

Nordic men on parental leave: can the welfare state change gender relations?

Johanna Lamm-Taskila

Promoting fatherhood at the policy and institutional level can produce more symmetrical definitions of women and men as parents than will exist without such promotion. But does the politicising of fatherhood really 'make men into fathers' (Hobson, 2002)? Men are facing a challenge to increasingly share the responsibilities of family life at the same time as women have become an important part of the labour market. From the early 1990s, fatherhood has been a focus area in the development of parenthood policies. In order to encourage more men to take parental leave, individual and non-transferable rights for fathers have been legislated.

Changes in gender relations at the institutional level are expected to change the gendered practices of work-family reconciliation. The way men and women think, act and feel is, however, also influenced by the workplace culture (Haas et al, 2002) as well as by family negotiations (Olsen, 2000). Thus the politicising of parenthood to promote fathercare does not necessarily produce radical changes in the division of paid and unpaid work in everyday life.

In the Nordic countries, parental leave schemes have been available for men since the 1970s, but men have not taken up the opportunities nearly as much as had been expected (Leira; Borchorst, this volume). The daddy-quota of parental leave has been the main instrument in promoting fathers' take-up of the leave. The introduction of a quota has increased the number of men who take parental leave (Brundth and Överli, 1998; Haas et al, 2002; Rostgaard, 2002). The quota is a challenge to the traditional division of care work. Decisions about sharing or not sharing parental leave are no longer totally up to the parents. The idea of the quota is the same in all countries – this leave period is reserved for the father – but there is variation in the actualisation in different Nordic countries

(Rostgaard, 2002). The timing and the policy arguments have been different. The length of the quota varies, as well as the level of individual care responsibility, in other words, whether the father is the primary carer during his leave. Variation at the institutional level is related to differences in the gendered division of labour and power in everyday life, that is, to the take-up patterns of parental leave and the effects these patterns have for women's and men's positions in the labour market as well as at home.

Focusing on the politicising of fatherhood, this chapter compares the current entitlements of fathers for taking parental leave in five Nordic countries: Sweden, Norway, Denmark, Iceland and Finland. Next, reviewing both qualitative and quantitative research, the chapter goes on to examine the socioeconomic and cultural conditions of actualising leave possibilities, and considers especially negotiations of gender relations in the everyday life of families and workplaces. The conclusion returns to a main question raised: does the politicising of fatherhood change gender relations in infant care?

Fathers' rights to leave

The time that may be taken free from employment by a father to care for his child is not determined by one form of leave but several different policy elements. Some entitlements are individual and non-transferable, such as paternity leave and the daddy quota; some are transferable parental leave. First, the father can take a short paternity leave soon after childbirth when the mother is also at home with the baby. Paternity leave is meant to promote the father-child relationship and to provide help for the mother. The length of paternity leave is three weeks in Finland and two weeks in all other Nordic countries. Iceland has no special paternity leave.

Second, the father can share parental leave with the child's mother, according to their mutual decision. This time period varies from three months in Iceland to one year in Sweden. In principle, only one parent at a time stays at home on parental leave, taking full responsibility for childcare, while the other parent is at work or studying. In practice, however, it is possible and quite usual for the other parent – in this case the mother – to take annual holiday or sabbatical leave in order to stay at home together with the father and child (Rostgaard, 2002; Haataja, 2004).

Third, the father can take the daddy quota of parental leave, which is a non-transferable leave period, meaning that it cannot be taken by the mother if the father decides not to use it. The length of the daddy

quota varies from two weeks in Finland to three months in Iceland. Denmark is the only Nordic country with no daddy quota at the moment as a two-week quota has been abolished (see Borchorst, this volume). Also the two-week 'bonus leave' in Finland has a somewhat different character than the daddy quotas in Sweden, Norway and Iceland because it is conditional. The father only gets his two extra leave weeks if he first takes two weeks of the transferable parental leave.

There are some differences between the Nordic countries in the eligibility criteria for a father's parental leave. Only in Norway does a father's option to take parental leave depend on both his and the mother's employment, in order for the father to take parental leave, both parents must have been employed for six of the previous 10 months (Brandth and Kravande, 2003). Danish fathers are eligible for parental benefit if they have been in the labour market for at least 13 weeks before the leave and have during this time worked at least 120 hours; but also unemployed fathers can take parental leave (www.bm.dk). In Sweden and in Iceland, a father can take parental leave if he has been employed for at least six months; in Sweden also if he has worked altogether at least 12 months during the past two years (www.fk.se; Drew, 2005).

In Iceland and in Finland, a father living together with the mother of their child is entitled to parental benefit and parental leave regardless of the mother's position in the labour market (Gislason, 2004; www.kela.fi). In Finland, in order for the father to receive parental benefit he must have lived in Finland for at least 180 days before the due date, and the mother of his child must have taken a postnatal medical examination five to 12 weeks after childbirth (www.kela.fi). In Sweden, fathers who do not live with the mother are also entitled to parental benefit and parental leave if their child lives in Sweden and the parents have shared custody (Nyman and Pettersson, 2002).

The above-mentioned forms of leave are part of the social insurance system, which usually means that an earnings-related compensation is paid during the leave period. There are, however, some exceptions: during paternity leave, quite a large flat-rate benefit is paid in Denmark (Rostgaard, 2002) and in Norway wage compensation during paternity leave is not statutory but negotiated in collective agreements (Leira, 1998). Unpaid periods are also included in the parental leave scheme in Norway, where both parents have the right to a one-year period of unpaid parental leave in addition to the period with compensation. In Sweden, a low flat-rate benefit is paid during the last three months of the parental leave period (Haataja, 2004).

The level of the earnings-related parental benefit is highest in

Norway (80% to 100% of previous income) and lowest in Finland (about 70% of average income). The level of the Danish flat-rate benefit is 56% of the average male production worker's income (Rostgaard, 2002). Benefits are important for the family economy, but they also symbolise the importance of care work as it is evaluated by the state. As men's swages are in general higher than women's, a low compensation level may result in a lower take-up of leave by fathers (Haataja and Nyberg, this volume).

Flexibility in the parental leave schemes has been seen as facilitating men's take-up of leave (Rostgaard, 2002). In all the Nordic countries, parental leave can be taken on a part-time basis. The alternatives for full-time parental leave in Sweden are 70%, 50%, 25% or 18% of leave combined with part-time employment. In Norway, the time-account scheme allows parents to work part time 50%, 60%, 75%, 80% or 90% of the time and to receive a partial parental benefit that is paid for a longer period than the full-time leave benefit (Haataja, 2004). The daddy quota can, however, only be taken full time (Rostgaard, 2002). In Denmark and in Iceland, parents can take part-time leave if they are able to negotiate it with their employers (Rostgaard, 2002; Gislason, 2004).

Compared to the other Nordic countries, Finland is a latecomer in creating part-time possibilities for parental leave. Part-time parental leave was first legislated for in 2003 and, unlike in the other Nordic countries, it is conditional: part-time parental leave can be taken only if both parents shorten their working hours at the same time and take turns in childcare for at least two months (Haataja, 2004). The Finnish system is more rigid also in regard to the timing of leave periods and taking leave over a longer time span. Whereas parents in Denmark, Sweden and Iceland can take periods of parental leave until the child is eight to nine years old, in Finland this is possible only until the child is about 10 months old. If the father has not taken up his leave entitlements during this period, he can no longer receive the income-related parental benefit.

However, in Finland and Norway there is still the possibility of full-time or part-time leave with a flat-rate benefit after the paternity and parental leave periods, until the child is three years old. During this period, a cash-for-care benefit is paid to a parent who stays at home with the child instead of using public child day care services (see Ellingsæter, Leira, this volume).

High popularity of short leave periods

The possibilities for sharing the care of young children between the parents are quite extensive in the Nordic countries at the institutional level, but in practice the gendered division of labour in families is still far from symmetrical. Although large numbers of Nordic fathers are taking some form of parental leave, sharing the transferable period of parental leave between mothers and fathers so that the father bears the primary care responsibility is still a marginal phenomenon. The introduction of the daddy quota has resulted in take-up by fathers in greater numbers as this part of parental leave cannot be transferred to the mother. The daddy quota has also increased the sharing of parental leave outside the quota between fathers and mothers in Norway and in Iceland (Brandth and Kvande, 2003; Gislason, 2004). On the other hand, the quota has shortened the average length of leave periods taken by fathers in Finland and in Sweden (Haataja and Nyberg, this volume).

The popularity and the high take-up of the father's individual leave rights – paternity leave and the daddy quota – have been referred to as 'everyman's mass movement' (Tammi-Taskula, 1998) or 'a father revolution' (Floker, 2003) as these leave periods are taken by a majority of fathers with different socioeconomic backgrounds. In Norway, the two-week paternity leave is taken by more than two thirds of fathers and the one-month quota of parental leave is even more popular – when the quota was introduced in 1993, the share of fathers taking parental leave rose from 4% to more than half of entitled fathers, and has since then grown to close to 90% (Brandth and Kvande, 2003).

Similarly, rapid development has taken place in Iceland along with the daddy quota of parental leave. During the first year (2001) of the new parental leave system with a one-month daddy quota, the take-up of leave by fathers grew from less than 1% to more than 80%. The take-up has remained as high with the extension of the quota to two months in 2002 and three months in 2003 (Gislason, 2004; see Chapter One, Table 1.1, p. 23). The success of the daddy quota in Norway and Iceland may at least partly be due to the fact that the quota was added to the existing parental leave period, whereas in the other countries it was partly or totally taken from the existing transferable parental leave that had mainly been taken by mothers.

In Sweden, another aspect explaining why the daddy quota has not increased the take-up of parental leave by fathers as rapidly as in Norway and in Iceland is that leave can be taken during a much longer period, until the child is eight years old. Before the quota in

1993, about one in four parents taking parental leave were fathers, but in 2001 the share of fathers was almost 40%. Half of the entitled fathers take some parental leave on a yearly basis, and during a five-year period only one in four fathers has not taken any leave (Nymman and Petterson, 2002).

In Finland and in Denmark, more than half of fathers take one or two weeks of paternity leave, but longer parental leave – which requires taking full responsibility for childcare and which needs to be negotiated with the mother – has been taken by only a few men (Rostgaard, 2002; Lammi-Taskula, 2003). The daddy quota has been more popular than the common parental leave among fathers, but not nearly as much as in the other countries. Before the two-week daddy quota was abolished in Denmark, it was taken by one in five fathers (Rostgaard, 2002). A similar popularity to that in Denmark was predicted in Finland as the new father's bonus leave ('quota') was introduced (Haara, 2004). However, during the first year the quota was taken up by only about 5% of fathers in Finland (Kela, 2004).

The length of parental leave taken yearly by fathers is longest in Iceland, where the average number of fathers' parental leave days has grown from 39 days in 2001 to 87 days in 2003. The one-month quota was taken by most fathers, and the two-month quota was also possible for a large majority. In 2002, about nine in 10 fathers took the whole two-month quota period. In 2003, three in four Icelandic fathers took all three months of their parental leave quota (Gislason, 2004).

Contrary to Iceland, the fathers' parental leave periods have become shorter in Sweden and in Finland after the introduction of the daddy quota. In Sweden, the average length of leave taken by fathers was 40 days in 1993 but only 27 days in 2001 (Nymman and Petterson, 2002). In Finland, parental leave periods taken by fathers averaged 64 days in 2002 but only 37 days in 2003 (Kela, 2004; see Box 1.1, Chapter One). As the fathers' take-up rate of parental leave is very low in Finland, the average length of all leave (paternity and parental) among fathers was only 17 days in 2003 (Kela, 2004).

In Denmark the mean length of parental leave taken by fathers in 2000 was one month. The same year the mean length of leave taken by fathers in Norway was 25 days, according to a survey those taking the daddy quota stayed at home on average for six-and-a-half weeks (including paternity leave) whereas those who did not take the quota only took on average one-and-a-half weeks of leave (Brandth and Kvande, 2003).

However, as fathers mainly take short leave periods, their share of

all parental leave days is low, ranging from less than 1% in Denmark (Rostgaard 2002) to 17% in Sweden (Jäm O, 2005). In Norway, fathers take 8.5% of all leave days (Rikstrygdeverket 2002/ www.ilkestilling.no) and in Finland only 5% (Kela, 2004; see Chapter One, Table 1.1, p 23). In addition to the short total length of leave periods taken by fathers, leave is also not always taken continuously but split into several periods. For example, in Iceland, because of the lack of paternity leave, many fathers take the first two or three weeks of their quota right after the birth of their child when the mother is also at home, and the rest later (Gislason, 2004).

The high popularity of paternity leave and the daddy quota of parental leave indicates that taking some leave from work to take care of one's child has become 'normal' among Nordic fathers. However, fathers' leave periods are mainly quite short and their share of all the parental leave days taken in each country is low. Following the expansion of the parental leave period and of individual non-transferable leave rights, Iceland has during recent years been the only Nordic country where both the number of fathers taking parental leave and the length of leave taken by fathers have been growing at the same time. Iceland is thus in the forefront of revising the hegemonic pattern of 'a small dose of fathercare' (Leira, 2002) and moving towards more symmetric gender relations.

Marginal but not marginalised: socioeconomic patterns of take-up

Compared to paternity leave and the daddy quota, the transferable parental leave has been taken only by a minority of fathers. One could say that this minority is marginal – only a small proportion of all fathers – but the socioeconomic composition of this group shows that the leave-sharing families are not by any means marginalised. Quite the contrary: according to statistics and surveys, the fathers who share the common parental leave come from relatively well-off families in all the Nordic countries. These fathers have a high education level, their earnings are reasonably high, and they have a spouse with a good position in the labour market (Olsen, 2000; Nymman and Petterson, 2002; Brandth and Kvande, 2003; Lammi-Taskula, 2003). Reports of the socioeconomic patterns of fathers' take-up of parental leave are not available from Iceland.

According to a Norwegian survey of 1,377 men whose child was born in 1994–95, the take-up of parental leave was higher among fathers whose spouse worked full time and did a lot of overtime work,

whereas the spouse's part-time work was related to a low take-up of parental leave by fathers. On the other hand, fathers with part-time employment or with a temporary work contract took more parental leave than full-time employees with a permanent position (Brandth and Kvande, 2003). Another survey of 1,661 men in Norway – who became fathers in 1995 – showed that parental leave beyond the four-week quota was taken especially by men with an academic degree and by those employed in white-collar positions (Brandth and Övretli, 1998).

Among a sample of about 4,000 Danish families with children born in 1995, the mother's high education and income level increased the chance of the father taking parental leave (Christoffersen, 1997). In Finland, a survey of 1,400 fathers and 3,300 mothers of children born in 1999 showed that men taking parental leave had a higher education level and were more often in a white-collar expert position than those who took only paternity leave. However, the father's academic degree increased the possibility of his taking parental leave only when the mother also had an academic degree, as these mothers took shorter leave periods than mothers in general (Lammi-Taskula, 2003).

The Swedish Social Insurance Institute (Riksförsäkringsverket) analysed the take-up of parental leave by fathers of children born in 1996 during a four-year period (1996–99). Leave was more often taken by men with longer education and higher income, as well as by men whose spouse had a higher education level. The fathers who did not take any parental leave had more often been unemployed and received other social benefits, and they were more often born outside of Sweden (Nyman and Pettersson, 2002).

As the families sharing parental leave are by no means economically or socially marginalised, the arguments concerning the importance of the negative economic consequences of fathers' parental leave for the family can be questioned. Of course, the economic argument is real as men in general have better wages than women – partly because of gender segregation in the labour market but also because of discrimination (Vartiainen, 2001) – and as the compensation level during parental leave is in most cases less than 100%. Thus, a family usually loses more money if the father takes parental leave than when the mother does so (Leira, 1998). The higher the family income level, the bigger the losses are in absolute terms, but their relative importance for the family economy can still be smaller.

Despite gendered wage differences and actual losses experienced by families, economic constraints are experienced as a relevant

argument for parental leave only in a minority of Nordic families. In a Swedish survey of 317 fathers working in the private sector in 1997–98, a majority (61%) reported no economic obstacles to taking leave (Haas et al., 2002). In a Danish sample of over 700 parents, even though 60% of the families would have lost income if the father took parental leave, only one in five said the father's leave would have been an economic burden for the family (Rostgaard et al., 1999). A third of the Norwegian fathers with children born in 1995 who had taken the four-week quota said the economic compensation had been important for them (Brandth and Övretli, 1998).

Even when economy is seen as an obstacle for sharing leave in one's own family, the assumed economic losses related to the father's parental leave are not necessarily verified by making calculations. Of Finnish parents with children born in 1999, more than half of those fathers and mothers who did not share parental leave referred to negative economic consequences as an argument against the father's leave, but less than one third had done any calculations (Lammi-Taskula, 2003). Obviously, the economic justification can only partly make sense of the gendered division of labour in childcare; this justification is often founded on assumptions based on statistical facts, that is, the general pay gap between women and men, rather than facts that are significant in one's own family life.

Negotiations in families

Qualitative studies on parental leave have pointed out that in addition to the socioeconomic factors, negotiations in families between mothers and fathers are an important part of the reproduction of the gendered division of labour. Relationships between economic rationality, family time and emotional aspects are outlined in everyday life practices in the context of prevailing norms and ideologies of motherhood, fatherhood and gender equality (Olsen, 2000; Planin, 2001; Brandth and Kvande, 2003).

The importance of family negotiations has also been addressed in several surveys. The results from Swedish workplaces showed that the partner's willingness to share parental leave was a significant predictor of a father's decision to take leave (Haas et al., 2002). Nearly half of the Norwegian fathers who did not take parental leave said an important reason was the mother's intention to stay at home, and another half reported that the parents were united in their willingness to prioritise the father's career (Brandth and Kvande, 2003). In Finland, a survey among parents of young children showed

that discussions about parental leave were more common among highly educated parents who had also shared leave more often than others: 72% of fathers with an academic degree, compared to 44% of fathers with no occupational education said they had discussed the take-up of parental leave with their spouse. Lack of discussion was partly due to lack of information, despite the fact that the fathers' possibilities have existed for almost two decades. Young first-time fathers as well as the less educated ones knew less about the parental leave system than fathers in general (Lammi-Taskula, 2003.)

Often the family negotiations about parenting and parental leave are subtle and implicit rather than exhaustive and explicit. When there is little discussion, the status quo of gender relations is often taken for granted. Swedish couples interviewed at the end of the 1990s expressed a strong consensus about the division of parental responsibilities; in the context of gender inequality in working life they saw the mother's parental leave as a gain for the family (Plantin, 2001). On the other hand, equal parenting practices can also be based on implicit shared understandings. A Norwegian father who took six months of parental leave said that sharing leave was an easy decision based on mutual desire: 'It was completely natural for me to stay at home and I really wanted to stay at home, I was very happy that she agreed and there was not much discussion really, or any arguments' (Brandth and Kyande, 2003, p 84).

The father's own needs, such as hoping for a break from work (Brandth and Kyande, 2003) or the child being a long-awaited fulfilment of hopes and dreams (Olsen, 2000), also motivate him to take parental leave. In family negotiations, these needs are not necessarily the first to be mentioned. When Finnish parents' justifications for the take-up of parental leave were compared, both mothers and fathers reported their own needs, for example getting out of the rat race and being together with their child, as more relevant than their spouse's needs (Lammi-Taskula, 2004). In other words, parents were not always aware of their spouse's needs. The mother's willingness to return to work may be combined with the father's tiredness with his own work, but what is often emphasised as a main argument is the child's best interests. For example, 90% of the Norwegian fathers taking their parental leave quota at the end of the 1990s said they took leave so that their child could be in home care as long as possible and enjoy a good father-child relationship (Brandth and Kyande, 2003).

What do they say at the workplace?

A conception of the father's indispensable occupational expertise can be behind the lack of negotiation about parental leave in families. When the work situation is constructed as a considerable obstacle to the father's parental leave, he is simply not seen as able to leave his work, and discussion of alternatives is useless. According to Jouko Huttunen, who has studied fatherhood in Finland, having a family and being a father is usually seen as a positive achievement for a man in worklife, but fatherhood can be practised only within certain limits (Huttunen, 1999). Taking parental leave can be perceived as going beyond this limit and disturbing paid work too much. The responses at the workplace are significant for the take-up of leave: a survey among Swedish fathers at the end of the 1990s showed that fathers who considered their companies to be supportive towards caring fatherhood, as well as gender equality, were more likely to take parental leave (Haas et al, 2002).

In the survey among parents of young children in Finland, half of the fathers who did not take parental leave said there would have been problems at the workplace if they had taken leave. However, only one in 10 of these fathers reported the employer's actual negative attitudes towards parental leave, so a majority had based their conception of the work-related barriers on assumptions (Lammi-Taskula, 2003). Job-related reasons were also reported as the major obstacle to parental leave by Norwegian fathers: 64% of those who did not take their parental leave quota said it would have been difficult to combine leave with work tasks (Brandth and Kyande, 2003).

Despite widespread assumptions and experiences of the work situation or work culture as obstacles to the father's parental leave, certain branches of worklife can be characterised as more 'father-friendly' than others. Take-up rates of parental leave by fathers employed in different sectors show that men employed in the public sector have taken parental leave more often than those employed in the private sector in all the Nordic countries (Risförsäkringsverket, 1993; Christoffersen, 1997; Brandth and Överli, 1998; Lammi-Taskula, 2003). According to the survey of parents from Finland, take-up rates are especially high in the public health and social care sector, whereas fathers employed in private industry or commerce have taken leave least often (Lammi-Taskula, 2003).

Several explanations have been given for the higher take-up of parental leave by fathers employed in the public sector. In Denmark, public sector employees received a supplement to the parental

benefit and thus the probability of sharing parental leave between parents was higher in the 1990s when the father was employed in the public sector and the mother in the private sector (Christoffersen, 1997). Public sector – especially health and social care – organisations are female-dominated in all the Nordic countries (Nordic Council of Ministers, 1999). In these organisations, absences of employees due to parental leave are usual. As routines in arranging substitutes and reorganising tasks during parental leave have been created, it is also easier for men working in female-dominated occupations to take leave (Olsen, 2000).

The attitudes of managers can also be different in public and private sector organisations. In the mid-1990s, Danish managers in the public sector were more positive towards parental leave than those in the private sector, and female superiors – who are more typical in the female-dominated public sector – were more supportive than male superiors (Andersen et al, 1996). Compared with Danish private sector companies, leave periods in public sector organisations were less often perceived as a sign of lower commitment and weaker performance (Carlsen, 1994).

The attitudes of colleagues in the workplace may also be significant to a father's decision to take up parental leave. Norwegian studies carried out in the mid-1990s showed that men taking parental leave received a lot of positive attention from their female colleagues (Brandth and Øverli, 1998). In a study involving 15 workplaces in Finland, it was found that middle-aged, white-collar female employees were particularly positive towards fathers' parental leave (Salmi and Lammela-Taskula, 1999).

The work culture, including attitudes and reactions in the workplace towards parental leave, is interrelated with the organising of work. Lisbeth Bekken (1999) distinguishes between individual and team work as relevant to the possibilities of men (and women) taking parental leave in Sweden. If work is based on individual specialisation, the absence of an expert has more relevance for the totality of the work process rather than for other expert colleagues concerned with their own, specialised tasks and projects. The attitudes towards parental leave in specialised workplaces can thus be negative among the management whereas the reactions of colleagues can be neutral or positive when someone takes leave. The absence of one employee from a more collectively organised work process, on the other hand, is not as relevant for the management as it can be for the colleagues. The re-division of tasks can add to the workload of colleagues, and they may need to spend time in tutoring a substitute employee.

In the early 2000s, tasks are more and more tied to individuals with special expertise, and employees are expected to bear responsibility for the company's success, and so leave can be interpreted as a sign of weaker commitment. The long-hours culture at dynamic workplaces and the mixed messages from management may prevent fathers from taking leave (Hias et al, 2002). Critical comments have been made by corporate management in the Finnish media about men even taking paternity leave, which is seen as incompatible with a work culture based on maximum efficiency and complete devotion to work (Jaaskonen, 2003).

There may be both individually and collectively organised tasks – carried out by specialists and experts as well as those whose work can more easily be replaced – within the same workplace. This means that the attitudes and practices in regard to parental leave vary according to position and situation. The reactions of management are also related to predicting and controlling work/family situations: at what stage are they informed about the pregnancy and plans about parental leave, how is it possible to plan ahead and reorganise tasks and how easy is it to hire a substitute? According to Bekken (1999), many Swedish fathers have combined a short parental leave period with a summer holiday. Prolonging holiday with parental leave may cause less negative reactions in the workplace than taking a long parental leave as such. In the early 1990s, Swedish fathers who took parental leave often had a different relationship to work than men in general: they did shorter hours and valued family life rather than paid work as the most important sphere in their life (Fias and Hwang, 1999). Perhaps this family orientation is even more threatening for employers than the temporary absence from work due to parental leave.

Outdoor daddies and household work

Sharing the responsibility of childcare also has implications for sharing the unpaid household work between parents. In general, housework is still predominantly done by women. The basic needs of the child create an inevitable frame for daily practices during parental leave. Still, there is also room for variations in practising parenting according to the mother's as well as the father's orientation and previous experience. While there is variation among mothers as well as fathers, qualitative research on parental leave suggests that fathers tend to spend their day with the child in a somewhat different manner than mothers (Hjølter and Aarseth, 1994; Olsen, 2000; Brandth and

Kvande, 2003). Nordic fathers – especially Norwegian ones – seem to prefer an active outdoor and social life rather than being indoors with the child. Men creating their own practices with their babies, such as going on picnics and forest adventures, seem to be more satisfied with their parental leave than those fathers who mainly stay at home and take care of daily household duties along with childcare (Brandth and Kvande, 2003).

Going out of the home with the child is easier for those fathers who are more familiar with the childcare routines. A lack of experience means it is more difficult to recognise the child's needs and adjust sleeping and eating patterns so that longer outdoor trips are possible. Those Danish fathers who – often because of work – had not practised the basic care of their child before they started their parental leave needed to spend much more time and energy in learning the daily routine. They said in the interview study that it came as a surprise to them how time-consuming childcare could be, and frustration resulted when things did not work out as planned (Olsen, 2000).

In addition to basic childcare, a lot of housework is included in the everyday life of parents of young children. Even if unpaid housework may be quite equally shared by a childless couple, a redistribution happens when a child is born (Ahne and Roman, 1997). This work of cleaning the home, washing clothes, buying food, preparing meals, washing dishes, and so on, is usually done predominantly by mothers, who take most parental leave and thus spend more time at home. A more equal sharing of household work between the parents can be expected when the father also takes parental leave (Brandth and Överli, 1998; Haas and Hwang, 1999).

Being a primary carer for the child can also mean paying less attention to household chores and concentrating on the child (Einarsdottir, 1998). Surveys in the mid-1990s among parents of young children in Sweden and Norway showed that the longer the father's parental leave period, the more equal was the sharing of daily housework. Tasks related directly to childcare such as changing nappies, feeding the child and getting up at night, as well as staying at home from work if the child was ill, were more equally shared in families where the father took a longer parental leave (Ahne and Roman, 1997; Brandth and Överli, 1998). The division of labour may become more symmetrical due to the father's leave experience, but it is also possible that leave is taken more by those fathers who are more care oriented in the first place.

Mother's choice?

Although the statutory leave possibilities and the attitudes and practices found in working life are quite central to the division of paid and unpaid work between mothers and fathers, other social and cultural conditions are relevant as well. The availability and quality of day care places for the child as well as cultural conceptions and ideals of mothering and fathering can determine the length of each parent's leave period.

Especially in areas populated by a lot of families with young children, the supply does not always meet the demand and many parents have difficulties in finding a suitable day care place for their young children (Haas and Hwang, 1999; Rostgaard et al, 1999; Leira, this volume). For parents with a precarious position in the labour market – often mothers with a low education level – a long leave seems like a good alternative to unemployment and at the same time a solution to the day care problem as well as high day care fees (Olsen, 2000; Lammi-Taskula, 2004; Ellingsæter, this volume).

Negative attitudes against mothers returning to work when their children are 'too young' do not make it easier to decide about the father's parental leave. The parental leave system creates a norm for the length of the period that a 'good mother' should stay at home with her child. The traditional model where the mother takes a long leave and the father takes no more than a short paternal leave is still 'the correct choice' for many Danish women (Olsen, 2000). If a mother returns to work before the right to leave is over, she faces a lot of questioning and criticism, especially from other mothers. As one Swedish mother put it: 'It would have been seen as quite weird, had I not stayed at home when the child was young' (Plantin, 2001, p 127).

When the obstacles to fathers' parental leave are listed, breastfeeding is often mentioned as 'naturally' prohibiting the sharing of parental leave between mothers and fathers (Salmi and Lammi-Taskula, 1999; Ellingsæter, this volume). The capacity to breastfeed is indeed one of the relevant physiological differences between mothers and fathers, and rather long periods of breastfeeding are recommended by medical authorities. In Finland, full breastfeeding is recommended for six months, partial breastfeeding at least until the child is one year old (STM, 2004). However, a majority of Finnish mothers will supplement breastfeeding; in 2000, a survey among mothers showed that no more than 14% of four-month-old babies were given only their mother's milk (Hasunen, 2002).

Being unable or unwilling to fulfil the expectations created by

the breastfeeding recommendations may create more pressure to be a 'good mother' by taking a longer parental and childcare leave. Instead of referring to breastfeeding as an argument for not sharing parental leave, the mother's 'choice' to stay at home is emphasised. A Norwegian mother who left her job when the second child was born said: 'In all the families with young children that I know, it is the mother who is at home. That's how it is with us, too. I am at home because I want to be at home!' (Brandth and Krvande, 2003, pp 97-8).

The 'mother's choice' argument has been criticised by pointing out that it is actually the cultural, social and practical everyday facts that 'order' the mother to stay at home (Olsen, 2000; Kivimäki, 2001). It is fathers rather than mothers who can choose whether or not to take parental leave and for how long (Bekkengen, 2002). And even when the father may be willing and able to take parental leave, prevailing conceptions of good motherhood do not encourage mothers to leave a baby in the father's care.

Do parenthood policies change gender relations?

The Nordic policies of parenthood, with independent and non-transferable leave rights for fathers, aim at a more equal division of the work and responsibility related to childcare between women and men. This is expected to promote gender equality in the labour market as well as in family life. So far, change towards gender symmetry has been modest as the development of fatherhood policies has not led to widespread actualisation of new practices of paid and unpaid work in families and in worklife.

The fatherhood policies include different leave possibilities for fathers, reflecting different kinds of ideas of parental gender relations. As paternity leave is relatively short and taken while the mother is also at home, this leave scheme does not construct symmetry in gender relations in the same way as parental leave does. During paternity leave, the mother is the primary parent and the father can be a 'visiting-care assistant'. The take-up of the transferable part of parental leave is left to be negotiated and decided by parents, with no explicit suggestion to change the status quo of gender relations, that is, the mother's primacy in childcare. The daddy quota, on the contrary, is a non-transferable right, which explicitly places the father in the primary parent position. Thus, the quota countries – Norway, Sweden and Iceland – have a more determined orientation towards promoting fathercare and creating a more symmetrical division of

labour between women and men in infant care. Finland and Denmark, on the other hand, are more vague in striving for gender equality in promoting fathercare. The conditional bonus quota in Finland and the abolished short quota in Denmark indicate that the actualisation of possible changes in gender relations is entrusted to individual parents.

In general, policies promoting fathercare are more significant on the symbolic level of gender relations than on the level of actual division of labour between mothers and fathers. Fathers take only a small proportion of the whole parental leave period in all the Nordic countries, with somewhat more in Sweden, Norway and Iceland than in Finland and Denmark. A daddy quota of parental leave makes the take-up rate as well as the average number of days taken by fathers higher compared with common parental leave which leaves the decision of take-up to the parents. In Norway and in Iceland where the quota was added to the existing parental leave period, it was an immediate success among fathers, whereas the rise of popularity has been less fierce in the other countries where the quota period was partly or totally separated from the existing transferable parental leave. It seems to be easier for fathers to take their individual quota when it is not taken from the mother.

Parenthood policies promoting fathercare reach their target better among the white-collar than the blue-collar population. In the minority group of couples sharing parental leave, well-educated parents employed in the public sector are over-represented. For them, a couple of months' leave period taken by the father is not economically impossible, the mother has a good job to return to, and the father's employer is probably more supportive than employers in general. In addition to socioeconomic resources that support their choices, the higher reflectivity of leave-sharing couples is yet another resource for reaching a more equal division of labour. Instead of taking the prevailing gender order for granted, they have discussed, explored and evaluated different possibilities. For large numbers of Nordic parents, unverified assumptions – for example, about the economic consequences of equal sharing of parental leave as well as cultural conceptions of gender and parenthood, especially motherhood – hamper negotiations both in the family and in the workplace. Unreflected unequal gender relations are naturalised and remain unchallenged.

Worklife practices play an important role in the actualisation of family policy in everyday life. The demands of employers to be ever more productive, effective and committed to their work do not leave too much room for care responsibilities. With a

simultaneous discourse of good parenting underlining the importance of early attachment for a child's well-being; the parents of young children end up in a cross-swell of undercurrents taking them towards a traditional gender pattern. In this pattern, the father is supposed to meet the demands of worklife, and the mother to be responsible for childcare. The segregation of responsibilities and tasks reproduces a gender order where women are at a higher risk of discrimination in the labour market and men can become emotional outsiders in family life.

Still, parents do have possibilities to choose a different pattern. They can start by having a discussion of the alternatives at home, and take up plans for parental leave also at the father's workplace, where unexpected support may be found. The father's parental leave can promote the deconstruction of gender segregation and hierarchy in the workplace and in the labour market. For an individual father, taking parental leave can be a turning point in his life, bringing him closer to his child and making him rethink personal priorities. For an individual mother, sharing parental leave with the father can reduce her double burden of paid and unpaid work and make the work-life reconciliation easier. More generally, take-up of parental leave by fathers can produce change in gender relations by bringing in new perspectives, ideas and practices of parenthood.

The means provided by family policy are important but not sufficient for producing any major change in gender relations. In the context of the present gender order, these means are often used to reproduce prevailing gender relations. For example, the possibility of both parents staying at home at the same time may promote higher take-up by fathers while undermining the policy aim of constructing more symmetrical gender relations in society. When the father can be on parental leave without the mother being 'defamilised', she can maintain the social status of a 'good mother' who has not given away her care responsibility.

Individual positions and characteristics of each parent such as the high education level of mothers or the employment of fathers in the more family-friendly public sector may not by themselves result in the sharing of parental leave; it takes several, simultaneously supporting social and economic factors to involve men in the daily tasks and responsibilities of infant care. As long as the pay gap between men and women exists, the economic justification for mothers' parental leave continues as one of the main arguments against fathercare, negative consequences for family economy being assumed without any reality check. The implementation of existing family policy and the

actualisation of more equal sharing of parental care responsibilities also require new discourses of parenthood as well as new insight in working life. It needs to be recognised that both parents are able to provide good care for the child, and that employees, including men, have desires and responsibilities outside the workplace.

At the moment, Iceland leads the way in this respect with the longest daddy quota of parental leave. Following from new fatherhood policies, both the number of men taking parental leave and the number of leave days taken by fathers have increased. Fathercare is no longer a minority phenomenon in Iceland; it has become hegemonic among families with young children. The consequences of this rapid change of gender relations in infant care for gender equality on a more general level have, however, not yet been evaluated. More research is needed also in the other Nordic countries to see whether the politicising of fatherhood can in the long run change gender relations not only on a discursive or ideological level but also in the practices of the labour market and in the everyday life of families.

References

- Ahrne, G. and Roman, C. (1997) *Hemmet, Barnen och makten: Förhållningar om Arbete och Pengar i Familjen*. Stockholm: SOU.
- Andersen, D., Appeldorn, A. and Weise, H. (1996) *Orlov: Evaluering af Orløvsordningerne*. København: SFI.
- Bekkengen, L. (1999) 'Män som 'pappor' och kvinnor som 'föräldrar', *Kvinnovetenskaplig Tidskrift*, vol 20, no 1, pp 33-48.
- Bekkengen, L. (2002) *Man för Väija: Om Föräldraskap och Föräldradeltagelse i Arbetsliv och Familjeliv*. Malmö: Liber.
- Brandth, B. and Kravde, E. (2003) *Fleksible Fedre*. Oslo: Universitetsforlaget.
- Brandth, B. and Överli, B. (1998) *Omsovgemission med 'Kjærlig Twang'*. Trondheim: Allforsk.
- Carlson, S. (1994) 'Men's utilization of paternity leave and parental leave schemes', in S. Carlson and J. Elmn Larsen (eds) *The Equality dilemma*. Copenhagen: The Danish Equal Status Council, pp 79-91.
- Christoffersen, M. (1997) *Spædbarnsfamilien*. København: SFI.
- Drew, E. (2005) *Parental Leave in Council of Europe Member States*. Strasbourg: Council of Europe, Directorate General of Human Rights.
- Einarsdóttir, B. (1998) *Through Thick and Thin: Icelandic Men on Paternity Leave*. Reykjavik: The Committee on Gender Equality, City of Reykjavik.

- Gislason, I. (2004) 'Papporna på island', in U. Lorentzi (ed) *Vens Valfrihet?*, Stockholm: Agora, pp 92-105.
- Haas, L. and Hwang, P. (1999) 'Parental leave in Sweden', in P. Moss and F. Devan (eds) *Parental Leave: Progress or Pitfall? Research and Policy Issues in Europe*, The Hague/Brussels: NIDI/CBGS Publications, pp 45-68.
- Haas, L., Allard, K. and Hwang, P. (2002) 'The impact of organizational culture on men's use of parental leave in Sweden', *Community, Work and Family*, vol 5, no 3, pp 319-42.
- Haataja, A. (2004) 'Pohjoismaiset vanhempainvapaat kahden lasta hoitavan vanhemman tukena', *JANUS*, vol 12, no 1, pp 25-48.
- Hasunen, K. (2002) *Imenäisikäisten Ruokinta Suomessa 2000*, Helsinki: STM.
- Huhtamo, H. (2002) *The Rise and Fall of Nordic Family Policy?*, Helsinki: STAKES.
- Hobson, B. (ed) (2002) *Making Men into Fathers: Men, Masculinities and the Social Politics of Fatherhood*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Holter, Ö. (2003) 'Nordic studies on men: paths for the future', in J. Varanka (ed) *Developing Studies on Men in the Nordic Context*, Helsinki: STM (Ministry of Social Affairs and Health).
- Holter, Ö. and Aarseth, H. (1994) *Mäns Livsmanhang*, Stockholm: Bonnier.
- Huttunen, J. (1999) 'Muuttunut ja muuttuva isyys', in A. Jokinen (ed) *Mies ja Muutos: Kriittisen Miestutkimuksen Teorioja*, Tampere: Tampere University Press.
- Järn O. (JämsställdhetsOmbudsmannen) (2005) *Föräldraskap: Kunskaps- och Nylägesrapport*, Stockholm: JämsställdhetsOmbudsmannen.
- Kela (Kansaneläkelaitos/Social Insurance Institution in Finland) (2004) *Tilastollinen Vuosikirja 2003* (Statistical yearbook of the Social Insurance Institution), Helsinki: Kela.
- Kivimäki, R. (2001) *Hoitovapaat Työpaikalla ja Perheen Arjessa*, Tampere: Tampereen Yliopisto, Työelämän Tutkimuskeskus.
- Laaksonen, T. (2003) 'Työhön on sitouduttava apinan raivolla', Interview with Tero Laaksonen, chief executive officer of Compel (available at: www.bisnes.fi).
- Lammi-Taskula, J. (1998) *Miesten Perhevapaat*, Helsinki: STAKES.
- Lammi-Taskula, J. (2003) 'Isät vapaalla: ketkä pitävät isyys - ja vanhempainvapaata ja miksi?', *Yhteiskuntapolitiikka*, vol 68, no 3, pp 293-8.
- Lammi-Taskula, J. (2004) 'Sukupuolijärjestelmä, vanhempainvapaat ja isät', in I. Aalto and J. Kolehmainen (eds) *Isäkirja*, Tampere: Vastapaino, pp 167-92.
- Leira, A. (1998) 'Caring as social right: cash for childcare and daddy leave', *Social Politics*, vol 5, no 3, pp 362-78.
- Leira, A. (2002) *Working Parents and the Welfare State: Family Change and Policy Reform in Scandinavia*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Nordic Council of Ministers (1999:514) *Women and Men in the Nordic Countries*, Copenhagen: Nordic Council of Ministers.
- Nyman, H. and Petersson, J. (2002) *Spelade Pappamånaden Någon Roll? Pappornas Uttag av Föräldrapennning*, Stockholm: Riksföräldrarverket.
- Olsen, B. (2000) *Nye Fedre på Orlov*, København: København Universitet, Sociologisk Institut.
- Plantin, L. (2001) *Mäns Föräldraskap: Om Mäns Upplevelser och Erfarenheter av Faderskapet*, Göteborg: Göteborgs Universitet, Institutionen för socialt arbete.
- Riksföräldrarverket (1993) *Vilka Pappor kom Hem?*, Stockholm: Riksföräldrarverket.
- Rostgaard, T. (2002) 'Setting time aside for the father: father's leave in Scandinavia', *Community, Work and Family*, vol 5, no 3, pp 343-64.
- Rostgaard, T., Christoffersen, M. and Weise, H. (1999) 'Parental leave in Denmark', in P. Moss and F. Devan (eds) *Parental Leave: Progress or Pitfall? Research and Policy Issues in Europe*, The Hague/Brussels: NIDI/CBGS, pp 23-44.
- Salmi, M. and Lammi-Taskula, J. (1999) 'Parental leave in Finland', in P. Moss and F. Devan (eds) *Parental Leave: Progress or Pitfall? Research and Policy Issues in Europe*, The Hague/Brussels: NIDI/CBGS, pp 85-121.
- STM (Finnish Ministry of Social Affairs and Health) (2004) *Lastenneuvola Lapsiperheiden Tukea: Opat Työntekijöille*, Helsinki: STM.
- Vartiainen, J. (2001) *Sukupuolten Politiikan Tilastointi ja Mittaaminen*, Helsinki: STM.