

Abstract

This work provides an ethnography of maternity leave in the Czech Republic, analyzing the experiences, attitudes and reflections on motherhood among 14 Czech mothers living in Prague. Maternity leave in the Czech Republic distinguishes itself from that in many other western countries by virtue of its long-term nature – typically 3 to 4 years per child. Ultimately, this model for long-term home care, institutionally structured and culturally naturalized, has an essential impact on the position of woman in the family and in the society at large. Today, Czech mothers find themselves the default caretakers in the home but lacking the extended family support and networks accessed in the past, particularly acute in the context of culturally negative attitudes toward hired help and nurseries in the Czech Republic. Czech mothers also find themselves pinned between two ideologies – one stressing the importance of maternal care for the well-being of the child and another establishing the low status of staying home to raise a child in the context of the need for self-realization in a career. This ethnography teases out the sometimes reinforcing but often conflicting notions of what it is to be a mother through analyzing the biographical narratives of three identified groups of Czech women: mothers who have devoted several years to childcare at home; mothers who work part-time; and mothers how return to their jobs full time “shortly” after the birth of their child.

Key words: maternity leave, motherhood, child care, gender, gender equality, household division of labor