoslavia, for example, will adopt the liberal regime, the Czech Republic will emerge as a social democratic regime, and East Germany will join the conservative-corporatist regime.

In the same vein, Fenger (2007) has applied Esping-Anderson's welfare regime typology to transitional countries. He replicated Saint-Arnaud and Bernard's (2003) hierarchical cluster analysis approach to empirically assess whether the post-socialist welfare states of Central and Eastern Europe can be classified according to any of Esping-Andersen's well-known welfare types, or form a distinct group of their own. He constructed a data set consisting of 19 variables to incorporate 15 Central and Eastern European countries into the analysis. These data include variables that characterize the government programs in a country, the social situation (e.g., unemployment, life expectancy, inflation), and the political participation. However, variables that indicate the extent to which post-socialist countries reinforce or challenge gender roles (e.g., maternity, paternity, and parental leave; child care provisions) are not considered.

Fenger (2007) distinguished between six different types of welfare states based on the similarities and differences between the countries that have been analyzed. There are the conservative-corporatist type (Austria, Belgium, France, Germany, Greece, Italy, The Netherlands and Spain), social-democratic (Finland, Denmark, Norway, and Sweden), liberal type (New Zealand, United Kingdom, and United States), former-USSR type (Belarus, Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Russia, and Ukraine), post-socialist European type (Bulgaria, Croatia, Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland, and Slovakia), and developing welfare states type (Georgia, Romania, and Moldova).

It should be mentioned that Fenger's typology is the only typology of welfare regimes that includes Belarus among other post-Soviet countries. The subgroup of former-USSR countries are similar to the conservative-corporatist type countries in terms of the total government expenditures, but the scores on all other governmental programs variables are below the three well-known Western European types. However, the biggest differences can be observed in the social situation and the political participation in these countries. Fenger (2007) argued that the post-communist European countries made a smoother transition to a market economy than the former-USSR countries. This is reflected in their higher levels of economic growth and lower inflation. Moreover, the level of social well-being in the European post-socialist countries is somewhat higher than that in the former-USSR countries, which is reflected in the infant mortality and the life expectancy rates.

Finally, Fenger (2007) stated that the developing welfare group of post-socialist countries are in the stage of developing into mature welfare states and that the differences between the post-socialist countries and the traditional Western welfare states are more considerable than the differences between the countries within any of those groups. Therefore, at this moment the post-

socialist welfare states cannot be reduced to any of Esping-Andersen's or any other well-known types of welfare states.

Gendered Welfare State Theory

In the past two decades, there has been an increased interest in gender and family among welfare scholars. This is in part due to demographic changes and the challenge of globalization (Aidukaite, 2004; Baker, 2006; Esping-Andersen, 1999; Javornik, 2014; Gauthier, 1996; Kamerman & Kahn 1981; Saxonberg & Sirovatka, 2006; Szelewa, 2012; Teplova, 2007; Thevenon, 2011). Also, increased attention to gender and family is a result of the feminist critique of research on welfare policies. In this critique, gender roles as they are reflected in social policies are as important for comparative analyses of welfare state policy as decommodification (O'Connor, 1993; Orloff, 1993; Sainsbury, 2001).

Gendered welfare state theory views the state as “not just a set of services, it is also a set of ideas about society, about the family, and - not least importantly, about women who have a centrally important role, within the family, as its linchpin” (Wilson, 1977 as cited in Javornik, 2014, p. 242). Gendered welfare state theory emerged as a result of feminist critique of welfare state theory. Reviewing the whole course of gendered welfare state research and theory is beyond the scope of this thesis. Therefore, I will limit my review to the developments that emerged as a result of the critique of Esping-Andersen's (1990) model.

Familialism Theory of Gendered Welfare State

Familialism is one of the analytical concepts developed by gendered welfare state researches. Since the feminist response to the Esping-Andersen's welfare typology (1990), it has become clear that the questions of family issues and gender should become central to welfare

state development. This is important from the viewpoint of women's citizenship rights and in particular women's economic autonomy (Baker, 2007; Lewis, 1992; Orloff, 1993).

The concept of familialism was developed by Lister (1994), McLaughlin and Glendinning (1994). They introduced the concept of familialism and its counterpart concept of de-familialisation, to refer to the degree to which welfare regime "packages" provide freedom from compulsion to enter or remain in family relationships. A de-familializing welfare state "... reduces the extent to which the satisfaction of individual needs is dependent on the individual's relation to the family" (McLaughlin & Glendinning 1994, p. 65) and "diminishes individual's welfare dependence on kinship" (Esping-Andersen 1999, p. 51). In contrast, the familialistic welfare state "assumes – indeed insists – that households must carry the principal responsibility for their members' welfare" (Esping-Andersen 1999, p. 51).

Addressing the feminist critique, Esping-Andersen (1999) re-evaluated the welfare regimes through the lens of familialism. In his research the concept of familialism is operationally defined by indicators that measure the intensity of familial welfare responsibilities, such as the percentage of elderly living with children, the percentage of unemployed youth living with parents, and the number of women's weekly unpaid hours spent on domestic obligation, while the concept of de-familialisation is defined through dimensions of social policies, such as public expenditure on family services and the percentage of children under 3 in public child care.

A similar welfare regime typology with a focus on the extent of de-familialization and modification to the "gender regime" was identified by Hantrais. In particular, Hantrais (2004) developed four categories for European countries: "defamilialized", "partially defamilialized", "familialized", and "refamilialized". The first category ("defamilialized") is represented by countries where family policy is explicit, coordinated, supportive of working parents, and

universal (e.g. Sweden and France). The second category (“partially defamilialized”) is represented by the United Kingdom, Ireland, Austria, and the Netherland where family policy is implicit, limited in coordination, and based on residence. The southern European countries are located in the “familialized” sector. Their family policies are characterized as weakly legitimised, uncoordinated, and poorly funded. Countries where family policy used to be universal during the Soviet era have undergone changes due to the shift to market economy are located to the fourth category (“refamilialized”). In these countries, family policy is implicit, uncoordinated, transitional, and unfunded (e.g. Poland, Hungary).

The welfare regimes of the EU member states that are post-socialist countries have also been studied through the lens of familialism. While some countries of these countries have explicitly supported familialisation by implementing conservative family policies that encourage women to leave the labor market, other countries have rather implicitly supported familialisation by providing market-liberal policies based on means-tested family benefits and reliance on private child care services. An examination of the developments of family policies in the Czech Republic, Poland, Hungary, Estonia, Slovakia, and Latvia indicates a tendency toward implementing familialist, gendered policies (Javornik, 2014; Saxonberg & Sirovatka, 2006; Szelewa & Polakowski, 2008). Slovenia and Lithuania support de-familialism encouraging women’s continuous employment and active fatherhood (Javornik, 2014). Similarly, since the 1990s, Russia experienced significant reforms of its socio-political and social systems which were associated with significant changes. According to Teplova (2007), these changes transformed the Russian welfare system towards a neofamilialism model. Teplova (2007) examined the development of the welfare regime in Russia from the 1930s to the early 2000s. Her analysis revealed that Russia has undergone significant structural reforms of its social,

political, and economic systems, including child care. She stressed that these changes involved a transformation in the Russian welfare regime, leading towards a neofamilialist welfare model and identified its main characteristics, such as compensating for childbearing, child rearing, and informal domestic labor; developing generous programs of pregnancy and family leaves (in terms of duration and eligibility) that employers are mandated to provide; women providing the bulk of care work in the household; and labor market regulations encouraging part-time employment. Teplova (2007) stated “[t]hat this neofamilialist model aims to support informal care work and seeks to elevate childrearing and informal domestic labor to parity with formal paid labor” (p. 299).

Leitner’s “Varieties” of Familialism Model

Sigrid Leitner (2003) elaborated on Espin-Andersen’s familialism approach by developing a framework of different “faces” or “varieties” of familialism as analytical tools for grasping the diversities in family policies in a cross-country comparative approach. Unlike earlier scholarship, Leitner (2003) argues that each welfare state combines both the features of familialism and de-familialism, and that leave provisions and services comprise a “package”, whereby all policy aspects together shape carers’ options regarding engaging in paid employment and/or care. Leitner (2003) stresses that welfare states differ in the extent to which they consider the uneven capacity of mothers to invest in paid employment and how these states as legislators and service suppliers use family policies to challenge or reinforce gendered caregiving. Familialistic regimes are usually considered to be those that enforce traditional gender roles. Since care is mainly women’s responsibility, it is assumed that familialistic regimes will strengthen the caring role of women, and thus reproduce the gendered division of labour. Leitner (2003) argues that familialistic regimes can specifically address gender equity and weaken the

breadwinner model of the family by way of de-gendering. De-gendered familialistic care policies provide incentives to ensure that care provision is equally shared between male and female family members. To achieve the goal of promoting greater gender equality in both paid and unpaid work, welfare policies are needed to both encourage and enable active fatherhood.

Leitner (2003) suggested including public policies which explicitly support the family in its caring function as an indicator for familialism. In particular, policies which actively aim at strengthening the family in its caring function can be found in the field of child care and can be distinguished by (1) time rights (parental leave) and (2) direct and indirect transfers for caring (cash benefits and tax deduction). These familialistic policies can be contrasted with de-familializing policies which aim at unburdening the family from its caring function, such as public provision of child care. Considering the extent to which the caring function of the family is promoted, Leitner (2003) defined four types of familialism: explicit familialism, implicit familialism, optional familialism, and de-familialism. These types were described by Leitner (2003) as follows:

The explicit familialism not only strengthens the family for caring for children... It also lacks the provision of any alternative to family care. This lack in public and market driven care provision together with strong familialisation explicitly enforces the caring function of the family. Within the optional familialism services as well as supportive care policies are provided. Thus, the caring family is strengthened but is also given the option to be (partly) unburdened from caring responsibilities... Yet, only in the optional familialism is the family's right to care not equated with the family's obligation to care. The implicit familialism neither offers de-familialisation nor actively supports the caring function of the family through any kind of familialistic policy... This type,

therefore, relies implicitly upon the family when it comes to care issues. Finally, de-familialism would be characterized by strong de-familialisation due to the state or market of care services and weak familialisation. Thus, family carers are (partly) unburdened but the family's right to care is not honored. (p. 359)

Based on defined empirical indicators such as paid parental leave and parental benefits for famialization and public child care provision for de-familialization in the field of child care, Leitner (2003) locates the EU member states in four clusters of familialism. In particular, she classified Austria, Germany, Italy, Luxemburg, and Netherlands as a group of countries of explicit familialism (poor rates of formal child care but payments for child care within the family). Greece, Portugal, and Spain were classified as implicit familialistic countries (poor rates of formal child care as well as a lack of cash support for child care within the family). Belgium, Denmark, France, and Sweden were in a cluster of countries of optional familialism (widespread formal child care and payments for child care within the family). Finally, Ireland and United Kingdom were located with the group of countries of de-familialism (widespread formal child care but a lack of payments for child care).

Szelewa and Polakowski (2008) applied Leitner's model to a comparative study of the child care policies of the new member countries of the EU. Two indicators of child care policy such as publicly provided child care services and parental leave provisions are taken into consideration and four policy types are identified. These are implicit familialism, explicit familialism, comprehensive support, and female mobilizing. Szelewa and Polakowski's (2008) classification significantly overlaps with Leitner's typology of familialism but with small modifications.

The first type, implicit familialism, comprises countries with family policies that are formally neutral and residual. They neither suggest the locus of responsibility for care, nor do they explicitly mobilize women to join the workforce. The lack of affordable and available child care leaves the responsibility of care almost solely to families. In the second familialistic combination, explicit familialism, the state supports some more active policies to support the traditional family model. The periods of paid parental leave are long (usually from two to four years) and the state does not subsidize any form of child care arrangements. The third cluster, comprehensive support, encourages families with dual earners. Families and women are both paid and relieved in their care responsibilities, and this also leaves some space for mobilizing two earners within family. Finally, the last group comprises the countries with low generosity of parental leave provisions. Parents may even have a universal right for parental leave, but parental benefits are not very generous. In this context, women cannot afford to leave paid employment.

Szelewa and Polakowski (2008) argued that their classification allows for the identification of cross-country variation of child care policies within the new EU member states. The countries are classified as follows: the child care policy in Poland are characterized by implicit familialism; The Czech Republic, Slovakia, and Slovenia by explicit familialism; Lithuania and Hungary are of the comprehensive support type; and Estonia and Latvia are of the female mobilizing type.

Javornik (2014) developed a new analytical approach to comparative child care policy analysis based on Leitner's typology of familialistic varieties and applied it to Central and Eastern EU member states. She proposed a composite (policy) index of state de-familialism for measuring the degree to which the state supports women's continuous employment and promotes active fatherhood. The policy index integrates policy provisions on leave and formal child care

services as regulated by law and other national contractual arrangements. Javornik emphasized that these two policies were selected because they require an active state role (Lambert, 2008 as cited in Javornik, 2014) and were targeted specifically at careers (Leitner, 2003 as cited in Javornik, 2014). For example, Javornik pointed out that income replacement levels while on leave determine who claims the entitlement. When payment is low, few men will be willing to use their right to leave as on average, men earn more than women.

Drawing on varieties of familialism theory, she chose eleven dimensions which provide comprehensive information about policy provisions for leave and formal child care services. In particular, total length of leave time, income support payments during leave, job protection during leave, flexibility of leave provision, parental entitlements, and father's entitlement were selected to reflect policies on parental leave. Then, six individual dimensions were compiled into a single (numeric) variable – the leave index. The day care index was formed in the same way by compiling five individual dimensions that characterize the public child care service provision regarding to the availability, affordability, quality, and intra-country disparity in service provision (e.g., allocation of child care spots, age of admission to day care, child care fees). Finally, these two indices are integrated into the composite index ranging between 1 and 8. The index score is then used to divide countries into groups from more de-familialistic to more familialistic. The higher the score the closer the policy to the state of de-familialism. Countries with a score of less than 4 are considered to belong with the familialistic type.

Javornik (2014) tested the composite index on eight post-socialist countries, the Czech Republic, Estonia, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Slovakia, Slovenia, and Poland. According to the calculated index score these countries are clustered around three different familialistic types. Slovenia and Lithuania are classified as de-familialistic. There, child care is viewed as a public

responsibility and the state supports the dual-earner family type. The leave generates incentives for mothers' continuous employment and encourages active fatherhood. Municipal child care accommodates all children aged between one year and mandatory school age. The child care policies in Hungary, Czech Republic, and Estonia have the key characteristics of the explicit familialistic model. In particular, child care policies are built on the principle of "subsidiarity". These states subsidize family care and provide practically no public child care for children under 3 years old. Finally, Poland, Slovakia, and Latvia belong with the implicit familialistic type. Financial responsibility for public child care centres in these countries has been delegated to local governments, and without direct funding from the state the majority of child care services have closed. The state invests neither in family care nor in public child care. Due to the shortage of public child care, families with child care needs can rely only on the private sector.

In summary, Leitner's typology of familialism has proven to be a useful tool for analyzing diverse child policies and grouping countries by familialism types. Many European countries, including original and new EU member states have been classified with regard to this typology. Such analyses assume the political structure, that is, the EU, as the conceptual foundation for analysis. While family policies in the Western world have already received considerable attention, the situation in post-socialist countries, including Belarus, remains under-analysed.

Gender Roles Welfare State Theory

As well, scholars who critically engaged with Esping-Andersen's 1990 welfare state model introduced another dimension, the distribution of gender roles, in addition to the relationship between the state and the family in the provision of care. This scholarship seems to

be concerned about gender equality first and foremost. An overview of some of these developments is provided below.

Feminist studies have contributed to welfare state research by stressing the inequalities between men and women embedded in work and social welfare policies. They drew attention to the underlying ideologies of familial and gender roles and expanded the analytic focus of mainstream welfare state studies on policies designed to harmonize work and caring (Orloff, 1993, Siaroff, 1994).

By contrast to Esping-Andersen conceptual framework, gender scholars (Lewis, 1997; O'Connor, 1993; Orloff, 1993; Sainsbury, 1996) argued that the welfare state is not just a set of services; it is also a set of ideas about the roles of society, family and women in it, both as welfare providers and users. The approach taken by Orloff (1993) and O'Connor (1993) is to elaborate on the Esping-Andersen conceptual framework to include a gender dimension.

In particular, Orloff (1993) and O'Connor (1993) argued that Esping-Andersen's concept of de-commodification has never been relevant for most women because historically, women have had a lower attachment and less access to paid work. They seem to refer to the generation of older women who stayed home to raise children – a phenomenon of post-war Western world. Therefore, categorizing the welfare state by how effectively it allows employees to maintain income when they become unemployed or when they retire is inadequate for understanding the effects of state social provision on all workers. Orloff's (1993) five dimensions are: 1) the pattern of social provision through state-market-family relations; 2) the impact of state provision on gender relationships (with the focus on treatment of paid and unpaid work; 3) social citizenship; 4) access to paid work; and, 5) capacity to form and maintain an autonomous household. Thus,

Orloff (1993) expanded on Esping-Andersen's approach in highlighting ways to address unpaid work, and power, and autonomy in private relationships (Pascall & Manning, 2000).

A similar approach in categorizing welfare regimes from feminist perspectives was taken by Lewis (1992). She stressed that gendered welfare regimes should be understood in terms of their relations to traditional family structures of the male breadwinner/female dependent (Lewis, 1992). She distinguished between social policies that placed a strong, moderate, or weak emphasis on the male breadwinner. For example, Lewis identified Ireland and Britain as strong male breadwinner states on the basis of social policies recognizing women as dependent housewives with low labour force participation (Lewis, 1992). By contrast, Sweden was identified as a weak male breadwinner model of the welfare regime as this country has achieved a high rate of women's labour force participation through child care provision, and extended parental leave (Lewis, 1992).

The alternative typologies that I reviewed above led to further conceptual developments and theory formation on the gendered effects of the welfare state. These include, but are not limited to, the taxonomies of Pfau-Effinger (1998, 2004a), Crompton (1999), Gornick and Mayer (2003).

Pfau-Effinger (1998, 2004a) argued that women's employment patterns are not solely determined by state intervention in the labour market and child care provisions. Culture, the dimension of societal ideas, meaning and values, should be included in any explanation of the historical and national variations in women employment patterns. Pfau-Effinger's (1998) five-type family model distinguishes different household models of male-breadwinner and dual-breadwinners arrangements according to gender division of labour in both in employment and care responsibilities of households. In particular, Pfau-Effinger (1998) identifies a typology

comprising five different gender cultural models. The family economy model corresponds to the pre-industrial situation in most European countries. It is characterized by cooperation of men and women in their own family business (farming, commerce, craft unit). There may be a strong sexual divisions of task, but men and women are dependent on one another for the survival of the family economy.

The male-breadwinner/female-carer model is based on a differentiations between the public and private spheres to which individuals are assigned according to their sex. Men are considered as breadwinners who earn the income, whereas women are assigned for taking care of the activities in the private household. Child care is a family responsibility. The male-breadwinner/female-part-time-carer model is a modernized version of the male-breadwinner/female-carer model. Men and women are all expected to work but a child's birth serves to redefine the women's labour force participation with a move from full-time to a parallel combination of part-time employment and unpaid caring.

Pfau-Effinger (1998) also identified two other gender cultural models in which women are not only more fully integrated into the labour market but in which the tasks of earning income and household responsibilities are not as rigidly defined and separated. The first version of these models is the dual-breadwinner/state-carer model. Men and women are not assigned primarily to others of two spheres and each individual is expected to work. When people choose to live together, they are both breadwinners who earn money for themselves and their children. However, the task of caring for children is perceived not as the family's responsibility alone but to a considerable extent the task of the welfare state. The second version of the dual-breadwinner household model identified by Pfau-Effinger's typology (1998) is the dual-breadwinner/dual-career model. This form is classified by the notion of a "symmetrical and equitable" integration

of breadwinning and caring provisions. The basic idea that men and women are not only considered equal, they are also interchangeable in labour force participation and as regards unpaid caring responsibilities. Childrearing is to a large extent the responsibility of both parents.

Pfau-Effinger (2004a) identified that cultural norms in Finland have shifted from a family economy model to a dual-breadwinner/state-carer model. In the Netherlands, cultural changes has led to an evolution from the male-breadwinner/female-carer model to the dual-breadwinner/dual-career model and in West Germany, the shift has been from the male-breadwinner/female carer model to the male-breadwinner/female-part-time-carer model.

Crompton (1999) is also one of the scholars who suggested distinguishing countries on their “gender regime”. The underlying assumption is that gender relations are constructed in a particular social contexts in a complex way, as they evolve from a multiplicity of origins. Crompton’s gender regime typology was ordered along a continuum. A continuum reflecting different patterns of male and female paid work and arrangements for care shows a range of models from traditional male-breadwinner/female-carer arrangements at the one end, to the more common arrangements such as dual-breadwinner/female-part-time-carer model, dual-earner/state carer model (the care work is carried out through the state), and dual-earner/marketised model (the care work is carried through the market). At the end of the continuum stands an idealized dual-earner/dual-career model in which an equal distribution of care work and labour force participation between men and women becomes possible (Crompton, 1999). Each of Crompton’s models is grounded in a set of assumptions about gender relations and division of labour. Normative expectations about the roles of men and women frame the state’s social policies, which, in turn, influence the choice of women to engage in paid work in the labour market or in unpaid work in the household.

Following Crompton's typology (1999), Gornick and Mayers (2003) point out that a new model of work and family life is emerging out of contemporary debates on the characteristics of the "women-friendly" state: the dual-earner/dual-career model. This model is compatible with various ideological concerns: it is gender egalitarian both in the labour market and in the home; it values and rewards care work for both men and women; and it emphasises child well-being. In order to achieve this model, a country should implement a flexible and composite package of social policies, which include three components: (1) family leaves that provide job protection and wage replacement for parents with young children; (2) affordable, high quality early childhood education and care; and (3) working time regulations aimed at protecting workers' rights to engage in caregiving without undue economic hardship and career sacrifices.

Child Care Policies and Female Employment

As I mentioned in the Introduction, female employment rates generally drop subsequent to childbirth and in general, mothers of young children are economically disadvantaged across countries" (Javornik, 2012). It is recognized that child care policies, such as leave for child care and child care services have a major impact on women's behavior regarding labour force participation when their children are young. Such policies vary considerable across welfare states, and consequently, the extent of mothers' economic disadvantage also varies (Smith & Datta Gupta, 2001). Below I briefly review the literature on the link between female employment, on the one hand, and child care leave and child care services, on the other hand.

Paid Leave Policies and Maternal Employment

Maternity leave is paid statutory leave granted to employed mothers immediately before and after childbirth. In addition to maternity leave for mothers, most EU countries have introduced parental leaves that are available to fathers as well. Under the EU law, employed

women are entitled to maternity leave of at least 14 weeks and to parental leave period of at least 3 months, but countries are free to provide additional time off, transfers, and other benefits.

While the length of maternity leave (14-22 weeks) and the wage replacement rates ratio (most over 80 percent for most EU countries) are quite similar among the EU countries, parental leave differs substantially in terms of total length and the proportion of the leave that is paid (Del Boca, 2015). For instance, in the Netherlands the paid leave is a 6 months and in the United Kingdom it is 18 weeks whereas a relatively long leave of 3 years exists in France and Germany. Denmark and Sweden have the most generous wage replacement rates. Moreover, in some countries such as Sweden women have the option to take only part of the leave and to work a reduced number of hours; alternatively they can postpone the leave until the child is older, rather than taking it immediately after childbirth (De Henau et al., 2008). Overall, the leave entitlements provided by Scandinavian countries are the most generous, whereas liberal welfare states such as the United Kingdom and Mediterranean countries tend to be the least generous.

Several authors, such as Del Boca, Wetzels, Gauthier, and Hatzius have classified countries according to the generosity of their welfare state and their policies for promoting the employment of mothers of preschool children. On the basis of the availability of publicly funded child care (as well as tax relief, maternity and parental leaves), countries were classified as providing high support (Sweden, Denmark, Finland, France), medium support (West Germany, the Netherlands, Norway) or low support (Greece, Italy, Spain, the United Kingdom, the United States). A relatively strong correlation between the supportiveness of policies and women's employment emerges except in the liberal countries (and particularly the United States and the United Kingdom), where low support from the state does not preclude high female labour force participation (Del Boca & Wetzels, 2008; Gauthier & Hatzius, 1997).

The relationship between maternity leave provision and women's labour force participation is a complex one. Although women remain unemployed when they are on leave, paid leave actually strengthens the attachment of women to the labour market, providing an alternative to exiting the labour market completely and thus playing a positive role in respect to mother's re-entry into employment. This is consistent with empirical research. Waldfogel et al. (1999) compared mothers in the US, Britain and Japan and find that young children have a very strong negative effect on women's employment. However, they found strong evidence that family leave coverage increases the likelihood that a woman will return to employment after childbirth in all three countries investigated. They conclude that the recent expansions in family leave coverage in these countries are likely to lead to increased employment of women after childbirth and in some cases even boost job retention.

Ruhm (1998), using data from nine European countries from 1969 to 1993, found that the right to paid leave raises the percentage of employed women by up to 4 per cent. Only about one-quarter of this effect can be attributed to an increase in women who are registered as employed but are absent from work due to the parental leave program. Ruhm (1998) offers two explanations. First, women who would otherwise choose not to work for pay may search for a job in order to qualify for the paid parental leave. Second, the scheme of parental leave may speed up the re-entry to work. The reason is that some mothers who would have quit their jobs to take a long leave period now find it worthwhile to return to work sooner in order to remain in their old job. Ronsen and Sundström (1996, 2002), who have studied the impact of family policies on the return to work by comparing the post-birth employment activity of Norwegian, Swedish and Finnish women, found that the right to paid parental leave, coupled with the legal right to return to their previous job, speeds up the return to employment for women.

Gustafsson et al. (1996) analyze labor force transitions around childbirth and the extent to which lower labor force participation rates of mothers are explained by different family policies. They compare German, Swedish, and British women and find that family policy schemes have a large impact on the behavior of mothers with respect to returning to work after child birth. These countries represent the three main types of different welfare states. The researchers conclude that the difference in total labour force participation of women is a result of fewer mothers entering the labour force after childbirth and more women taking longer to return to work after childbirth. Interestingly, although there is no such difference before the birth of the first child, the difference is more pronounced for second and third births. Moreover, Gustafsson et al. (1996) found that in Germany and Great Britain, women who are less educated take longer (over 2 years) to re-enter labour force compared to less educated women in Sweden who re-enter the labour force by the time the child is two years old.

Long parental leaves however may also reinforce the role of women as carers. The Annual Report for Equal opportunities for Men and Women in the European Union expresses reservations about extending leave time: “While this is a positive development, given the gender imbalance in the approach to caring, with the responsibility continuing to fall on women, there is a danger that long periods of leave could have a negative impact on women’s labour force participation, widen gender pay differentials and increase gender segregation” (CEC, 2002, p. 9 as cited in Hein, 2005). Research indicates that extended periods of leave have the effect of reducing future prospects for earnings and career development, particularly when the leave extends over a number of years (Gornick and Mayer, 2003). Ronsen and Sundstrom (2002) stressed that long absence from work may have large lost opportunity costs in addition in

reinforcing gender inequality. In particular, very long leave entitlement could have negative impact in women's career and may preserve an unequal division of labour in the family.

Child Care and Maternal Employment

Childcare, alongside wider employability issues such as qualifications and skills and labour demand, is crucial to mothers' abilities to join, re-enter and remain in the workforce. It is also crucial to for women's' ability to work full-time progress in their career. Childcare services play a major role in supporting women's employment; the more satisfactory the provision of childcare services is, and the more affordable is the cost, the more likely women are to engage in paid work after childbirth (Plantenga & Remery, 2005; Jaumotte, 2003). International research carried out by Plantenga & Remery (2005) on behalf of the European Commission finds convincingly that affordable childcare increases labour force participation among mothers. In Greece, the availability of public childcare services contributes to the workforce mobilization of a significant number of unemployed women (Plantenga & Remery, 2005). In Austria, a positive correlation was revealed between the labour-market participation of mothers and the availability of adequate childcare services (Neuwirth & Wernhart, 2007). However, the availability and affordability of childcare varies between European countries. National models of family policy and childcare systems are the result of the interaction between different social policy measures and pre-existing social and institutional features. Paes de Barros, Olinto, Lunde & Carvalho (2011) examined the impact of Rio de Janeiro's program that expanded access to free publicly provided child care to families living in the city's low income neighborhoods. The results indicated that access to free child care significantly impacted maternal labor outcomes. Employment rates were substantially boosted, while unemployment rates were reduced. The impact was particularly strong for newcomers to the labor force. For mothers who were not

working before being offered free child care, there was an almost 100 percent increase in employment rates.

Also, in facilitating female labour market participation, childcare promotes greater gender equality. Additionally, childcare facilities contribute to child cognitive and emotional development and socio-economic integration, help mothers reconcile work and family life, and may provide an answer to declining fertility rates (Plantenga & Remery, 2005).

Parents' Perspectives on Child Care Policies

In regards to my research questions about Belarussian parents' perceptions of institutional child care and their experiences with current child care, I was not able to find any studies on the subject matter that focus specifically on Belarus. However, there are several studies that explored Russian parents' experiences with public child care in Russia. Russia and Belarus were once part of the former Soviet Union. Both countries have inherited the main features of the Soviet child care system, therefore research on Russia may be applicable to Belarus.

Lyon (2004) explored a phenomenon of raising children in post-Soviet Russia. Her research was based on in-depth interviews with forty mothers and fathers in the city of Saratov that she conducted between 1998 and 2000. She found that three quarters of her participants considered institutional child care as an alternative for familial care and enrolled their children in nurseries and child care. In several cases, parents put their children in child care even when the mother was not employed at the time. Socialization, school readiness, psychical activities, and learning to a member of "the collective" were identified by the participants among the benefits of institutional child care for their children. However, the participants were frustrated with long commutes, child care staff neglectfulness, and the difficulty of securing a space in child care, in

the first place. Also, Lyon's study (2004) indicated that parents in post-Soviet Russia value the state-subsidized child care system and support its continuation and preservation.

Gradskova (2012) analysed parents' experiences of childrearing in post-Soviet Russia on the material of internet bloggers' entries. Overall, the Internet forum participants considered child care to be important for children well-being and development. In particular, mothers were satisfied institutional child care and believe it has a positive impact on their physical and emotional well-being and insisted on the importance of child care and its age-appropriate educational programs for children's cognitive development. Interaction with peers, development of communication skills, and scheduled routines were also recognized as additional advantages of institutional child care. Negative experiences were also shared. Parents wrote that they were not satisfied with waiting times, unofficial fees paid directly to the child care director, bribes for getting a space in a high quality child care, and lack of an individual approaches to a child's needs.

Summary of the Literature Review

In summary, in the first part of my literature review I provided a general overview of welfare theory and gendered welfare theory. I explored theories that focus on the distribution of the roles of the state and individual as they related to care and employment. I specifically focused on familialism. I also reviewed theories that looked at gendered welfare state through the lens of the nuclear family, the distribution of roles between the man and the woman as income earners and carers. The literature review showed that gendered welfare state research has introduced a range of concepts that help us understand the gendered effects of the welfare state and its numerous policies.

The review of applied welfare state research based on familialism showed that many western countries have been classified with regard to the familialism concept. The post-socialist countries have had the least amount of academic attention and typically have been described as having a common trend toward re-familialisation/neofamiliasm which means that the state reduced its role in sharing care with families (Hantrais, 2004; Pascall & Lewis, 2004). Thus, post-socialist countries have shifted towards familialism since the transition. Studies analyzing possible diversity of family policies in post-socialist countries are still quite rare (Saxonberg & Sirovatka, 2006; Szelewa & Polakowski 2008; Szelewa, 2012; Javornik, 2014) and typically have focused on new EU member states of Central and Eastern Europe, such as Hungary, Poland, the Czech Republic, Slovakia, Slovenia, Latvia, Lithuania, and Estonia. Former USSR republics that are the new EU members and to some extent, Russia. Belarus has not been included in this research.

As maternal employment is the underlying focus that underpins this study, I also reviewed the link between maternal employment and child care policies. Accessible and affordable child care emerged as a factor boosting women's employment rates. I also reviewed research on complex dynamics surrounding parental leave. Duration and level of compensation emerged as relevant features influencing women's labour force behavior.

Lastly, I reviewed the scarce academic research available on perspectives of parents on institutional child care. Evidence from post-Soviet Russia suggest that institutional child care is supported by parents. However, the aspect of child care as it relates to mothers roles as workers remains unexplored. From the literature review it became clear that there has been little attention to Belarus and no academic research focusing on the gendered welfare regime of this country.

What kind of a welfare regime does Belarus have? Does it encourage maternal employment?

What do mothers think? My study will address these questions.

CHAPTER 3 METHOD

This chapter is organized as follows. I start with an acknowledgment of my assumptions and biases as a researcher. Then I describe the methods I employed for both the theoretical and empirical components of my study. Then, I give a detailed account of the data generation, the sample description, and data analysis strategies for the empirical component. Finally, I explain how rigor in my research was ensured and what measures I have taken to comply with ethics standards.

Researcher's Voice

Feminist methodologists have challenged the assumption of positivists that research can be free of bias (Fontana & Frey, 1994; Reinharz, 1992 as cited in Breitkreuz, 2005). Consequently, feminists such as Reinharz (1992) have proposed that a more realistic, and ultimately more honest research orientation, is to name bias, or research voice, upfront at the inception of a study” (Breitkreuz, 2005, p.114). I believe that researchers and those who use research can benefit from the researcher openly stating the assumptions and bias, regardless of their philosophical and political stance.

The underlying assumption of my study is that being employed is beneficial for women, while having long absences from employment is detrimental in terms of economic autonomy and its accompanying material and non-material benefits. I acknowledge this my bias originating from being born and raised in the former USSR, a country where women embraced the opportunities created for them to participate in paid employment and have careers. Delegating child care to the state was a cultural norm when I was a mother of a young child, which I also supported. Yet, I recognize that the researcher should not allow her own biases to drive the research. Qualitative research affords an excellent opportunity to listen to people and explore possible diversity of perspectives.

Method and Data Analysis Strategies for the Theoretical Part

Identification of Belarus' Type of Familialism

For the theoretical part of my study, I used policy analysis as an approach to my inquiry. Pal (2006) defines policy analysis broadly as "...the disciplined application of intellect to public problems" (p. 14). In a similar vein, Dunn defines policy analysis as: "a process of multidisciplinary inquiry designed to create, critically assess, and communicate information that is useful in understanding and improving policies" (Dunn, 2004, p.2. as cited in Pal, 2006).

In investigating the topic of child care policy in Belarus in its relation to maternal employment, I had to first define what I understand by "child care policy". There is no unanimity in the literature regarding which dimensions best describe a country's family/child care policy. Initially, I understood it narrowly as policies regulating the state child care system. However, my literature review showed that paid leave, (duration and level of compensation) and child care service provision are used most frequently in family policy analysis frameworks to measure the extent to which a welfare state shares the task of child care with families, and that in fact, leave and child care services are two sides of the same coin (Misra et al., 2010 as cited in Javornik, 2014). Welfare policy literature demonstrates that these dimensions have the highest explanatory power for cross-country variation in maternal employment (e.g., Javornik, 2014; Leitner, 2003; Robila, 2010; Szelewa, 2006; Welosowski & Ferrarini, 2012). Thus, for the purpose of my inquiry, I have adopted a narrow working definition and define child care policy as a combination of two policy instruments: 1) paid leave for child care, and 2) the provision of child care services.

Analytical lens. To determine Belarus' type of familialism, I needed to choose an analytical framework. In order to choose an analytical framework, I undertook a literature review of gendered welfare policy research with a focus on analytical frameworks. At the onset of the study I already had an idea of state child care services as a focus of the study and the division of care between individuals and the state as the main underlying question. Therefore I was looking for an analytical framework that first, addressed child care services and second, addressed the relationship between the state and individuals with regards to the care of those who cannot care for themselves. Familialism as an analytical lens met these criteria perfectly. Although I reviewed frameworks that problematized the asymmetry of gender roles in caring, such as Pfau-Effinger (1998) for instance, I found them unsuitable for the purposes of my study due to their focus on the distribution of roles between the man and the woman as the members of an adult nuclear family unit, which I am not pursuing in this study. Thus, for the purposes of my study, I chose familialism as an analytical framework. Familialism, with its focus on social organisation of care and whether the state supports family vs. public care, perfectly aligns with the goal of my study to explore the extent to which the Belarus state shares in and supports family in its child care function. Among the various familialism models that I have reviewed I chose Leitner's framework which she explicitly identified it as a tool for analyzing care functions, such as care for young children and care for the elderly. This is exactly how her framework has been applied in past research. The dimensions of Leitner's framework, paid leave and child care services, are in perfect alignment with my research interest. As described in my literature review, Leitner (2003) identifies the existence or absence of regulations for paid parental leave as an indicator of strong or weak familialisation and the percentage of children under 3 years old who are in formal child care as an indicator of strong or weak de-

familialisation. Based on two basic dimensions of familialization and de-familialization, she classified the EU member states according to four types of familialism: (1) the optional familialism with widespread formal child care and payments for child care within the family, (2) the explicit familialism with poor rates of formal child care but payments for child care within the family, (3) the implicit familialism with poor rates of formal child care as well as a lack of cash support for child care within the family, and (4) de-familialism with widespread formal child care but a lack of payments for child care. However, recognizing that definitions may be subject to interpretation, I studied examples of how Leitner applies her familialism framework and used those as a basis to guide my judgment.

Operationalization. Once I have determined a suitable analytical framework for analyzing Belarus' type of familialism, I needed to determine the most appropriate way to operationalize paid leave and child care service provision. An operational definition of a concept under study explains how the concept is measured or manifested (Watt & Berg, 1995). Much of my operational definition of paid leave and child care services is informed by Leitner's work.

Leitner's framework of familialiam varieties requires the use of three indicators, particularly, for the analysis of paid parental leave, it is (1) the duration of the leave and (2) the amount of parental leave benefits, and (2) the duration of parental leave, and for the analysis of publicly funded child care policy, it is (3) child care enrollment rates of pre-school children (Leitner, 2003).

I also reviewed some of the applied research that used Leinter's theoretical concept or situated their research in Leitner's model, such as Javornik (2014), and Szelewa and Polakowski's (2008), to examine how researchers operationalized paid leave and child care services. These two studies are pieces of quantitative international comparative research. Since

my study is not a piece of comparative research, ensuring comparability, via designing and calculating indexes, is not a requirement for my study. Therefore, replicating the methods of the above researchers was never the intent of my study. Also, I noted that while Javornik explicitly included child care services for children up to 6 years, Szelewa and Polakowski's (2008) used data on leave and then on childcare for children aged 3-6 years old. I have decided to examine child care services for children up to 6 years as I could not find a reason for not considering a certain age group of pre-school children from analysis.

In summary, I will be examining two types of policy instruments: (1) paid leave for parents, and (2) and publicly funded institutional child care for pre-school children, that is, children under 6 years old. Lastly, I will only look at statutory, universal provisions, thus excluding provisions by local governments and "niche" programs for certain categories of the population (e.g., families with children with disabilities).

Method and Data Analysis Strategies for the Empirical part

Descriptive Qualitative Method

Because the purpose of the empirical part of this study was to explore and describe Belarussian mothers' experiences with child care, a descriptive qualitative method was chosen. The intent of a descriptive qualitative method is a basic description and summary of the phenomenon (Sandelowski, 2000). The researcher stays very close to data to produce such summary and description (Mayan, 2009). Descriptive qualitative is the least theoretical of all qualitative approaches to research. For example, while phenomenology or grounded theory is based on specific methodological frameworks that emerged from specific disciplinary traditions, a descriptive qualitative method tends to draw from naturalistic inquires and may have some overtones of other approaches (e.g. grounded theory, feminist) (Sandelowski, 2000).

Regarding the use of sampling in descriptive qualitative studies, any of the purposeful sampling techniques may be used. As in any qualitative study, selection of participants and research sites is intentional and purposeful; that is, participants and sites are selected according to their potential to best explicate the central phenomenon under study. Data collection techniques involve the use of open ended interviews or interview guides, conducted with individuals or focus groups.

Qualitative content analysis is the analysis strategy of choice in a descriptive qualitative method (Sandelowski, 2000, Mayan, 2009). Many qualitative researchers describe an inductive approach to the data, based on content analysis, and consider it the most fitting analytic technique in a descriptive qualitative study (Kitzinger, 1994; Krippendorf, 2004; Holloway & Wheeler, 1996; Mayan, 2009; Nyamathi & Shuler, 1990; Schroeder & Neil, 1992; Stewart & Shamdazani, 1990; Reutter & Ford, 1996). Qualitative content analysis goes beyond merely counting words; it involves examining text and discourse with the purpose of uncovering the underlying meaning (Weber, 1990). Content analysis can be divided into two different types: manifest and latent. In manifest content analysis the researcher looks for specific words used or ideas expressed. The words, context, frequency or extensiveness of comments and the intensity of comments are examined. In contrast, latent content analysis “[i]s the process of identifying, coding, and categorizing the primary patterns in the data” (Mayan, 2009, p. 94). In my study I used latent content analysis because it allows for coding of participants’ meaning within context, rather than what is expressed literally. Coding is a method for sorting and dividing the data into categories. In this process, transcripts are reviewed and data are coded into categories and sub-categories. Finally, themes that weave throughout and tie the categories together are formed (Knodel, 1995; Kreuger, 1994; Mayan, 2009; Stewart & Shamdasani, 1990).

The presentation of findings from a descriptive qualitative study involves a straightforward descriptive summary of the data that is organized in a logical manner. In the simplest of its forms, presentation of findings can be arranged by: time of occurrence; categories/sub-categories; actual or reverse chronological order of events; most prevalent to least prevalent themes; moving from a broad context of an event to a more narrow context (i.e. specific cases); or, describing an event from the perspective of more than one participant (Sandelowski, 1998; Wolcott, 1994).

In summary, a descriptive qualitative approach needs to be the design of choice when a straightforward description of a phenomenon is desired. It is an approach that is useful when the researcher is attempting to answer the “what” question. A descriptive qualitative method provides a set of procedures that require a purposeful sampling of participants and sites, interviews (individual or focus groups) as a data generation method, and content analysis as a data analysis strategy. For data generation, I used a focus group interview method, which I describe it below.

Focus group method. Fabiano and Lederman (2002) define a focus group method as follows: “Focus groups are a qualitative method in which a group of interacting individuals having some common interest or characteristics is brought together by a trained facilitator, who uses the group and its interaction as way to gain information about a specific research interest” (p. 1). Participants in this this type of research are selected on the criteria that they would have something to say on the topic, have similar socio-economic characteristics and would be comfortable talking to the interviewer and each other (Richardson & Rabiee, 2001).

One of the distinct features of focus group interviews is their group dynamic. Therefore the type and range of data generated through the social interaction of the group are often deeper

and richer than those obtained from one-on-one interviews (Krueger & Casey, 2000). Focus groups could provide information about a range of ideas and feelings that individuals have about certain issues, as well as illuminating the differences in perspective between groups of individuals. The uniqueness of a focus group is its ability to generate data based on the synergy of the group interaction. The members of the group should feel comfortable with each other and engage in discussion. Krueger and Casey (2000) stress that, for some individuals, self-disclosure is natural and comfortable, while for others it requires trust and effort. That is why they recommend investing time and effort in selecting participants for focus group interviews.

Focus groups need to be somewhat homogeneous in composition (Krueger, 1994; Krueger & Casey, 2000; Morgan, 1997; Morgan & Krueger, 1993; Stewart & Shamdasani, 1990). Diversity in group composition may lead to one being unduly influenced by another's position. Similarity can be narrowly or broadly defined based on the nature of the research being conducted. Generally speaking, the more homogeneous the membership of the group, in terms of social background, level of education, knowledge, and experience, the more confident individual group members are likely to be in voicing their views. Thus, heterogeneous groups are usually undesirable (Stewart & Shamdasani, 1990).

The optimum number of participants for a focus group interview may vary. Morgan (1997) suggests between 6 and 10 participants: groups of this size are large enough to gain a variety of perspectives and small enough not to become disorderly or fragmented. Also, Morgan (1997) recommends over-recruiting by 20 % to ensure six to ten participants. In order to maximize participation it is important to obtain an agreed date from the informants well in advance of the interviews and to remind them a few days before they start.

The process of data collection from focus groups is a delicate and complex one, for four main reasons: 1) data need to be collected not only on what participants say, but also how they interact with one another; 2) quotations need to be attributed accurately to individual group members; 3) the process of data collection should not interfere with or detract from the coordination of the group; 4) the method of recording data should not disturb participants (Sim, 1998).

Another unique feature and benefit of the focus group method is its ability to generate large amounts of data in a relatively short period of time. This is an important consideration for someone who needs to collect data within a limited period of time and with limited funding. Each group interview usually lasts approximately 1-2 hours, depending on the complexity of the topic under investigation, the number of questions and the number of participants. It is, therefore, ethical and good practice to inform the participants about the time commitment (Krueger & Casey, 2000).

Sample and data generation. The target population for my study was Belarussian women with pre-school children. Purposive sampling (Morse, 1991) was the method used to recruit participants for this study. This method provides informants who are best able to meet informational needs of the study, and allows for the most effective and efficient use of resources for obtaining a sample that fits the inclusion criteria (Morse, 1991). The inclusion criteria for this study were Belarussian mothers who were using or looking for child care for their pre-school children at the time of the interview. Families requiring care for at least one pre-school child but who also had school-aged children were recruited for participating in the study but the child care needs related to their pre-school children were the primary focus of this study. I recruited my participants in the city of Gomel. This is my home town where I lived and worked before

immigrating to Canada. That made it easier to recruit participants and to conduct focus groups because I still had connections there who helped me to find a space for gathering my participants. The sample of my participants includes only urban residents because travelling to rural areas was not an option for me due to financial and time constraints. I used multiple strategies for recruitment. I contacted my acquaintances and asked them to participate in my study. I also asked them to refer their friends, family, or peers to my study. I also approached parents at child care centres while they were picking up their children. I explained what the study is about and handed out leaflets with my contact information and the study information. I placed posters advertising the study at several child care centres. Each participant was given a reminder call the day before their scheduled focus group. Two focus groups were held at child care centers. The third focus group interview had to be cancelled at the last moment because most of the participants could not make it. However, it was held at a later time as a Skype conference call. I decided to conduct a third focus group despite of organizational challenges because it had participants from a different Belarussian city, which added another perspective to the data. The quality of data of the Skype focus group was not different from that of the in-person focus groups. For the participants, it was their first time participating in a research study using a focus group format. They told me that they enjoyed participating in my focus groups and appreciated the opportunity to share their child care experiences with peers.

The interviews were conducted in Russian, which is my native language and the native language of my participants. Russian is an official language in Belarus along with Belarussian. The study poster, informational letter/consent form, the study interview guide were also in Russian (see Appendix C). Although my research is a piece of overseas research considering that I was a student at a Canadian University at the time of writing my thesis, I was able to avoid the

challenges that overseas research typically faces, such as the language and cultural barriers. In my case, I had no difficulty establishing a rapport with my participants given that we spoke the same language, were from the same city, and I am a mother whose child attended a state child care centre in the same city.

The major challenge at that stage of my research was recruitment. None of my participants participated in research studies before, let alone qualitative research and focus groups specifically. Most of the participants and the people I approached had not even heard of "focus groups" before, thus I had to do much explaining.

Another challenge was time constraints. I only had 5 weeks in Gomel to recruit and conduct focus groups. Scheduling focus groups was a challenge to ensure that the time worked for everyone. I believe I would not have been able to do this work in such a short time frame if I were not a native of this city.

Each focus group lasted approximately 90 minutes. At the beginning of a focus group, I explained the purpose of the study, the focus group procedure and asked for permission to audio-record the sessions. The interviews focused on participants' experiences and perspectives about availability, accessibility and quality of current child care arrangements. All interviews were audio recorded. Immediately after each focus group interview, field notes were completed to reflect my observations and impressions. I transcribed the audio recordings of all three focus groups verbatim in Russian. One focus group interview was then translated into English by a qualified translator. To ensure the accuracy of the translation, a peer review of the translated text was performed by a native speaker of Russian who is also proficient in English and is a graduate of my Department. She also read the transcripts of the other two focus group interviews as peer review to ensure the quality of the data.

The written documents collected from the participants included an informed consent form and a demographic profile. The demographic profile is a standardized form to document information about the number and age of children, the age of participants, family and personal income, current employment situation, co-parent status, types of child care arrangements that mothers use for their children, and the number of hours per week children spend in child care. Demographic profiles were used as reference material to assist in the interpretation of the focus group interview data.

Data Analysis

Data analysis is a crucial step in the research study and yet the one that is most variable. In order to analyze the data effectively, the analysis must be systematic and verifiable (Krueger, 1994). I analysed focus groups data using the method that Mayan (2009) refers to as latent content analysis, "the process of identifying, coding, and categorizing the primary patterns in the data" (p.94). Latent content analysis is widely used by qualitative researchers because it allows for explicating units of meaning. Essentially, the method involves the researcher analyzing specific passages of text and interpreting the content in terms of what it suggests. Content analysis can be done by pencil or with the help of text cross-referencing software. Software-assisted approaches to content analysis are increasingly being applied to focus group data analysis because they maintain much of the rigour of traditional content analysis while greatly reducing the time and cost required to complete such analyses (Richards & Morse, 2007).

I began data analysis as soon as the first focus group was completed. I recorded field notes immediately after the interview to capture the key things, such as prevailing attitudes, opinions, etc. After the focus group interviews were transcribed, I read the transcripts and field notes, listened to the audio-recording to immerse myself in the details and get a sense of an

interview as a whole. The next stage of data analysis was software assisted. I used qualitative data analysis software, NVivo 9 (QSR International Pty Ltd, 2009), designed as a tool to record and manipulate codes. “NVivo is a code-and-retrieve type of program (Neuman, 2000), which allows a researcher to attach codes to lines, sentences, paragraphs, or blocks of text” (p. 439). This software package is “a good choice for [analyzing] interviews and other text-based research” (Lewis, 2004, p. 461). Nvivo is “a powerful yet easy-to-use entry-level qualitative analysis tool” (Durian, 2002, p. 738).

Each interview transcript was entered in Nvivo and stored as a separate electronic file. My initial coding framework was the interview guide questions. When this type of coding was complete, I was able to retrieve answers to each interview question across all three focus groups and compare the responses. Then I proceeded to coding at a more specific level. I went from an interview question to the next interview question and coded each focus group participant’s response to that question. For instance, in answer to the question “What are some of your challenges with your current child care?” in the first focus group, one mother talked about inconvenient hours of operation, another one brought up long commute. I coded these instances as “inconvenient hours of operation” and “long commute”, respectively, as sub-categories of the code "challenges".

Thus, my approach to coding was a combination of a top-down and a bottom-up approaches. Coding by interview questions represented a top-down approach. The interview questions reflected a top-down concept that I intended to explore. Once the data from the first focus group were organized by the interview question, the coding proceeded in a bottom-up fashion where new sub-categories are driven solely by the data as I did not have a preconceived framework. Those sub-categories were initially grouped under the categories that corresponded

to each interview question. As I proceeded to coding the second and third focus group transcripts, I already had my initial coding framework in place, which then expanded with the addition of new sub-categories from the other two transcripts. At this stage I began to notice that some of my bottom-up sub-categories belong with more than one top-down categories, while others did not correspond to any of the interview questions. . For instance, a bottom-up sub-category “child care centre staff” was assigned to three categories, such as “ideal child care”, “meaning of child care”, “mothers’ experiences with current child care system”. To “clean up” the coding, I re-grouped categories under more general concepts rather than by the interview questions. This resulted into a coding map of data represented by eight blocks: (1) positive features of the current child care, (2) challenges, (3) ideal child care, (4) mothers' perspectives on child care policies, (5) meaning of child care, (6) grandparents' role in child care, and (7) public vs. private child care. At this stage, I reviewed the frequency of occurrence of the sub-categories and their consistency across the three focus groups. The analysis consisted in constant comparison within each focus groups (between the participants) and between the three focus groups to identify commonalities and differences. Morgan (1997) indicated that what should be emphasized in a report of focus group findings is data which are consistent from group to group. He terms this “group-to-group validation” (p. 63). Therefore, analysis also looked at whether the identified concepts were present in more than one focus group. For those that were recurring, I selected representative quotes. Then I proceeded to the description of the findings based on the coding map I developed and presented the description of the findings to my supervisor. What became apparent as a result of the review is that, although I did manage to condense the data, in my description I did not quite tell the story of the data. Thus, the next stage of the analysis consisted of trying to align the research questions, the data, and the initial conceptual framework.

This involved re-reading the transcripts, making notes, reflecting on the research questions, and re-grouping, modifying codes, as well as creating new ones. The last stage of the analysis was identifying overarching themes and cross-referencing them with research questions.

Rigour

General Standards of Rigor in Qualitative Research

I was satisfied with the quality of the data that I collected from the focus groups. I also believe that the focus group format was a good choice of data collection method that yielded richer data than what would have been possible in individual interviews. It was often the case that one participant would bring up something that others reacted to, which led to a very rich discussion and helped me answer my research questions. In conducting this study, I followed Lincoln and Guba's (1985) framework for ensuring rigor. In this framework, the conventional standards of validity and reliability, which make for rigor in quantitative research, are re-conceptualized as trustworthiness. Trustworthiness is established through credibility, transferability, dependability and confirmability. I used them as guiding principles to do my research.

Credibility (comparable with internal validity) is a "fit between respondents' views and the researcher's representation of them" (Schwandt, 2001 as cited in Tobin & Begley, 2004, p. 391). In this study, credibility was achieved through peer review, "the process of engaging a colleague (another researcher) in an extended and extensive discussion of one's findings, conclusions, and tentative analyses" (Morse & Field, 1995 as cited in Mayan, 2001, p. 28). My peer reviewers were my supervisor and a native speaker of Russian who is also proficient in English and is a graduate of my Department. Transferability (comparable with external validity) refers to the generalizability of inquiry that is the applicability of the research findings to other

contexts (Lincoln and Guba, 1985). In qualitative research, transferability is achieved by giving a detailed description of the participants' characteristics, so that users of the research can make their own judgment regarding applicability of the findings to other populations and contexts.

Dependability (comparable with reliability) equates to auditability. Researchers can ensure dependability by keeping an audit trail, the purpose of which is to demonstrate that “the process of research is logical, traceable and clearly documented” (Schwandt, 2001 as cited in Tobin & Begley, 2004, p. 391). My audit trail consisted of memos and a journal in NVivo. The purpose of a journal was to reflect on personal biases, thoughts, and feelings that may influence my interpretations (Szabo & Strang, 1997). The memos were a logistical tool to organize my analytic work with the data and to ensure that I applied the analytical tools consistently and systematically. I also took steps to ensure the quality of the data through “cleaning” the focus group transcripts by listening to the audio recordings and checking them against the transcripts, to ensure the accuracy of the transcription.

Confirmability (comparable with objectivity) is concerned with establishing that the researcher’s interpretations are not products of his/her imagination and can be traced to the data (Tobin & Begley, 2004). As was the case with dependability, confirmability was achieved through an audit trail and by having my academic supervisor review the various iterations of the coding framework, the participants’ quotes, and the description of the findings.

Ethics

Informed Consent

To ensure the study was conducted in an ethical manner, I gave my participants informed consent forms and explained them thoroughly. I obtained written consent from all of my participants. The consent letter outlined that participation is voluntary and that there would be no consequences to mothers if they choose not to answer particular questions within the focus group interviews. It also stated that if a person withdrew from the study after completing the focus group interview, his/her data would be removed from the study (destroyed by shredding their documents) and would not be used in analysis. The consent form also explained that the results from this study would be used in a thesis project and possibly in journal articles as well as public presentations, but individual results and names of participants would not be disclosed.

Anonymity and Confidentiality

I ensured anonymity by not using unique identifiers (such as names of persons, names of child care centers, neighbourhoods, and streets) in the focus group transcripts and this thesis. I achieved confidentiality by: 1) safeguarding the data from becoming available to unauthorized persons, and 2) not disclosing private information in this thesis. I prevented unauthorized access by using the following measures: 1) storing the electronic documents in locations unavailable to anybody except me or my supervisor (my personal password protected laptop computer and the computer at my university office which is also password protected); and 2) keeping paper materials in a locked cabinet. With regards to non-disclosure of private information, I considered all information shared by the participants as confidential. My obligation with respect to confidentiality is ensuring that, in a report on the study, identity of participants cannot be inferred. This was achieved by a careful use of sensitive data, such as verbatim quotes and

descriptions involving demographic characteristics. I will store the transcripts and demographic profiles and informed consent forms for 5 years since the consent forms were signed. After 5 years these documents will be destroyed.

CHAPTER 4

FINDINGS

The Findings chapter consists of two parts. In the first part, I describe the results of my exercise of locating Belarus in Leitner's model of familialism varieties. In the second part, I describe the findings of my qualitative inquiry into the experiences of 13 Belarussian mothers with institutional child care.

Belarus: between Optional Familialism and De-familialism

In order to locate Belarus in Leitner's model of familialism varieties, one needs to describe Belarus' child care policies with regards to child care services and leave. Among the former Soviet republics Belarus is a peculiar case. Belarus has been described as a market economy with a socialist face (Belarus: Choices for the future, 2000). Although much of its social policy is the legacy of the USSR social policy, certain modifications were introduced to it since the country became an independent state in 1991. In particular, Belarus' child care policies, such as paid leave, the state child care system, were affected by new developments differently.

Paid leave provisions, which is one dimension of Leitner's model, are provided by the Belarussian State in the form of two different policy instruments, (1) a maternity leave for the mother to prepare for and recover from childbirth, and (2) parental leave, also known in Belarus, and some former USSR countries as a "decreed leave". These provisions are universal and guaranteed by law. The latter is referred to in international literature as "extended parental leave".

Maternity leave is 126 days¹ covered at the rate of 100 per cent of the mother's wage she earned at the time of starting her maternity leave (for students, 100% of the scholarship¹; for

¹ Women who live in contaminated areas after the Chernobyl accident are entitled to a maternity leave of 146 days (Law on State Benefits for Families with Children, 2012).

unemployed women, 100 % of the unemployment benefit). The minimum monthly amount is 50% of the national average subsistence income amount. The maximum monthly amount is three times the national average wage in the month before a woman's due date (Social security programs, 2014). The parental leave is three years maximum in duration starting from the last day of the maternity leave. It is compensated at a flat rate of 35% of Belarus' average monthly wage, which is \$190.8 USD for the first-born, 40% for the second and subsequent children, and 45% for a disabled child. The extended parental leave can be taken a mother or a father, an adoptive parent or a guardian (Social security programs, 2014). However, practice shows that only around 1% of Belarusian men decide to take parental leave due to the low monetary value of the parental leave benefit (Borowska, 2013). The job that the maternity leave/parental leave recipient holds at the time of starting the leave is secured for the duration of the leave by the Belarus labour laws.

Apart from the above policy instruments, there are many other provisions for families with children. These include such universal benefits as a birth grant and paid sick child leave up to 14 consecutive days to care for children under 14 years of age, compensated at the rate of 100 per cent of average wage. There are also niche benefits, such as a cash benefit for the care of a disabled child up to 16 years of age, a cash benefit for a child with HIV up to 16 years of age. For single mothers, the aforementioned cash benefits are increased by 25% (Belarusian telegraph agency, 2014).

Looking at the leave provisions in Belarus, which is a combination of maternity leave and extended parental leave, through the lens of Leitner's model, namely, the duration and level of compensation dimension, one can see that the Belarusian state does financially support familial care and for a significant period of time. A generously compensated, but relatively short

maternity leave and a long (3 years), less generously compensated parental leave is still generous compared to most EU countries. The Belarus state can be said to support familialism. However, the state's financial support to parents and the return to employment guarantee stop short at the end of the 3-year extended parental leave. After it is over, parents need to make alternative arrangements for child care, such as the state child care system as an option.

As to the child care provision, the other dimension of Leitner's model, the Belarussian state provides child care services starting from the age of 2 months, similar to what the Soviet state provided. Currently, according to the Code of the Republic of Belarus on Education (updated in 2013), early childhood education and care in Belarus is free of charge and is funded by the state. Child care institutions receive their funding from local budgets and the local authorities decide independently how much money to allocate for each child care centre. Typically, local governments operate under tight/deficit budgets. However, some municipalities have stronger budgets than others, depending on the economy of the region. The cost of a child care space to the government is estimated at \$215 USD per month, including the cost of utilities and consumables, depreciation of equipment, and salaries for child care staff (Vorobei, 2012; Vorobei, 2013). Officially, parents are only responsible for the cost of food which is 26% of the total cost of child care service (equivalent of \$40 USD) (Vorobei, 2013). The amount of \$40 USD represents 7.5% of the net average monthly income in Belarus (Belarus Statistics, 2013). Of note, this fee covers the cost of four meals: breakfast, lunch, afternoon snack, and dinner. Frozen food and fast food are not allowed. However, additional services such as dance lessons, foreign language lessons, and martial arts, which are not covered by the formal pre-school education curriculum, are explicitly a parental responsibility. Thus, the Belarussian state does assume significant responsibility for child care, which points to de-familialism.

As explained in the literature review, in Leitner's model, state child care provision is measured by child care enrollment rates. Significant differences are uncovered when one looks at children of different age brackets: 17% for children under 3 years old and 83% for children 3 years to 6 years old.

The information I presented above tells us that Belarus' child care policies, through its paid leave and child care services, combine the features of both familialism and de-familialism. This is in alignment with Leitner's thesis that it is the combined effect of policies that give a country a certain character. To re-iterate, Leitner's model proposes four "ideal" types: explicit familialism, implicit familialism, optional familialism, and de-familialism. Belarus is definitely not an example of implicit familialism as it compensates family child care rather generously. It is not an example of explicit familialism because in explicit familialism, family care, although compensated by the state, is not an option, but the only option optional familialism and de-familialism describe Belarus' child care policies the best.

As follows from my review of paid leave and state child care services, the Belarussian state seems to differentiate between mothers based on their child's age. For pre-school children, the demarcation line is 3 years of age. For mothers of children under 3 years old, the state has two major supports in place. It provides a paid maternity and parental leaves with the combined maximum duration of 3 years, backed up by guaranteed return to the job that the mother held upon starting her maternity leave. At the same time, the state also funds child care for very young children. These are two very different policy tools that in principle enable two very different courses of action for mothers. Those mothers who wish to stay at home to care for their young children can take advantage of the extended maternity leave. Those mothers who wish to return to work can do so and enrol the child in a state child care as soon as the child turns 2

months old. At face value, these are the two options that are equally available to Belarussian mothers. Thus, Belarus is an example of optional familialism when it comes to children under 3 years old, as for this age group, the state supports both familial care and parental employment, at least on paper. The intent seems to support those parents who want to care for their children at home as well as support those parents who want to resume employment soon after childbirth. (Interestingly, the state does not prevent parents from taking a parental leave and collecting parental leave payments and having their children enrolled in state child care at the same time.) Whether these policies actually work as intended is a separate question.

The child care policy for mothers of pre-school children of 3 to 6 years of age is diametrically different from that for mothers of younger children. The Belarussian state only supports mothers by providing affordable institutional child care in state-funded child care centres. The state assumes full responsibility for the care of a 3 to 6 year old children for the day, while their mothers are at work and transfers only a fraction of the child care service cost to the family. No financial support is available from the state for mothers who choose to care for their children at home, if the child is older than three. This type of a policy environment represents de-familialism in Leitner's framework. By dropping all job security and financial provisions, it de-incentivises familial care; at the same time, by providing state child care, it enables and encourages parents to continue employment.

It is not clear whether Belarussian women want to be supported in the way that the current state policies support them. Specifically, it is not clear whether Belarussian women want to stay at home with the child for 3 years, with the parental leave benefits being their source of their income, or return to work and place the child in institutional child care for the day. Similarly, another important question is whether or not the current policy for mothers of

children, where they are enabled to send their children to child care, works well for mothers of older pre-school children. I attempted to answer these questions in my qualitative inquiry of Belarussian mothers' lived experiences with child care, which I discuss below.

Focus Group Sample Characteristics

The sample of my study was 13 participants. Although I was hoping to recruit both mothers and fathers into the study, I was able to recruit only mothers. The participants were Belarus natives and residents of two Belarussian cities, Gomel (a major urban centre) and Minsk (the capital of Belarus), although the majority were Gomel residents. The participants' mean age was 32.9 years (see Table 1 for details). All women had a college or university degree (with the exception of one woman whose highest level of education was high school) and were in professionals and skilled workers (an engineer, an economist, an accountants, a designer, and teachers).

Most participants had either one child or two children. Three participants were on parental leave at the time of their focus group interview, while the rest were employed. The children of the women who were on parental leave did not attend child care; the children of these women were under 3 years of age. The rest of the women had their children enrolled in state child care, full-time; the mean age of these children was 4.3 years.

All women who were employed worked full-time, with the exception of one mother who worked part-time as a designer (the child of the part-time employed woman attended child care full-time). All participants were married with the exception of one single mother. The married participants' husbands were employed full-time. The participants' mean annual family income was \$18,957 USD. For the majority of the participants, their family incomes were above \$10,000 USD per year, but below \$30,000 USD per year. The average annual income in Belarus is

\$6,000 USD (Statistics Belarus, 2013). Thus, overall my sample represented women of higher than average socio-economic status.

Table 1

Demographic profile

		Number of participants
Age of participants	20-29	5
	30-39	5
	40-49	3
Number of children	one	6
	two	5
	three	1
	four	1
Family income	\$5,000-9,999	2
	\$10,000-14,999	4
	\$15,000-19,999	1
	\$20,000-29,999	4
	\$40,000-49,999	1
Education	High school	1
	College	4
	University degree	8
Occupation	Professional	9
	Quasi-professional	3

	Blue collar	1
Employment situation	Employed full-time	9
	Employed part-time	1
	Unemployed (parental leave)	3
Marital status	Single	1
	Married	12
Number of children		
Age of children	0-1	1
	1-3	4
	3-5	8
	5-6	5

Key Themes

The focus group interview data had several themes. My first research question was “What does institutional child care mean to mothers of pre-school children?” The themes generated from this research question included: (1) institutional child care enables mothers to continue labor force participation, (2) institutional child care is a substitute for parental care, and (3) grandparents' care is not a substitute for institutional/parental child care. My second research question was: “What are the mothers’ experiences with institutional child care?”. I identified four themes: (1) satisfaction with quality of institutional child care, (2) dissatisfaction with overcrowding of institutional child care centers, (3) challenges with access to institutional child care, and (4) satisfaction with cost of institutional child care.

Meaning of Child Care

Institutional Child Care Enabling Mothers to Continue labour Force Participation

As mentioned above, most of the participants were well-educated. They felt that their education needed to be utilized and had high career aspirations. They wanted to realize themselves not only as mothers, but also as workers. These women had career jobs: the women who have returned to work appreciated the opportunity to do so, the women who were on leave were looking forward to returning to their jobs. Public child care provided them with such an opportunity.

[B]ut we never discussed the option of not putting him in a child care centre and staying at home till he goes to school... no way. I already miss my work. I do not want to be a stay-at-home mom. It is completely not for me. I am a very active and determined person, I want to continue my professional career and my family encourages me to do that.

Mother from Focus Group 2

Women who stayed at home with their young children rather than returning to work and putting the child in public child care were an exception. For those mothers who had university degrees it simply did not make sense to stay at home, especially for those who paid out of pocket for their education; they expected return on their investment. In the following statement, one participant describes her perspective on combining motherhood and employment:

I think it is not typical in our society for a women to be only a stay-at-home mother. Of course, things change and some families can afford to have the wife to take care of the kids where she doesn't need to work, I mean there is no financial need. But ...you know, it is kind of an exception. And in my case, it would be completely irrational. I graduated from a university. My degree cost us a lot of money, Of course, I wouldn't want to waste all that money by sitting at home with my kid. So, for us, right now, there is only one problem, it's finding a child care centre that will be close to our house.

Mother from Focus Group 3

The participants discussed their views on institutional child care in tandem with their views on Belarus' leave policies. The women said these policies do not work for them.

If they had a choice, they would have preferred their parental leave be shorter than 3 years, which means they would have liked to be able to put their children in child care before the age of three. However, lack of child care spots for younger children has forced them to stay at home. The women indicated that the standard 3 year parental leave does not work well for them financially and career-wise as it is easy to lose one's qualifications and skills while staying at home for 3 years. This is a consequence of a dynamic job market and a quickly changing technology. Moreover, one of my participants noted that such a long parental leave and an acute shortage of spaces for children younger than 3 years old led her to the decision to not have another child. She gave her opinion on parental leave as follows:

Of course, it is emotionally rewarding to take care of my child while being on parental leave with him. But, when I think about a second child, yeah..., there is no way I can take another parental leave for three years. It is not possible for me and my family. I realized that it's hard for me to stay at home for 3 years straight. That has a negative impact on me. In addition, I feel that gradually I am losing all my job skills. To be honest, about one year after my son was born, I realized that I want to come back to my work. Of course, there was a lot of stress and pressure on me in my job, but I felt very confident and needed. Several times over the last year I was approached and offered a promotion, for which I would have to break off my maternity leave. Though I really wanted to take up that promotion, but, I wasn't able to find a nursery for my son. My parents are still working and do not plan to retire any time soon. It is completely understandable. How can you live on a meagre state pension? ...[S]o, in this case, I cannot understand why there are no alternatives for those mothers who do not want to stay at home for three years straight and want to return to work sooner. Why doesn't the state open more nursery groups where I can put my child. I am even willing to pay, up to 2 million roubles (equivalent to \$ 200 USA) for a good quality nursery care. By good quality, I mean fewer children in the group and professional child care staff.

Mother from Focus Group 3

In the experience of my participants, the amount of the parental leave benefit of \$190.8 USD (The Act of 29 December 2012 “On State benefits for families with children”) was not sufficient and did not replace enough of the income that the mothers were earning before the leave to maintain an adequate standard of living. All participants agreed that the parental leave

payment alone cannot be relied on to care for a child. For example, one mother pointed out that the parental leave payment covers neither the child's nor the mother's necessities:

I think that if the government is interested in a high fertility rate, it should pay a mother her average wage she earned in her most recent job she had before having her child. Our parental leave benefit is meagre. It does not cover my needs or the child's needs. If you do not breastfeed and need to buy formula, it is a huge impact on the family budget. It is so expensive. I am not even talking about baby clothes' cost, it is almost just the same as for grown-ups.

Mother from Focus Group 2

Another mother said:

I believe that the state should pay the mother's average wage earned prior to child's birth instead of parental leave benefits. Parental leave benefits maybe are enough to cover the needs of the child, but for the mother's necessities [it] is almost nothing.

Mother from Focus Group 2

The situation with parental leave benefit is even worse for lone mothers. One participant shared the story of her close friend who became a single mother after her husband's death:

I have a close friend whose husband died in a car accident when she was pregnant. She has no living parents, her husband's parents live far away, and she has nobody to help her. Somehow she was able to survive for a year on savings and donations from friends. When her son turned one, she started working, because the money ran out. She leaves her son with a neighbor who does not ask a lot of money for babysitting but likes to drink. She has no money for a good nanny, child care centres do not accept children under 2 years old, and nurseries around the city have no available spots for the nearest two years. Every day she is frenzied by fear for her child, but they can't survive on her parental leave benefit only".

Mother from Focus Group 2

The solution that the mothers proposed was to reduce the parental leave duration to 2 or 2.5 years, while increasing the payments. They reasoned that the total transfer of money from the state would not change, but the monthly payment amount would be higher, which is a win-win situation for both mothers and the state. This is illustrated by the following quote:

Our parental leave benefit doesn't let us stay at home for too long. In addition to that, as I said, I needed to return to work, I would have lost it otherwise. All in all, three years of intermission is quite a long time. Maybe it would make sense for the government to reduce the three-year maternity leave to, say, 2 or 2 and half years and increase child benefits instead.

Mother from Focus Group 3

Institutional Child Care as a Substitute for Parental Care

The majority of participants strongly believed that child care is vital for children's well-being. The most important reasons for enrolling children in child care were interaction and socialization with peers and learning social behaviors. Almost all of my participants stressed that child care was crucial for early socialization. For instance, two mothers from different focus groups expressed their ideas about the necessity of a child's interaction with peers as follows:

[A] child care center gives more opportunities for communication and socialization, and... you know, I mean not only when children are playing with each other. They eat together, help each other to get dressed and undressed, they craft, color, learn to read and write together. I think, it's important for them.

Mother from Focus Group 3

A child care centre has a social advantage, a child has to be in social surrounding, it provides communication, then comes school. Child care is inviolable, if a child doesn't attend child care, he does not receive any communication with children. It is important for the child's development. I believe child care is a great advantage for a child.

Mother from Focus Group 1

Mothers expected that interaction with peers in child care would teach essential social skills, such as setting personal boundaries and standing up for oneself. Some participants emphasized that child care is meant to prepare children for survival in the harsh conditions of a society where adversity and competition are the norm. To illustrate, this is the meaning that one mother ascribed to child care:

You know, our world is not always perfect place. Sometimes, we face with issues and problems. I have a son and I do not want him to become a wuss. He should know how to stand up for himself. Anyway, I am sure, he will adapt to school easily thanks to his child care experience.

Mother from Focus Group 2

Several mothers spoke of acquaintances who chose not to enroll their child in child care and care for the child at home and then regretted that decision. In their experience, the children who did not attend child care before elementary school struggled in a number of areas. In particular, such children had poor communication skills, were afraid of new people, were not sociable, and did not play well with peers. Second, they did not adapt to school very well to the point where they refused to go to school. Third, they demonstrated a lower level of school readiness compared to their peers who had attended child care. In the following statement, one mother described how a neighbor's daughter who did not attend institutional child care as a pre-schooler struggled with adapting to school:

My friend's daughter did not go to a child care center. The parents were afraid of infections. So, they decided that the mother will not go back to work and will take care of her at home. The result was very sad. The child is afraid of everything, interacting with both children and adults, and would refuse a play date with my daughter.

“Mother from Focus Group 2

One of my participants brought in a professional perspective on the matter as an elementary school teacher.

I am an elementary school teacher and from my personal experience I know that those children who were attending child care centers adapt much faster and better to their school environment.

Mother from Focus Group 2

Ensuring school readiness was identified by the participants as another important function of public child care. The mothers mentioned that the current requirements regarding readiness for elementary school were stricter than in the past. Specialized elementary schools require that children take examinations to be enrolled. Children are expected to be able to read and write before starting elementary school. Mothers felt that professional early childhood educators were better suited for the role of teaching children these skills. One reason is that

mothers simply did not have the time for this due to paid employment. This is illustrated in the following comment about a mother's satisfaction with educational programs in child care centers:

I am completely satisfied with children being taught writing, reading, and other things in child care. I do not have enough time for all of that after my job. Moreover, I strongly believe that the evening is not a good time for this. I feed her, play with her, or simply speak with her. I read her bedtime stories, if I myself do not fall asleep in a process.

Mother from Focus Group 3

Another reason that mothers valued school readiness is that they did not feel confident about their ability to adequately teach their children these skills. For instance, previous generations were taught a solid letters type of writing whereas the new standard is block writing, which is a skill that my participants' generation does not have. Almost all participants were satisfied with the national educational program ("Praleska") which is offered in all public child care centers. This program was developed by the National Institute of Education and based on the personality-oriented model of child-parent-pre-school teacher interactions (UNESCO: Belarus, Early childhood education and care programs, 2006). "Praleska" includes lessons in crafts, singing, reading, writing, drawing, and counting. Parents buy special textbooks and workbooks for their children as well as parents' guides.

It's a program that prepares children for school. It's different at every level. At the junior level, they mostly draw, learn how to use pencils, they learn colours, objects, shapes. At the middle level, they learn to draw and start to learn numbers. At the preparatory level, they have handwriting, counting, some basic facts about nature, learn to recite rhymes.

Mother from Focus Group 1

However, several mothers complained that "Praleska" did not account for individual characteristics of each child. Moreover, textbooks, workbooks, and guides were quite expensive and added to child care costs.

With this program, we have to buy both kits for kids and a manual for parents. I can't say that books and workbooks are too cheap. And...it is of course only my personal opinion, but I think our mandatory program does not take into consideration individual characteristics and preference of the child, which is difficult to do given the standardized nature of the program.

Mother from Focus Group 2

“Umka” ("smartie") is another educational program used in some child care centers. It is not mandatory and parents could choose optional lessons for their children such as foreign languages, dancing, crafts, playing piano, for additional fees. In illustration, one mother commented on this particular educational program practiced in her daughter's child care center:

In our child care we have “Praleska”, a mandatory program, as well as “Umka” which is an optional program. According to “Umka” we can choose additional lessons. My daughter takes English and dancing classes. She enjoys these classes very much. And for me it is so convenient, I do not have to bring her in different places. We have everything we want in our child care center.

Mother from Focus Group 3

All participants valued physical activity as an essential element of a child's optimal development. As such, they valued public child care as an institution that can provide such activities, in particular, dancing and swimming.

We like the fact that they've got a swimming pool. They provide three swimming classes per week and we like our dance classes. My daughter is thrilled by the dance classes. She doesn't dance too well, but she tries her best.

Mother from Focus Group 1

The above quotes demonstrate that professional child care is valued more highly by the mothers than child care provided by family. As one mother summarized it,

Moreover, I think that it takes a special kind of mom to provide as much for her child as a daycare does. There, they have specialized developmental activities, qualified teachers, sports activities. I am very content with having a swimming pool in my daycare, it makes children healthier, mine stopped getting sick as often as they did before.

Mother from Focus Group 1

Although the dominant view of institutional child care in my sample was that of an acceptable substitute for parental care for employed parents, there were exceptions. There were two participants whose idea of ideal child care included neither public nor private child care. They were completely opposed to the concept of non-parental child care based on the premise that a single paid caregiver is unable to give a child as much love and attention as the parent, let alone to several children they are in charge of. These mothers' feelings about public child care are articulated in the following quote:

From my understanding, it is all about relationships between a child care provider and a child. A child care centre is a public organization and like in all public organizations there are a lot of issues and conflicts between individuals. I cannot believe that a child care provider is able to love 20 children, know their interests, habits, and individual preferences. So... no one will love and take care of my children as I.

Mother from Focus group 3

In an ideal world, one of these mothers would have preferred to care for her child herself while staying at home, if she could afford this. She would then enroll her child in an early childhood education centre only for the sake of activities, such as dancing, singing, reading, etc.:

I am not totally against a child care center, but if I could afford it financially, I would have brought my child to a child care development centre, not a child care center. These days you can find development centres where you can bring your child for a couple of hours a day or part-time. Same as at a child care centre, they prepare kids for school, maybe even better, because groups are not as crowded there. Also, they've got many extracurricular activities, which develops the child's individuality and creatively.

Mother from Focus Group 2

For the other mother, the point of enrolling the child into an early childhood education centre as an alternative to full-time public child care was not so much about activities, but socializing with peers.

If I had the opportunity, I would prefer to stay at home with my child. But...of course, he should be enrolled in early childhood programs in order to communicate and interact with his peers and to learn social norms and rules.

Mother from Focus Group 3

Grandparents' Care is not a Substitute for Institutional/Parental Child Care

Although child care provided by family members, such as the child's grandparents, was not the topic of my study, my participants did bring this up. In qualitative research, it is not unusual to make unexpected discoveries. My participants' view was that grandparents' care is not a substitute for parental care and/or institutional care. I decided to report this finding because it suggests that even if the grandparents were always available to care for the grandchildren, the participants would not resort to that.

According to the Belarussian Labor Code, a paid parental leave can be granted not only to a mother but can be transferred to a father or another relative, who actually is taking care of the child. The monthly child care benefit is then paid to the caregiver. However, very few grandparents take up the transferrable parental leave. For example, in 2012, in Belarus, maternity leave was taken by 257,837 people. Of these, less than 1% were taken by grandparents: 120 (0.04%) were grandfathers and 946 (0.36%) were grandmothers (Rumak, 2013). While for the participants of my study, delegating child care to the state was a better option than delegating it to the low uptake of the transferrable maternity leave by grandparents, who are typically of retirement age (60 years old for men and 55 years old for women), may be explained by the fact that many people in this age group choose to continue working long past the retirement age because they do not have enough savings and they have to rely on government pension, which is very small (the average pension in Belarus is \$223 USD). As a result, few grandparents are available as caretakers.

My findings are consistent with these statistics. Only one of my participants used the option of transferring the parental leave to her mother. However, in their case, the grandmother had to make a sacrifice to make this happen.

I was able to take only one year of my parental leave. Maybe it is good to stay at home with your child for three years, but it was certainly impossible in my case. First of all I could not leave my career for three years. Secondly, we could not afford that financially. When I came back to my work, my mother took the rest of the parental leave, in spite of the fact that she had another year before the official retirement age and she had to take a cut in her income. But we did it. We couldn't find another way to manage our situation.

Mother from Focus Group 2

For the rest of my participants, grandparents' support in child care involved dropping off or picking up children from a child care centre when parents' schedules conflict and providing occasional babysitting during weekends or in urgent situations. In my study, the majority of participants did not draw on grandparents' help and relied occasionally upon them for babysitting during weekends or in emergencies. These scenarios are described in the following quotes:

My son stays with my mother over the weekend, they get along very well, while my daughter stays with me, because she is too young. Of course, my mom can spend some time with her, but only for an hour or so, it's hard for my mom to do more. Of course, if something urgent happens, I turn to my mom or mother-in-law.

Mother from Focus Group 1

All our grandparents are already of the retirement age, but they still continue to work. Of course, we would like to have more of their help in caring for our children, but this is not our case. Usually we come to their place for dinner during weekends on holidays. My son and daughter love their grandparents so much, they always keep asking us when they are visiting them again.

Mother from Focus Group 3

When I asked my participants what grandparents' child care support meant to them, they were unanimous in their positive attitude toward it. The participants noted that grandparents are less busy and more patient compared to parents. As a result, they can pay more attention to the

child and spend more time with him/her, in particular, teaching them skills such as reading and teaching them about the world.

Our grandmas read a lot to him, poems, and books. Mind you, my husband and I are trying to read to him, but he prefers his grandmas doing that. Probably, this [reading] is good for him, it helps him prepare for school.

Mother from Focus Group 1

My mother-in-law majored in biology, and when my eldest rarely visits her, she shows her anatomical charts for where the heart is, where the liver is. Then, she also gives us piles of handwritten poems, for, like, reading and learning with our daughter. This grandmother strongly believes that at my daughter's age she should be able to count to 100 and she should learn to read.

Mother from Focus group 1

However, all participants noted that too much grandparents' involvement in child care has its downside. In particular, participants admitted that, in many cases, grandparents spoiled children.

My mother-in-law pampers him immeasurably, which is not too good, since he doesn't enjoy the authority of a mentor from her. He respects me as a mentor because he understands what's allowed and not allowed when I'm around. It's a whole different story with the mother-in-law... On occasions when she gets mad at him and spanks him, he can freely hit her hand back. It's like his grandmother is not an authority for him.

Mother from Focus Group 1

Same story here, if my son spends a week at his grandma's, it takes us a week to get him back to earth. He is 5 years old already, he's quite mature. After spending time with his grandma who allows him to do as he pleases, he may throw tantrums. Moreover, he can even raise his hand at me if I try to discipline him.

Mother from Focus group 1

Another way in which some of the employed grandparents contribute to the care of grandchildren is assisting with money. Some help to pay for part or all of child care fees, others pay for clothing or cover other expenses involved in child rearing. For example, one participant who was on parental leave stressed that without grandparents' financial support it would not be possible for their family to make ends meet:

I am not working, I am on parental leave, and my husband does not make big money. His wage is around 4 million roubles per month (equivalent of \$400 USD). You see, it is almost nothing for 4 of us. Honestly, I did not want a second child in our situation. But, our grandparents persuaded us to keep the baby. They promised to help us with all expenses for the baby. Thank God we listened to my parents and had this baby. Yeah..., however, even with their help it is not easy for us.

Mother from Focus group 2

In some cases, families went to great lengths to ensure that grandparents are close by and available for child care support. One participant described a situation where her family moved to another city, leaving the maternal grandmother who was very involved behind. However, the grandmother's help was so essential to this family that they set the goal of her moving to their city and buying an apartment in the same condominium:

My mother has always been a great help for our family, especially, when I had my second child. When we lived in Gomel she lived with us and she took care of my daughter and son. I did not take my parental leaves and completely relied on my mom's child care. Then, we moved to Minsk and she stayed behind in Gomel. Despite the fact that we found child care for our children close to our home, it was a real challenge for me to drop off and pick up them as my schedule was unpredictable and sometimes almost crazy, and so was my husband's. So, when my mom decided to move to Minsk too, we did all we could to find an apartment for her in the same condo building. Right now we have a perfect balance. On the one hand, we do not live in one apartment and have more privacy for our family. On the other hand, she is around and always helps take care of my kids whenever I need her.

Mother from Focus Group 3

Mothers' Experiences with Child Care Centers

As shown in the previous section, Belarus' state child care system plays a significant role in the life of employed mothers who see it as the optimal arrangement that meets their needs as workers and the need of their children for full-time, care during the day. Apart from the global meaning of Belarus' child care system, the participants also brought up their daily experiences with child care, which shows the concrete side of their experience. They discussed material and

tangible things (for instance, the size of playrooms, amenities, etc), qualities of the child care staff, and how their daily lives interfaced with their child's child care.

Satisfaction with Quality of Institutional Child Care

The participants in my study were satisfied with the state of child care facilities and the environment as well as health care and safety components in the activity of child care services. They were completely satisfied with what the state-run child care system provides. They felt that the public child care system inherited the best features of the Soviet child care, such as quality, and affordability. The following quote is representative of the sample's view of the public child care system:

What do I think about an ideal child care? Hm...I think we have an ideal child care right now and I wouldn't change anything. Moreover, I am very glad that we kept the best of the Soviet child care system. We pay... just so little money, but our children have everything they need. I mean that they have playrooms, bedrooms, playgrounds, hot meals and even swimming pools in new child care centres. Child care providers take care of and educate them. What else do we want?

Mother from Focus Group 3

The importance of amenities, such as a gym or a swimming pool, in child care centres and their proper maintenance was emphasized by many mothers. Other mothers focused on other things such as the quality of food or the design of playgrounds in choosing a child care centre for their children:

As for me...even the smell matters. The kitchen is on the first floor, when one enters a daycare, you know right away, what it is cooking. The food smells like home-made food. Perhaps, the design of the play grounds and group rooms play an important role, too. When we started daycare with my eldest daughter in our neighbourhood, I mean, where we used to live previously, we had an opportunity to choose between three daycares. We had a tour at all three, I observed how playgrounds were decorated, how clean the area is.

Mother from Focus group 1

A larger range of amenities was critical for mothers whose children required special care or had special needs. One participant whose child attended a daycare designed to accommodate

children with additional health needs, known as “sanatoriums”, particularly emphasized the importance of having a qualified pediatrician and a swimming pool on the premises. This, she noted, was the deciding factor that determined her choice of the child care centre and it also helped her avoid taking frequent health-related leaves from work:

We've got two child care centres close to our home, both have swimming pools, but we chose the child care of a “sanatorium type”. Each Wednesday, children are examined by a pediatrician. If she's got a little cough or a runny nose, the doctor can prescribe massage, inhaling therapy or some other therapy. The kid goes to child care, attends the therapy and she rarely gets sick. The doctor examines her and if it gets worse, then the child can't attend child care centre. All this is very convenient, since I would have had to take sick leaves more frequently, in order to get my daughter to the clinic to see our family pediatrician.

Mother from Focus group 3

The health care services provided by child care institutions were also highly valued by mothers whose children attended regular child care centers. The participants reported that their child care centers had a full-time staff nurse onsite. Besides that, children were seen by a physician weekly. Furthermore, once a year children underwent an examination by specialist doctors, in particular, a pediatrician, neurologist, orthopedist, speech therapist, ophthalmologist and others. One mother said the following:

My daughter attends an absolutely regular child care center but I know that different specialists visit and examine our children. When my daughter was 4 years old, I was told that she should see a speech therapist. I thought that we needed to go to our children's clinic. But... thank God, the speech therapist comes to our child care center three times a week and works with children who have speech problems. Of course, it is a great relief for me and I do not need to ask my boss to leave work early and take her to the children's clinic.

Mother from Focus Group 3

Another participant, a mother of three daughters, felt the same way about the health care services provided at the child care center. In particular, she was very satisfied with the staff nurse at their child care center:

I have never been afraid to leave my kids at a daycare. On the contrary, I know that they will be fed well, taken care of, and they receive a first aid if something happens to them. Our nurse is an excellent professional. Yeah,...I know she checks playrooms and bedrooms to make sure that they clean and well ventilated regularly and she also dispenses vitamins and provides mandatory vaccinations. Once a year my kids have a general physical check-up and a vision test. And, you know, it is very convenient for me. I do not need to take an additional day off for all these things.

Mother from Focus Group 1

The participants felt that their child care center's physical environment was safe and healthy. They felt confident that the building was maintained up to sanitary and fire standards, thanks to strict oversight on behalf of government inspection bodies. The manager's role in maintaining cleanliness (e.g., in the kitchen, bathrooms, and common areas) was also recognized. Most of my participants referenced regular sanitary, food, and fire inspections that their child care centres underwent. One participant whose friend worked as a food inspector commented that inspectors arrive unannounced, and that the child care administration would face a hefty fine in case of violations:

Yeah...I like it that we have kept just the same inspections as during the Soviet Union times. My friend is a food inspector. She told me that they check on the quality and quantity of food served to children once a month...and even swab children's tables for bacteria samples. And...what I was impressed with most of all, she told me that, sanitary inspectors are to check that children do not sleep with their heads where their feet had been. Did you know that bed sheets in our child care center are marked "head" and "foot" to prevent this?

Mother from Focus Group 2

The participants spoke at length about the child care staff as this was an essential part of their experience. Most of mothers in my study were happy with their child care staff, whom they described as caring, nurturing, and attuned to each child's individual needs. The participants noted that the staff were able to communicate well with the children. Their impression was that the children were happy, felt understood and nurtured when in the child care or around their

child care providers. In particular, one participant shared her experience with child care providers as follows:

My daughter tells me, with whom she had made friends, with whom quarreled, but she never says anything bad about the caregivers. She said that her child care providers are very fond of her. And, you know, all our care providers are very nice and kind. One time their group had a replacement because our child care provider got into the hospital, so the other child care provider took care of them in same way. She hugged and kissed the kids in the morning, that's why kids liked her too. In our child care centre each child is given an individual approach. I remember when my daughter only started to go to the child care, in the early days caregiver would cradle my daughter in her arms during the sleep hour until she got used to sleeping on her own.

Mother from Focus Group 2

The qualities the mothers valued in child care staff included above all love and respect for children, tact, patience, and kindness. In the opinion of most mothers, their child care providers possessed the above qualities.

They just have to be a nice person, to love kids. Not just wanting kids to leave them alone. For instance, after naptime, our child care worker braids every single girl anew, while there are 15 girls in the group. Everything is done in a play mode, every girl sits on a chair, and boys help to hold ribbons and bands. That is, no one is bored, every child is involved. Moreover, she communicates very well with parents. She'd always tell how the day went, whether my daughter was a good eater or not, what they learnt. Sometimes I'm amazed at how she's able to manage such a large number of kids. Obviously, she is experienced, she has been a child care worker for more than 30 years now. This talent for child rearing is, like, you know, heaven-born, when the child care worker loves her job despite the ridiculous wages.

Mother from Focus Group 1

Interestingly, participants did not comment on the staff's specialized knowledge and skills, such as teaching skills or knowledge of child psychology, as opposed to their personal qualities. It is possible that such skills never came to the forefront because all of the caregivers were professional child care educators and the mothers did not have experiences with non-professional caregivers to appreciate the difference.

Although most participants had all-around positive experiences with the caregivers, some shared negative experiences. One mother had a negative experience with her child's caregiver who would not communicate with parents; she would not give any feedback about the child, even when asked, so the mother did not have any information about how the child was doing at the child care during the day:

I and my daughter were less lucky with our child care workers. One of them is an old age, the other is young. The first one can't manage anything, she doesn't even put much effort into managing things, while the young one isn't too familiar with the procedures yet. When you ask how the child behaved, whether she's got any complaints, she only shrugs her shoulders or says one word – it was okay. I can't see any warmth or love for children.
Mother from Focus Group 2

Another participant shared an experience that spoke of the child care provider's lack of compassion. The participant's daughter struggled with toileting as she was not trained to use one at home. The caregiver would not help the child who had to hold it all day long. This mother described in the following quote how she tried to manage this situation:

My daughter refused to sit on an adult toilet, she was too used to her potty. I tried talking to the child care provider, so that she could probably have helped her, the child was struggling, and she couldn't hold it all day. And, you know, she brought me some manual book where it says that it's not included in her duties. That it's us, the parents, who must train her to use the adult toilet. In other words, the human approach is absolutely absent. I have an impression that she is just afraid to approach kids.
Mother from Focus Group 1

Thus, in the participants' experiences, not all of the caregivers seemed to be committed to and enjoying working with children. The mothers believed that some of this poor attitude on the part of some of the caregivers is due to their low salaries. They also noted that the caregivers' low salaries were responsible for the low retention rate of skilled and experienced staff, who left for better jobs elsewhere. The mothers expressed criticism of the government for not ensuring an adequate salary for the occupation that is tasked with raising the next generation:

I also want to add that the government has absolutely to pay more. Even child care providers with experience receive very little. What is about those who are just starting to work? For this reason, it is so low prestige. Nobody wants to work for this sort of money. ...But these people should take care of our kids, I mean, our future generation.

Mother of Focus Group 2

In addition, the segment of my sample that did not think highly of public child care also cited examples of less than stellar performance of staff in public child care centres. According to one mother, caregivers in public child care did not demonstrate much creativity and flexibility in their approaches to children. She had a negative experience with most of the public child caregivers who always complained about her son's unruly behaviour, until a replacement staff member used a non-traditional approach with the child. She made a deal with the boy that he would behave in exchange for the opportunity to help the kitchen staff serve food and clean up because she had previously noticed that he enjoyed this activity, although children are not expected to do this. However, this type of thinking outside the box is not common among child care workers in public child care centres, according to this mother.

Apart from “front-line” child care providers who interact with children every day, the participants also attributed high importance to the skills of the child care centre’s director. The director’s qualities also influenced their choice of child care as well as their child care centre experience. The director’s position in Belarusian kindergartens is strictly administrative. Directors are in charge of hiring new staff, arranging staff work schedules, evaluating staff performance, ordering supplies, finding substitutes, enrolling new children, overseeing the centre's budget, handling parent complaints, and finding sponsors.

The Manager's personal and professional qualities were very important to the participants. Mothers thought that the quality of care in child care centers often depends on the Director’s initiative, responsibility and professionalism. The mothers' notion of a good Director

was of someone who hires skilled and caring staff and is able to establish good relationships with officials who oversee pre-school centers. Some mothers also stressed the director's responsibilities for monitoring the required standards for cleanliness, health, safety, and the curriculum.

Probably, what I like the most in our child care is our headmaster. Thanks to her, our child care always takes first place in formal and informal ratings. I am sure it's due to her management skills and professionalism. She is extremely strong manager and both child care staff and parents respect her very much. All employees constantly keep order in child care: clean leaves from playgrounds, paint, fix up child care equipment. As far as I know, sometimes, even at their own expenses. Local administration values her as a manager highly. She is retired but she constantly renews the contract. Also, as I see, she always monitors the quality of cooking in the kitchen. I've have never heard any complaints, all is on super level. Smells are delicious, menus and portions are according to the standard. My kids eat everything and ask additional portion.

Mother from Focus Group 2

Interestingly, the participants did not focus much on the educational approach and activities that the children engage in at public child care centers. However, some of the participants voiced the opinion that private child care centers were superior to public ones in this regard. Notably, these mothers were from higher income families. They indicated that they would prefer to send their children to privately owned child care centres which, based on their information, provide better service than state-run facilities. Such centres are private businesses that charge fees in the range of \$500 USD to \$1000 USD per month. Typically, such centres occupy newly built, free standing buildings. In some cases, privately run centres are located in the suburbs where children are transported by a private bus. Among the features of private child care are a balanced menu developed by nutritionists, the presence of psychologists and nurses who monitor speech development and the psychological wellbeing of children, and newer furniture and equipment.

In their opinion, better service provided by private child care centers is made possible because private child care centers are better resourced:

The [private] daycare has their own bus at hand, kids are being driven to the puppet theatre, to the swimming pool, to an arts school. The bedrooms and play rooms are very creatively equipped. Every child is able to find an activity they'd like.

Mother from Focus Group 1

Also, those mothers who viewed private child care as superior to public child care attributed this to a higher caregiver to children ratio:

For me, it [the ideal child care] is a private child care with few kids, so that the child care worker could give enough attention to each child. I mean 6 kids, well, 10 kids maximum... 10 kids is even too many. We've got 28 kids at our current group, the child care worker is simply not able to attend each child.

Mother from Focus Group 3

These mothers placed high value on meeting each child's unique needs and fostering their unique tendencies. A smaller number of children per caregiver was seen as facilitating this approach. What these mothers disliked about the state-run child care system is that it treats every child the same. There is a standard list of activities that each child is expected to engage in regardless of their interest or ability. In the view of these mothers, private child care is a complete opposite to the public child care in that it is sensitive to a child's individual characteristics. This is in part due to a smaller number of children per caregiver, but also is explained by due a different philosophy of education. To illustrate, one mother commented on her preferences for a private child care as follows:

I'd like a private child care with a small number of kids, with a lot of developmental activities, i.e. so that the child care worker was able to identify the child's potential. More of the individual approach. If you are keen on singing – then sing, on dancing – off you go dance. I don't like it when they enforce dance teaching upon a child who has no interest in dancing. The teachers must be qualified and the conditions should be corresponding to the teachers.

Mother from Focus Group 1

Another mother added:

Yes, I also agree that there are not enough classes tailored to the individual child's abilities. Of course, it is understandable that it's probably difficult to implement for groups of 25-27 people. And, yes...we cannot expect that from public child care.

Mother from Focus Group 1

These mothers also felt that public child care does not encourage creativity in children.

In the following quote demonstrates a mother calls for introducing more classes that develop creativity:

I would like more classes that develop creativity. It seems to me that our children are taught only to repeat after the teacher. If children try to express their own understanding of the world, it is usually not encouraged.

Mother from Focus group 2

Dissatisfaction with Overcrowding of Institutional Child Care Centres

The issue of overcrowded groups due to shortage of spots in child care centres significantly influenced the mothers' perceptions of quality of pre-school education and care in Belarus. The participants told me that the groups in their children's child care centres were overcrowded. In preparatory and middle groups, there were up to 27 children per caregiver and in nurseries there could be as many as 30 children per caregiver. For instance, in the quote below, one mother stated:

When my daughter started nursery at the age of 2 years old, they had 25 kids. I managed to find some connections and we transferred her to a child care center where they had 17 kids at the nursery, but that daycare was still far from our home. Now that she is older the high number of kids in the group doesn't bother us as much. When it is time for her to start the preparatory school, there will be 26 kids in their group, which is the case at most child care centers.

Mother from Focus Group 3

The issue of overcrowded groups became worse during the summer months, during which time child care staff take vacations. A mother from Focus Group 1 shared her experience with the overcrowded groups in her daughter's daycare:

Yes, officially, there are standards, but the new child care centers, I mean those that are being built in new neighbourhoods, these daycares don't care about standards. There are many children, while there are probably just 2-3 child care centers for the whole subdivision. Our group had 32 kids in the summer. The kids had to use a different group's space for their naptime as there were not enough beds in their space. They [staff] virtually begged us not to that bring our children to the daycare if there is a single chance or if someone was available to stay with them at home during the summer months.

Mother from Focus Group 1

The mothers' major concern about the issue of overcrowding was a higher risk of communicable illnesses (for instance, chickenpox), as perceived by the mothers. Another major downside of larger groups was the fact that caregivers could not physically give enough attention to each child; therefore, not all of their children's needs were being met:

We've got 28 kids in our current group, the child care staff is simply not able to attend to each child. It does not matter how she is skilled and professional. It is not possible, that's it.

Mother from Focus Group 2

A high staff to child ratio was an important aspect of optimal child care that was elicited by an interview question about ideal child care. Some of the mothers thought their desire for a higher staff to children ratio could be met by private child care centres:

For me, it [an ideal child care] is a private daycare with few kids, so that the child care worker could give enough attention to each child. I mean 6 kids, well, 10 kids maximum... 10 kids is even too many. We've got 28 kids at our current group, the child care worker is simply not able to attend each child.

Mother from Focus Group 3

Thus, higher staff to children ratio was one the areas where the participants wanted to see improvement. Opening more child care centres was also viewed by the participants as a strategy to increase staff to children ratios, so that the same number of children could be distributed across several centres as opposed to being concentrated in one.

My participants also attributed the low staff to children ratio observed in public child care centers to the low rates paid to caregivers, which leads to high turnover and does not attract the most skilled workers into the occupation. They thought that the first step would be raising child care staff's salaries to reduce high turnover and retain the most skilled workers. One participant commented on child care staff's salaries:

Yes, I agree, salaries are just laughable. When I wanted to send my daughter to nursery, she was 1.5, I went to the Regional Education Authority. I was told that nurseries are terribly over-crowded and that I'd better stay at home if I have been getting the child benefit. My reply was that I can't stay at home for this sort of money. They told me that I'd be interested to know that the child care worker's salary is about the same as my social assistance. So, just go and stay at home with your child. Like, see, there are people who have to work all day long with a group of 30 children for this money.

Mother from Focus Group 1

Another mother had a similar comment:

It seems to me that something has to be done with the child care workers' salary. It has always been very low, but currently it's just ridiculously small. Soon we won't have a single qualified teacher in the daycare. Who would take care of our kids then? I'm about to send my youngest to daycare and I am already thinking if she will have the same child care workers as my middle daughter used to have. If they leave, who would replace them, who would agree to work for such money?

Mother from Focus Group 2

Some high-income mothers were even willing to take an increase in the child care centre's fees so that the difference covers the increase in staff pay. One mother participant reasoned that given the current low fees, an average family's budget would not be hurt by a moderate increase, but would make a difference for child care provider salaries. The mothers emphasized that they wanted their children to be cared by the most qualified staff who are committed to and love their job. The following quote illustrates this view:

I can't say that the official fees are too burdensome for our budget. And from my point of view, it is not big deal for all parents if the payment will be raised. In this case, I think, the state will be able to increase child care staff's salaries. It's worth it. I want my children to be cared by qualified child care providers who receive an adequate salary for their highly valued job.

Mother from Focus Group 3

Several mothers were very unsatisfied with the hours of operations of child care centers and this was a source of considerable stress in their lives. When I asked the participants about how their current child care situation could be improved, one mother stressed that for her it was definitely hours of operations. Her work hours did not coordinate with the hours of operation of the child care center, which caused friction between her and her employer:

For me – it's the hours of work. It's just a pain. My daycare opens at 7:30, and I've got my first class at 8:00 a.m. I have to spend an hour to get to work, and that is without the traffic jam, taking the traffic jam into account would easily make it 1 hour 40 minutes. Buses are packed, city shuttles are not there. They started to thoroughly control the teachers' being late. I asked the education department to avoid scheduling the early morning class for me, but they do ...and then they come to check on you. You can't take the child to the daycare earlier, at this time of day it's just the gateman that's there, and what am I supposed to do in this situation, how I can manage to drop my child off and manage it on time for work.

Mother from Focus Group 1

In the following passage, another mother mentioned her challenges with hours of operation on Friday nights. Child care staff always asked parents to pick up children earlier because they wanted to close the child care centre earlier.

We've got constant problems with Fridays. Officially, the daycare is supposed to be open till 18:00. But on Friday child care workers always ask us to pick kids up earlier so that they themselves could leave earlier. What shall I do if I'm not able to do that? So...it is a permanent Friday conflict.

Mother from Focus Group 2

Challenges with Access to Institutional Child Care

Shortage of child care centres was the most common problem identified by the participants. Mothers indicated that they were witnessing a catastrophic shortage of child care centres (along with schools):

We are considering placing our youngest daughter somewhere closer to home. As soon as she got registered, as soon as she was born, first thing we put ourselves on the waiting list. We've got a daycare close to our place, it was built a year ago. As soon as I

registered my youngest one, I applied for a spot in this daycare, but it's already impossible to get there, because there are so many kids per one staff and there are no more vacancies left.

Mother from Focus Group 1

The demand is so high that the average waiting time to get a child care spot is up to 6 years. One mother described the situation with child care spots in new neighborhoods as follows:

My acquaintance was in the same situation, she also lives in a new neighbourhood. They were building a child care centre close to their home, so she went and applied, but they told her straight away that they could not possibly accept her child, because all the spots were taken 6 years ahead of time.

Mother from Focus Group 1

The participants in my study believed that during the Soviet times, there was no shortage of child care centers as community infrastructure was planned and developed in a centralized way. However, in today's world, the state has largely removed itself from building new infrastructure (other than public roads) due to lack of funds, which are used for maintaining existing infrastructure. Private businesses that develop new communities do not prioritize child care facilities. As such, they are not willing to invest in this important infrastructure:

Right, virtually impossible, whole neighbourhoods are being built. Also, people build their own condos for their own money, on credit payment. However, people are not able to re-build the infrastructure, I mean, daycares, schools, hospitals, and the government currently has no money for that. Therefore, the result is that as soon as at least one daycare is built for a whole subdivision, it is impossible to get there.

Mother from Focus Group 2

The participants reported that shortage of child care spaces, specifically in nurseries, prevented them from going back to work sooner:

The problem is how to get a spot for your child. The number of young children whose parents want to put them in a nursery is growing and nursery spots are lacking. So, I think the state should again restore nurseries that had been closed because of budget deficits and...you remember that there were significantly fewer young children 10 years ago.”

Mother from Focus Group 2

Furthermore, mothers noted that it makes sense to put children in child care sooner because the children themselves seem to be mature enough for attending a child care at the age of 2 or 2.5 years. They felt that this generation of children develops faster compared to previous generations that were growing up without technology. This is illustrated in the following passage:

Of course, three years for the parental leave is too much. In my case, my youngest daughter started nursery at the age of 2. The oldest started it when she still had a couple of months before she turned two. And the business wasn't in the fact that I was having a hard time combining my work with keeping my child at home with me. It's just that by then she was absolutely ready for daycare. She was eating on her own, she was potty-trained, and she dressed herself. At home she took the spoon from my hand and ate using two spoons, she used to dress herself, from panties to outwear. Both kids instantly loved it at the nursery, none threw any tantrums.

Mother from Focus Group 1

The mothers advocated for increasing the number of child care centres, especially in new communities. However, the mothers were well aware of budget deficit challenges faced by the state which limited its ability to build and maintain new child care centres. Their solution to the problem was for the state to encourage private businesses to run child care:

I think...yeah...that my perspective on child care in Belarus,...I think that our government should encourage a private run child care. I do not know, maybe preferential taxation for business owners. We already have a certain percentage of high income parents who wish to send their children to a private child care. But there are no private child care centres in our city. In our case, we can afford private child care and we would like to send her to it, but... what can we do.

Mother from Focus Group 2

Participants also indicated that the child care shortage was a significant source of stress for them at the time when their children were younger and they were looking for a child care spot. They emphasized that this led to insecurity about the future and put their employment prospects at risk:

I remember our situation very well.... It was so painful and stressful. I had to go back to work and we did not yet get a spot in child care center....And, you know, my job was so important for me, for my career... So, we made every effort to get a spot. You won't believe it, but we used everything: networking, bribes, and acquaintances. Finally, we've got a spot, but not exactly what we wanted. It is far away from our apartment and it takes me 45 minutes to bring her to our child care. ...Our mornings...are crazy, but at least, I did not lose my job.

Mother from Focus Group 3

When I asked the participants whether it was possible for them to put themselves on the waiting list while they were pregnant, they told me that was not an option:

According to our law, it's impossible, because you can only apply once the child is registered with a birth certificate.

Mother from Focus Group 1

In order to improve the situation with the shortage of spaces and overcrowded groups in child care centres in new communities, municipal educational authorities offer available places in child care institutions located in mature neighbourhoods which are typically far away from new neighbourhoods. Because most of the participants in my study lived in new neighbourhoods, which do not have enough child care centres, and they were not successful in finding a child care centre close by, they had to place their children in child care centres that were far away from their home. Most families did not have a second car (typically, if a household owns a car, it is used by the husband or the breadwinner). In some families, it was the father who dropped the child off on his way to work. One participant described their typical morning routine:

We wake up around 7, and it's a big struggle. I dress her up, wash her, and comb her hair while she is half asleep. My husband drives her there. Of course, it helps a lot, I can't imagine getting there by bus.

Mother from Focus Group 3

In most families, however, the child care hours and fathers' work schedules did not work together. As a result, the mother took the child to the child care centre by public transportation. This is quite inconvenient as it involves long commutes on overcrowded buses. Riding on

overcrowded buses in peak hours can be difficult on adults, let alone young children. However, this was a struggle the families dealt with every day:

[w]e had to ride 40 minutes to get to the child care center. We had to wake up at 6, but the kid wasn't able to bear 40 minutes on a bus, she threw a tantrum. She didn't speak too well then, but she pointed to the door and cried. She did not want to get on the bus. It's a whole different story getting there by car, but we don't have this option. Yes, we had a really hard time with transportation back then.

Mother from Focus Group 1

I had the same problem with the commute. However, I can't say that the distance between my home and child care is really big. I was ready to go there, I liked the daycare, but the child didn't like the idea of waking up early and riding the bus. Can you imagine our overcrowded buses in the morning? He managed 20 minutes at most, and then we had to get off the bus and walk. He kept asking us to find him a daycare that's closer.

Mother from Focus Group 1

Like mothers from new districts in Gomel, mothers who lived in new neighbourhoods in Minsk had a similar problem with accessibility of child care centres. Recently, a popular news website in Belarus published the article titled "How are child care spots distributed?" (Spasuik, 2014). According to the article, starting from the first of April each year, municipal education authorities "are stormed" by parents of young children. Local authorities launched a campaign on the distribution of spots in child care institutions for the next academic year. However, in spite of the fact that parents were on a waitlist immediately after a child was born, there is no chance for them to be enrolled in a child care center that is close to where they live. For example, one mother who lives in a new neighbourhood in Minsk described her situation with child care spots' distribution as follows:

I came to the Department of Education early in the morning. Today is the first day of the distribution of child care spots for the next academic year. I was number sixteen on a waiting list that means one of the first. My child was on a waiting list immediately after he was born. He was born in May and we applied for a spot in child care center in our community in June. But it turns out it does not matter who got on the waiting list earlier or who got on it later. There are no child care spots in our district. We were told we can be enrolled in child care centers located in Pushkin district. It is completely unacceptable because of the distance. It takes over an hour to get there. I cannot imagine how we could do it on our overcrowded buses in the morning. There is another thing that I cannot understand. If we take a child care spot in Pushkin district, we will be automatically eliminated from the waiting list for a child care spot in our local district.

Comments from a Mother (www.tut.by)

In an environment where the demand for child care spaces exceeds the supply,, the onus is on individuals to look for ways to access the service. The participants used multiple strategies to secure a spot in a child care centre that met their requirements. Networking and bribes was the most common one. This strategy involved finding acquaintances who personally know the director of a child care centre or “people in power” who can order the director to enroll the child. The following quote illustrates one mother's strategy to find a space for her 2 year old son in a context where availability is low and long waiting lists are common.

We want our child to go a child care with a focus of performing arts where he would be able to thrive developmentally, and not just learn how to read and write. The child care centres we want have long waiting lists. We put ourselves on a waitlist for one of them. At the same time we also approached out acquaintances for help to get us in earlier, which worked. Now your child would be able to start child care at 3. Without their help, we would have had to wait until he is 5.

Mother from Focus Group 1

Bribes were also a common strategy. A mother from Focus Group 3 shared her sister’s experience to get a spot into a “prestigious” child care center:

We all know that a bribe is a very common way to get a spot into a “prestigious” child care centre. If you want your child in such a centre, you need to share the contents of your purse with the director or simply put – to give a bribe. I cannot blame all child care directors, but it happens. My sister personally gave a bribe and my nephew was enrolled in a “prestigious” child care center without any waiting lists.

Mother from Focus Group 3

I was not able to find any published literature on this practice, not surprisingly.

Another strategy to secure a child care spot that was reported by the participants involved asking the child care centre's director to enroll the child in exchange for goods and services, such as equipment, repairs, renovation or for personal benefits, which is another form of bribery. In this case, the goods and services were supplied through and paid for by the parent's organization as opposed to out of pocket.

In our case getting a spot was very easy. Our dad is a director of a major plant in our city. You know, he can provide a significant sponsorship to any child care centre. So, we were accepted without any problems. ...And every director would be happy to have us as clients.

Mother from Focus Group 2

The experience of using one's position of power to obtain a child care spot was also described by a mother from the city of Minsk:

We did not have to deal with long waiting list as we live in an old neighborhood. There is no shortage child care centers unlike in new neighborhoods. But, when I visited a child care center closest to our home, the headmaster told me that we were late and she could only put us on a waiting list. Then, she started to fill out preliminary applications and asked about my occupation as well as my husband's. When I told her that we are both Assistant of Professors at the Belarussian State University, she pondered for a while and then said that she probably would be able to find a spot for us. The fact is, her son is studying economics at our university and she thinks we could be of help to him in some ways. You know, just in case.

Mother from Focus Group 3

Another strategy was get a job at a child care centre of choice as a nanny in exchange for a spot for one's child in that child care centre. This is in turn a strategy that the administration of child care centres uses to attract and retain nannies, which is a low paying job. Nannies are assistants to trained child care staff. One does not require any formal education to work as a child care nanny as this is a menial job that involves serving food, washing the dishes, bathing or showering children, cleaning bathrooms, assisting children with dressing and undressing, and

occasionally supervising children during free play when the professional child care staff is not available. Getting a job as a nanny at a child care centre was not a common strategy for securing a child care spot in my sample. However, the strategy worked well for the one woman who used it.

I have an acquaintance who, while still on parental leave, started working as a nanny, although she had a law degree. ...So, that she could eventually place her child there. There is a shortage of nannies, no one wants to work for this sort of money. There is one sole advantage, though, that there is an opportunity to get a priority spot for your child. This is as far as the headmasters go.

Mother from Focus Group 1

Satisfaction with the Cost of Institutional Child Care

Participants in my study maintained that the current official monthly child care fee ranging from \$35 USD to \$45 USD is affordable not only for parents with average and higher income but for low-income parents as well. As I mentioned earlier, this covers the cost of food. The participants felt were satisfied with the quality of food served at child care centres and felt that they were getting great value for the money paid, as the quote below illustrates:

Right, according to the official bill, we don't pay a lot. I know that for lower income parents it's a great help. The child is fed 3-4 times per day, an obligatory soup, and hot meals. It would have been difficult to provide such food at home, especially if parents don't earn much.

Mother from Focus group 2

All mothers were satisfied with the meals' quality, portion size, and availability of extra portions. The participants emphasized that the menu took into consideration children's ages, seasonal availability of food, and features of the national cuisine.

However, official fees paid by Belarusian parents for a state-funded child care is only one side of the coin. One of the challenges that mothers discussed was unofficial, or "hidden" costs above and beyond the official monthly fee.

In August 2012 President of Belarus Alexander Lukashenko made a speech at the Republic Teaching Conference where he announced that the state has done everything possible for early childhood education and care and now parents are expected to contribute financially. It appears that child care centres' administrations interpreted this as a direction for action to impose cost-sharing on families of children attending state child care centres. The participants emphasized that child care centres' administrations have been routinely requesting that the cost of major repairs (e.g., roof, windows, flooring, etc.) be covered by parents. This is presented to parents as their obligation, rather than an option. The following quote describes a participant's dissatisfaction with additional charges:

I believe we have to contribute too much additional money pretty often. For renovations – no less than four times a year. I am on parental leave with my second baby, the only source of income is the dad's salary. The maternity leave benefits we get for our younger child, as you know, is quite small. I can't imagine how we'd have managed if it was not for the help we get from our parents. I am categorically against additional charges ...well, at least not in such amounts.

Mother from Focus Group 1

Another participant shared in same vein how much she paid per month for the care of her child in a child care:

We are expected to pay for the air my child breathes. For example, in addition to official bills of 400 thousand roubles (equivalent to \$40 USD), we gave 200 thousand roubles (equivalent to \$20 USD) as a donation, 70 thousand roubles (equivalent to \$7 USD) for repairing needs, 100 thousand roubles (equivalent to \$10 USD) for blinds, and 50 thousand roubles (equivalent to \$5 USD) for detergents. For our family it is a lot of money. Look, it is 400 thousand roubles (equivalent to \$40 USD) as the official fee and 420 000 roubles (equivalent to \$43 USD) in unofficial fees. And I forgot about fees for watching cartoons, but it is a completely separate story.

Mother from Focus Group 3

I am not aware of any changes to the legislation on early childhood education and care that reference financial contribution from the child's parents for maintenance of child care centers, or of any decrees issued by the executive branch of the government that support what

President Lukashenko referred to and what is practiced by state child care centres' administrations. In fact, the practice of additional charges in public child care centres seems to be unlawful because it contradicts the Code of the Republic of Belarus on Education. Yet, the participants did not seem to dispute the authority of the administration to impose these charges or complain to the government.

Also, it should be noted that these extra payment are made in cash to the administration directly. The administration does not report back to the parents about the actual expenditures. It depends on a particular child care center. The mothers were quite dissatisfied with this practice. They told me that they would rather have the official fees doubled as that would give them the opportunity to plan their budgets:

Additional contributions can sometimes be two or even three times more than the official fee. I think it would be better to increase the official payment and cancel all further contributions. At least, it would be clear that the official fee paid once a month and all, no more additional costs. For me, I mean for our family, it is to plan our budget.

Mother from Focus Group 3

In addition to the cost of repairs, the participants also talked about the cost of supplies. They shared that typically, at the beginning of a new academic year (September), the administration presents them with a list of supplies that are required for each child, which parents buy for their children on their own. These costs range from \$30 USD to \$50 USD per year:

In September, we immediately get a list of items totalling 300-400 thousand Belarussian roubles (equivalent to \$40 USD or 7,5 % of the net average wage). Every year we receive a list of supplies starting with colors, scrapbooks, pencils and etc. Yeah, annually, we have to buy and bring a bedding set to the daycare. Seemingly, we don't pay much officially, but considering all the additional charges and purchases, our government-funded daycares do not appear free of charge at all.

Mother from Focus Group 3

Unlike the cost of major repairs, charging parents for the cost of supplies is a legal practice. In 2007 the Resolution of Ministry of Education decreed that parents cover the costs of

supplies provided to children in a child care centre (The list of supplies for institutions providing pre-school education, 2007). The list of supplies includes 36 items such as pencils, markers, white and colored paper, scissors, napkins, etc.

Apart from repairs and supplies charges that are common in all state child care centres, the participants also reported other types of extra charges that individual centres' director imposed. For instance, one participant described a practice where a child care centre charged parents an "admission" fee for cartoon showings. Although such "tickets" only cost the equivalent of one US dollar, the monthly cost can be significant, especially for low-income families, as illustrated by the following quote:

...[b]ut we absolutely could not afford it. To watch a cartoon at that daycare you had to pay. One day cost 10 thousand Belarussian roubles (equivalent to \$1 USD), and they watched cartoons every second day, so at the end of the month we had a huge bill. If you don't pay, though, your child is left alone, while the rest went to watch the cartoon. You know that's just too much to handle, beyond all reason.

Mother from Focus Group 1

Also, the participants told me that extra charges for repairs, supplies and miscellaneous services are paid in cash to the administration directly, and the administration does not report back to the parents about the actual expenditures. The mothers were quite dissatisfied with this practice. They told me that they would rather have the official fee doubled as that would give them the opportunity to plan their budgets:

Additional contributions can sometimes be two or even three times more than the official fee. I think it would be better to increase the official payment and cancel all further contributions. At least, it would be clear that the official fee paid once a month and all, no more additional costs. For me, I mean for our family, it is to plan our budget.

Mother from Focus Group 3

In summary, participants indicated that the cost of child care, which is a combination of the official monthly fee and the and a host of unofficial extra charges, is considerable, and thus, the state's claim about "free" pre-school education is misleading.

In sum, in this chapter I described Belarus' child care policy in comparison with other post-socialist countries and concluded that Belarus has started moving from de-familialisation to familialisation. Further, I characterised Belarus as a country of optional familialism according to Letner's typology. The findings from the empirical part demonstrated that the familialistic tendencies do not align with the preferences and values of my participants. I will provide discussion of the findings with connection to available evidences and academic literature in Chapter 5.

Summary of Findings

The examination of Belarus' paid leave and child care services policies through the lens of Leitner's model of familialism varieties showed that for children under 3 years old, these policies are characterized by optional familialism, whereas for older pre-school children they are de-familialistic. From the report of my qualitative study with 13 Belarussian mothers that I presented above, it follows that that overall, the mothers were satisfied with the state child care system and see it as an appropriate function for the state, but access to it is a major challenge. The mothers would have liked to use child care sooner and return to work sooner, but for the difficulty in securing a child care space. In the Discussion and Conclusions chapter below, I tie the findings from the theoretical and the empirical components together.

CHAPTER 5

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

Discussion

I will discuss my findings in light of: 1) the meaning of institutional child care to Belarussian mothers; 2) Belarussian mothers' experiences with state child care services; and 3) the alignment of Belarus' child care policies, including state child care services and the maternity/parental leave, with Belarussian mothers' needs.

Meaning of Institutional Child Care to Mothers

From my findings, it seems that the prevailing view of my participants is that child care is an appropriate function for the state, not just for older children, but for younger children as well. Participants indicated that institutional child care was positive for children's socialization, school readiness, and physical activity. Importantly, from the mothers' perspectives, institutional child care is better suited to meet these developmental needs of the child than the care provided by the child's family. My findings suggest that, for women of higher socio-economic status, such as the participants in my study, institutional child care, and public child care in particular, is an optimal substitute (and even a superior one) for parental care during the daytime while the mother is at work. This is in stark contrast with the views of "traditionalists" in North America, where some believe that pre-school children should be cared for solely by the mother (Cleveland & Krashinsky, 2003).

Furthermore, my study uncovered where institutional child care fits compared to other sources and options for child care, or a broader model of the distribution of roles in child care between the mother, the child's grandparents and the state. For my participants, public child care was the first choice. Grandparents' care emerged as a supplementary and optional source of child

care, which is not so much about care per se, but more about providing the opportunity for the grandparents and the child to socialize. Grandparents' care was also seen as a back-up for unforeseen situations when parents need to be away. Finally, friends could be asked to provide child care, but only in extreme circumstances. It should be noted that these findings probably cannot be generalized to all Belarus mothers, but only to a certain sub-population of Belarussian mothers.

Mothers' Experiences with the State Child Care Services

As I showed in my Findings section, the women in my study spoke at length about their experiences with the state child care system as a service, from the service user perspective. This is different from discussing state child care as an institution. Hence, I will discuss these findings in light of "user perspective", in particular, experience with quality, accessibility and affordability of the state child care service.

Mothers' perspective on the quality of the state child care services. As to the participants' day to day experiences with the child care institutions, they were overall positive. The mothers were satisfied with the quality of child care services and many of their aspects, such as amenities, facilities, child care staff, activities, food, health care, etc. It seems that the current system has inherited the main features of the Soviet child care, which mothers valued. In post-Soviet Belarus, the child care system "gained" shortages and higher cost sharing with families. Overcrowding of child care centres and a low staff to children ratio, detracting from the quality of care, was a serious concern.

Finally, the participants were sympathetic to child care staff in public child care centres for their low pay rate and called on the government to increase it. The mothers felt that increasing the rate would be fair compensation for the good and hard work that caregivers do and

would boost their performance on the job, and consequently the quality of care for the children. This characterizes my participants as rational and altruistic people who endorse social justice.

Despite the overall sense of satisfaction with public child care, the mothers who were not low income expressed preference for private child care centres, which they believed offer better service than state-run facilities. The perceived benefits included better amenities (e.g., a swimming pool), a better variety of activities, more skilled staff, and an individual approach to each child, and commitment to fostering each child's unique tendencies. These mothers did not mind paying a premium for better services. More often than not, the mothers who voiced preference for private child care also cited some negative experiences with public child care. These findings highlight the fact that, despite the trust in institutional child care in general, there seems to be a divide between higher-income and lower-income mothers regarding public (subsidized) versus private (paid) child care. This reflects the reality of the consumer mentality: the more affluent consumers want to have the choice of better service for their money. Also, the demographics have changed: the Belarus population today is markedly more stratified income-wise than it used to be, which is characteristic of countries with a market economy (Vorobei, 2013). People with higher incomes may have different needs and preferences regarding child care. This was evident in my qualitative inquiry where wealthier participants expressed preference for private child care which they perceived as providing better service.

Mothers' perspective on the accessibility of the state child care services. Challenges with institutional child care played a prominent part of my participants' experiences. A shortage of child care spaces was the most common problem identified by the participants. These findings underscore a pressing need for this vital service and the unfortunate reality of budget cuts and deficits in Belarus. The mothers also discussed the strategies that the parents used to secure a

child care spot for their child in a child care facility closer to home or any child care centre at all. Bribing the child care administration with cash under the table or using one's status and access to resources were the most common strategies. This finding suggests that child care is a scarce resource and ideal conditions are created to breed corruption among those who control access to it.

Shortage of child care spots and particularly nurseries is a fact of post-Soviet Belarus' reality, which was not present in the Soviet times. After Belarus proclaimed independence in 1991, the country became tightly constrained by serious budget deficits, despite the gradual transition to a market economy, which, in its turn, led to welfare state restructuring. Belarus has cut back on child care services for pre-school children, especially those under 3 years old. Between 1990 and 2012 the number of child care spaces has decreased significantly, presumably due to the introduction of extended parental leave. A large number of child care centres and nurseries closed. According to the national statistics office of Belarus, the number of child care facilities declined from 5,530 in 1990 to 4,091 in 2012, and the number of children enrolled in those facilities dropped by more than 45 per cent from 608,000 in 1990 to 388,000 in 2012 (Statistics Belarus, 2013). Instead of maintaining the same number of child care centres, Belarus started to provide an extended, 3-year parental leave.

It is not apparent what drove that policy change: whether that was a conscious choice by policy makers based on an ideological belief that child care is a family responsibility, not a state one, or simply a cost-saving measure. It was most likely the latter. It is possible that policy makers reacted to the declining fertility rates and a high unemployment rates that all former USSR republics, including Belarus, experienced after the transition to market economy in the 1990s. In 1991, the fertility rate in Belarus was 1.91, while in 1995 it decreased to 1.39. These

indicators are in line with female unemployment rates. While in 1993 (the earliest year for statistics on post-Soviet Belarus) it was 1.4%, by 1995 this number doubled (World Economics Outlook, 2015). The female unemployment statistics for Belarus should be interpreted with caution: the ultimate source of these data is Belarus State Statistics Agency, some of its data does not reflect reality. However, the reality was that public expenditures on early childhood education and care were greatly reduced.

The most recent OECD cross-country analysis on child well-being shows that, on average, countries in the OECD spend 2.4% of GDP on families with children in cash benefits, services and tax breaks, while Belarus still spends less than 1% of its GDP (OECD, Family database, 2013). Over the past several years, between 2005 and 2011, there has been a steady reduction in expenditures on early childhood programs, as shown in Table 2. In particular, public expenditures on early childhood education and care decreased from 0.99% of GDP to 0.92 % which translates into decline of 7.2%

Table 2

Early childhood expenditure and related statistics

Indicators	Year				
	2005	2008	2008	2010	2011
Public expenditures on early childhood education and care, % of GDP	0.99	0.97	0.94	0.95	0.92
Number of child care centers	4,150	4,087	4,097	4,099	4,081
Number of pre-school children	366,700	367,700	378,800	384,000	387,400
Number of children per child care institution	88	90	93	94	95

Source: The numbers shown in this table were taken from Statistics Belarus, 2013 and Statistics Belarus, 2013: Education.

Most nurseries for children under 3 years old have closed down or have been converted to combined child care centres, providing care for children from 2 months to six years old. In 2012 in Belarus, there were 4,069 child care centres, but only 5 nurseries (see Table 3).

Table 3

Child care centres

Child care centers	2005	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012
Nursery (children from 2 months to 3 years old)	7	8	5	5	5	5
Combined child care centre (children from 2 months to 6 years old)	2,376	2,270	2,281	2,262	2,313	2,334
Child care centre (children from 3 to 6 years old)	1,767	1,809	1,811	1,832	1,763	1,725
Total number of child care centers	4,510	4,087	4,097	4,099	4,081	4,069

Source: Statistics Belarus, 2013: Education.

Mothers' perspective on the affordability of the state child care services. With regards to the cost of child care, many mothers felt that public child care is affordable and that they are getting good value for money. However, mothers emphasized the hidden costs, such as the administration's charges for repairs, and supplies. Although there is no academic research available in Belarus on my topic to draw upon, I was able to find evidence that support my findings in the media. Belarus' print media have covered child care costs issues extensively. . The public's comments made on those issues are in line with my findings, as illustrated in the following quotes:

The issue is not that we are paying for soap, toilet paper, supplies, toys and etc. The issue is that officially child care in Belarus is free, but, actually, less and less money is allocated from the state budget and more and more expenses are passed on to parents.

Comment in “Komsomolskaya Pravda”

Why not include all official and unofficial fees in one bill? For example, this amount is for supplies, this amount is for food, this amount is for repairing needs. It is better for our government to recognize that child care is no longer free and everything will be clear for the state as well as for parents.

Comment in “Komsomolskaya Pravda”

The mothers would prefer that the same charges be official, and therefore more predictable, and accounted for. Some mothers found it difficult to put up with the unofficial charges as they represent a deviation from the free child care of the Soviet times. . For the lower-income participants, the unofficial extra charges were the tipping point that stretched their family budgets. This reflects the plurality of perspectives. Some mothers were not opposed to extra charges in principle and called for more transparency and accountability. Others were still entrenched in the socialist paradigm, finding it difficult to accept that child care is no longer free. The twenty years of a new democratic regime and market economy have produced changes in mentality, but did not quite erase the societal memory of free child care.

Alignment of Belarus' Child Care Policies with Mothers' Needs

This part of my discussion focuses on the alignment of Belarus' child care policies, including the state child care service policy and the maternity/parental leave policies with Belarussian mothers' needs. Here, I bring together the findings from the theoretical and the empirical parts of my study. I will start with the discussion of the policy environment for parents with children under 3 years old, which is characterized by optional familialism. I will discuss the 3-year maternity/parental leave policy which is accompanied by a parallel policy of providing state child care, and how well that works for mothers. The theoretical investigation of these policies allowed me to qualify them as optional familialism, where staying at home and putting children in state child care appear to be the two equally available options. However, my

qualitative study uncovered that this is not the case because the state does not provide a sufficient supply of child care spots. This shortage is particularly felt for spaces for children under 3 years old. In this situation, mothers have to take up the "option" to take a longer leave than they prefer to. In other words, family child care becomes a "forced" choice for women. They do not mind staying at home with their children for some time, but not for such an extended period of time. The pattern was that most of the women in my study returned to work as soon as they were able to find a child care spot, which occurred long before the end of the 3-year parental entitlement. Otherwise they would have resumed employment sooner.

This pattern of behavior is consistent with the results of the survey conducted in Belarus (Head Hunter, 2014). According to the survey, 54% of women return to work before the 3 year parental leave is up. The results of this survey, in combination with my findings, suggest that the 3-year parental leave policy does not work for mothers. The fact that the majority of the women did not use the whole 3 years of the leave and returned to work before the leave was up is a clear indication of problems in the policy uptake.

There may be a number of reasons for which women interrupt their parental leave and return to work before the child turns three. In fact, the women in my studies identified several of them. First, as my participants explained, they could not take advantage of the 3-year leave because it is not compensated well enough. The Republic of Belarus's official rhetoric glorifies motherhood and fertility and claims to encourage it by providing financial support for mothers with young children in the form of benefits and allowances for child birth and child rearing. In particular, as I mentioned in the beginning of this chapter, the parental leave benefit is tied to the average monthly salary of employees in order to automatically adjust (index) the benefit to the increasing consumer prices. A quarterly indexing of the maternity leave benefit only partially

compensates for the rising cost of living in Belarus. In particular, in 2014 compared to 2011, the monthly parental leave payment benefit increased 2.6 times from \$78 to \$190.8 USD. Despite indexing parental leave benefits to adjust for inflation, the monetary value of this amount is not sufficient for the mother's and child's necessities (Spasuik, 2012). For this reason, women in Belarus cannot afford to take advantage of their right to the full duration of the parental leave, because the current economy typically requires two incomes to maintain an adequate standard of living. It should be noted that Belarus had the highest inflation rate on the continent during the previous years. Thus, in 2012 the inflation rate in Belarus averaged 16%, which is eight times higher than the average inflation rate in Europe (Luzgina, 2014).

Also, from the experiences of my participants, it seems that a 3-year parental leave and staying out of the labour force for such an extended period of time can have negative implications for women. They may face negative repercussions for taking the 3-year leave in the form of passing up career opportunities and losing job skills.

Integral to the parental leave provision is obliging the employer to retain the mother's position for the duration of the leave. On the one hand, the evidence suggests that this type of job security provision strengthens women's attachment to the labour market (Gornick et al., 1997). On the other hand, a long-term absence limits career opportunities and job retention (Mandel & Semyonov, 2005). Several studies revealed that the loss of qualifications during a long parental leave, or negative attitudes from employers (who view mothers as unreliable workers), often coerce women into precarious job patterns, thereby damaging their careers and economic security in the long run (Mandel & Semyonov, 2005; Teplova, 2007). Recent public polls paint a similar picture. Respondents in the "Head Hunter: Belarus" survey indicated that returning to work after a long break was not an easy task due to changes that had occurred in the company,

staff turnover, and loss of some of the job skills. While 18% of respondents said they easily adjusted to their job duties, 14% of respondents noted that their job skills had deteriorated while they were on maternity leave. Thus, in reality it turns out that it is not beneficial for women to take a longer parental leave in terms of their labour force attachment and employment prospects.

Third, the decision to not take the full duration of the parental leave and return to work may be a matter of a cultural norm. Several participants noted that combining motherhood and workforce participation is a norm in Belarus's society, which is rooted in the Soviet traditions. Mostly it was a question of prevailing ideology during the era of socialism. According to Bebel, Engels, Marx, Kollontai and Lenin, women's participation in the labor force was considered necessary for economic independence (Burckley, 1981). As Lenin put it: "You cannot build communism without drawing women into labor force." (Burckley, 1981, p. 68). In fact, the Soviet labor force was heavily dependent upon female labor, including new mothers. It seems that Belarus women value labour force participation, and for many women in Belarus going back to work before a child turns 3 years old is a matter of preference and choice. This was the perspective of mothers in my study, which is consistent with the results of the survey conducted by the company "Head Hunter: Belarus" in 2014 (Head Hunter, 2014). Their survey of with 546 women from 61 companies found that one-third of the women were looking forward to the end of their parental leave and were happy to return to work before it was completed. Many participants in my study noted that they felt bored staying at home and not working. Thus, a long, not so generously compensated parental does not seem to find support in the socio-cultural trends and attitudes. "The employed mother" has become a dominant life pattern for adult women in Belarus where women make up over 50 per cent of the total work force (Statistics Belarus, 2013). From the women's perspective, the state policies that encourage women to leave

the labor market to raise children are not desirable. Studies have shown that only 5 to 7 percent of Belarussian women would like to completely stop working (Revin, 2009; Robila, 2012). There are growing numbers of employed women who do not plan on abandoning their careers. Women “increasingly have careers, not just jobs” (Javornik, 2014, p. 240).

As to the policies on the state child care, my findings suggest that they are problematic for Belarussian mothers as well. The participants of my study indicated that although their preference was to return to work before the child turns three, they were not able to do so because they were not able to secure a nursery space. The shortage of child care spaces, especially, nursery spaces, forces women to take up the "option" of staying at home to care for their children. The qualitative part of my study uncovered that a shortage of child care spaces is the biggest problem for mothers of young children. Consistent with other sources of data, this shortage was felt most with respect to nurseries.

The participants in my study reporting acute shortage of child care spaces, especially nurseries, is corroborated by the official statistics. In the Gomel region, where 11 of the 13 participants live, between 1990 and 2012 the number of child care centres fell from 1,117 to 704 or by 38 per cent (Statistics: Belarus: Regions, 2013). At present, about 3,000 pre-school aged children in the Gomel region are not enrolled in child care institutions and are currently on the public child care waiting list. Moreover, 73% of child care centres in the Gomel region are overcrowded (Gomel Committee of State Control, 2013).

The shortage of child care centers has led service providers to increase class sizes beyond standards established by the Regulation of Early Childhood Education and Care in Belarus. It is not unusual to see classes that have 25 to 30 children. This finding is consistent with the statistics. For example, in Gomel an average children to staff ratio in nurseries (for children from

2 to 3 years of age) is 20-25 children per one staff (Gomel Committee of State Control, 2013), while the standard is 15 children, while for classes for children between 3 and 6, the average ratio 25-27 children per one staff while the standard is 20 children.

The shortage has also caused Belarusian parents to utilize alternative child care facilities such as newly developed private child care and care by relatives. However, in Belarus private child care is not wide-spread. Currently, there are only 9 private child care centers in Belarus and their monthly fee range from \$500 to \$1000 USD (Expert community in Belarus, 2013) This is out of proportion with an average monthly income of \$513 USD in the country; only a small percentage of the population can afford to pay this fee.

These findings underscore the women's unmet need for child care spaces and especially for nurseries. This means that Belarussian women need a different kind of support from the state than they currently receive. They want the state to assume direct responsibility for the care of their children during the day to enable them to return to work as opposed to the state financially supporting them to care for their children at home. In Leitner's terms, Belarussian women seem to endorse de-familialism when it comes to the care for children under 3 years old. The current policy environment of optional familialism, which is optional only in theory that is maintained by the Belarussian state goes against Belarussian mothers' needs. The problematic piece is the overly long and not so well compensated parental leave that "encourages" family care while what women need is more support for institutional care that enables them to continue employment.

The policy where the state provides affordable child care for children between 3 and 6 years old seems to be one area where the policy the Belarussian state and the needs of Belarussian mothers align. This is a de-familialistic policy environment.. Given that my participants expressed preference for this type of policy environment for very young children, it

is not surprising that they also endorse de-familialism for the care of older children. As I indicated in my findings, the women in my study welcome the opportunity to put their children in state child care: this way they were able to return to work to earn income and advance their careers and have the assurance that their children are well cared for. The majority of my participants did not even consider the possibility of staying at home with their children when the children were old enough to be enrolled in child care. Granted, most two-parent, dual-earner families in Belarus would struggle financially if the mother took all three years of the parental leave (Spasuik, 2012). However, as my findings show, another reason for which women are seeking to place their children in institutional child care is that they believe it is the most optimal care arrangement for the child development. Yet, despite the fact that Belarussian women and the Belarussian state seem to be on the same page when it comes to the care of older pre-school children, there is a disconnect between the intent of the policy and the women's ability to take advantage of it due to the shortage of child care spaces. The least desirable situation that a woman can find herself in is when her three-year parental leave is up or she needs to return to work, but a child care space has not been secured due to the shortage. Not securing child care in this case means that the woman can lose her job. Participants in my study described such a situation. They also described situations where they had to bribe state child care centre's administration to secure a spot. This is where the Belarussian state has failed families with pre-school children by not delivering on the commitment to ensure accessible child care and by forcing parents to resort to illegal activity.

Conclusions

My study was the first to conduct an examination of child care policy in Belarus. The purpose of this study was: 1) to explore the extent to which the state in Belarus shares in and supports familial child care; 2) to explore the alignment between current child care policy and parental preferences.

My thesis included two parts, theoretical and empirical. In the first part I provided an extensive description of Belarus's public child care system. This system, established in the Soviet times, is meant to provide full-time care during the day for children aged from 2 months to 6 years old. The system is heavily regulated for compliance with standards that concern hygiene, fire safety, staffing, etc. Apart from child care, the system also provides primary health care services. The care and services component are subsidized by the government, while food and supplies are the financial responsibility of the child's parents.

I also examined Belarus' family and child care policy from a historical point of view. My review demonstrated that, in the years following the dissolution of the USSR, Belarus has moved to greater reliance on the family as the carer, which is probably due to budget deficits rather than a deliberate ideological doctrine. I discussed these changes in light of Leitner's framework of familialism varieties. Using Leitner's model of familialism varieties and the analysis of two child care policy instruments, maternity/parental leave and the state child care service, I concluded that Belarus' policies differentiate between children under 3 years old and children of 3 to 6 years old. For the former group, Belarus' policies are characterized by optional familialism, while for the latter group they are de-familialistic in nature.

I conducted three focus groups with 13 Belarussian mothers to uncover their perspectives on child care related policies, specifically, the maternity/parental leave and the state child care

service. I explored how optional familialism for younger pre-school children and de-familialism for older pre-school children in Belarussian child care policy are played out in lived experiences of Belarussian mothers. I provided an interpretative description of the participants' experiences supported by use of representative quotes.

My study showed that the familialistic tendencies that are apparent in the current child care policy for children under 3 years old go against Belarussian women's needs. The option of taking an extended parental leave 3 years does not work for women in principle. Therefore, there is a case for changing the current child care policies. My study has demonstrated that optional familialism in the current child care policies for children under 3 years old encouraging mothers to stay at home with their young children does not align with the preferences and values of mothers, particularly those from higher socio-economic strata. I found that Belarussian women with these characteristics value labor force participation and have high career aspirations. They are opposed to staying at home to care for their children for an extended period of time (a few years) and prefer institutional child care, which in Belarus is provided mostly by the state. In particular, women did not find the 3-year extended parental leave policy to be beneficial for them and expressed preference for institutional child care from a younger age. This attitude on the part of women is explained by my findings with regards to the meaning of institutional child care for them. Not only do they see public child care as a substitute for parental care, but also a great avenue for the child's socialization and early childhood education.

The mothers' rich descriptions of their lived experiences with institutional child care helped contextualize these findings and identify prevailing attitudes. While not everything in the women's experiences was positive and certain challenges were present, the mothers were satisfied with the child care system as a whole. They saw it as safe, trustworthy, and conducive

to optimal child development while being affordable. Overall, my study suggests that Belarussian mothers are satisfied with the current public child care system inherited from the Soviet times with its focus on quality and affordability. However, accessibility of state child care, especially, for children under 3 years old, was the main challenge for the women.

My study is a first step toward understanding how the role of the state and families are played out in contemporary Belarus. My participants articulated clear messages to policy makers regarding parental leave and child care policies. The government needs to increase the number of child care centres, especially in new neighbourhoods, and especially for children under 3 years old, to help address long waiting lists and overcrowding. The reduction in waiting time to get a child care spot would allow mothers to return to work earlier than they are currently able to. Returning to work is a major priority for Belarussian women, who are increasingly more educated and career-minded. The government should consider decreasing the duration of the parental leave, while increasing the amount of the monthly benefit. However, these conclusions should not be generalised to the whole population of Belarussian parents with pre-school children as mine was only as small sample of married urban, high-educated women with above-average incomes.

Study Limitations and Directions for Future Research

Although my study provides new knowledge about Belarussian mothers' experiences with child care, its limitations should be kept in mind. First, my study only used a small convenience sample of participants. Future qualitative studies on the topic should strive to recruit a larger sample and use a more theoretically sound sampling technique. Also, the findings speak to mothers' experiences only and do not reflect fathers' experiences. Although I meant to include both genders in the study, I was not able to recruit men. The literature suggests that qualitative

researchers often experience challenges recruiting fathers (Mitchell et al., 2007). Due to the relatively small scale of my investigation, I was not prepared to deal with this challenge. My sample consisted of women who were in their late twenties and early thirties, married, had at least a college/university degree, were well-educated, and held professional jobs. That means that the findings of my study may not be applicable to Belarussian mothers with different demographic characteristics. Future studies should strive to recruit representatives of other sub-populations of Belarussian mothers with young children, to investigate experiences of parents living on lower incomes, single mothers, and individuals employed in non-professional jobs, such as trades and the service sector. Future researchers should invest additional effort in recruiting fathers. Also, the key finding of this study regarding mothers' satisfaction with, trust in, and preference for institutional child care may be in part due to a self-selection bias. Since the majority of the mothers in my sample were employed while their children were cared for by the state, it is likely that such an arrangement was a matter of their choice. It is possible that the study would have led to different findings if I had included mothers who have chosen to care for their children at home rather than placing them in child care.

One of the challenges I experienced in conducting this study is the scarcity of reliable statistical data on indicators related to child care policies, including direct indicators, such as child care enrolment rates for different age groups, and related indicators, such as employment rates. Some of this information may be available in a paper format, from authorities and government agencies. Time and financial constraints prevented me from taking advantage of this option for collecting data.

More research is needed on Belarus and other former USSR republics to investigate variations in family policy with regards to the roles of the family, the state, and the private

sector. We need to understand more about specific family policy and how it may impacts families in these changing welfare systems, in order to learn about what kinds of policy configurations best contribute to the well-being of children and families. Perhaps, future research could act on Javornik's direction to include the countries that have been received little attention from welfare state researchers (e.g Belarus and Ukraine) in comparative studies based on Leitner's model of familialism varieties.

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Appendix B

Interview Guide

CHILD CARE POLICY AND THE EXPERIENCES AND PERCEPTIONS OF EMPLOYED BELARUSIAN PARENTS WITH PRE-SCHOOL CHILDREN

Interview Guide for Participants

Purpose: the purpose of these focus groups is:

to elicit experiences and perspectives from parents of pre-school children about the availability, accessibility, quality of current child care services.

to inquire about parents' experiences in integrating work and family.

to explore parents' perspectives on what child care would look like in an ideal world.

Child Care Experiences

1. What is your current child care situation?

2. How did you choose this? What influenced the choice? What were the steps that you took to find this child care?

3. Did you choose the child care option that was closest to home? [Why/why not?] How do you organize travel to and from child care? [Who is primarily responsible for this? What is the travelling to/from child care like for you? When and why do travel arrangements change?] Or do care-givers travel to your home?

4. Who made your child care arrangements? How did you decide who would do what?

5. What type of child care arrangement (public or non-public) do you prefer for your children?
6. Is there anything you would do differently when choosing your child care?
7. What is the best feature of your current child care situation? What is the worst?
8. Please tell us about your level of satisfaction with your child care arrangement.
9. If you were to change your child care arrangement what would you be looking for in a new child care option?
10. In an ideal world, what would your child care look like? Where would it be provided?

Concluding Comments

1. Is there anything related to child care that you would like to talk about before we finish the focus group?

Appendix C

Information Letter for Child Care Study Focus Group Participants

Purpose of the Study:

Parents in Belarus use a variety of child care strategies to meet their child care needs. The purpose of this study is to find out what strategies Belarusian parents of pre-school children are using for child care and to understand how those strategies impact child and family well-being.

Who is doing this Study:

Dr. Rhonda Breitreuz is an assistant professor in the Department of Human Ecology, University of Alberta, investigator's supervisor.

Iryna Hurava is a graduate student in the Department of Human Ecology, a principal investigator.

Methods:

The information for this study will be collected through focus groups. The focus groups will take approximately 60-90 minutes to complete. Each focus group interview will be audio recorded and typed out to ensure the accuracy of the data and assist with data analysis.

Consent:

Participation in this research study is entirely voluntary. You are free to leave the focus group at any time. You may also choose not to answer particular questions within the focus group interviews. Once the focus group interviews are transcribed, all identifying information, such as names and child care providers, will be removed from the transcript. No one will be able to connect your data with any identifying information. Due to the nature of the recorded focus group data collected, where specific individuals' contributions are not distinguishable, it will not be feasible to remove your contribution.

Confidentiality:

The data will be kept in a locked filing cabinet/password protected digital file for five years following the completion of the study, after which time the data will be destroyed. We will not share the original interviews with anyone other than the researchers.

Members of the research team will comply with the University of Alberta Standards for the Protection of Human Research. They will sign a confidentiality agreement to ensure confidentiality.

Benefits of participating in this study:

While participating in this study may not benefit you directly, the information we gather will help us to better understand how parents in Belarus are managing their child care responsibilities. This knowledge may help other parents and may be used to plan family policies that support parents requiring child care for their pre-school children.

Risks of participating in this study:

A risk of participating in this study is that you may feel upset about the information that you have shared. If this occurs, the focus group facilitator will talk with you after the focus group and help you to decide how to deal with your feelings. The focus group facilitator can also provide information about services that you can go to for help.

There is also a risk that another focus group participant might share what you have said in the focus group with someone outside of the group. Before and after each focus group, all participants will be reminded that information shared in the group is confidential and shouldn't be shared outside of the focus group.

Reimbursement of expenses:

To acknowledge your time, you will receive a \$10 for participating in the focus group interview.

Ethics Approval:

The plan for this study has been reviewed for its adherence to ethical guidelines and approved by a Research Ethics Board at the University of Alberta. For questions regarding participant rights and ethical conduct of research, please contact the Research Ethics Office, University of Alberta at 780-492-0459.

Contact Information:

If you have any questions or concerns, please contact Iryna Hurava (phone: +375296690150 (Belarus); +1017807603354 (Canada)).

Appendix D

Belarus' Child Care System

General Overview

Belarus currently has a nationwide system of continuous education beginning at the pre-school level. The pre-school level of education is not obligatory but around 17 % children between 1 to 3 years old and 83 % children between 3 to 6 years old attend a nursery or child care centre (Statistics Belarus: Education, 2013).

A Belarusian child care centre usually accommodates children from three to six years old, where child groups are organized by age. A standard child care centre will offer care for three groups of 3 to 6 years old. The basic structure of a child care centre involves three main groups. The “junior group” accommodates children three to four years old. The “middle group” provides child care to children who are four to five years old. The “preparatory group” includes children five to six years old, which most closely resembles the North American concept of kindergarten” in that it prepares children for school. Some child care centres are “yasli” which is corresponding to the North American “nursery” and designed solely for children aged from 2 months to three years old. Due to budget deficits during the transformation period, most nurseries have closed down or have been converted to combined child care centres, providing care for children from 2 months to six years old.

Services and Programs

The services and programs are tailored to different age groups. Groups are also formed by age. Child care centers are equipped according to special requirements for pre-school institutions. Health care is a very important feature of child care institutions. Each child care center has a nurse on site whose duties include daily check-ups, prophylactic immunization, and

first aid. Also, each child care center undergoes regular sanitary and hygienic inspections as well as food and fire inspections. In addition to regular child care centers there are special centers that accommodate children with special needs.

The health care component is especially important in the activity of pre-school institutions. One of the functions of these institutions is to provide primary health care to children and to correct the shortcomings of their physical and mental development (The Regulation on special pre-school, 2011). Special opportunities for children's health improvement and the correction of developmental deviations are available at specialized child care centers known as sanatoriums. Children who need health improvement are accepted to sanatorium child care centers based on a medical certificate issued by the medical advisory committee of the local children's polyclinic. There are sanatorium child care centers for children with speech development disorders, child care centers for children with vision disorders, and child care centers for children with muscular and skeletal disorders. Such child care centers have health care personnel on site and all necessary amenities (such as a swimming pool and gyms for therapeutic physical exercise). These types of sanatorium child care centers promote the health of children whose state of health is not optimal so that they could make a successful transition to full start primary school (The Regulation on special pre-school, 2011)

In most cases, each child care centre employs a director, child care providers ("upbringers"), nannies (child care assistant), cooks, a nurse, musical teachers, and night guards. The overwhelming majority of child care providers (99.9 %) are women (Vorobei, 2013). For each group of 15 children under the age of 3 and for each group of 20 children aged 3 to 6 there is to be one early childhood educator and one nanny. However, due to the shortage of spots in child care centres, these ratios are not met in many child care centres.

The education level of child care providers in Belarus is very high. According to the statistics of the Ministry of Education (2010), 39.9% of child care providers had a university degree, 55.5% have a college degree (pedagogical college), 2.3% were in the process of obtaining a university degree part-time, and 2.3% had a high-school diploma (Statistics Belarus: Education, 2010). Similarly, according to 2008 UNICEF Situation Analysis, the total number of child care providers in Belarus in that year was 50,217, of which 95.6% had formal education in early childhood education (UNISEF, 2010). In Belarus, training for child care staff for pre-schools is provided at three pedagogical universities, one pedagogical institute, three colleges and eight teacher training schools (UNESCO, 2006). Child care providers at pre-school institutions are divided into the following professional categories: 1) the highest professional category; 2) professional category I; 3) professional category II; 4) unclassified. Child care providers with higher professional designation receive slightly higher salaries than those with lower professional categories. The criteria for a professional category are the education level in the field of early childhood education and years of experiences.

Cost of Child Care

To date, according to the Code of the Republic of Belarus on Education, early childhood education and care in Belarus is free of charge and is funded by the state (The Code of the Republic of Belarus on Education, 2013). Child care institutions receive their funding from local budgets and the local authorities decide independently how much money to allocate for each child care centre. Typically, local governments operate under tight/deficit budgets. However, some municipalities have stronger budgets than others, depending on the economy of the region. The cost of a child care space to the government is \$215 USD per month, including the cost of utilities and consumables, depreciation of equipment, and salaries for child care staff (Vorobei,

2012; Vorobei, 2013). Officially, parents are only responsible for the cost of food which is 26% of the total cost of child care (equivalent of \$40 USD) (Vorobei, 2013). The amount of \$40 USD represents 7.5% of the net average wage in Belarus (Belarus Statistics, 2013). Of note, this fee covers the cost of four meals: breakfast, lunch, afternoon snack, and dinner. Frozen food or fast food is not allowed. All meals, including snacks, involve at least some cooking. However, additional services such as dancing, foreign language classes, and martial arts, which are not covered by the formal pre-school education curriculum, are explicitly parents' responsibility. Those fees depend on two factors: 1) how many additional classes a child attends and 2) the rate charged by service providers. Private services typically cost more than those provided by state-funded organizations.

Physical Environment

According to the Regulation of Early Childhood Education and Care in Belarus issued in 2011 by the Ministry of Education, the conditions of providing pre-school education as well as looking after and caring for children in pre-school institutions are governed by the sanitary and epidemiological rules and regulations including the requirements for the building, its lighting and heating, equipment (including the requirements for children furniture), outdoors playgrounds, and meals (The Regulation of Early Childhood Education and Care in Belarus, 2011). For example, the statement indicates that the standard land plot area shall be not less than 29 square meters per 1 child and not less than half of that area shall be landscaped. Also 1-2 playgrounds shall be included with a child care center. In Belarus, there are two types of child care set up. One is where a child care centre occupies the main floor of an apartment building, and the other is a two- or three-storey freestanding building. Each pre-school institution has music and sports rooms; the institutions which have been constructed since 1990s have swimming pools. Group

rooms where the children spend more than 50% of their time in a child care centre are divided into: a change room with individual lockers; a room where children play and have classes; a room for sleeping for afternoon naps; and a bathroom. Each room has a design appropriate to the activity it is meant for.

Each center has a fenced outdoor play area and each age group has its own dedicated play area separate from those of the other groups. When the children are engaged in play outside, child care staff educate them about natural phenomena, such as rain, snow, etc. Children play in the sand box, play ball, badminton, and draw with colored chalks, mold things out of clay. Usually, each of these separate play areas has a wooden shelter in it. The shelters are used for briefly escaping snow or rain in the winter time and the hot sun in the summer time.

The first room that the child sees in the child care institution is the change room where children leave outerwear and where parents drop off and pick up the children. Dressing rooms are equipped with child-sized wooden lockers located along the walls, one for each child. Each closet is decorated with different pictures so that children can easily find their own. Children's art (drawings, etc.) are displayed either directly on the top of the closets or on a separate shelf hung on the wall. There are also displays for parents, including parenting books and notices. The notices made by center staff may include child health care and safety information, and exercise and activities tips.

The playroom is typically a large rectangular room with large windows. Its walls are painted in light colours. The space is divided into four activity areas, for drawing, building blocks, toy kitchen stove and utensils, a book corner. Each playroom has a desk for child care staff and a small kitchenette area to serve snacks and rinse utensils. The playroom has small tables painted in bright colours used for lessons and meals. The furniture is built child-size.

There are toys that are meant for boys and for girls. The toys and activities are geared toward developing spatial and crafts skills, didactic games and role-play. Each group has their own bathroom. All bathrooms are equipped with child-sized toilets and sinks. Each child has her or his own cloth towel in small individual cubicles and knows which cubicle is hers or his. All bathrooms have a small bathtub or a shower stall. It is equipped with running water and is used after outdoor play.

In the bedrooms, each child has an assigned child-sized wooden bed with a headboard and a footboard, a cotton sheet, a pillow and a blanket. For sanitary reasons, sheets are marked “head” and “foot”. The nanny makes sure that children use the bedding accordingly. All child care institutions have one or two large rooms used for music lessons and exercise activities. In the participants' experience, a music hall has a piano and about 25-30 child-sized chairs. Children sing, dance, and do stage performances for social events, which are attended by parents and other family members. In some centres, in addition to the music room there is a gym. Exercise units with ladders for climbing, hoops, balls, and benches are standard equipment for physical education activities. Some newly-built child care centres were reported to be equipped with swimming pools where children have swimming lessons two or three times a week guided by qualified instructors.

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