

Paid parental leave and social sustainability in the Nordic countries



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INTRODUCTION: PARENTAL LEAVE AND SOCIAL SUSTAINABILITY

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The development of the Nordic welfare model – same or somewhat different?

The Nordic countries have developed family policies with a strong emphasis on gender equality and children's rights to care from both parents. Paid parental leave and comprehensive childcare policies (ECEC) have been crucial in creating the Nordic "dual earner dual carer societies" where men and women engage both in paid work and in caregiving (Eydal et al., 2018, Ellingsæter, 2024). The Nordic countries formally collaborate on promoting gender equality and children's wellbeing through the Nordic Council, an official entity for inter-parliamentary cooperation, and the Nordic Council of Ministers, which includes all five Nordic countries and the three autonomous regions (the Faroe Islands, Greenland and Åland).

When viewed from the outside, the Nordic family policies seem similar, as they share similar goals of gender equality, in terms of women's labour market participation and men's involvement in care (Ellingsæter, 2024). However, from a more detailed and closer view, differences in policy designs become apparent. These differences are important as they may explain, and be explained by, varying social, economic and demographic conditions. Country-specific policies have also developed in parallel with different societal narratives and discussions about the future. Furthermore, although scholars and policy makers today agree on aiming for a social sustainable future, the means may differ. Regarding family policy, the goal of gender equality must compete with, or at least be combined with, other sustainable outcomes. How this unfolds will depend on the current policy and its implementation.

In this volume, we will focus on the development of paid parental leave, a component of family policies in all the Nordic countries that requires constant study due to numerous reforms and changing patterns of leave usage over time. We will demonstrate how the development of paid parental leave and its societal contexts

vary over time and between the Nordic countries. A historical perspective will serve the understanding of the development and will show the different pace, different progress and regress depending on changing political governing, and on compromises between political ideas. It is clear that the development is not a straight line of progression. Ellingsæter (2024) has recently traced the development of Nordic policies related to families from a start in the 19th century with efforts to protect children and mothers. In the first half of the 20th century the focus was on increased state responsibility and gendered legislation. This was followed by universal policies and a focus on women's right to work. In the 1970s, the idea of gender equality gained prominence, resulting in family and care policies that supported women's participation in paid labour. By the 1990s, the Nordic welfare state had taken a new turn, where workfare, stressing the duty to work, was combined with an openness to privatisation of many welfare institutions such as early childhood education and care (ECEC). While general trends can be identified, the variation in timing and degree of change is considerable between the countries.

The development in the 1970s marked the beginning of dual earner-dual carer policies, where the Nordic countries are forerunners. These policies include a combination of paid parental leave, maternity and paternity leaves, early childhood education and care (ECEC), and cash-for-care policies. While these components complement each other, they can sometimes be seen as conflicting. Paid parental leave is a major component, especially when combined with available and affordable ECEC of relatively high quality. A turning point for parental leave occurred in the 1990s, when quotas for fathers (and mothers) were first introduced. The Nordic countries have taken different paths and developed policies at varying speeds, particularly regarding quotas. A key factor explaining these differences is how the issue of freedom of choice has been addressed. Sometimes, the freedom to choose childcare arrangements has been used as an argument against quotas in parental leave. Additionally, aspects such as children's rights, the inclusion of new family constellations, and economic security are important goals that may lead to different policy directions. The prominence of these goals in the debate around parental leave has varied and continues to vary today.

The general definition of parental leave includes two basic components: A right to take time off from work with job protection to take care of one's young child, and economic benefits to compensate for lost income during leave. There is, however, variation in the leave terminology used in different countries, and this is also the case in the Nordic countries. The early form of parental leave was related to maternity protection (Dobrotic et al., 2022), available for only mothers and thus called "maternity leave". To some extent this was transformed to a policy also available to fathers in the 1970's. This was done both as a gender-neutral "parental leave" and as a "paternity leave". The gender-neutral parental leave was in practice

nevertheless mainly used by mothers. Paternity leave was only some days or weeks and usually taken simultaneously with the mother, thus promoting a supporting role for the father rather than independent care responsibility.

To promote the take-up of leave by fathers, leave quotas were, as mentioned, introduced in the 1990's. The quota is a parental leave period that is reserved for either parent and is non-transferable, that is, forfeited if not used by the receiving parent. As the Nordic countries have moved towards gender-neutral, less heteronormative terminology the term "maternity leave" has been replaced by "pregnancy leave" or "birth leave", "paternity leave" has been replaced by "simultaneous parental leave" or for instance "10 days in relation to birth". The longer parental leave is divided into equal quotas for both parents referring to the two parents rather than the mother and the father. However, a part of the leave is still transferable between parents, resulting in gendered leave use patterns.

Building on the long history of paid parental leave in the Nordic countries, we focus on the last 20 years. This period begins when paid parental leave was already introduced and established, and has since developed, been reformed, and debated—sometimes in similar ways and sometimes differently across the Nordic countries. Over 15 years ago, more or less the same group of authors wrote a volume titled *Parental Leave, Childcare and Gender Equality in the Nordic Countries*, published by the Nordic Council of Ministers (Gíslason & Eydal, 2011). The content included the development of parental leave, childcare (or ECEC), cash-for-care policies, children's rights, and the political agendas for family policies. At that time, gender equality and children's best interests were still sometimes seen as conflicting. Parental leave was viewed as a prerequisite for women's labour market participation and men's sharing of care for newborn children. The volume provided a coherent review of the situation in the Nordic countries, the debate, and research on the issue. It showed that the use of paid parental leave and cash-for-care policies differed by gender and that the political discussion was distinct in various countries. At the time, gender equality mainly meant equal rights in the labour market for women and men: equal pay for the same jobs, the same career possibilities, and the same opportunities to combine work and family life. Care and children's best interests were increasingly integrated into the concept of gender equality but needed to be emphasized, as was done repeatedly in the volume. The importance of fathers' care and responsibility sometimes still had to be highlighted when discussing gender equality. We believe the volume's contribution was not only to provide information and present research findings on the issues but also, and perhaps mainly, to underscore the importance of viewing both care and work as fundamental when discussing gender equality.

But what has happened since then? All the Nordic countries have advanced their policies towards gender equality and the paid parental leave is increasingly shared

between the parents. Nevertheless, there seems to be quite a long way to gender equal sharing of leave and other tasks related to children in all the countries. Fathers' importance is increasingly assumed, and mothers' right and encouragement to labour market participation is rarely challenged today. But this has to be seen in the light of the more recent development towards gender-neutrality. To regulate the leave to be used by two parents of equal importance means that mothers and fathers are given equal rights, and this may be seen as a step towards gender equality. However, the same equal rights and gender-neutral language may hide the differences that still exists in how childcare is shared by gender.

We may now be at a pivotal moment when crucial political decisions regarding the future of family policy, specifically parental leave, are being made. These decisions will link paid parental leave policies to various aspects of society and aim for a sustainable future in different ways. Our goal in this volume is to provide a description and analysis of the developments over the last 20 years. We will connect this development to a discussion on how parental leave policies can contribute to sustainable development.

Paid parental leave and ECEC development in the Nordic countries

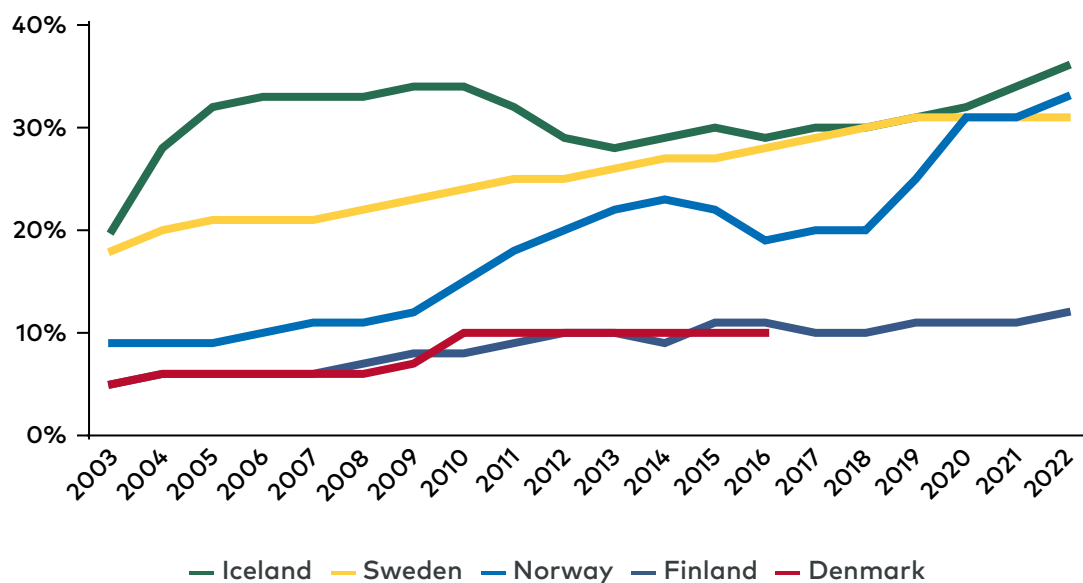
A major interest and focus within parental leave policies is gender-equal usage. One measure of this is the proportion of leave taken by fathers. Note that this is just one dimension and does not account for factors such as the length of leave, benefit levels, and eligibility criteria. Additionally, changing fertility rates can influence this measure, as fathers most often use leave during the second year of the child's life. Therefore, an increased share of leave taken by fathers may simply indicate a declining birth rate.

Norway was the first country in the Nordics to introduce a quota for fathers, but it was not until 2022 that quotas for both parents were included in the leave schemes in all the Nordic countries. In 2022, Denmark introduced an 8-week quota and Finland expanded the quota to 16 weeks. Iceland has stepwise extended the quota to today's 18 weeks, along with extending the total leave length. In Norway the quota's development has been back and forth, from being 14 weeks in the start of the period to being reduced to 10 weeks in 2014 and then extended to its current level, 15 weeks, in 2018. In Sweden, the fathers' quota has been 13 weeks since 2016 (Ellingsæter, 2024).

In Figure 1 the development of fathers' share of leave use in the Nordic countries is compared. As can be seen, fathers in Iceland used approximately one third of the leave period in the beginning of the 2000s but when Iceland was hit by the financial

crisis in the fall of 2008 the share decreased, perhaps foremost as the economic leave compensation was severely lowered. Nevertheless, since 2000 Iceland has been the forerunner to the other Nordic fathers regarding this measure, with Swedish fathers catching up around ten years into the new millennium. The pattern of Norwegian fathers follows the policy's reforms quite visibly as can specifically be seen with the reduced quota from 2014, as well as the increased quota in 2018. Denmark and Finland are laggards but recent changes in these countries are likely to show increased use by fathers.

Figure 1. Percentage of the total number of parental leave days used by fathers in the Nordic countries in 2003-2022

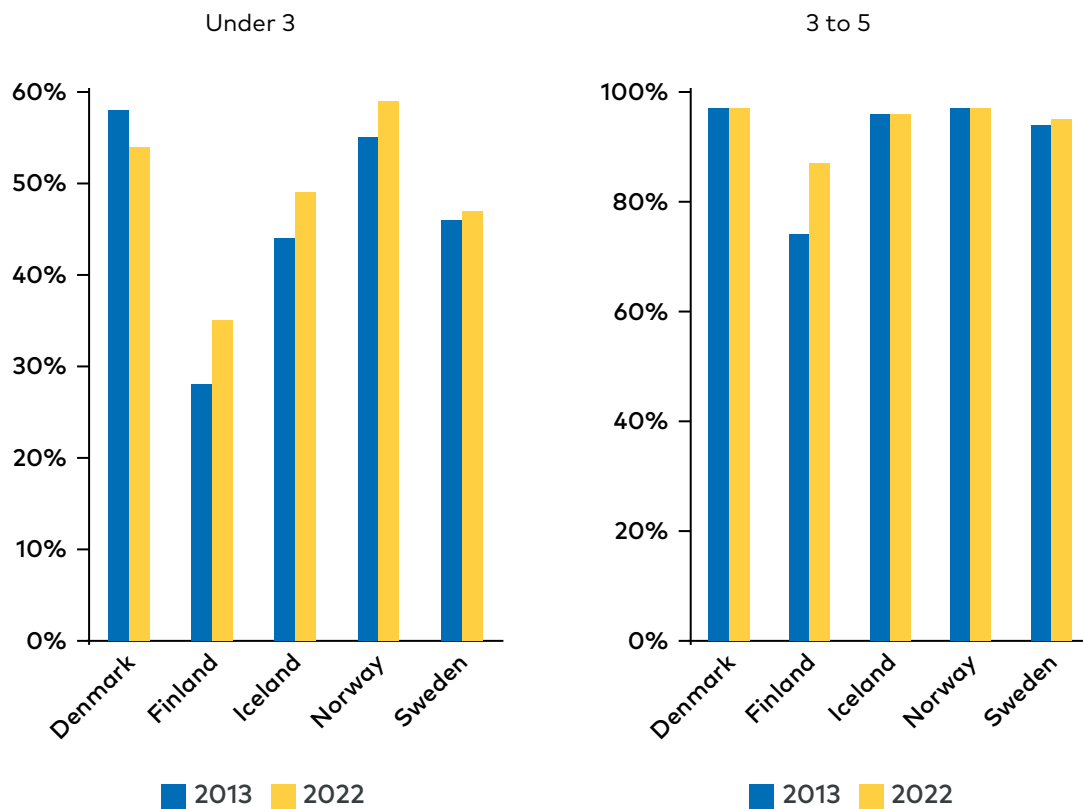


Source: Nordic Statistics, 2024

Note: The database does not provide information on Denmark after 2016

In addition to looking at the development of sharing of the paid parental leave, we also need to consider the use of ECEC in the Nordics. These two policy areas are closely related and can be seen as part of the same package; both are needed for either to be used efficiently. Ideally, ECEC is available when the paid parental leave ends and this is increasingly the case. As we can see in Figure 2, the participation rate of children from 3 years of age is almost universal in all the Nordic countries. For the younger children, there has been more development the last 10 years. In all the countries, except Denmark, the participation rate for children under 3 has increased over the period. Denmark has seen a somewhat reduced use of ECEC among young children but still has among the highest participation rates in the Nordics. Finland stands out with low participation rates although it has increased somewhat.

Figure 2. Enrolment rate in ECEC in the Nordic countries in 2013 and 2022 (% of age group)



Source: Dobrotić et al., 2024.

Challenges

The situation today is markedly different from what it was two decades ago. At that time, most Nordic countries were emerging from the economic crisis of the 1990s, which had a significant impact on family policy development. Fertility rates also decreased during the 1990s, particularly in Sweden (Andersson et al., 2009). This decline was largely attributed to the financial situation, where individual circumstances, general societal conditions, and local contexts all played a role. Today, there are major challenges regarding birth rates and the labour market situation. In all Nordic countries, birth rates have been falling over the last decades, with the most dramatic decline in Finland and the least in Norway (Jalovaara et al., 2019). However, it appears that today's declining birth rates are due to different reasons, as the economy is no longer in the previous severe state. Despite having sufficient economic stability to sustain a family, many young couples still refrain from having children. In 2023, the total fertility rate ranged from 1.25 in Finland to

1.59 in Iceland and was somewhat higher in the autonomous regions (the Faroe Islands, Greenland, and Åland). This new northern query of why birth rates are declining occupies demographers, and many insightful studies are relevant on the issue (see, for instance, Gortfelder et al., 2024; Oláh & Neyer, 2021; Alderotti et al., 2021). However, there does not seem to be a universal explanation for the declining birth rate. 'Classical' concerns over the reconciliation of work and family life are still evident as explanations but are now situated in a new labour market context of platform economy and precarious work, with fewer and less secure labour market rights. New explanations revolve around uncertainty in a much wider area than the individual economic situation, including the general economy, concerns over climate change, and political unrest in the world (Matysiak & Vignoli, 2024). Additionally, a cultural shift towards more emphasis on parents' increased time and investment in children may further seem unappealing to some (Símonardóttir, 2024). The role of parental leave policy in creating possibilities for parenthood may thus have changed.

Regarding the labour market, it is often argued that there is more insecurity today. However, it is important to distinguish between objective measures of labour market characteristics and trends, and the perception of these factors. All the Nordic countries have similar employment rates to the EU average for men and higher rates for women. The levels range from the lowest in Finland, with 78.3% for men and 78.1% for women, to the highest in Iceland, with 88.2% for men and 82.1% for women (Nordic Statistics Database, 2023). Nevertheless, it seems increasingly difficult to find a stable labour market position or a secure full-time job. The gig sector, platform economy, and temporary employment are becoming significant parts of the labour market and may serve as gateways to the more traditional, secure, and stable labour market. At the same time, temporary reduced work engagement, such as sick leave, part-time work, unemployment spells, and returning to further studies, seems to be becoming more common. Thus, instability and mobility in the labour market may indicate that the conditions (and preferences) for a secure full-time job have changed. Indeed, flexibility may also be desired by some groups as it creates possibilities to combine work with other parts of life that earlier generations often had to sacrifice. Examples include traveling, engaging in time-consuming hobbies, and so on. However, the new situation primarily creates new exclusions and social inequalities in the labour market, often based on immigrant status and educational level, while the old inequalities based on gender persist in a largely gender-segregated labour market. This puts parental leave in a different context, and the current setup may not work as well for large groups of parents

Another related dimension of the development that is relevant to the functioning of parental leave policies is the development of child poverty, sometimes connected to the immigration trends. An example here is the high share of immigrant mothers in

Sweden using the leave at the basic flat rate indicating that they did not work before becoming parents, and often of a precarious economic situation.

Thus, when we consider the development of the paid parental leave in the various Nordic countries today, we need to not only connect it to the “usual suspects” of labour market and fertility trends, but also to consider how they influence the parental leave use along with other sources of insecurity, ranging from housing prospects to climate anxiety and war threats, and cultural transformations in parenting. Intensive parenting and ecological anxiety are examples of such influences on normative ideas of parenthood.

Social sustainability – a useful concept?

To consider a sustainable future as based on social, economic and ecological needs is often seen as originating in the Brundtland report (UN, 1987). The report argues for the urgency of considering economic, social and ecological justice together and not compromise future generations when striving to achieve such justice for the present situation. While family policy research has a long tradition of discussing how present economic and social equality should be attained in combination, there is less research so far that consider long term aspects of sustainability and even less that include the ecological aspect. But recently some studies have started to speak about how social policy is related to climate sustainability (Boström, 2012, Koch, 2022, Hirvilammi et al., 2023) and family policy is obviously an intrinsic part of social policy. Family policy, including parental leave, can be seen as part of the general ecological-social policy discussion, but may also contribute to the discussion with the crucial dimension of caring for the very concrete future that is entailed in children. Thus, the argument for integrating ecological, social and economic sustainability when considering the future of paid parental leave is relevant but needs development. Reproduction is sometimes used as the link between these three dimensions of sustainability, as environmental factors pose risks for pregnancy and birth, especially for those in the most vulnerable situation (Sasser, 2024) and in the literature, parenthood and potential future hazards related to climate change, have been discussed together (Björklund, 2024).

A major aspect of sustainability is to view challenges such as gender inequality, social inequalities and labour market difficulties as interconnected. Also, sustainability incentivizes goals on health and wellbeing, decent work, economic growth, and fertility, which should be considered simultaneously and as connected. Connecting a broader palette of goals that can be addressed with paid parental leave is a major advancement, and using the concept of sustainability to make such a connection is helpful. In fact, various aspects of social and economic sustainability have been addressed in parental leave policy research. For example, research on the

gendered use of leave and the outcomes of leave take-up on women's labour market participation and men's informal care participation directly addresses the UN sustainable development goals of increasing gender equality. Other goals are related to reduced poverty and economic inequalities. Parental leave policies address these goals by securing payments to parents while they withdraw from the labour market to care for their young children. Leave policy research has addressed poverty and social inequalities by placing focus on how entitlements and payments vary according to labour market attachment and family form. Increased health and well-being are another sustainable development goal that have been addressed in research on the outcomes of paid parental leave (see for example Lindbeck et al., 2018). While sustainability is a useful concept for directing leave policy research towards various interconnecting factors that matter for the future, it also demands innovative and constructive thinking, within a more rigid set of policy analysis than we are used to.

We attempt to approach the development of paid parental leave in the Nordic countries with a sustainability approach, primarily considering the dimensions of gender, social and economic inequality together. The sustainability approach raises concerns about fertility choices and capabilities, economic and social inequality, decent work and individual health and wellbeing. At the same time, we need to consider how these challenges of "a good life" translate to the societal level where questions of economic growth, gender and social equality and climate change are to be considered. Two immediate connections where paid parental leave plays a role are apparent, one regarding fertility and one regarding the structure of family policy. These two aspects are interdependent.

Regarding fertility, parental leave aims to make the combination of children and work possible for men and women by providing economic security and time during the early period of a child's life. On a societal level, this may lead to stable and relatively high fertility, ensuring a sustainable population composition and a balanced age dependency ratio. In short, fertility close to the reproduction rate will provide the workforce of the future. However, if young men and women refrain from parenthood due to climate concerns, the current parental leave policies may not be very helpful. Examples from the developed world include birth strikes and media coverage of the challenges of having children during a climate crisis (Sasser, 2024). Such concerns are likely not evenly distributed, and reproductive injustice will amplify social and economic inequalities, as climate change is likely to impact already vulnerable groups in society. While the response to climate anxiety and its effects on childbearing will come from policies and political actions beyond family policy, it should be noted that universal and generous parental leave may improve health and contribute to achieving some of the UN sustainability goals (Heymann et al., 2017). This is likely beneficial for globally balanced fertility and ecological goals, but may be less significant in the Nordic countries, where well-developed family policies are more or less assumed today.

In the Nordic countries, parental leave is supported by high tax revenues, high labour force participation, and economic growth. However, economic growth often seems at odds with ecological sustainability, as it can increase the strain on nature. The incentive to combine work and care to provide for children may conflict with climate concerns, making it difficult to balance good parenthood with a climate-friendly lifestyle (Björklund, 2024). Björklund (2024) highlights examples in the literature of conflicting goals for parents, concluding that norms stemming from family policy (to provide economically) often trump ecological concerns. In this bleak view of the future of societies built on economic growth, one way forward may be to value care at the same level as paid work. Upgrading the concept of care could help find a balance between ecological, economic, and social sustainability. This upgrading needs to go hand in hand with continued development of gender equality, even in the most gender-equal contexts, such as the Nordic countries. Much theoretical and empirical work is needed, but important contributions on how to broaden the concept have been initiated (Folbre, 2024; Tronto, 2013; Doucet, 2023a, 2023b; Doucet & Duvander, 2022).

The sustainability frame makes us affirm that the social and economic inequalities created in today's Nordic countries, and specifically in the labour market, need to be related to the ecological situation. We welcome the discussion on how these matters for the analysis of paid parental leave, here and in the years to come.

Nordic cooperation on sustainable development

The Nordic countries have set common goals towards a sustainable future. In 2020 the Nordic Council of Ministers presented its actions for 2021 to 2024, with the goal of reaching the vision of the Nordic region becoming the most integrated and sustainable region world-wide, by 2030. In the action plan it was stressed that for the Nordic region to become socially sustainable, its inhabitants must feel safe, and that health and well-being must be promoted. A focus was placed on safeguarding and further developing the Nordic welfare model, particularly with regards to access and services for vulnerable children, young people and adults. Efforts also included enhancing social inclusion and supporting the well-being of children and young people. The Nordic Council of Ministers emphasized the need for further cooperation on health, and the need to address challenges stemming from an aging population. In all its activities, the Nordic Council of Ministers aimed to integrate sustainable development, gender equality and children's rights (Nordic Council of Ministers, 2020).

Despite an emphasis on building a socially sustainable Nordic Region, and the emphasis on equal access to benefits and services that promote equality, previous projects have not produced knowledge about the significance of paid parental leave for social sustainability in the region. This report aims to address this gap in

knowledge by highlighting the need to focus on children's first years of life, as children are the future and are therefore at the heart of social sustainability.

Role of paid parental leave for sustainable development

We argue for the study of paid parental leave as a crucial element in regard to social sustainability. Fertility, gender equality and work-life balance are examples which paid parental leave can address and has addressed for some time. Still, paid parental leave and other types of family policy are largely missing from the agenda of social sustainability, which is a puzzle, as the aspect of children is a major part of a sustainable future. It is therefore important to address to what extent the Nordic countries have been able to create and reform parental leave policies that make it possible to have children for those who so desire, and to make it possible to care for the children in a sustainable way, for the family and for the labour market. Can anything be more at the core of the idea of sustainability? Therefore, in this volume we will follow up on the earlier publication on parental leave and ECEC in the Nordics (Gíslason & Eydal, 2011) to update how to develop family policy in the most sustainable way, not just socially but also economically and ecologically.

We have taken the approach of country specific chapters in which we cover a number of relevant dimensions of the policy development to structure the chapters in the same way. However, new and varied policy trends, as well as other country variations are important in the country specific narratives. We will end with concluding on how this relates to the more recent concept of sustainability. Our main argument is that the role of paid parental leave may change, and if it changes, we should make sure to study the various aspects of this change and its outcomes. As researchers it is our job to point to the problems, to what we have gained and what advantages of the present systems that are to be, yes, sustained.

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PARENTAL LEAVE IN DENMARK

Tine Rostgaard

Introduction

In the last two decades, the Danish parental leave system has shown remarkable consistency in its course of providing relatively (in a Nordic setting) short leave periods with no particular gender equality incentives, supplemented with extensive Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) service provision from early age. According to the current Danish legislation on leave, the aim of the parental leave is to ensure that parents with labour market attachment can take leave of absence and receive a parental benefit in the case of pregnancy, birth and adoption.

In comparison with the other Nordic countries, gender equality as an ideological foundation has been (and seems still to be) of a more symbolic nature and receiving somewhat unenthusiastic political support in Denmark (Borchorst & Dalerup, 2003) where political manifestation of gender equality has mainly focussed on women's labour market opportunities. In accordance, the parental leave legislation does not mention gender or gender equality (Retsinformation, 2022).

The observed imbalance in men's and women's take-up of leave has not been voiced as a general concern in the political debate or in the public agenda but has in recent years been raised by employer's organisations. Rather than addressing gender imbalances in terms of use of leave, Denmark has instead maintained the focus on early return to the labour market for mothers, facilitating in particular the dual-earner side of the egalitarian dual-earner/dual-carer ideal (Gornick & Meyers, 2009) in the pursue of full employment. Gender equality in parental leave use has in recent years mainly gained political focus in Denmark as a consequence of the 2022 EU Directive on parental leave which obliged Member States to introduce leave quotas. In contrast to the Danish leave legislation, the Directive clearly states the aim of contributing to gender equality by promoting women's labour market participation, encouraging a more gender equal distribution of care between men and women and reducing gendered income differences (EU Commission, 2019).

This is not to say that Denmark has not at (transitory) times been inspired by the gender equality agendas and policy instruments which were introduced in the neighbouring Nordic countries. Most important has been the short period of the

two weeks' father's quota which was introduced by a Left-Centre coalition government in 1998 as a response to the fact that mainly mothers used the parental leave (which amounted to 10 weeks then) and up to 26 (low-paid) childcare leave weeks. The weeks were added to the total leave length and could thus in the public eye be seen as an extended right for leave. The quota was proposed and passed in Parliament after a record short time of one month and generally gained little public or political awareness. However, the quota only had a four-year life span and was abolished by a new Conservative-Liberal coalition government in 2002. It was argued by this government that voluntary workplace agreements were sufficient for ensuring a gender-balanced take-up of leave, and that the quota constituted state coercion of what was essentially a private family matter. In accordance, it was argued that the decision of who should take up leave should be entirely made by the parents. Again, it went under the radar of both public and political debates, smoothed perhaps by an extension in leave length of an additional 10 weeks, which totalled the parental leave period to transferable 32 weeks. Also, the reform came with improvement in leave entitlements, such as full pay for public employees and the right to take part-time leave. However, the 2002 reform abolished the low-paid childcare leave of 26 weeks, which in effect shortened the total period of leave available for parents and their children (Eydal & Rostgaard, 2011; Rostgaard & Lausten, 2015).

In the years that followed, quotas were instead introduced in various labour market agreements, in both the private and public sectors. This positioned fathers and their families somewhat different as the right to non-transferable leave was no longer a social right but depended on one's labour market status and sector. A new centre-left wing coalition government in 2011 attempted to re-introduce the quota but was unsuccessful. It seemed at the time difficult to produce a rhetorical frame that presented the lack of a father's quota as an urgent policy problem and the window of opportunity for (re-)introducing the quota seemed lost (Rostgaard & Ejrnæs, 2024). A 'freedom to choose' agenda seemed generally prevalent, also when in 2017 the new EU Directive on work-life balance was being prepared which would require Member states to introduce quotas of 2 months for each parent. Despite initial opposition across most political parties, a minimum requirement model of the Directive was agreed upon and was implemented in August 2022, giving fathers a right to additional 9 weeks of non-transferable parental leave as part of the 32 weeks.

Currently, the leave rights are discussed vis-a-vis falling quality and take-up of childcare and considered in the political and public debate with regards to the imbalance between work and family life with consequences for falling fertility rates and parental burn out. And this is despite that Denmark is ranked 2nd in the OECD work-family score card, which measures total family friendly policies, only superseded by Italy (OECD, n.d., Better life index on work-family balance) (see also section on the proportion of children cared for in child care).

Present policies

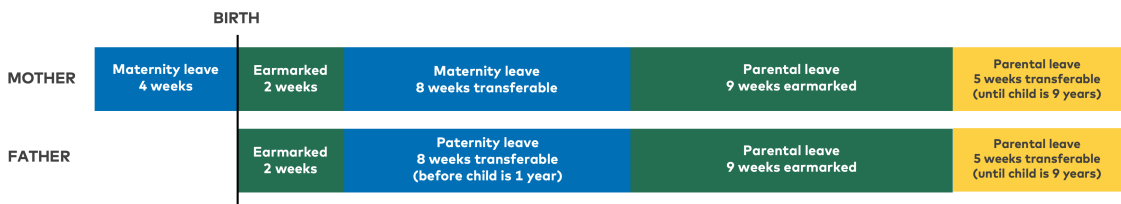
Length of leave

Following the implementation of the EU Directive, parents now have a total of 52 weeks of paid leave, including maternity leave before and after birth, paternity leave straight after birth and parental leave (Figure 1).

Of the 52 weeks, the statutory rights entitle the mother to 4 weeks of maternity leave before birth. It should be noted that in addition to the statutory rights, collective agreements may provide extra weeks. For instance, collective agreements entitle employees in municipalities and regions 8 weeks before the birth and entitle employees working in the state sector 6 weeks.

After birth, and as part of statutory rights, each parent has a 2-week earmarked leave, followed by 8 weeks of transferable maternity/paternity leave, then 9 earmarked weeks of leave and lastly 5 weeks of transferable leave (Figure 1). In the previous scheme, the father also had two non-transferable weeks straight after birth. The real change is therefore that the father has gained an additional right of 9 weeks of non-transferable leave. Therefore, the rights for non-transferable leave ensured in the legislation now provides better entitlements than the previous rights in the various collective agreements, and positions fathers working in various job sectors and employment situations equally.

Figure 1. The leave model in Denmark, weeks available for mother and father, 2024



Another important change is the recognition of non-biological parents, while single parents still have a shorter total leave than two-parent families: As of January 1st, 2024, the total 13 weeks of leave which are transferable can also be transferred to so-called social parents (non-biological co-parents), and near family member of single parents. This new entitlement positions LGBT+ families better, as they can now also transfer leave to the non-biological parent. With just one period of 2 weeks non-transferable leave just after birth, single parents, by their status as having full custody over the child, have a total of 50 weeks of leave, and thus 2 weeks less than two-parent families.

Eligibility

Eligibility to full compensation of the parental benefit for an *employee* is based on a period of work of at least 160 hours in the 4 months preceding the paid leave, i.e., regardless of the partner's labour market situation. Workers must also have worked at least 40 hours per month in 3 of those 4 months, and they must be working up to the 1st day of the leave. Workers with temporary contracts are included if they are eligible for unemployment benefits. In addition, the father should be in a recognised partnership with the other parent.

Eligibility for the parental benefit for *self-employed* parents (including helping a spouse) is based on at least part-time professional activity for at least six months within the last 12-month period, of which one month immediately precedes the paid leave. Likewise, the company must produce a profit. Eligibility also requires that the person is caring for the child on a daily basis. If the individual has recently started their company and has been self-employed less than 6 months, they can count regular paid work (not including various forms of public benefits) as work.

Unemployed people who receive unemployment benefit, are entitled to parental benefits from unemployment insurance or similar benefits (activation measures), under the same conditions as employed parents. Persons outside the labour market who receive *social assistance*, continue to receive this benefit under the leave period. Parents on *sickness benefit* also continue to receive this benefit. Mothers who have a child while *studying* are entitled to a total of up to 12 months' extra study grant. Male students are entitled up to 6 months extra study grant. Students can also apply for extra monthly study grants, as well as a postponement of their study. In the current political attention to the declining fertility rates and the problem of balancing work and family life, it has been proposed to give students on leave the sickness benefit instead, as this represents a higher monetary value and could incentivise earlier fertility (DM, n.d.).

Finally, people who have just completed a *vocational training course* for a period of at least 18 months, or who are doing a *paid work placement* as part of a vocational training course, are also eligible for the parental benefit.

In order to receive *full earnings* under leave instead of receiving the parental benefit, a number of collective agreements and work contracts have the requirement that the employee must have been employed in the company for a certain period, for instance 18 months. This positions young people poorly in regard to their right to full pay but also for taking up work elsewhere (Politiken, 2023).

The percentage of the total Danish workforce that is covered by collective agreements is, 82 per cent (2018) but fewer in the private sector, 74 per cent (DA, 2020). Coverage is typically lower among younger people, which means that they are less likely to be ensured to leave under collective agreements.

Benefits

The legislation ensures that all employees and self-employed parents are entitled to a daily *parental benefit* based on former earnings, and up to an upper limit of DKK4,695 [€629] per week for full-time employees, before tax. The same amount is paid for unemployment and sickness benefit. The payments are taxed, typically within the range of 38 to 41 per cent.

Only parents who are entitled to social security in Denmark, can receive the parental benefit. The entitlement to social security is automatic if the person is working in Denmark. If only one parent has this entitlement, he/she can apply for transfer of up to 13 weeks of leave from the non-eligible parent.

Under collective agreement and/or work contracts, *full earnings* may be paid during leave, i.e., the employer supplements the state benefit up to full normal earnings.

Flexibility

Except for the first two weeks after birth, which are non-flexible, the parental leave scheme in Denmark is rather flexible but the flexibility is somewhat dependent upon one's employer (and, in some cases, also the other parent's employer). The following eight weeks can be postponed, for instance if she/he returns to part-time work but this leave has to be taken within the first year of the child's life. As regards the 9+5 parental leave weeks, depending on the employer's agreement, the leave can be taken part-time, as single days or single weeks. Everyone eligible for parental leave can postpone five weeks of leave and use it anytime until the child is nine years old. Subject to agreement with the employer, more weeks can be postponed. If leave is transferred to the other parent, the employer of the first parent must agree to postpone these leave weeks until after the child is one year. Both parents can be on leave at the same time.

It is possible to return to work on a part-time basis, with a reduced benefit payment spread over this extended period of leave. This is also subject to agreement with the employer.

Financing

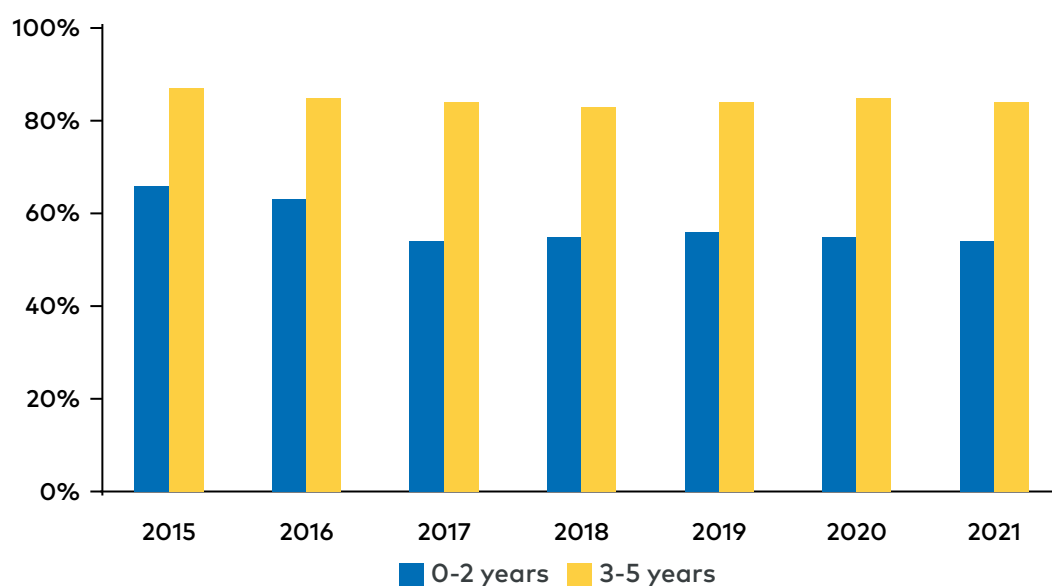
The parental leave scheme is funded by the state from general taxation, except for the initial 8 weeks when municipalities bear half of the cost. Private employers receive compensation up to the maximum level of the leave benefit from the state and are obliged to be a paid member of a public or private compensation fund, which refunds the difference between parental leave benefits and full earnings.

Other work and family policies

Childcare

The relatively short leave period is complemented with extensive ECEC provision, enabling the dual-earner model. ECEC for the 0-5 years is provided by the local municipality, and parental fees take into account the household income to ensure that ECEC is affordable across income groups. In 2000, a ECEC guarantee was introduced, giving children from the age of 26 weeks the right to a place in either family day care or a ECEC institution. And it used to be that one in five children under the age of one was cared for outside the family, a record high even within the Nordic region. While Denmark for many years therefore took the lead in the provision of ECEC for the youngest age group, take-up rates have dropped in recent years for the youngest children, aged 0-2 years old, from 66% in 2015 to 54 % in 2021 (Figure 2).

Figure 2. Share of children using ECEC, 0-2- and 3-5-year-olds, 2015-2021, Denmark



Note: Includes for the 0-2-year-olds: family day care, creches and age-integrated institutions. 3-5-year-olds: kindergartens and age-integrated institutions. Source: Bureau2000, 2022

This drop in take-up rates may be explained by parents' increasing concern over the quality of care in the ECEC institutions, caused by shortage of (trained) staff and increasing child:staff ratios. Municipalities have struggled to keep up with demand from a rising number of children in the recent decade, and with living up to the

ECEC guarantee. A recent study also found substantial differences in levels of quality across the ECEC provisions for the 0–2-year-olds (Lindeberg et al., 2023).

Parents have not surprisingly reacted to the mounting reports about the quality concerns: A representative survey from 2023 found that 24 % of Danish parents of children under nine years had prolonged their leave period in order to postpone the use of extra-familial childcare, giving the poor quality of ECEC on offer as the reason why. The survey also found that the lack of quality had led 19% of parents to cut their working hours in order to reduce the time their children spend in ECEC (Epinion, 2023). In other words, parents' impression of declining quality of care has led not only to a drop in take-up rates but has also affected their labour market participation. The staff also identify the lack of quality as an issue: in another survey, 38% of ECEC staff say that more children show signs of poor well-being compared to five years ago. Asked to the reason behind, 74% of these respondents quote the lack of staffing as a reason (Bureau2000, 2023). The situation of the shortage of staff has changed will change in the years to come with the already experienced drop in fertility (from 1.7 in 2020 to 1.5 in 2023), which is expected to remain stable or even decline further. Just one year ago, the prospective was of a shortage of 5.0000 trained pedagogues in 2035 (Finansministeriet, 2023), while updated figures on the fertility rate now indicate an excess of 1.000 pedagogues by the same year (Finansministeriet, 2024).

Other absentee and leave rights

Caring for sick children is an often-debated issue in Denmark and there are no statutory rights for parents to take time off from work in such situations. Most collective agreements include the right to take at least one day off from work with full pay if the child is ill and on the first day of illness. Public employees have the right to take up to 2 days off, given that the child is under 18 years and resides with this parent. It is mainly the mother who take these days. Women on average take 1.5 days annually, and men 0.9 days (2019). The biggest difference is found in the state sector where women took half a day more than men, and lowest in the municipal sector where the gendered difference was only 0.2 days annually. Absence due to the child's illness is lowest in the private sector, where men take on average 0.8 days and women 1,2 days – likely because employees in this sector have less extensive rights (Statistics Denmark, 2020).

Parents as well as co-parents and adoptive parents also have the right to 2 annual care days per child under 7, residing with the respective employee. The days can be passed on to the following year.

Work hours are stipulated not in the legislation but in the work contract or collective agreement. Typical work hours are 37 hours per week. It is possible as an employee to make an individual agreement about reducing work hours, but this is not a statutory right.

Should a parent/parents lose a child under 18 years, a so-called sorrow leave can be granted of up to 26 weeks for both parents. Collective agreements ensure full pay during this period.

In addition, a care leave of 5 working days can be granted annually to provide care for own children, parents, spouse/partner, or a person residing in the abode if they need support due to severe illness or functional limitation. It can be taken as a full period of consecutive days or as individual days.

Unlike in the other Nordic countries, there is no cash for care scheme following the parental leave period.

Leave reforms

In comparison to the Nordic neighbours, it is the non-reforms of parental leave policies during recent decades which are of most interest in Denmark. Unlike the changes which took place in the other Nordic countries between 1990s and 2000s (see www.leavenetwork.org for detailed developments in each Nordic country), which most importantly resulted in the introduction of a father's quota, the Danish government has until recently withheld its' opposition to the re-introduction of this particular policy. Instead, it has been the labour market partners representing employers and wage earners who have been pushing for the re-introduction of the father's quota in this period.

In Denmark, parental leave is not only regulated via national legislation but also via collective agreements between labour market partners (in addition to company-specific local agreements). These labour market rights ensure full wage compensation during leave and in some cases also provide the right for a father's quota. The quota is then contingent on certain conditions, such as the father using his quota and taking certain weeks of the parental leave period. The state does not guarantee these entitlements, however; they depend on being in employment and in a job covered by the collective agreement.

While most political parties have argued against re-introducing the father's quota which was in place 1998-2002, the financial sector in the private labour market sector was actually the first to introduce the quota as a labour market right in their collective agreement, with the introduction of a 4-week father's quota with full pay.

The father's quota has also been included in collective agreements in other traditionally male-dominated private sectors, such as the industrial sector, where a paid 3-week father's quota with full pay was introduced in 2007. This sector represents 18,000 private sector employers encompassing more than 300,000 employees (two-thirds of whom are men) nationwide, mainly within production (Statistics Denmark, n.d.-a). The number of weeks has been prolonged on multiple

occasions (five weeks in 2017 and at the renegotiation of the collective agreements in 2020, the father's quota was extended to eight weeks in the industrial sector). As regards the public sector, a 6-week father's quota was introduced in 2008, and an additional week was added in 2015, thus lagging behind the private sector (Rostgaard & Ejrnæs, 2023).

This development illustrates that fathers over time have been positioned differently with different leave rights according to which job sector they belong. Also, parental leave continues to be used by mothers. There have been only few political attempts to address this situation, except by the coalition of political parties consisting of the Social Democrats, Social Liberals and Socialist People's Party (Socialistisk Folkeparti) who stood together for election in 2011. Their party program aimed to re-introduce the father's quota, and this time of 12 weeks. However, once in office, the Social Democrats took a different position, concerned that the introduction of the father's quota would curtail women's right to take a long leave and have consequences for the family's freedom to organise their time, here replicating arguments previously applied by the right-wing government (Rostgaard and Lausten, 2015). In the words of the then Prime minister:

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If we are going to earmark parental leave for men, then we ought really tell women that they can have less time together with their children. This would mean that we would go to the families and tell them that we will decide how they should take up parental leave

– Prime Minister Helle Thorning from the Social Democratic Party (Børsenn.d; author's translation).

This rhetorical position was held by the Social Democratic Party as well as the organisations representing employers (Dansk Arbejdsgiverforening, DA) and unions (3F) in the years to follow, also when learning in 2017 that a new EU Directive on work-life balance was being introduced. Denmark voted against the directive, arguing for the case of national sovereignty and the need to let labour market partners decide on such matters, in accordance with the Danish labour market model.

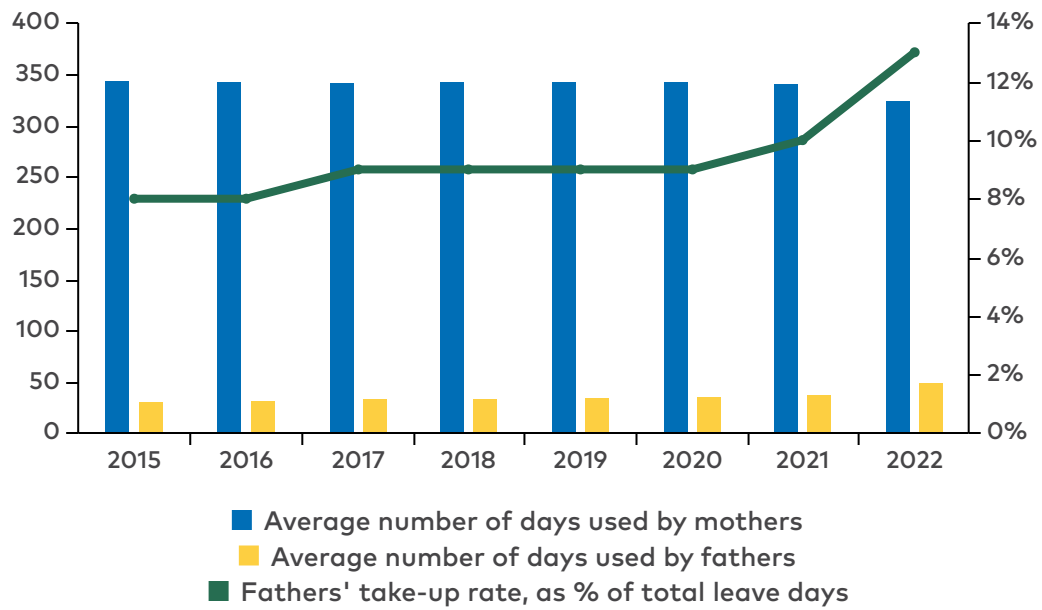
When the directive in 2019 was decided within the EU, Denmark initially wanted to apply for exemption and proposed to instead introduce 16 weeks of parental leave for each parent but without any use-it-or-lose-it strings. In addition to the argument of state paternalism, a concern was raised that the directive would mean that some families would not use their full leave period, resulting in a shorter time at home with the family for the child (Børsen, n.d.). However, just 2 days after announcing the intention to apply for exemption, the Danish government agreed to implement the directive, having realized that the exemption would violate the aforementioned EU directive.

In the years to follow, many of the major labour market and trade organisations (Dansk Industry and Dansk Erhverv) expressed their support for the directive, pointing to the success of the quota in the other Nordic countries. Also in recognition of the need to strengthen gender equality in the work place and in the management corridors (ibid). Similarly, once a national model for implementation was agreed in 2021, two out of three political parties in the coalition government (The Social Democratic Party and the Liberals) expressed their support for what they saw as important gender equality steps that would strengthen the father's rights and the general well-being of the child (ibid). And in August 2022 a minimum requirement model of the EU Directive was introduced, meaning that Denmark is currently the Nordic country with the shortest quota of 11 weeks for each parent.

Leave use

Before the implementation of the EU directive in 2022, parental leave used to be taken predominantly by mothers. Since then, fathers have increased their take-up, especially in the average number of leave days taken by fathers. Looking at the parents' take-up of the parental benefit, in 2015, fathers entitled to this benefit on average took 30.2 days. In the following years this rose slightly, with 37 days in 2021 just before the implementation of the EU Directive in August 2022. Already by the end of 2022, the average number of leave days had increased for fathers to 48 days (Figure 3). Mothers' average number of leave days remained stable around 340 days until 2022, where it dropped to 323 days, as a consequence of the increase in fathers' days. As indicated in the figure, there has been a slight drop in total leave days, from 377 days in 2021 to 371 days in 2022. Likewise, fathers' share of total leave days increased in the same period, from 8.1% to 13.0% (Figure 3). There is no data on whether and how many parental leave days parents do take together, so that they are at home at the same time. However, generally, parents seem to split up the leave days, also in order to use the leave most efficiently.

Figure 3. Average number of leave days taken by mothers/fathers and fathers' take-up rate as % of total leave days, 2015-2022, Denmark

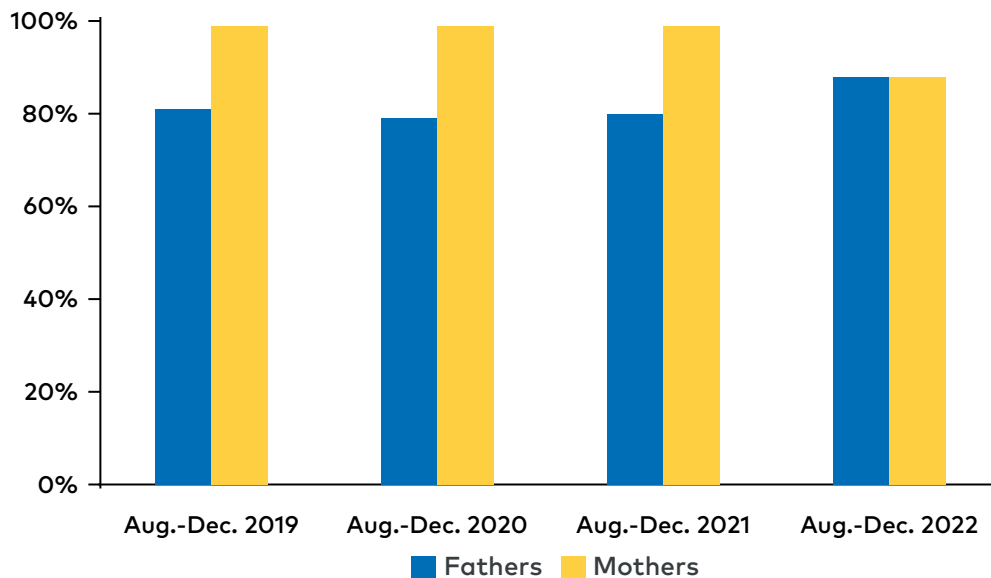


Source: Statistics Denmark, Statistikbanken, Barsel11.

Note: cohabiting parents entitled to the benefit and taking it up. Includes weeks for mothers before birth.

There has also been a change in the proportion of fathers who take up leave (Figure 4). Among those eligible for the parental benefit and co-habiting, there has been an increase from 80 to 88% of fathers who take leave in August 2022 when the EU Directive was implemented.

Figure 4. Share of parents entitled to the benefit who took leave, %, 2019-2022, Denmark



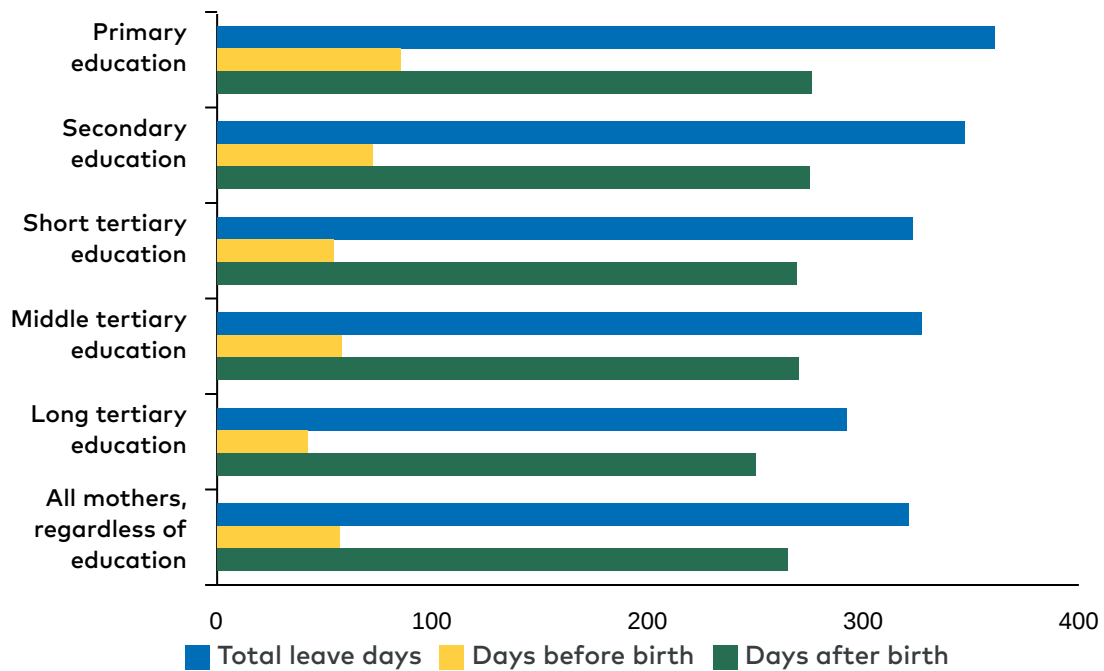
Source: Statistics Denmark, Statistikbanken, barlov1. Nyt fra Danmarks Statistik, 2024.

Note: Includes all who have taken 1 day or more; only for parents of children born in the period Aug-Dec.

Across the educational divide, there seems to be some differences in leave take-up: the higher their educational level, the shorter leave mothers take (Figure 5). To exemplify, mothers with no education take on average a total of 361.0 days, while mothers with tertiary education take 291.5 days. This suggests that there are also differences in leave take-up across income levels. The difference according to education is found for the leave taken before birth as well as after birth.

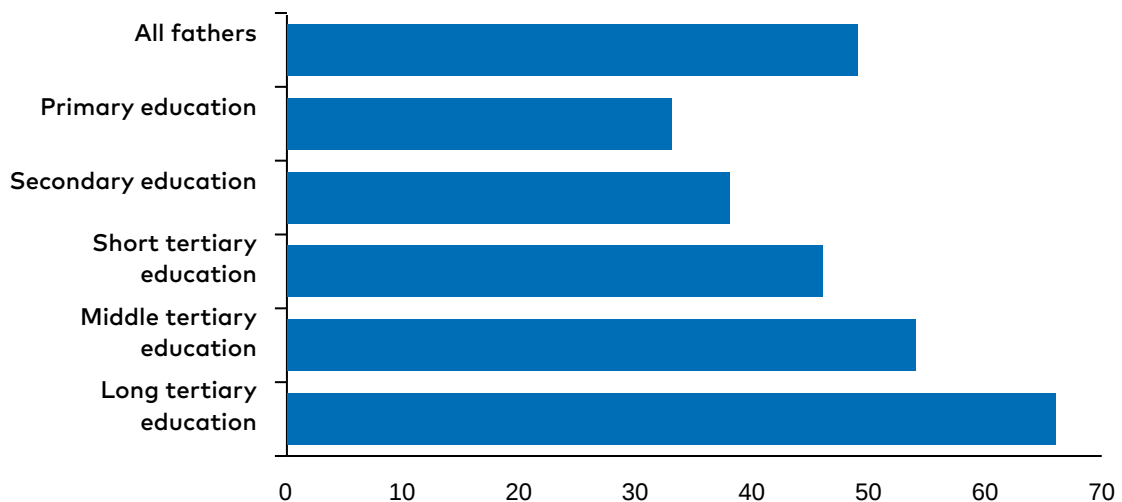
For the fathers, there is – and perhaps not surprising – opposite patterns: with increasing educational level, more fathers take leave (Figure 6). Fathers with no education take on average 32.5 days compared to 65.5 days on average for fathers with tertiary education. This implies that the share of leave is more equally balanced in families where the father has a higher education. And again, this indicates that fathers with higher incomes take longer leave periods.

Figure 5. Mothers use of leave days according to educational background, average number of days, 2022



Source: Statistics Denmark, Statistikbanken. Note: mothers entitled to the benefit.

Figure 6. Fathers' use of leave days according to educational background, average number of days, 2022



Source: Statistics Denmark, Statistikbanken. Note: fathers co-habiting with mothers and entitled to the benefit.

Beyond the educational divide, there may be a number of reasons why fathers do not take leave or take less than they are entitled to. A representative survey conducted among 2,500 men who became fathers after the reform of the parental leave showed that 24% took less than the 11 weeks (Mødrehjælpen, 2024). The study was conducted in August 2023, and thus one year after the reform. It revealed a mix of economic and attitudinal reasons preventing the fathers from taking leave but also that the partner has superior leave rights and a job situation that more accommodated taking up leave: The main reason was financial concerns (50%), that the mother wanted to take leave (26%), having insufficient leave rights (22%), the work situation did not allow it (22%), the child needs a mother (for instance breastfeeding) (22%), would negatively affect my career (11%), the mothers leave rights are superior to mine (10%), the mother is best fit to care for the child (9%), the child is better off with its mother (9%), other (17%).

Discussion: Parental leave in country context

Overall, the leave reform has indeed affected the situation so that more fathers today take leave and spend time with their young child. The reform has also meant a more gender balanced take-up of leave, with fathers lengthening the period of leave and mothers shortening theirs. This can have a positive effect in society in furthering gender equality in practice in the home and in the workplace, enabling women to better make use of their competences in the labour market and generally furthering a male role model that can embrace also care work. The reform may in this way contribute to societal sustainability.

However, the reform has also affected the legislation so that the total leave length is today a bit shorter. The drop in total leave length is minor but nevertheless mirrors a societal concern voiced before the introduction of the father's quota, that some families would refrain from taking leave or take shorter leave, eventually affecting the time that the very young child is cared for in the family and potentially affecting the child in a longer perspective.

Previous research using Danish data has shown that the child may not be affected in physical health by the length of the parents' parental leave (Beuchert et al, 2016) but more recent research suggests that shortening the leave period may affect the child's well-being and development. A recent study using Danish register data and following children whose parents have taken leave prior to the reform suggests that a shorter leave period has effects for the child when they reach 13-15 years, in terms of their socio-emotional skills and how well they thrive in the school setting (Gensowski, 2023). Following up on this issue, early research of the register data shows that the drop in total leave days following the reform is more frequent in families with low income and educational level, indicating a social class gradient (Gensowski et al., 2024).

The small drop in leave length which is reported for 2022 may also be reversed when statistics for the take-up in 2023 become available. At least, and as reported earlier in this report, parents seem to have reacted to concerns over quality of care in the ECEC provision by expanding their leave period. With the current data, we do not know if these strategies have a social gradient.

But as shown above we do know that a more gender balanced take up of leave where fathers take longer leave seems to be more prevalent in families where one or both have a higher education, reflecting most likely attitudinal preferences and perhaps also the work situation. This indicates that the economic effect of taking leave may also have a social gradient: previous research using Danish data has shown that mothers earn more when the father take more leave, while the father's wage is not affected or may actually increase slightly (Andersen, 2017). When mothers with low education continue to take the bulk of the leave, they may also be negatively impacted in terms of their wage levels.

The relationship between the parents may also be affected by how long leave each take. A recent Danish study combining survey and register data shows that both parents are more satisfied, the longer leave the father take (Niss et al, 2019). A small but significant and positive effect from fathers' increasing the length of leave is also their involvement with the child later on, such as their frequency of activities with the child, as well as their overall attachment to the child. The study argues that this may have a spill-over effect on the father's health, quality of life but also his legal position in the case of a marital break-up – similar to what Ottesen (2015) found in a previous Danish study. In a more long-term perspective, Niss et al. (2019) find an association between fathers' use of leave and the male children's grades in mathematics in school, especially among boys with fathers who have a long, further education. Fathers' use of leave also spill-off in their share of household tasks and who stays at home from work when the child is ill. Finally, the survey data indicates that fathers find that taking leave has had a positive effect on their wages and career, while mothers find it has had a negative effect. The longer leave, the more positive effect according to fathers, and the more negative effect according to the mothers.

The gendered uptake of leave has to some degree been modified in that more fathers take up leave and for longer period. However, this is mainly in families with higher education and the traditional gendered uptake continues as a general trend. This may have an impact on social sustainability, in terms of labour market participation, lifetime earnings, division of house and care work, and eventually also on the social norms of gendered parenting.

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PARENTAL LEAVE IN FINLAND

Johanna Lammi-Taskula

Introduction

Like the other Nordic countries, Finland has often been seen as a country representing the dual earner-dual carer model in comparative studies on the reconciliation of paid employment and childcare (e.g. Gornick & Meyers, 2008). Family policy in Finland is however a somewhat contradictory combination of defamilisation and familism. On the one hand, many policy measures introduced since the 1970's are defamilising i.e. they underline public childcare responsibility and support possibilities for paid employment outside the home for both mothers and fathers, thus promoting gender equality in the labour market and in the family. On the other hand there are still today also familistic policy measures that focus on parental responsibilities combined with families' freedom of choice in childcare arrangements, which in practice reproduces a more traditional gender division of labour (Haataja, 2004; Hiilamo & Kangas, 2009; Salmi & Närvi, 2017; Ciccia, 2022; Saarikallio-Torp et al., 2024).

The dual earner-dual carer family model and gender equality in both unpaid work in family life and paid work is supported by relatively well-paid parental leave with quotas for both parents, followed by a universal right of all children to early childhood education and care (ECEC) services. The main familistic childcare policy measure is the Home Care Allowance (HCA) which gives parents the option to choose to stay home with the child after parental leave and until the child is three years old as an alternative to using ECEC services (Mahon, 2002; Sipilä et al., 2012; Lammi-Taskula et al., 2023).

During the past three decades, the parental leave scheme in Finland has been reformed several times. Most reforms involve an increase in leave rights for fathers or taking family diversity more into account. For example, leave rights of single parents, adoptive parents and same-sex parents have become more equal to those of heterosexual, biological parents (Moring & Lammi-Taskula, 2021). In addition to gender equality, the motivation for introducing longer and more flexible parental leave quotas for fathers has been to encourage fathers to take more responsibility for childcare, thus supporting their parenthood in the long run as well as the wellbeing of both parents and children (Räsänen et al., 2022).

Due to the importance of the freedom of choice, and the familistic path-dependency of family policy in Finland, the non-transferable leave quota for fathers was introduced later than in the other Nordic countries (Lammi-Taskula, 2022). The freedom of choice has been used as an argument against leave quotas and keeping a longer transferable parental leave period (Salmi, 2017). After several small adjustments of the leave scheme to promote gender equality such as lengthening paternity leave, compensating leave costs to employers, and increasing the flexibility of leave use, a more profound leave policy reform with symmetric leave quotas for both parents took place in 2022, more than two decades after similar reforms in Sweden, Norway and Iceland.

While the parental leave reform can be considered a relatively radical step towards gender equality, the familistic policy is still strong as the cash-for-care benefit HCA has remained untouched - despite of repeated critique during the past decades (Sipilä et al., 2012; Salmi & Närvi, 2017; Närvi et al., 2024).

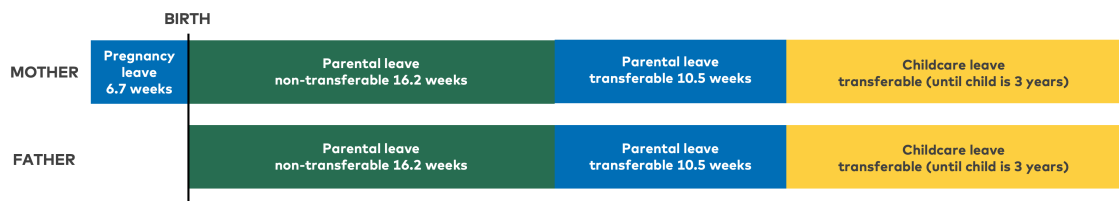
Present policies

Length of leave

Before the most recent parental leave reform in 2022, the leave system in Finland included an almost one-year-long parental leave with an income-related benefit, followed by a two-year childcare leave with a flat-rate benefit (Home Care Allowance). The leave was divided into a 4 months' mother's quota, a 9 weeks' father's quota and 7 months of shareable leave. After parental leave the parents could then divide a two-year childcare leave between them. Relatively inflexible parttime options were available for parental leave as well as childcare leave (Miettinen et al., 2021.)

Since the reform, each parent, regardless of their or their partner's gender, is entitled to an individual parental leave quota of almost 27 weeks (6.4 months) of which 15.5 weeks are non-transferable while up to 10.5 weeks can be transferred to the other parent (see Figure 1). Parents can only be simultaneously on parental leave for a maximum of three weeks. In addition, the birth-giving parent has a right to a 6.7 weeks' pregnancy leave that can start 14 to 30 days prior to the due date. In the case of multiple births, the length of parental leave is extended by 14 weeks for each additional child, distributed equally between parents. In case of a couple where the birth parent starts their pregnancy leave early and the other parent does not use their quota the maximum leave period is nine months. If the birth parent starts their pregnancy leave later and both parents use all of their quotas with no simultaneous leave taking the maximum leave period is almost 14 months. Single parents can use the whole leave period. The childcare leave with the flat-rate HCA remained unchanged in the reform (Miettinen et al., 2024).

Figure 1. Parental leave scheme in Finland, 2024



Eligibility to leave

Residence is the primary basis for entitlement to all income-related parental benefits in Finland. Those regularly living in the country are insured under the Finnish Health Insurance Act and thus entitled to parental benefits, and therefore also to leave during the benefit period (Miettinen et al., 2024).

A pregnant/birthing parent is entitled to a pregnancy benefit after 22 weeks. A parental benefit is available to biological or adoptive parents and to any legal guardian of a child. Same-sex couples have the same leave and benefit rights as different-sex couples. Both parents are entitled to a parental benefit even if they are not cohabiting provided that they take leave from work and are responsible for childcare. One can claim the parental benefit while studying during parental leave as long as one is able to take care of the child. Single parents can use the whole parental leave if the other parent has not been acknowledged and confirmed; is not the child’s legal guardian; is not insured under the Finnish Health Insurance Act; or is, due to illness or injury, unable to take care of the child. A single parent can also transfer leave to another person (Miettinen et al., 2024).

The Home Care Allowance (HCA) can be paid to any parent – whether or not they are on leave from work – as long as their child is not in a childcare service provided or funded by the local authority. An employed parent is entitled to partial childcare leave (i.e. a reduction in working hours) if they have been working for the same employer for at least six months during the past 12 months. The reduction of hours should be negotiated with the employer, but at the minimum the employee has the right of reducing their working hours down to 30 hours per week. Parents who reduce their working hours and take partial care leave can receive a flat rate benefit to compensate for their loss of income. The Flexible Care Allowance is paid to parents with children under three (two options depending on working hours), and the Partial Care Allowance to parents whose child is in first or second class at school (one option regardless of working hours) (Miettinen et al., 2024).

Benefits

The Parental leave benefit is calculated on the basis of one's annual income in the preceding 12 months or last three months of the 12-month period. If the estimated due date of the new baby is before a previous child turns three years old, the parental benefit can be based on the same income that was used for the previous child. The income-related parental benefit is regressive, i.e. the compensation rate is higher for lower earnings. Parental benefits are not paid for days when one is working more than five hours in paid employment. However, as parental benefits are not paid on Sundays one can work more than five hours then as well as on midweek holidays while claiming parental benefits. As in all benefits paid by the sickness insurance, there is no ceiling for the parental benefit in Finland (Miettinen et al., 2024).

In 2024, the parental benefit was 90 per cent for annual earnings between €10,665 and €67,296, and 32.5 per cent for earnings above this level. Parents who have not been employed or have had annual earnings below €13,712 get a minimum flat-rate allowance of €32 per day (about €800 per month). Many collective agreements include full pay during pregnancy leave and part of parental leave for both parents, which means that parents included in such agreements get a higher compensation during leave compared to those who are not included. During periods of full pay, the benefit is paid to the employer (Miettinen et al. 2024).

The Home Care Allowance consisted in 2024 of a basic payment of €377 per month, with an additional €113 for every other child under three years of age and €72 for every other pre-school child plus a means-tested supplement (up to €202 per month). In addition, some municipalities pay a supplement to the HCA. According to a report by the association of Finnish local and regional authorities, one in five municipalities, most commonly the bigger ones, paid such a supplement in 2022. The supplement ranged from of €50 to €350 per month, often with specific conditions such as home care for all children below school age in the family (Lahtinen & Svartsjö, 2022; Miettinen et al., 2024).

For parents who reduced their working hours because of childcare, the monthly amount of Flexible Care Allowance in 2024 was €179 if the weekly working hours were 80 per cent of the normal full-time hours, and €269 per month if the weekly working hours were 60 per cent of the normal full-time hours. The amount of Partial Care Allowance was €108 per month (Miettinen et al., 2024).

In 2023, the average parental benefit paid to fathers was €98 per day (€2,460 per month) and to mothers 74 per day (€1,867 per month). The average HCA paid to parents was €451 per month; about 23 per cent of HCA recipients received means-tested supplements and 15 per cent received municipal supplements. The average flexible care allowance was €202 per month, and the average partial care allowance was €108 per month (Kela, 2024).

Parental benefit, the child Home Care Allowance, the Partial Care Allowance and the Flexible Care Allowance are all taxable income. The tax for income-related parental benefit is similar as in salaries, the minimum tax rate being 25 per cent. For the flat-rate benefits, the minimum tax rate is 20 per cent. Pension is accumulated during the parental benefit and HCA periods. In 2024, pregnancy and parental leave accumulate the beneficiary's pension based on 121 per cent of the annual earnings from which the benefit is calculated. These earnings accumulate the pension at 1.5 per cent per year. For those with no income from paid employment, as well as during the HCA period the pension is accumulated as if the earnings were €857 a month (Miettinen et al., 2024).

Income-related parental benefits are part of the Social Insurance scheme, financed by contributions mainly from employers and employees. In 2024, employers paid 47 per cent and employees 40 per cent of the total costs. The remaining parental benefit costs are funded from state taxation. (Miettinen et al., 2024).

The flat-rate benefit promoting child home care after parental leave (Home Care Allowance) as well as the benefits compensating for lost income during temporarily shortened working hours (Partial Care Allowance and Flexible Care Allowance) are funded by municipalities who are also responsible for providing childcare services (see section on childcare) (Miettinen et al., 2024).

Flexibility

With the 2022 reform, the use of parental leave with income-related benefit became more flexible than before. Before the reform, only fathers could use parental leave until the child turned two, but now this is possible for both parents. Parents can no longer receive (minimum) parental benefit while working full time, but they can combine part time work and partial parental benefit. Parental leave can be taken part-time if the daily working time is no more than five hours per day. One day of partial parental leave decreases the leave by half a day, and the benefit is half of that for full-time leave. Parents can also take partial parental leave simultaneously. Employed parents can take parental leave in four parts per calendar year, or more often if the employer agrees. The minimum duration of leave is two weeks, but leave can be shorter – minimum one day - if agreed by the employer (Miettinen et al., 2024).

After parental leave, parents can take childcare leave in two parts, the minimum length being one month. Parents can alternate the use of childcare leave (with the Home Care Allowance) and parental leave in the case that one parent (usually the father) uses their parental leave quota later. (Miettinen et al., 2024),

After parental leave, parents can also choose to take partial childcare leave and work reduced working hours for at least one month, until the end of the child's

second year at school. Both parents can take partial childcare leave during the same period but not during the same hours of the day. Parents of children under three years of age are entitled to Flexible Care Allowance (see section on benefits). Flexible Care Allowance can be paid to both parents at the same time if they take care of the child during different hours of the day or different days of the week. Parents can receive Flexible Care Allowance even if the child attends municipal ECEC (Miettinen et al., 2024).

Parents can take temporary childcare leave when a child under ten years of age falls ill. Also, parents with joint custody are entitled to the leave even if they do not live with the child. The length of leave is up to four days per illness. Payment is dependent on collective agreements, typically the employer pays full salary during three or four days at a time (Miettinen et al., 2024).

Other work and care policies

Childcare

It is the municipalities' responsibility to provide Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) services for all children living in the municipality, in accordance with the needs of the respective families. According to the Early Childhood Education Act (2018), it is up to each municipality to decide the specific forms of ECEC services it provides. ECEC is typically provided in day care centres or family day care, but also in open activities such as playgrounds and children's clubs. Municipalities can either provide ECEC services themselves or in co-operation with private service producers. A bachelor's degree in education is required from ECEC teachers, and a vocational degree from care assistants in daycare centres. A vocational degree is needed in family day care.

There is no gap between parenting leaves and ECEC services: From the age of nine months the child is entitled to a place in childcare. An application for a place must be submitted four months before the starting day, but if there is a need for service due to an unexpected change of employment, education or relocation the application period is two weeks. A parent is allowed to take up to 13 weeks of parental leave after the child has started in ECEC, without the child losing its place.

In general, the maximum length of the service per day is ten hours, but extended hours must be provided for families with shift work or other irregular working hours. The fee paid by parents is based on the family size and income, along with the length of the child's stay. In 2024, the maximum monthly payment for full-time service (minimum 35 hours per week) was €311 for the youngest child of the family. For the next older sibling it was 40 per cent of that, and for consequent siblings 20 per cent. If the child spends between 20 and 34 hours the payment is according to

hours and if the child spends less than 20 hours per week the payment is 60 per cent of the full-time payment. For very low-income families the ECEC is free of charge.

If a child is taken care of in a private (for-profit or non-profit) day care centre, by a private nanny, or another person employed by the family and accepted by the local authority, the family is entitled to Private Day Care Allowance (€192 per month per child in 2024) with an addition based on the size and income of the family (up to €266 in 2024). Municipalities also offer service vouchers for private day care services.

The Private Day Care Allowance is used by 2-3 per cent of families with children under three years of age (Miettinen et al., 2024). A service voucher for private ECEC is more common: it is offered by more than third of the municipalities (Lahtinen & Svartsjö, 2024). Altogether less than one in five children are in private ECEC.

The participation rate of children in ECEC has been lower in Finland than in the other Nordic countries. In recent years however the rate has been increasing, especially among younger children. In 2015, 30 per cent of children in the age group 0-3 participated in ECEC whereas in 2023 the proportion was 42 per cent (Tilastokeskus, 2024).

Most parents think children are ready to start in ECEC at the age of 18-24 months, which means they prefer a period of child home care after parental leave rather than enrolling children in daycare. There are some gender differences in these opinions as well as socio-economic differences. Fathers find a lower starting age more acceptable than mothers, as well as those with a higher education and income level. This is also reflected in the childcare choices of parents: highly educated parents use shorter periods of HCA and return sooner to paid employment (Saarikallio-Torp et al., 2024).

In surveys with parents whose children participate in ECEC, the level of satisfaction is typically high (e.g. Suomen Vanhempainliitto, 2024). The main determinants of parental satisfaction with ECEC are resources such as number, stability and education level of personnel, and practices such as clear pedagogical principles, guided activities and support for child development (Saranko et al., 2021). Today, many parents are worried about the lack of resources that could lead to personnel shortage and thus risk the wellbeing of children. Still, in 2022 only 12 per cent of mothers reported doubts about the quality of ECEC as a motivation for using the Home Care Allowance (Miettinen & Närvi, 2024).

Leave reforms

For decades, leave reforms in Finland have been negotiated between three parties: Employers' central organisations, employees' central organisations, and the state. The negotiations were originally part of larger compromises about working conditions, salaries and social security measures. More recently governments have initiated reforms in the government programs. Final decision of each reform must be taken by the parliament (Lammi-Taskula & Takala, 2009; Varjonen, 2011).

The reforms during the past two decades have mainly increased leave possibilities for fathers, with the aim to encourage fathers to take more independent childcare responsibility and thus to promote gender equality in families and in the labour market (Saarikallio-Torp et al., 2024). While the HCA has been widely criticized, it has not been reformed. The HCA allows parents – in practice mothers – to stay at home with the child and outside the labour market much longer than do policies in the other Nordic countries (Duvander & Ellingsaeter, 2016). This has a negative impact on the employment rate and career development of women – especially immigrant mothers – and is an important factor in the persistence of the gender pay gap (Koskenvuo, 2016; Kosonen, 2014; Napari, 2007; Österbacka & Räsänen, 2022).

Following the example of the other Nordic countries, a leave quota for fathers was created in Finland in 2003 (Lammi-Taskula, 2022). The first Finnish version of the quota was called father's month and consisted of 2+2 weeks – the latter two weeks were a bonus given to fathers who used two weeks of the sharable parental leave (Salmi & Lammi-Taskula, 2003). The quota was later lengthened to six weeks and its use was made more flexible. In 2007, fathers could use their leave quota until the child turned 1.5 years (Saarikallio-Torp & Haataja, 2016).

The supporters of the father's quota have included employee central organisations as well as leftist, liberal and green political parties. In addition, employers in the female-dominated service sector have argued for the promotion of father's parental leave use in order to equalize employer costs related to parenthood. The proponents of the quota wanted to guarantee an independent leave period that would strengthen the father-child relationship, improve the position of fathers as equal parents in the family, while influencing attitudes towards fathers in working life. As a biproduct of this development, women's position in the labour market would improve. The quota was resisted by conservative parties, as well as the central organization of private sector employers. The main argument of resistance has been the urge to protect the families' freedom to choose but employers have also resisted any additional costs (Varjonen, 2011).

During the 2010's, employment goals became more important than before in reforming the parenting leave policy (Elomäki et al., 2020). There was a growing

concern about the employment rate of mothers of young children rather than about meeting the diverse needs of families in childcare arrangements (Kaarakainen et al., 2022). As the conservative government did not plan any leave reforms, at the end of the 2010's various leave models were presented by several political parties as well as the social partners (employers' and employees' organisations). Most models suggested longer quotas for fathers, either by increasing the total length of leave or by dividing the existing leave period more equally between parents, and increased flexibility of leave use. Some suggested cuts to the length of the HCA period as it is used mainly by mothers, while others insisted that the HCA should be preserved (Lammi-Taskula, 2022).

The models proposed by the central labour market organisations (private sector employers as well as trade unions) and the centre-right and social democratic parties included a slightly longer parental leave with income-related benefit, a somewhat longer quota for fathers, shorter shareable parental leave period and considerably shorter HCA period with higher flat-rate benefit and equal quotas. The political parties with the most liberal gender ideologies were in favour of the 6+6+6 model with considerably longer parental leave quotas for both parents, somewhat shorter shareable parental leave period, and shorter HCA period with quotas. The more conservative centre-right party proposed a model with somewhat longer father's quota, and a longer shareable parental leave period. They wanted to keep the HCA period but increase the benefit amount for children under two with lower benefit for the remaining year (Salmi, 2017).

In 2013, a non-conditional father's leave quota of parental leave was introduced by the government with six political parties from left to right. Fathers were still entitled to nine weeks leave - now called paternity leave - of which three weeks could be taken simultaneously with the mother and six weeks were to be taken after the (mother's) parental leave period. The use of leave became more flexible as fathers could now use their leave quota until the child turned 2 years (Salmi & Lammi-Taskula, 2013).

In order to encourage parents to return to work sooner, the partial leave scheme was reformed by the same government in 2014. The flat-rate partial care allowance was now available for parents with children starting school (first or second class), and a new flexible care allowance was introduced for parents with children under three years of age. The flexible care allowance is higher for shorter part-time and lower for longer part-time work. The flexible care allowance did not meet much popularity among parents of young children who seem to prefer either full-time leave or full-time employment (Pekkarinen & Tuomala, 2019).

Fathers who do not reside with the child and the mother got a right to paternity leave and benefit in 2017. Before this reform, introduced by a centre-right conservative government, fathers who lived in another household than their child

could only use the shareable parental leave if they were responsible for childcare (Närvi et al., 2024).

The parental leave reform in 2022, introduced by a left-green government, brought many changes to the leave scheme. The gender specific terminology – “maternity leave” and “paternity leave” – were replaced by gender-neutral “parental leave” that is equally divided between the “birth parent” and the “other parent” and can also be transferred to other legal guardians of the child. With the reform, the length of the leave period with an income-related benefit increased with about seven weeks. The non-birth parents’ (in practice usually the father) quota became longer while the length of parental leave for birth parents (mothers) stayed the same as before. The use of leave was made more flexible. Each parent – not just the father - can now take several spells of leave until the child turns two years. Leave can also be taken part-time in a more flexible manner as part-time parental leave no longer requires that both parents take it simultaneously (Miettinen et al., 2024).

Due to the increased flexibility in leave use, two years needed to pass for it to be possible to observe the reform’s full initial impact. Statistics from the Social Insurance Institute show an increase in the number of parental leave days taken by fathers (see next section on the use of leave).

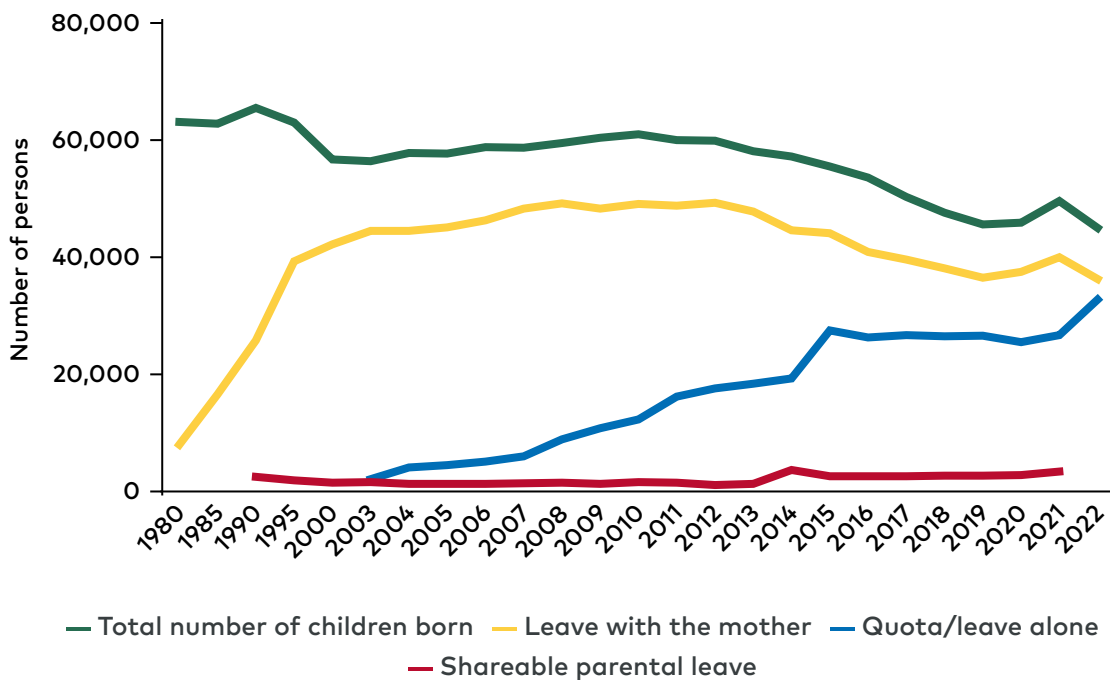
Leave use

In Finland, practically all mothers previously used the 17.5 weeks maternity leave and most of the shareable parental leave of about 26,5 weeks. Today, mothers continue to use the 6.5 weeks’ pregnancy leave combined with their 16 weeks parental leave quota. Two weeks of leave before and two weeks after the birth are obligatory. Very few mothers work during this leave period.

A majority of fathers have used some of the weeks of paternity leave that can be taken simultaneously with the mother (maximum three weeks), typically taken right after the birth of the child. Today, this leave is part of the father’s quota of parental leave. Before the 2022 reform, about one in five fathers did not take any paternity leave. Non-use was more typical among fathers with low education and/or income level; non-users were often students or unemployed (Saarikallio-Torp & Miettinen, 2021).

The use of the fathers’ leave quota (previously six weeks of paternity leave to be taken after the shareable parental leave period, now 16 weeks of parental leave) has slowly increased since it was introduced (Figure 2). Before the 2022 reform, about 45 per cent of fathers took this leave, the average length was five weeks. Almost half of these fathers took the leave when the child was 1.5-2 years old (Miettinen & Saarikallio-Torp, 2020).

Figure 2. Children born and take-up of leave by fathers in Finland 1980-2022

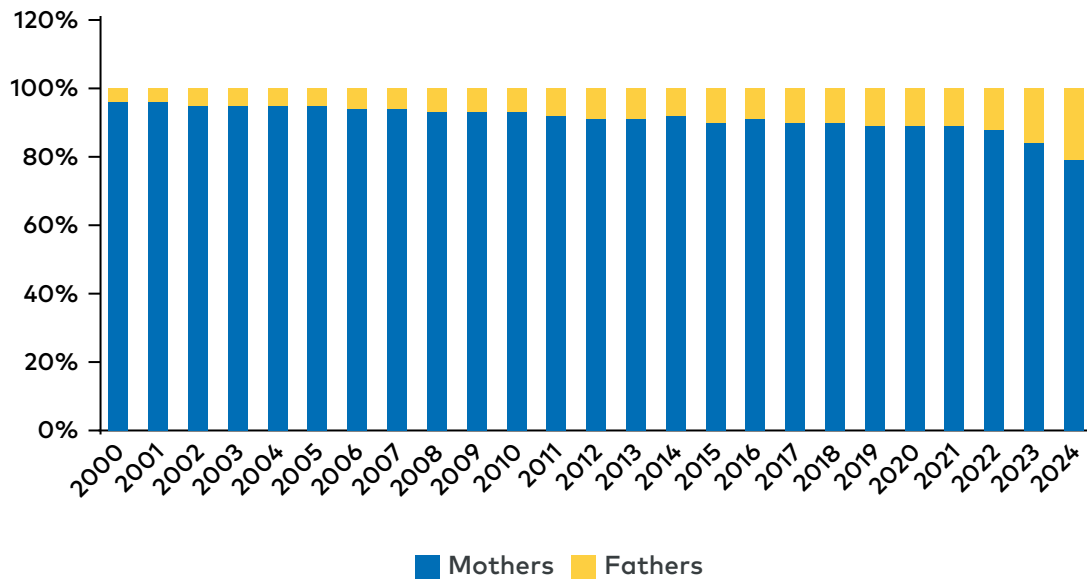


Source: Statistical yearbooks of the Social Insurance Institution

Note: The figure shows number of persons. The same fathers can be included in various leave groups

In the beginning of the 2000's, the share of all parental leave benefit days taken by fathers was less than five per cent. The share increased slowly as the fathers' quota was introduced and more fathers started using it: in 2010 fathers used seven per cent of parental leave and in 2015 ten per cent (Figure 3). After the 2022 reform that introduced a longer leave quota for fathers, fathers' share of all parental benefit days has increased from 12.5 per cent in 2021 to 20.9 per cent in 2024 (Kela, 2025). Fathers of children born in 2022, after the reform, took on average 13 weeks compared to little over seven weeks taken by fathers of children born in 2021, and parents used leave in a more flexible manner, taking several shorter leave periods and more part-time leave than before (Kela, 2024).

Figure 3. Percentage of parental benefit days paid to mothers and fathers in Finland 2000-2024



Source: Statistical Yearbooks of the Social Insurance Institution.

A very small group of fathers have taken the shareable parental leave and childcare leave. Before the reform, only about three per cent of parental leave days were taken by fathers (Saarikallio-Torp & Miettinen, 2021), and about eight per cent of all home care allowance recipients were men (Kela, 2022).

Highly educated fathers and those with a highly educated and/or high-income spouse have been more likely to use the father's quota, the shareable parental leave as well as the childcare leave.

The most common motivation of leave use reported by fathers is the wish to spend time with the child. More than two thirds of fathers who have used their quota think taking parental leave is self-evident and that parenthood is a shared responsibility. These justifications are reported more by highly educated and high-income fathers than those with lower education and/or low-income level (Saarikallio-Torp et al., 2024.)

Research on leave use in Finland has shown persistent socio-economic diversities in father's use of parental leave (Lammi-Taskula, 2007; Salmi & Närvi, 2017; Närvi, 2018; Saarikallio-Torp & Miettinen, 2021; Saarikallio-Torp et al., 2024). Highly educated fathers and those in higher white-collar occupational positions use their parental leave quota more often (Figure 4) and take longer leave periods than fathers with lower education level. Fathers' use of parental leave is also closely related to the mother's socio-economic status and position in the labour market

(Figure 4), as mothers with higher education level and upper white-collar position are less keen on using the childcare leave (supported with the Home Care Allowance) after the parental leave period.

Figure 4a. Use of leave by mothers (has used or plans to use childcare leave/HCA) in 2022, according to socio-economic position

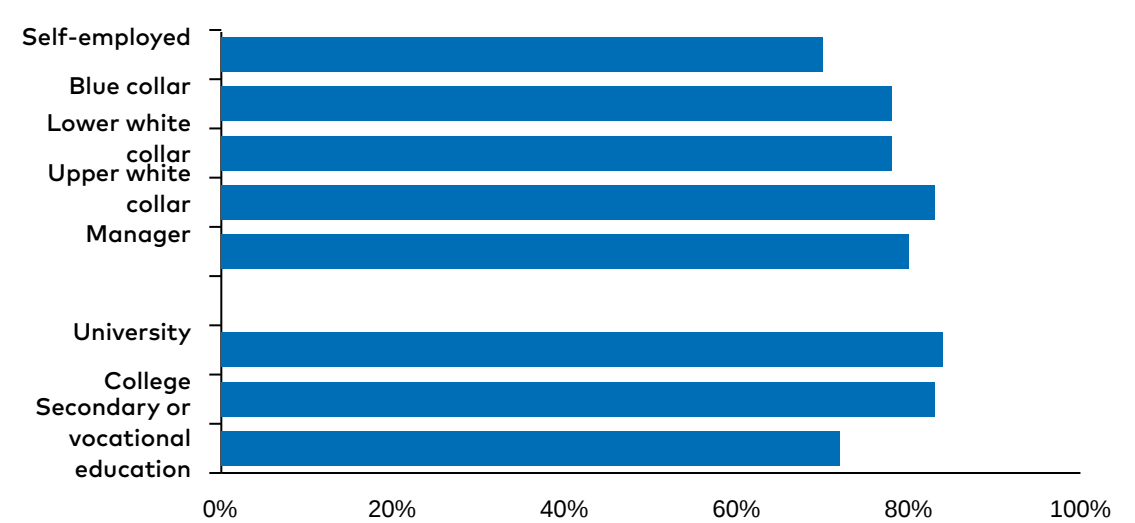
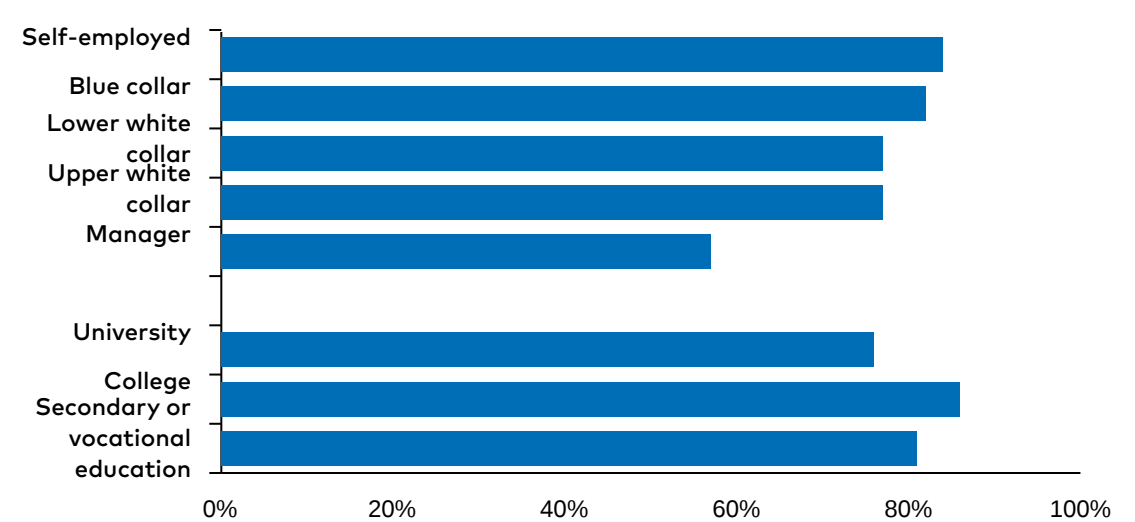


Figure 4b. Use of leave by fathers (has used or plans to use his parental leave quota) in 2022, according to socio-economic position



Source: Parental Leave Survey, 2022, Kinnunen et al., 2024

The childcare leave and homecare allowance (HCA) have been used by the majority of families (90 per cent) at least for some months after parental leave (Miettinen & Saarikallio-Torp, 2023). These policies are, like the parental leave, also used mainly by mothers. In 2021 less than ten per cent of recipients of the HCA were men (Kela, 2022). Longer HCA periods are taken by women with low education level and/or precarious position in the labour market (Närvi 2017; Österbacka & Räsänen, 2022; Miettinen & Saarikallio-Torp, 2023). Mothers with low socioeconomic status and low opportunity costs at the labour market choose child home care more often than mothers with high socioeconomic status. The latter, in turn re-enter the labour market faster after childbirth and are more likely to use private childcare (Räsänen 2023). However, as the HCA benefit is low, family economy is an obstacle for HCA use especially if one has a low-income partner (Miettinen & Närvi, 2024).

Labour market attachment before childbirth affects the length of childcare leave, but so do also higher, locally paid supplements for the Home Care Allowance. Women who are outside the labour force or unemployed are more affected by the increases in the HCA especially when the first or second child is less than two years old (Räsänen, 2023).

The leave use of mothers and fathers is interrelated. Shorter HCA periods are taken by mothers whose spouse also takes parental and/or childcare leave (Miettinen & Närvi, 2024), and the most typical obstacle for leave use reported by fathers is the mother's HCA benefit period (Saarikallio-Torp et al., 2024). During the past years HCA periods have on average become shorter and attitudes towards younger children's participation in ECEC have become somewhat more positive (Miettinen & Saarikallio-Torp, 2023). More mothers have returned to employment or studies while the father is taking leave (Miettinen & Närvi, 2024).

Research has pointed to negative effects of the HCA on gender equality as it reduces mothers' employment, income development and pensions (Napari, 2007; Kosonen, 2014; Kuitto et al., 2019; Koskenvuo, 2020; Österbacka & Räsänen, 2022). Also, the negative impact of the HCA on children's educational outcomes has been discussed, especially for those coming from more vulnerable background such as immigrant families (Karila et al., 2017; Karhula et al., 2017; Huttunen & Kosonen 2018; Gruber et al., 2022).

Discussion: Parental leave in country context

Gender equality, combined with socio-economic dimensions of equality, is a major driver of social sustainability. While the reforms of parental leave policies have, during the past decades, aimed at promoting gender equality, some positive development can be observed in Finland. General attitudes towards gender division of labour within the family have become more egalitarian (Attila et al., 2018), and the participation of fathers in unpaid childcare and household work has increased (Miettinen & Rotkirch, 2012; Statistics Finland, 2022). As fathers' share of parental leave use has increased, so has the labour market participation rate of mothers of young children (Tilastokeskus, 2023). That being said, mothers are still largely seen as main carers for young children and their use of the shareable parental leave, and the cash-for-care HCA has been seen as self-evident (Mattila, 2019; Repo, 2012; Terävä et al, 2018).

While the longer-term impacts of the most recent parental leave reform cannot yet be fully evaluated, it seems that the policy goals with regard to gender equality will realize, to some extent, as the fathers seem to be taking an increased share of all parental leave days. There are, however, persistent socio-economic disparities in leave use. Parental leave is more equally shared in families where both parents are highly educated. Thus, the positive development in gender equality has been more prominent in the highly-educated, white-collar population, while a more unequal division of paid and unpaid work and responsibilities is more common among those in a more vulnerable socio-economic position.

While the parental leave has been reformed, the HCA has remained untouched in Finland despite ample research evidence showing negative consequences of long leave periods on mothers as well as on children, especially those that were in a more vulnerable position to begin with. A majority of mothers in Finland have used the HCA for at least some months after parental leave. Recently, HCA periods have become somewhat shorter than before, but socioeconomic disparities prevail also in childcare choices of families (Miettinen & Närvi 2024). Longer childcare leaves taken by mothers with lower education level reproduce their precarious position in the labour market while creating by, disparities among children's participation in early education (Välimäki et al 2024). Also, while the fertility rate has fallen quite dramatically during the past decade, childlessness is highest among the lower educated women and men (Jalovaara et al., 2021).

It seems that familistic values have a strong hold in Finland alongside support for gender equality (Blum et al., 2020). A majority of children are in home care longer than the parental leave period, mainly with their mothers. While there has been increase fathers' time use in childcare, the division of paid and unpaid work is still gendered (Tilastokeskus, 2021b). Due to time spent in unpaid childcare work, women in Finland lose years of employment when children are small, along with

cumulative labour earnings (Lorenti et al., 2023). Longer-than-average childcare leave results in a greater child penalty in wages and thereby contributes to the gender pay gap even ten years after the first childbirth. Majority of the earnings gap is explained by reduced fulltime employment and increased part-time work among mothers (Räsänen, 2023).

The leave policy measures to promote gender equality started later in Finland than in the other Nordic countries and development has been slow. After several smaller steps toward increasing fathers' leave rights and increased flexibility, the most recent parental leave reform in 2022 can be characterized as a leap toward a dual-earner, dual-carer family model. However, the socio-economic disparities in leave use as well as falling fertility rate are still major challenges for equal rights and social sustainability in Finland.

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PARENTAL LEAVE IN ICELAND

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Introduction

The current legislation on paid parental leave in Iceland is based on a law that was enacted in the year 2000 which granted each parent three months of non-transferable leave and three months that they could share as they saw fit. The stated aim of the law is to ensure that children have access to both parents and enable the parents to coordinate family- and work life (Act on maternity/paternity and parental leave no. 95/2000). The law in 2000 extended the total leave period from six to nine months and economic compensation was raised from a low flat-rate benefit to 80% of salary for parents in the labour market, while those who had not accumulated such rights were entitled to flat-rate benefits. The law protected employment, making it illegal to fire an employee after he or she had announced the pregnancy and intended leave taking (Eydal & Gíslason, 2008). This was a radical law, as it involved a longer father's quota than was seen in other countries at the time, and the economic compensation was high by international standards (Moss & O'Brien, 2006).

Despite the Icelandic law from 2000 being progressive in terms of the length of the quotas, for many years the total leave length was shorter than found in the other Nordic countries. However, an extension of the leave was not enacted until 2020, when the total leave was extended to 10 months, with four quota months for each parent and two months that they could decide upon. A year later a total revision of the law took effect and parents of children born January 1st 2021, or later, receive 12 months of leave. Six months are allotted to each parent but each parent can transfer 1.5 months to the other parent, thus providing each parent with a 4.5-month quota (Arnalds et al., 2022).

Initially, the act from 2000 used the words "mother" and "father" when referring to parents' non-transferable rights (a so-called mother's and father's quota), but following changes to family legislation in 2006, gender-neutral language was introduced, and the terms "father" and "mother" were replaced by the term "parent." This shift was part of broader reforms across various laws aimed at ensuring that same-sex couples faced no discrimination. From the onset, parents

have had the right to paid parental leave regardless of their marital status and whether they share residency with their child or hold custody or not. Thus, all birth, adoptive, and permanent foster care parents have the right to take paid parental leave. In the case of a non-custodial parent a signed approval from the custodial parent for visitation rights during the leave period is required (Eydal & Gíslason, 2008). The issue of non-transferability thus applies regardless of whether parents live together or not. However, if there is only one parent, for example if a parent is deceased or a woman has undergone artificial insemination or an individual adopts a child alone, that parent is entitled to the same amount of paid leave as two parent families (Arnalds et al., 2022).

Present policies

Length of leave

In Iceland, each parent has an independent right to parental leave for up to six months (26 weeks), due to the birth, adoption, or permanent foster care of a child. However, as pointed out above, parents are allowed to transfer six weeks of their independent right to the other parent (see Figure 1) and a lone parent (i.e. if there is no other parent) is entitled to all 12 months. A parent is permitted to start using their individual rights up to one month before the expected due date and until the child reaches the age of two years, except in the case of adoption or permanent foster care, when the entitlements can be used until the child is eight years old. In case of a multiple birth, the sharable leave period is extended by three months for each additional child. In addition to the 12 months paid leave, each parent is entitled to four months long unpaid leave, which they can use until the child reaches the age of eight years (Act on parental leave, 2020/144).

Figure 1. Paid parental leave, number of weeks available to parents in Iceland, 2024



If the birth parent is unable to work due to ill health during pregnancy or in relation to the birth, the paid parental leave can be extended by two months. Additionally, if an employer cannot ensure the safety of a pregnant employee such as by providing the expectant parent with other tasks, the employee is entitled to a leave from work and payments from the Maternity and Paternity Leave Fund. It is also possible to extend the total leave period by a maximum of seven months due to serious illness or disability of the child. If the pregnant parent must stay away from home to receive health services related to the birth, they can receive a special per diem payment for 14 days for each child.

Eligibility

Parents receive payments from the Parental Leave Fund which is financed by an insurance levy paid by employers, while the benefit to those outside the labour market is financed by the state (Eydal & Gíslason, 2008). To be eligible for the earnings-related benefits, parents must have been active in the Icelandic labour market for at least six months prior to the birth of their child, and have worked at least nine hours per week, on average (25% work).

Students and those working less than 25% are entitled to flat rate benefits. To be eligible for the flat rate benefit, a parent should have legally resided in Iceland for at least 12 months prior to birth, adoption, or the start of permanent foster care. Full-time students (75-100% studies) are eligible for the flat rate benefit for students if they have been studying for at least six months in the 12 months prior to the birth of their child, adoption, or permanent foster care, and if they meet the requirements for academic progress during that time.

Benefits

Working parents receive 80% of their previous earnings while on leave up to a cap. The maximum monthly amount for parents who had a child April 1st, 2024, or later, was 700 thousand ISK (4,574 Euros). There is also a minimum, based on previous hours of work. The monthly amount to parents who have worked on average 25-49% should be at minimum 138 thousand ISK per month (902 Euros) and the payment to a parent who has worked a half- to a full-time job, an average, should be at least 191 thousand ISK per month (1,248 Euros) (Act on maternity/paternity and parental leave, 144/2020).

The flat-rate benefits, paid to students and those working less than 25%, have been criticised for being very low. In 2024 the monthly amount for studying parents was 223 thousand ISK (1,457 Euros) while the monthly amount for those working less than 25% was 97 thousand ISK (634 Euros). In comparison, the monthly minimum wage in Iceland in 2024 was 431 thousand ISK (2,816 Euros).

Flexibility

The birth parent is obligated to take leave the first two weeks after giving birth, but otherwise, the leave can be used as the parents decide within the first 24 months after birth. Parents can choose to use their rights all at once or divide it into shorter intervals. Furthermore, parents can use their individual rights simultaneously if they wish. Parents can also choose whether they use the leave full-time or if they take part-time leave with or without working on the side. Such flexibility has been in place for a quarter of a decade, since the law of 2000 was enacted. Thus, the parents have the right to use the leave as they like as long as this decision is made in an agreement with their employer. However, if an agreement is not reached, the parent always has the right to take uninterrupted leave.

Other work and family policies

The twofold aim of the paid parental leave law is in line with laws in Respect of Children (Law in respect of children no.76/2003), that emphasise the child's right to know and receive care from both parents, as well as the goals of the resolution on family policy from 1997 (Parliamentary resolution on Icelandic family policy and actions to strengthen the family, no. 121/1997), which emphasises both parents being able to reconcile work and care. Furthermore, the Act on equal status and equal rights of the sexes (no. 150/2020) also emphasises the importance of reconciliation of work and family and states that employers shall do necessary arrangements to make it possible for their employees to reconcile their work duties and family responsibility. Keeping in mind this clear emphasis of the Icelandic legislator on ensuring legal right to reconciliation it is noteworthy that after the paid parental leave ends, children do not have legal right to public ECEC, as it is up to each municipality to provide care services as they see fit (Arnalds & Duvander, 2022).

In 2022 the Icelandic government introduced a law on bereavement leave, intended for parents in the workforce who experience the loss of a child under the age of 18. A parent who has been in continuous employment has an independent right to bereavement leave for up to six months from the day the child dies up to three months in case of a stillbirth occurring after 22 weeks of pregnancy, and up to two months in case of miscarriage occurring after 18 weeks of pregnancy (Bereavement leave law, no. 77/2022). The payments are the same as for paid parental leave, that is 80% of previous earnings up to a ceiling. There are no laws on entitlements of parents to leave to take care of their children when ill, but rights to be absent from work with pay is negotiated in collective agreements. The employer pays the

salaries of the employee in accordance with the collective agreement. The social insurance system only pays home care benefits for parents of long-term ill and disabled children (Eydal & Rostgaard, 2013).

Leave reforms

Although the law from 2000 extended the leave from six to nine months and was generous in terms of individual quota rights, the total leave length of nine months was soon criticized for being too short. Parents were left to bridge the gap that existed between paid leave and ECEC and research showed that this gap was usually in practice bridged by mothers. This meant that the gender equality ambitions of parents' equal rights to paid parental leave were possibly endangered by the longer, and often unpaid, leaves taken by mothers to bridge the gap (Arnalds & Duvander, 2023; Arnalds et al. 2013; 2021; Ingólfssdóttir & Gíslason, 2016). Therefore, it was not politically contested that there was a need for longer paid parental leave. In fact, a gradual extension of the leave was in the White Paper of a coalition government in 2007 (Forsætisráðuneytið, 2007) but this government was forced to step down after a strong wave of protests from the Icelandic public after the financial crisis hit in 2008, so no reforms on the parental leave were made.

The Icelandic parliament *Alþingi* has three times decided to lengthen the leave, although an extension has only been carried out twice. A new coalition government left of the centre came into power in early 2009 after the protests. The new government was forced to lower the ceiling on benefits radically, as part of the austerity measures, but in December 2012 it enacted an extension of the leave to 12 months (with a 5+5+2 division), just before the end of its' term. In 2013 a new coalition government, right of the centre, was formed and they announced that the lengthening of the leave would have to be postponed due to the recovery after the financial crisis (Arnalds et al., 2013).

A similar bill to the one presented in 2012 was proposed by a left-right coalition government in November 2019. However, politicians were not ready to decide how to divide the 12-month period between parents. Two models were discussed: A 4-4-4 division, with a four-month quota for each parent and four months they could decide how to divide between them, and a 5-5-2 division, a five-month quota for each parent and a two-month sharable leave. The result was a middle-range solution, and a bill was passed granting parents who had a child from January 1st, 2020, ten months of paid parental leave, with a four-month quota for each parent and two months that parents could choose how to divide (a 4+4+2 division) (Arnalds et al., 2021).

The Icelandic parliament declared that by October 2020 the leave would be extended to 12 months, and a committee would use the time until then to reach an

agreement on the division (Law on changes in the Act on maternity/paternity and parental leave, no. 149/2019). The committee delivered a proposal of 5+5+2. When the draft of the bill was presented in the consultation portal, it garnered much feedback from individuals, stakeholders, and experts. The social partners, including both unions and the organization of employers, supported the proposed 5+5+2 division. Those in favour of the bill emphasized that the non-transferable rights of the 2000 legislation had ensured that children received care from both parents, increased gender equality, lowered divorce rates, and led to better relationships between children and their fathers. Opponents argued for the freedom of choice for parents and that a longer leave for mothers was important for breastfeeding. There were also concerns that children of non-cohabiting parents would receive less parental care due to lower take-up rates by non-residential fathers. After further debates in *Alþingi* about how the 12 months should be divided, the final decision was that each parent would be entitled to six individual months, with the option to transfer six weeks to the other parent. Thus, each parent's quota became 4.5 months. All MPs voted in favour of this proposal, and *Alþingi* accepted 12 months of paid parental leave by the end of 2020, with the changes implemented in January 2021. Furthermore, both unions and employers' organizations supported the extension of paid parental leave to 12 months, indicating strong general support for the law (Arnalds et al., 2022).

In addition to lengthening the leave, changes that have been made to the law from 2000 concern the ceiling on benefits and the issue of non-transferability. The original law from 2000 ensured that all employees would receive 80% of their previous income, with no ceiling on leave benefits. However, in 2004, a relatively high ceiling was placed on the amount working parents received while on leave, since more fathers utilized their right to take leave than was initially expected. At the time, only 3% of fathers and 1% of mothers had salaried earnings above this ceiling, which meant that the vast majority continued to receive 80% of their salary while on leave (Eydal & Gíslason, 2008). However, during the period from December 2008 to December 2009, the ceiling on benefits was lowered severely due to the financial crisis that hit Iceland in 2008, as mentioned earlier. The lowering of the ceiling was more likely to affect fathers than mothers due to the gender pay gap and in 2010 45% of fathers had wages above the ceiling compared to 18% of mothers (Arnalds et al., 2019).

The restoration of the ceiling began in 2013 but despite a significant raise in both 2016 and 2019 the ceiling was still below its pre-crisis level. In fact, the maximum amount stayed the same in absolute terms from 2019 to 2023, while inflation was high, so the share of parents with wages above the cap rose as time went by. By 2023, 43% of fathers and 23% of mothers had salaried earnings above the cap, a similar percentage to what was the case during the financial crisis

(Vinnumálastofnun, 2023). The Icelandic unions had long demanded that the economic compensation would be raised to the pre-2008 level as indeed politicians had promised. And as part of their agreement with the employers' organizations and the state in March 2024 it was decided to gradually raise the ceiling so that in 2026 it will be 900 thousand ISK (5,881 Euros) which is almost the pre-2008 level (Stjórnarráð Íslands, 2024).

As for changes in the rule of non-transferability, initially there was only one exception to the rule: Namely that if either parent died before having made full use of their right, the remaining period was transferred to the other parent. Over time, further exemptions from the non-transferability rule have been implemented but only in cases where one parent is unable to care for their child due to e.g. illness, an accident, or incarceration, can the total leave be utilized by the other parent. In 2021 the list of exemptions was extended and it is now possible to transfer leave to one parent if a parent is unable to comply with its obligation to identify the child's other, or under a restraining order, if a parent is neither entitled to parental leave in Iceland nor elsewhere, and if authorities or the courts prohibit the other parent from accessing the child. Despite these exemptions, the fundamental principle that a child has the right to receive care from both parents remains unchanged (Arnalds et al., 2021, 2022). In addition, as mentioned before, one parent families, e.g. women who have undergone artificial insemination and individuals who adopt a child alone, are entitled to the same amount of paid leave as two parent families.

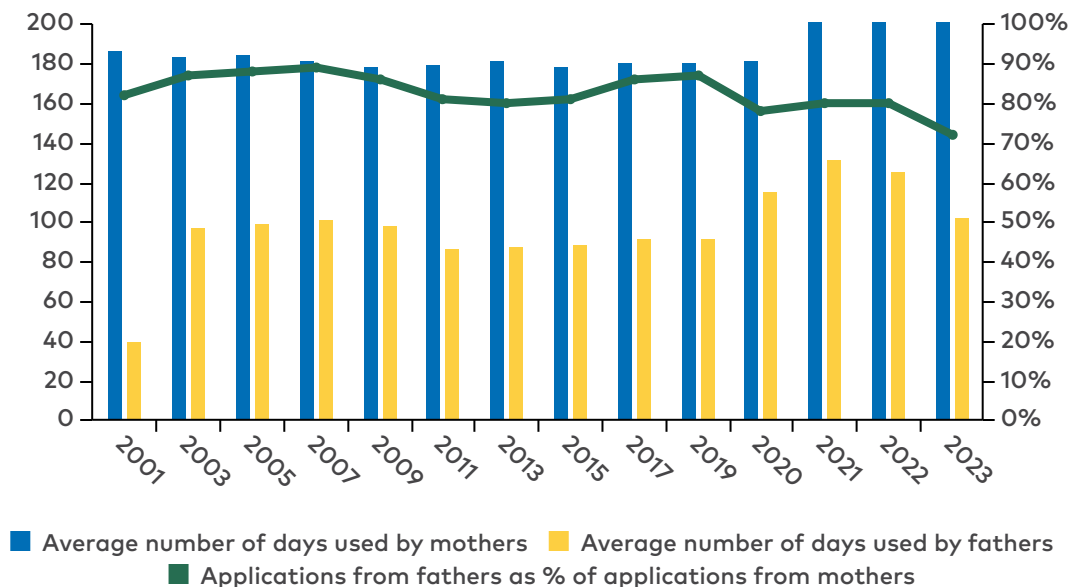
Thus, during the past 25 years the total leave period in Iceland has been lengthened from six to 12 months and the non-transferable part for each parent has been extended from 3 to 4.5 months. Although the ceiling on benefits has changed over the years and some exemptions from the rule of non-transferability have been made, the law has not changed in character since 2000. It still provides equal quota rights to both parents with the aim of ensuring that children have access to both parents and enabling both parents to coordinate work and family life.

Leave use

Although the current Icelandic legislation does not use the terms "mother" and "father" it is important to distinguish between mothers' and fathers' leave use. Figure 2 presents the average number of days on paid parental leave used by parents in Iceland during the past twenty years. The figure presents numbers for all leave users, regardless of whether they received the earnings-related benefits or the fixed amount, but it is worth mentioning that around 90% of fathers and 85% of mothers receive the earnings-related benefits. Figure 2 shows that the vast majority of new fathers in Iceland have taken paid parental leave during the past

20 years. Fathers' uptake dropped somewhat in the period from 2011 to 2015, when the ceiling on benefits was at its lowest due to the austerity measures after the 2008-crisis. There is also a considerable drop after 2019 most likely associated with the effects of the Covid pandemic and the fact that the ceiling on benefits was not raised, despite inflation. The figure also shows that the fathers that took leave, used between 86 and 101 days, on average, in the period from 2003 to 2019, when the father's quota was three months (93 days). This means that their length of leave corresponded with their non-transferable rights. With the extension of the father's quota to four months in 2020, fathers' average number of days increased accordingly. In 2021 when the non-transferable period for each parent increased to 4.5 months, fathers used 131 days, on average. Mothers have however, on average, used their quota rights and shared/transferable days, but the numbers for 2022-2023 are still preliminary as parents have up to two years to use their entitlements.

Figure 2. Leave use of fathers and mothers in Iceland 2001 to 2023



* Figures for 2022 and 2023 are preliminary

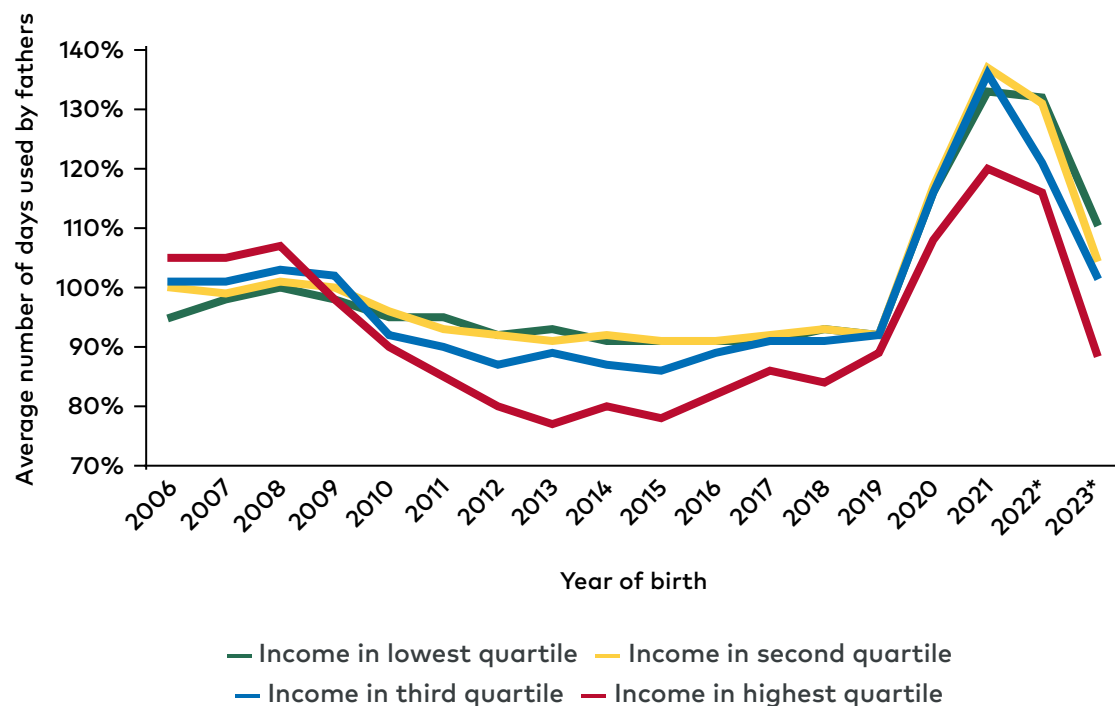
Source: Vinnumálastofnun, 2024

A lesson learned from the official statistics on leave use during the past two decades is that fathers' leave use is more vulnerable than mothers. While the lowering of the ceiling on benefits during the financial crisis had an impact on fathers' leave use, the average number of weeks used by mothers remained stable. Moreover, a study by Arnalds et al. (2019) showed that mothers of children born during the crisis were more likely than those who had a child before the crisis to

lengthen their time at home with the child beyond the 6 parental leave months. This they did by using the leave part-time, use vacation days, or unpaid leave. The authors argued that the mothers took a longer time off work or studies to compensate for a fall in fathers' leave use during the crisis.

Figure 3 shows the association between leave use and income. Data from the Maternity and Paternity Leave Fund provide information on the income of those who receive the income-related benefits but not the flat-rate benefits. The figure shows clearly that there was a significant drop in the leave use of the highest income group following the lowering of the ceiling on benefits in December 2008 to December 2009. While high-income fathers of children born in 2007 and 2008 used 105 days on average, high-income fathers of children born in 2012 to 2016 used around 80 days on average. In the fall of 2016, the income ceiling was raised quite substantially. As the figure shows, the number of days used by fathers in the highest income quartile increased after the restoration of the ceiling in 2016, and especially with the extension of the quota months in 2020 but continues to be lower than that of other income groups.

Figure 3. Leave use of fathers 2007 to 2023, by income



* *Figures for 2022 and 2023 are preliminary

Source: Vinnumálastofnun, 2024

Figure 4 shows the percentage of Icelandic and foreign citizens that used earnings-related leave and the flat-rate benefits. The figure refers to parents who had a child in 2019, the only year for which we have this information. The figure only shows those that used leave, as the Parental Leave Fund does not provide information on the citizenship of those that do not use paid parental leave. Minor differences were found in the type of leave used by fathers when broken down by their nationality. However, mothers with non-European citizenship were much more likely than European mothers to have received the flat-rate benefits intended for parents working less than 25%. This shows that the non-European mothers were less likely to have accumulated rights to the earnings-related benefits by participating in the Icelandic labour market.

Figure 4a. Benefit type of mothers of children born in 2019 by nationality.

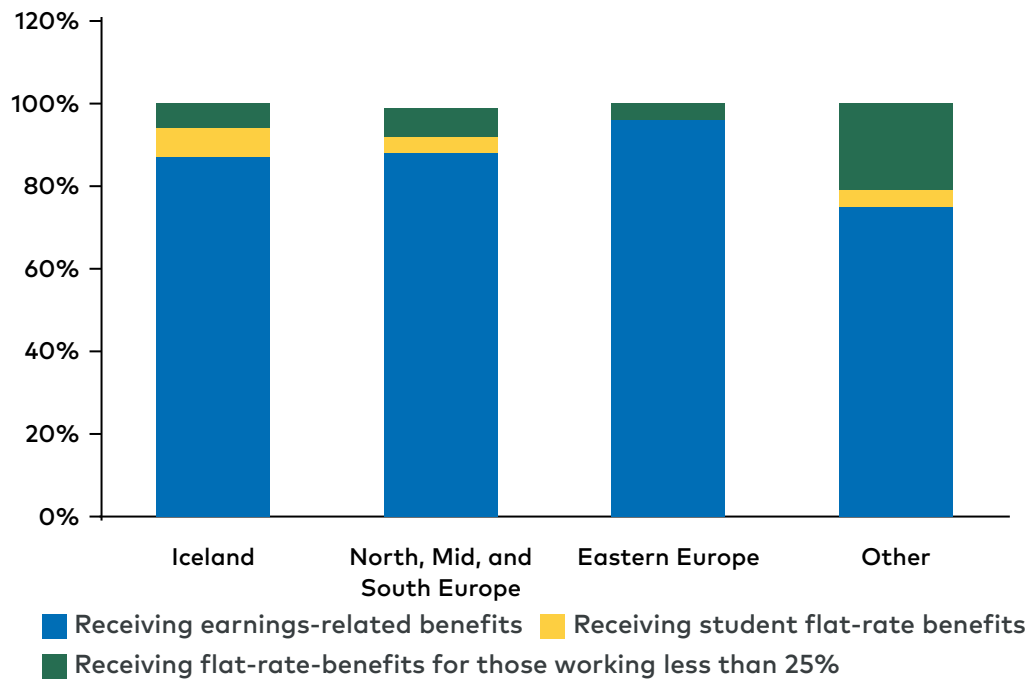
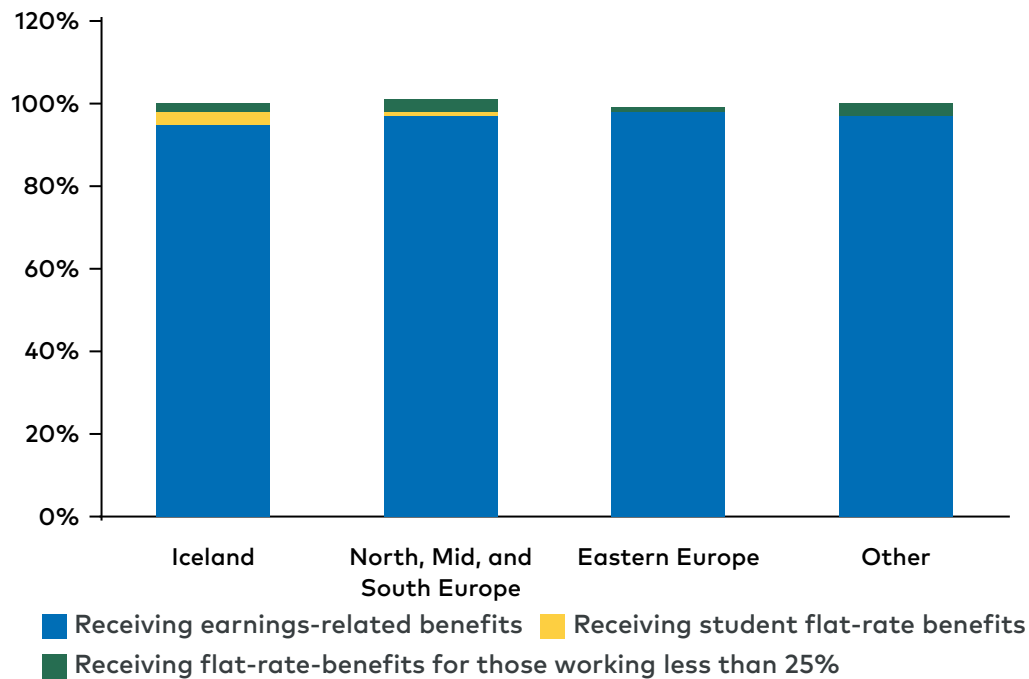


Figure 4b. Benefit type of fathers of children born in 2019 by nationality.



Source: Authors' own calculations on data from the Parental Leave Fund

Registered data does not provide information on parents' education. However, survey data collected in 2018 among parents who had their first child in 2014 shows that mothers with a secondary education were more likely to take "long leaves", for 6 months or more, compared to mothers with a tertiary education. Likewise, fathers with a secondary education were those most likely to take leave. Several factors could explain the differences in non-take-up rates between educational groups, such as labour market status and attitudes towards using leave. While the survey did not ask parents about their attitudes towards using leave, further analysis of the data indicates that fathers with primary education were more likely not to live with the child's mother and not having been in paid work before childbirth. This may explain their 19% non-take-up rate. Furthermore, the data shows that the non-take-up of paid parental leave among fathers with tertiary education is associated with having an income above the cap on parental leave benefits.

Figure 5a. Leave use of mothers of children born in 2014 – by education

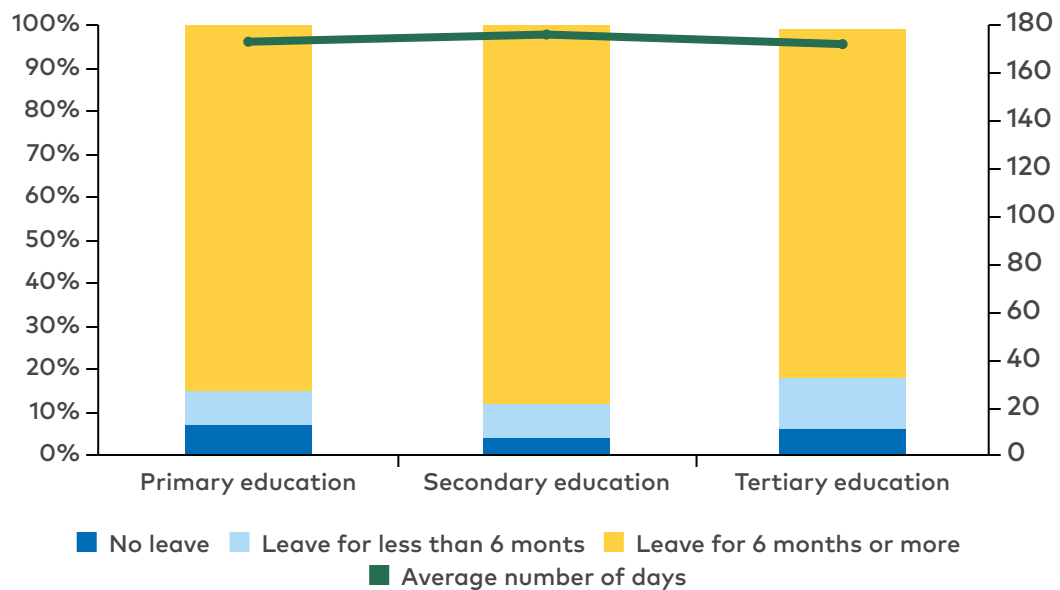
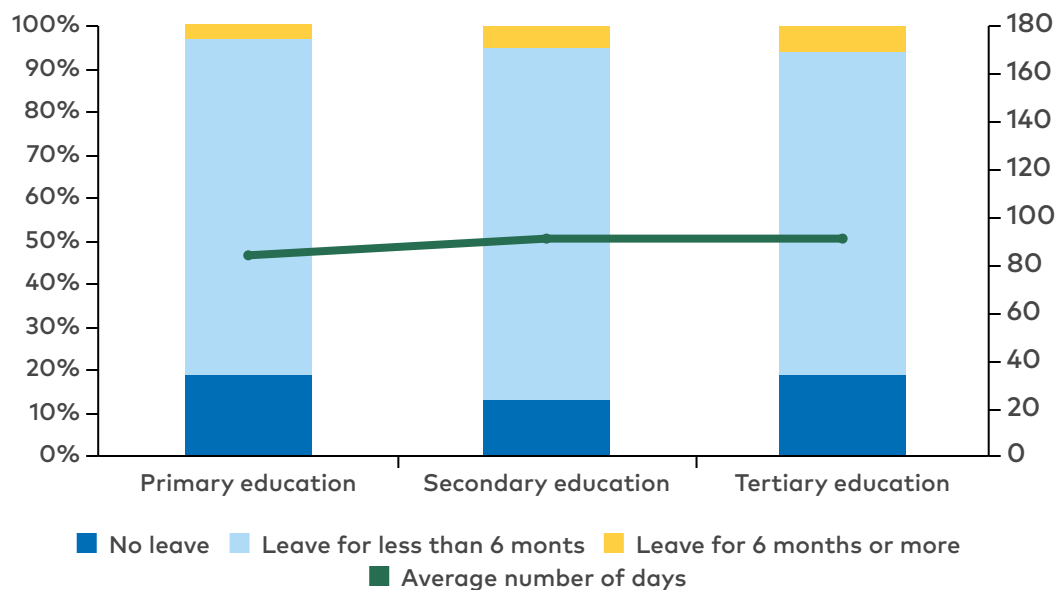


Figure 5b. Leave use of fathers of children born in 2014 – by education



Source: Authors' analysis of survey-data

In sum, registered data from the Maternity and Paternity Leave Fund clearly shows that fathers in Iceland use their quota rights while mothers use both their quota rights and the period which parents can decide upon. Flat-rate benefits are hardly used by fathers, while mothers, and especially those with a non-European

citizenship, are more likely to do so, which highlights how gender and nationality intersect regarding parents' rights to the earnings-related benefits. In Iceland, the labour market participation of migrants is high but gender differences in their labour market participation is reflected in the high number of mothers with a non-European citizenship receiving the flat-rate benefits. The statistics also emphasise the importance of high-income replacement as an incentive for fathers to use leave, especially for high-income fathers.

Discussion: parental leave in country context

Research has been conducted on if the Icelandic parental leave scheme has had an impact on parents' participation in work and care. The authors have conducted five extensive surveys among all parents who had their first child in 1997, 2003, 2009, 2014, and all parents who had a child in 2019 and 2021 in order to explore this issue. The surveys were conducted three to four years after the birth of the child and parents were asked to reflect on how they arranged care from month to month during the first three years as well as their labour market participation the year before the birth.

The main findings show that fathers have steadily increased their share in the care of their children since the non-transferable leave was introduced in the year 2000, and in the most recent surveys the vast majority of parents report that they share care equally by the time the child reaches the age of 13 months. The most profound increase in fathers' care participation occurred between the first two surveys (the one that reached parents who had a child before and after the implementation of the equal quota rights). Interestingly, fathers' share in care has continued to grow after the implementation of the law which indicates that the fathers' quota encourages fathers to take leave and enhances societal expectations towards the importance of fathers' care (Arnalds, et al., 2013; 2021; 2022). The results from our surveys show that this applies also to Polish fathers, which are the largest group of immigrants in Iceland. Despite dominant values in Poland that emphasise maternal care for young children, Polish fathers in Iceland have also increased their share in care (Arnalds, Eydal, & Skaptadóttir, 2022).

A report by the World Health Organization further suggests progress in terms of fathers' care participation later on. According to the report, Icelandic boys and girls aged 11, 13, and 15, rated their interactions with their fathers more positively compared to their peers in 41 other countries. This study included the first groups to benefit from the increased parental leave rights for fathers following the introduction of the fathers' quota in Iceland (Inchley et al., 2020). The authors suggest that this positive outcome is due to the enhanced opportunities for fathers to care for their children as a result of the non-transferable leave rights. This

conclusion aligns with findings from a comparative study on parent-child interactions in the Nordic countries, which identified an association between the length of non-transferable leave available to fathers and the quality of their bonding with their children (Arnarsson et al., 2019).

Furthermore, the introduction of the equal quota rights at the start of the century has also been found to have led to increased marital stability as parents who had a child shortly after the introduction of the fathers' quota were less likely to divorce than those who had a child shortly before the policy reform (Ólafsson & Steingrimsdóttir, 2020). These findings indicate that a more equal distribution of unpaid labour between the genders could lead to less conflict between parents, which benefits both children and parents.

The increased care participation also applies to fathers that have never lived with their child's mother. Results from a recent study show that equal care participation of parents living apart has gradually increased since the enactment of equal parental leave rights in 2000. Furthermore, analysis of data collected among parents of children born in 2009 and 2014 shows that when parents have an equal division of care, the mother is likelier to find it easy to make ends meet in the child's fourth year. These findings emphasise the importance of policies that promote care participation of fathers living apart from the mother (Lárusdóttir, et al., 2022).

However, despite significant progress since the non-transferable leave came into effect in 2000, there is still a considerable difference between the roles of mothers and fathers in Iceland, both at home and in the workforce. Mothers of young children still work shorter days than fathers and are also the primary caregivers in the first year after the birth of a child and, as pointed out above, the mothers usually use both their individual rights to paid parental leave and the period that parents can choose how to divide (Arnalds et al., 2021).

ECEC in Iceland operates in accordance with law and follows a national curriculum guide, presented by the Ministry of Education. ECEC is mainly operated by the municipalities and there are very few private institutions (Trættemberg et al., 2023). Iceland differs from other Nordic countries in that it has not enacted legislation on children's guarantee for ECEC after paid parental leave. In Iceland, there has been a persistent shortage of spaces for the youngest children, particularly in the capital area, and the enrolment age can vary between the age of one and two years (Arnalds & Duvander, 2023). In 2017 the average age of children starting ECEC was 20 months but in 2022 it was down to 17.5 months (BSRB, 2022). Since the Icelandic municipalities operate ECEC (Act on Preschools no. 90/2008), the starting age for children varies by regions. This means that, at least in some areas, there is a considerable gap between the end of paid parental leave and ECEC. Cash-for-care is offered in some municipalities while waiting for a place in ECEC, but no official information exists on which municipalities provide cash-for-care.

There are, however, indications that Icelandic authorities are placing emphasis on closing the gap between paid parental leave and ECEC. In 2024 the Association of Icelandic Municipalities and the Icelandic government signed a declaration in relation to a collective agreement. One of the key points of the declaration is to find ways to bridge the gap between parental leave and ECEC (Samband íslenskra sveitarfélaga, 2024).

Many municipalities prioritize disabled children and those who are socially or economically disadvantaged when it comes to places in ECEC, but a recent OECD (2023) report shows that there is a gap in attendance between native and foreign-born children. The municipalities also set the relatively low fees. The fees are not income related, but many municipalities offer reduce fees for lone parents, students, and families with more than one pre-school-aged children. The fees vary considerably between municipalities (ASI, n.d.).

As pointed out above there has been shortage of placement for children after paid parental leave ends, partly because the municipalities experience difficulties in hiring staff, in particular trained pre-school teachers. One of the largest municipalities in Iceland recently reacted to this situation by a policy offering six-hour attendance for free while increasing fees for longer stays. This approach has now been adopted by a few other municipalities but has faced criticism, because after the fee changes, an eight-hour stay for a child costs more than before. There are concerns that the new fee structure will negatively impact low-income parents and that mothers more often than fathers will reduce their work hours to be able to use the free six-hour stay (see for example Aradóttir Pind, September 4th, 2024). The Icelandic labour market is highly segregated both in terms of gender and migrant status, with non-Icelandic citizens working in low-income jobs that often do not allow for flexible work hours. Therefore, there is a great need for research on how the municipalities react to the shortage of preschool places and on whether the new fee-system may perhaps increase already existing inequalities.

Before being offered a place in public ECEC-, families can opt for family day care provided by self-employed childminders. While municipalities regulate and subsidize this type of care, parents still face higher fees for family day care compared to public ECEC. In some regions, municipalities establish fee standards whereas in others childminders set their own rates. Additionally, many areas experience a shortage of available family day care options relative to demand. The lack of continuum between paid parental leave and the availability of ECEC in Iceland requires parents to come up with solutions. The solutions are gendered, as more mothers than fathers reduce their labour force participation to take care of their child (Arnalds et al., 2021; Arnalds & Duvander, 2023; Ingólfssdóttir & Gíslason, 2016).

Iceland is also facing the challenge of lowering fertility rates. Since 2010 there has been a steady decline in the total fertility rate, apart from the year 2021 when

Iceland witnessed a short-lived rise in fertility during the height of the Covid-19 pandemic (Arnalds et al., 2025). Research shows that the fertility decline is concentrated around first births and the decline can principally be attributed to women under the age of thirty. The tendency to remain childless has seen a slight increase since 2013 while the desire to have a second or third child has not diminished. This suggests that the trend in Iceland is primarily characterized by a clear delay in parenthood rather than a change in the willingness to have additional children (Jónsson, 2024). Furthermore, qualitative interviews with people in Iceland who have decided to be childfree indicate that ideas on the gendered nature of parenting within the Icelandic context is one factor that shapes the decision to remain childless, as women describe the societal expectations and performances of parenting. The interviewees emphasized that in order to meet the demands of parenthood, the mother must be willing to give up her own needs, wants, and desires, whilst fathers can retain their freedom and autonomy (Símonardóttir, 2024). These findings suggest that despite the emphasis on parents' equal rights to earn and care, which are specified in the objectives of the Icelandic Act on Paid Parental Leave, people in Iceland may still find that the parenting role places more demands on mothers than fathers.

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PARENTAL LEAVE IN NORWAY

Elin Kvande and Brita Bungum

Introduction

Influenced by the ideas of equal rights, the Norwegian government introduced a parental leave model based on both parents having the right to share most of the parental leave in 1978. This was a move away from the idea that leave was just for mothers. Thus, representing a shift from maternity leave to parental leave for both parents. The essence of this model prevailed although the period available for parents to share was extended in the years that followed but this increase did not, however, influence fathers' uptake of parental leave. In 1993 a father's quota was introduced to encourage fathers to take parental leave, making Norway the first country in the world to do so. From being four weeks in 1993, the length of the quota was gradually increased to 14 weeks in 2013. The paid parental leave now includes three parts; the mother's quota, the father's quota and the sharable part, which are equal in length. The total length of the paid parental leave is 49 or 59 weeks depending on payment level, plus a further three weeks before birth.

The main political idea behind the shift from maternity leave to parental leave was to support a dual earner -dual carer model which again would encourage gender equality in the labour market and in family life. By granting fathers the right to share the leave, the original legislation signalled a new political view on men's responsibilities and duties concerning childcare. The same rationale was for the introduction of a father's quota. The aim was not only to bolster equal rights, but also fatherhood more generally (Stortingsmelding no 4, 1988-1989).

An important actor in the process leading up to the introduction of the father's quota in 1993 was "The committee on the role of men" which was set up in 1986 by a Social democratic government. In their White Paper to the government, they suggested the introduction of a father's quota as part of the parental leave system. The explicit political motivation was to strengthen father-child relations. The father's quota as an individual right given to fathers and not to the family as a caregiving entity, represented a break with the familistic character of the previous model (Brandth and Kvande 2020). The father's quota was introduced by a Social democratic government headed by Gro Harlem Brundtland.

Table 1: Development of parental benefits 1990-2024 (Number of weeks given)

Year and total number of weeks	Before birth	Mother's quota	Shared parental leave*	Father's quota	"Daddy days"
1990: 28/35		6	22/29		2
1991: 32/40	2	6	24/32		2
1993:42/52	3	6	29/39	4	2
2005: 43/53	3	6	29/39	5	2
2006: 44/54	3	6	29/39	6	2
2009: 46/56	3	6	27/37	10	2
2011: 47/57	3	6	26/36	12	2
2013: 49/59	3	14	18/28	14	2
2014: 49/59	3	10	26/36	10	2
2018: 49/59	3	15	18/28	15	2
2024: 49/59	3	15/19*	16/18	15/19*	2

Notes: *80% (instead of 100%) wages compensation increases the length of leave.

The table is based on Brandth & Kvande, 2020.

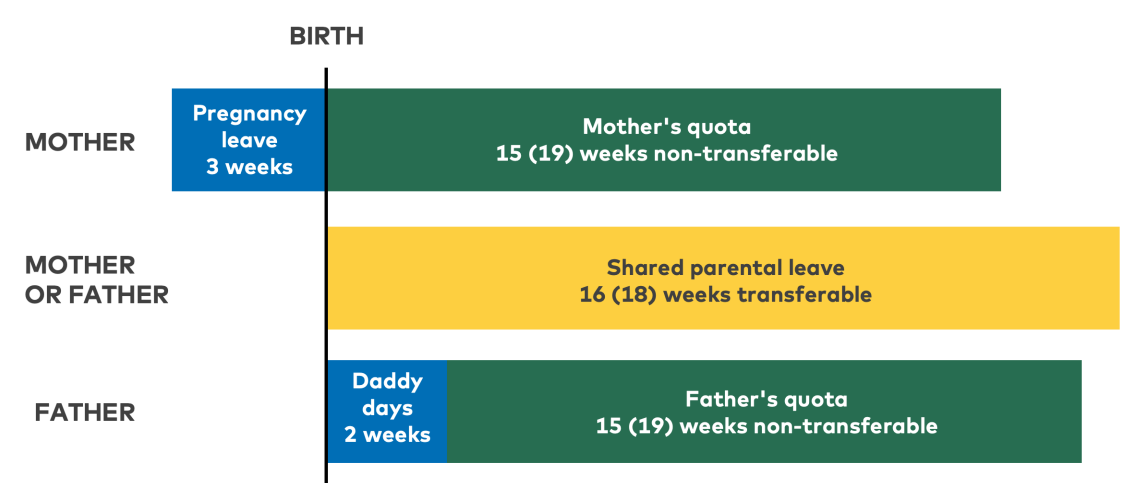
Present policies

Length of leave

Paid Parental leave is now 49 or 59 weeks depending on payment level, plus a further three weeks before birth. The leave is divided into three equal parts. It is obligatory for women to take six weeks leave after delivery for health reasons. These weeks are taken as part of parental leave reserved for women before and after birth, and for which the term mother's quota is used. Of the post-natal period, the mother's and the father's quotas are comprised of 15 or 19 weeks each, dependent on the percent of earnings, which are non-transferable rights. The

remaining 16 or 18 weeks are share-able and may be taken by either parent. In addition, fathers are entitled to a two weeks' leave just after birth, or so-called daddy days.

Figure 1: Structure of paid parental leave in Norway



Eligibility

Nine out of ten mothers have the right to parental leave money; the rest do not meet the eligibility criteria. Mothers not eligible for parental money receive a one-off payment. This is a heterogeneous group of mothers, but with an overrepresentation of immigrant mothers (NOU 2017:6). The main eligibility criteria are the same for fathers and mothers: They must have been employed for six of the last ten months prior to the birth of their child. In addition, they must have earned at least half the basic national insurance benefit payment over the previous year; in 2023 this was 55,739 NOK a year. They must also be members of the National Insurance system.

The eligibility rules for the family entitlement (the sharable period) and the father's quota are somewhat different. The father can use the 16/18 weeks of paid leave (the family entitlement) even if the mother is not eligible for leave; but the mother is required to take up work or study (at least 75 per cent of full-time hours) for him to be able to do so. For the father's quota, the mother must also have been eligible, but there is no requirement that eligible mothers (employed for six of the last ten months prior to the birth) go back to work.

Same-sex parents are eligible. When two women become mothers, the non-biological mother must have been officially recognized as a mother to have the rights to leave. Her rights are the same as a father's rights to leave. If two men

have a child together through surrogacy, the biological father normally gets the whole leave if he is officially approved as a father. The other father may get paid Parental leave if he adopts the child (as a stepfather) and if there are leave days left. The three-year period within which leave must be taken may present a challenge, as they cannot apply for leave before the child is born and the adoption processes may take a long time. The 15-week quota for the second father is transferable to the first father. If both fathers are adoptive parents, they may choose which of them starts the leave period at the time of the care order.

Single mothers who are eligible for parental leave will automatically receive the father's quota. However, if there is a non-residential father and the parents agree, they may apply for the father to use the father's quota. All employed fathers have the right to two weeks Daddy leave.

Benefits

Parents can choose between a total of 49 weeks at 100 per cent of earnings or for 59 weeks at 80 per cent of earnings, up to cap of six times the basic national insurance benefit payment of NOK118,620 (per month). This is financed by tax money. When employees are included in collective agreements, the employers pay the difference between the upper limit and the parent's earnings. Non-employed women receive a flat-rate payment of NOK 92,648 per child. Students also receive a flat rate payment. The Daddy days payment depends on individual or collective agreements, and most employed fathers are covered by such agreements.

Flexibility

For both the mother's quota and the father's quota it is possible to choose a longer period of leave paid at 80 per cent of earnings, or a shorter period of leave paid at 100 per cent of earnings.

After the first six weeks, it is possible for the mother to postpone parts of the parental leave period, but it must be taken during the first three years after the birth of the child, and the parent receiving the money is employed full-time during the postponement period. Hospitalization and vacation may also qualify for postponement.

After the first six weeks, it is also possible for one or both parents to combine all or part of the parental leave with part-time work. If parents take less than the full benefit payment, this will prolong the period of leave.

The Father's quota and mother's quota are not transferable to the other parent, except in certain circumstances, i.e., if the parent is ill or otherwise unable to care for the child, or if the mother and father do not live together. The Father's quota may not be taken in the first six weeks of the parental money period, except for

multiple births or adoption. Otherwise, fathers are free to choose at what time to use it during the first three years after the child's birth. They can also choose whether to take the quota as part-time leave. The sharable period may be taken as one block of time or split into shorter blocks of time within the three-year period.

Both parents may take leave at the same time, except during the period of obligatory leave for the mother (i.e., three weeks before birth and six weeks after) and during the period of shared leave, when mothers are required to go back to work or studies for the father to use it. During the period of the father's quota, there is no requirement for what mothers can do (i.e., both parents may be on leave together).

Daddy days can be used by someone else who will assist the mother (e.g., grandparents) if the parents do not live together. The law does not inform as to when the leave must be taken other than 'in connection with the birth.' This is normally interpreted as two weeks before or two weeks after birth. The leave may be split up. The father may, for instance, use a day or two to be present at birth, go back to work, and then take the rest when mother and child come home from the hospital. The leave can be used by foster or adoptive parents when taking over the care of the child.

Other work and family policies

Each parent has the right to one year of **unpaid leave** after the paid parental leave period. The maximum period of post-natal leave is thus just over three years. About two years of this is unpaid except for the recipients of 'cash-for care,' who cannot use publicly funded Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) services (or, if they do, only part-time). Leave paid at a high earnings-related rate runs for nearly 14 months. There is an entitlement to ECEC from one year of age, available on a full-time basis at kindergartens (though if the child is born later than September 1, there might not be a place ready until one year later). Potentially there is no gap between the end of leave and an ECEC entitlement, but it might happen.

Since 1998, parents with a child between one and two years of age are entitled to receive a cash benefit '**cash-for-care**' *scheme* when staying at home looking after the child, on condition they do not use a publicly funded ECEC. The full benefit is NOK7,500 per month. A minority conservative, government introduced the cash-for-care system. The introduction of the cash for care has been called a hybrid in the Norwegian system (Ellingsæter, 2003, 2006). Heated public debate took place before and after the introduction of this reform.

Each parent of one or two children under 12 years of age has a right to: Ten working days' leave per year when **the children are ill** (or the childminder or grandparent is ill

and the children are not attending kindergarten), or 15 working days' leave per year if they have more than two children. Single parents have the combined rights of couples, i.e. 20/30 days' leave per year. For severely or chronically sick children there are extended rights to leave until the child is 18 years old. This leave is paid by the employer at the same rate as sickness benefit, i.e., at 100 per cent of earnings.

The Work Environment Act grants all mothers the right to **breastfeeding breaks** of up to one hour per day for children under one year old. This leave is paid by the employer.

Parents have a **right to decrease their working time to care for their children up to the age of 10**. Working hours can, for example, be reduced in the form of shorter working days, fewer working days per week or work-free periods during the year. Reduced working hours mean reduced pay, but also a right to return to the original level of employment after a period. This is an employee right that is stipulated in the Norwegian Work Environment Act which gives the employee the right to reduced working hours for a period if it does not cause significant inconvenience to the employer (paragraph 10-2-4). The scheme primarily aims at meeting parents' wishes for more time to spend with young children or to meet needs arising from problems in obtaining childcare during working hours.

Leave reforms

Reducing and increasing the father's quota

Since its introduction in 1993, the father quota has been high on the family policy agenda in Norway (Ellingsæter 2024). The Conservative Party and the Progress Party did not support the introduction of the father quota maintaining that it represented too little choice for parents. In 2014 the father's quota was reduced to 10 weeks by a Conservative government. This was meant to be the first step in doing away with the quota. The reduction of the quota's length led to a decrease in fathers' average uptake which created a national discussion. This led to the same government reversing their original plan and instead increasing the quota to 15 weeks in 2018. This has since been seen as a natural experiment illustrating the importance of having a non-transferable father's quota.

Increased flexibility

The Norwegian Parliament has recently (2024) unanimously adopted amendments to the National Insurance Act to increase the flexibility of the parental benefit scheme by extending the parental benefit period at 80 per cent coverage. The reason for the change is that under the current scheme, parents who receive 80 percent parental allowance for 59 weeks receive less total payment than parents

who receive 100 per cent for 49 weeks. This will put these two alternatives on an equal footing by making the total benefit payment almost the same, regardless of the degree of compensation, by increasing the leave scheme with 80 per cent parental allowance from 59 to 61 weeks. The government proposed that the legislative change will apply to those who become parents as of 1 July 2024. This change can be understood as an attempt to counteract mothers taking unpaid leave to a greater extent than fathers.

Reducing age limits for cash for care

After the introduction of the cash for care reform in 1998 there has been significant changes in the regulations. The age limits are reduced, from a scheme for children aged between 1 and 3 years to the regulations where the scheme only applies to children from 1 to 2 years. The most recent change came in August 2024, when the Red Green government abolished cash benefits for children aged between 20 and 23 months. This means that parents of young children are only entitled to cash support for seven months, compared to 11 months previously. The current government's justification for reducing cash support is that it is a goal that as many children as possible should attend kindergarten, because it is best for the children and for the society. The cash subsidy is now being portrayed as a "waiting subsidy" for those who have not yet secured a place in a kindergarten. Instead of cash support, the government now wants to use the money to lower the price of kindergarten places.

Separate benefits for EEA citizens

Another change of great importance to the scheme occurred in 2004 which made it possible to export cash benefits to EEA countries, i.e. payments of cash benefits for children who did not live in Norway. Due to increasing labour immigration to Norway from EEA countries, the export of cash benefits became a hot political topic. Separate cash benefit rules were therefore introduced for EEA citizens in Norway. A requirement has also been introduced that the child must have lived in Norway for at least 12 months and that the parents must have been members of the Norwegian National Insurance Scheme for at least five years to receive support. A full benefit is NOK7,500 per month.

Leave use

Paid parental leave uptake

In the years following the introduction of the fathers' quota the percentage of fathers using parental leave gradually increased from 4 percent in 1993 to 85 per

cent by 2000 (Brandth and Kvande 2003a). The father's quota is widely used by fathers in Norway today, with over 90 per cent of eligible fathers using all or part of it (Bakken 2023). Comparable figures over time are, however, hard to obtain because of changes in the way statistics are presented, and because the leave length changes frequently. The introduction of the fathers' quota has been characterized as a success story because of the pronounced increase in fathers' leave use shortly after its introduction and after the expansions in length (Brandth and Kvande 2020).

There is, however, a clear difference in the total length of the parental leave (paid and unpaid leave) used by mothers and fathers. In general mothers use the mothers' quota plus the sharable leave. Fathers use the fathers' quota and to a lesser degree some of the sharable leave (Bakken 2023).

Although the use of the father's quota for Parental leave has become widespread among Norwegian fathers, there are some variations between different groups of fathers. While class differences are small, the *father's level of education* has some influence, particularly on the length of the leave. The eligible fathers least likely to use the quota are fathers with long working hours, in managerial positions, or with a partner who works part-time. In a study of male managers' experiences, Kvande and Moen (2019) found that there might be a process of change going on within this group. When fathers experience being 'irreplaceable' in caring for their child while taking leave, it also influences how they practice their work as managers; they make themselves less accessible to their job, and experience being replaceable at work without it influencing their career development. These findings can be understood in terms of most fathers now taking a relatively long period of leave, thus laying the foundation for a general change in practice that makes it easier for managers to take leave. However, this study has few participants, and future research will show whether the results apply to most male managers.

Moen, Kvande and Nordli (2019) explore how male managers in two male dominated sectors, the engineering industry and the finance industry, use the father's quota. Their findings show that male managers in the engineering industry have become unavailable and replaceable in their organizations, thus making it possible for the fathers to use the father's quota. In contrast to this, the institutional logic in the finance industry makes brokers available and irreplaceable in their organizations, thus making it difficult for them to use the father's quota.

A survey based on registry data finds that low take-up of the fathers' quota among non-Western immigrant fathers is linked to low economic activity among mothers in this group (Ellingsæter; et.al. 2019). In a comparative study of work and family adaptations in Norwegian and Polish families, Bjørnholt and Stefansen (2018) report that while the dual-earner/dual-carer model is strongly rooted among the Norwegian fathers, the Polish migrants use the Norwegian Parental leave schemes

more eclectically, with the dual-earner aspect as the main factor. A second study, based on interviews with middle-class immigrant fathers from various European countries, shows that the father's quota, being a statutory right and generously compensated for, is understood as accepted by employers and universally used by fathers (Kvande and Brandth 2017). The principle of earmarking and non-transferability is experienced by these fathers as a great possibility to care for their children and perceived as important since both male and female employees are constructed as potential parents. It is in comparison with the care regimes of their homelands that their understanding of these design elements becomes evident. These results can be seen as supporting the tendency to convergence in attitudes towards parental leave held by fathers from these countries.

Although the length of the father's quota has varied over the last decade, most fathers (seven out of ten) have taken exactly the number of weeks represented by the father's quota, regardless of its length (NAV, 2017). So, when the father's quota was 60 days, 70 per cent took exactly this period. The same happened when the quota was extended to 70 days in 2013. Then, after the quota was reduced to 50 days in 2014, again 70 per cent of fathers took the reduced quota days. Figures based on public records in 2011 show that 18 per cent of the Parental leave days were taken by fathers: in 2013, fathers took 46 days on average, and in 2014, 49 days; then, with the reduction of the quota's length to ten weeks/50 days in July 2014, fathers' average uptake decreased to 47 days. The figures from this natural experiment show that if the aim of policy is greater equality in leave-taking between mothers and fathers, changing the length of the father's quota is essential. In 2014, when the father's quota was reduced, mothers' leave use increased accordingly.

As we have seen, parental leave may either be taken for 49 weeks at 100 per cent of earnings or for 59 weeks at 80 per cent of earnings. During the last 10 years we can observe that an increasing number of parents are choosing the 100 percent alternative. In 2012 the number choosing 100 percent pay was 55 percent, whilst the number had increased to 78 percent in 2021 (Bakken 2022). When asked about the reason for choosing this alternative, most of both mothers and fathers pointed to economic reasons for this (Bakken.2023).

The share of fathers who use the daddy days to take time off work around the birth of the child is approximately the same as for the father's quota: 89 per cent (Bakken 2022). A study of paid and unpaid parental leave in Norway (Bakken 2022) focused on the total time mothers and fathers are away from work when they have children by including parents' use of unpaid leave. The findings show that 48 per cent of the mothers and 11 per cent of the fathers answered that they took unpaid leave after the paid parental benefit period. Of these, the mothers took an average of 16 weeks unpaid leave, while the fathers took 11 weeks (Bakken,2022)

Inequalities in uptake of cash for care

In June 2024 the number of recipients of cash for care was 16,558 persons. There has been a gradual decrease in the use of this benefit and for the past decade the amount of cash for care recipients has fallen by 40 percent

Many parents who received cash for care when it was first introduced, used a private nanny or made other private arrangements, for example using grandparents or other relatives (Bungum og Kvande, 2013). In 2003 'the day-care guarantee' was introduced in Norway. This reform gave all children from the age of 1 the right to kindergarten places. There was cross-party agreement on this reform, the center-right wanted parents to have full freedom of choice, while the left parties emphasized that this would make it easier for mothers and fathers to combine childcare with work. The development over the next years showed that cash subsidies plummeted in popularity among parents of young children, who used their 'freedom of choice' to choose a childcare centre for their child (Hirsch, 2010; Bungum & Kvande, 2013).

Discussion: Parental leave in country context

The importance of leave design

The importance of having a father's quota is illustrated by Kvande and Brandth (2019) and Brandth and Kvande (2020) where they discuss the connection between leave design and its' use. They show that in granting fathers an individual, earmarked and non-transferable right, the welfare state has contributed to turning leave taking into a norm for modern fathering. This has been labelled "Fathers' sense of Entitlement to Earmarked Leave" (Brandth and Kvande, 2018) which differs from how they experience the Shared parental leave. The father- and mother specific quotas are inherently gendered (Brandth and Kvande 2020). These findings illustrate what Brighthouse and Wright (2008) emphasize in their analysis of what is needed to achieve "strong gender equality" in family and working life, where they distinguish between policies that promote equality and those that enable it. Shared parental leave given to the family enables families to adopt egalitarian strategies, but puts no pressure on fathers to use them, like the non-transferable leave granted to individual parents.

This is supported in a recently published article (Bakken 2023) which shows how the Norwegian parental leave as it is currently designed, provides guidelines on how parents should allocate time at home with children. This suggests that policymaking and quotas have a strong influence on the distribution of the parental benefit period. The concept of "The Father- friendly Welfare state" (Brandth and Kvande 2013) has been used for describing how the welfare state, by introducing

policies like the fathers' quota, can be an important agent in promoting more gender equality in this field. The generosity in terms of length and full wage compensation strengthens it as a right in working life. Fathers being paid their full wages for staying at home taking care of their child also emphasizes the dual-carer norm. Their analysis also shows that the collision between fatherhood and the ideal of the unencumbered employee has weakened in many types of work organizations.

Evensen, et.al. (2023) have examined perceptions among mothers and fathers in Norway with children under the age of 20, as well as how attitudes to the length of Parental leave correlate with demographic and socioeconomic characteristics as well as attitudes to gender equality. They find that there is strong support among both fathers and mothers that some parental leave should be reserved for fathers, but fathers more often than mothers want a fifty-fifty system. In terms of their views on Parental leave, fathers can thus be considered more gender equality-oriented than mothers.

From this we can conclude that the Norwegian parental leave system has had a positive impact on the gender equality in caring for the young babies. It is, however, important to also be aware of the gender inequality in uptake of unpaid leave. As we have seen, in a study of paid and unpaid parental leave in Norway (Bakken 2022) showed the total time mothers and fathers are away from work when they have children show that the imbalances between mothers and fathers are larger than expected. Mothers most often and for the longest period go on unpaid leave, 48 per cent of the mothers and 11 per cent of the fathers answered that they took unpaid leave after the paid parental benefit period. Of these, the mothers took an average of 16 weeks unpaid leave, while the fathers took 11 weeks. Bakken (2022) points out that this might influence mother's wages, pensions and career development in a negative way.

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PARENTAL LEAVE IN SWEDEN

Ann-Zofie Duvander and Helena Håkansson

Introduction

When considering Swedish parental leave at a glance one might get the impression that it was fully developed and well-functioning already 20 years ago. Since its introduction in 1974, it had numerous times been reformed to enable the combination of work and family and by the turn of the century most women participated in the labour market and almost all men participated at least to some degree in childcare by using the parental leave (Duvander & Lundqvist, 2025; ESO, 2015). The development over the last 20 years has been both towards more and towards less flexibility in how the leave can be used. Towards more flexibility, the leave has been extended by a month and can now be utilized by others than the parents. Towards less flexibility, the leave has been conditioned with age-restrictions and the income replacement percentage has been reduced. The shareable period has also been reduced as now three months are reserved for each parent.

Throughout the 50 years of Swedish parental leave the political aim has been for men and women to be able to combine work and family. The goals have consistently been gender equality in childcare and in the labour market, as well as economic equality between families (and individuals) with and without children (Duvander & Lundqvist, 2025; Lundqvist, 2019; SSIA, 2024a). It is fair to say that the gender equality aim has been the dominating goal for all governments throughout the period while the aim of economic equality has been less visible. Different governments have also complemented the original aims with other aims such as parental choice, child's best interest and economic security. In addition, the goals of labour market participation of all parents and a balanced fertility has been discussed in relation to the parental leave (Duvander & Lundqvist, 2025; ESO, 2015; Lundqvist, 2019; SSIA, 2024a).

In this chapter we will describe the major changes in the parental leave policy over the last 20 years, how parental leave use has developed and conclude on how parental leave matters for social sustainability. But we start by reviewing the current legislation. As the legislation is rather intricate this should be seen as an overview rather than a detailed review (see also Duvander & Löfgren, 2023).

Present policies

Length of leave

One issue that complicates any analysis on the parental leave in Sweden is that it is based on two legislations. One legislation determines the right to take time off work and another legislation determines the benefit during the time off. The benefit is calculated on different levels depending first on income prior to the leave and secondly, the leave is divided into periods with different benefit levels (see below).

All parents are entitled to 18 months leave from work after childbirth, regardless of whether benefits are claimed during this period. When the child is older than 18 months the parents have the right to take parental leave with parental benefit from work up until the child is 12 years old. Employers may decline such requests if they happen more than three times a year, but often requests are accepted. This gives great flexibility in when the leave can be used and a common pattern is to stretch the leave, through saving benefit days for later and thereby accepting a lower benefit level while on leave (Duvander & Viklund 2020). The benefit can be used at any level from fulltime seven days a week but down to 1/8 of a day, for instance to cover wage loss for parents who use the right to reduce work hours during the child's preschool years. Lately such strategies of stretching the leave have gained more attention, and the Swedish Social Insurance Agency (SSIA) now publishes statistics on length of leave with and without use of parental benefit in addition to their previous parental benefit statistics. In addition, through an overlapping legislation, there is a two weeks' compulsory maternity leave (without benefit) either before or after giving birth, but this is not a well-known legislation among parents.

The paid parental leave benefit (from here onwards parental benefit) is eight months, (just over 34 weeks or 240 days) for each parent. It is an individual leave and only in cases of one custodian can one parent use the whole 16 months (almost 69 weeks). Out of the 34 weeks allocated to each parent, 21 weeks can be transferred to the other parent, which makes the mother/father quota 13 weeks. The design of the parental leave insurance is thus based on the assumption of individual rights, but in practice it is very common for fathers to transfer days to the mothers and mothers use about 2/3 of all parental benefit days.

Eligibility

Rights to leave and benefit are based on custody, but a sole custodian has the right to transfer days to the other parent regardless of whether the other parent has custody or not (Duvander & Löfgren, 2023). All custodians who live in Sweden

receive parental benefit at some benefit level. Sweden applies to the general rules of transferable benefits in the EU/EEA and Switzerland where there is a common set of rules for coordinating family benefits between countries. In the first instance, the country where the parent works pays family benefits. If the benefits are higher in the child's country of residence, that country may pay the difference, known as a supplementary amount. In some instances, the other parent can also get parental benefit from Sweden even if not living or working in Sweden (SSIA, 2024e). Parents seeking asylum are not eligible for social insurance in Sweden, they get a small allowance from the Migration Board for each individual in the family. Parents who get a residence permit with children under the age of 12 years receive 200 days of paid leave for children over 12 months old, and 100 days for children over 24 months old. For children under 12 months at the time of issuing of the residence permit, they receive the full parental benefit (Duvander & Löfgren, 2023).

Make note that the parental leave rights in Sweden are gender-neutral, the same rule applies to same-sex parents as to different-sex parents and to those that are non-binary parents. If the mother is married when giving birth, her partner is presumed as the other parent (Swedish Tax Agency, 2025). However, Swedish legislation does not allow surrogacy arrangements, which makes the process for male same-sex couples a bit different as the second parent has to go through an adoption process to become a parent (MFoF, 2022). The adoption process can in turn delay the right to parental leave and benefit.

Benefits

As mentioned, all custodial parents residing in Sweden have a right to parental benefit, regardless of whether they work, how long they have been in the country or whether they are Swedish citizens. However, the benefit level will be differently determined for parents who have an income, who have worked before childbirth, and also for different periods of leave. There are three levels of the parental benefit: an income-based level, a basic level and a lower level. For the first 26 weeks of benefit there is also a qualifying period regardless of which parent is using the leave. The benefit for the first 26 weeks is dependent on having had an income for the 34 weeks (8 months) leading up to birth that is higher than the basic level of 250 SEK a day, otherwise the basic level applies for this period. The regulation of a qualifying period mainly affects women who almost always use the first part of the leave (Duvander & Koslowski, 2023).

The basic level is, since 2016, 250 SEK a day. For parents with an income which is higher than the basic level, and for the rest of the income-related leave, the income replacement is set at 77.6 per cent of the normal income up to a ceiling that is annually indexed. In 2023 the ceiling was 1 116 SEK a day. For simplicity the benefit is often referred to as being approximately 80 per cent of the normal income but is

in reality a fair bit lower. This benefit applies for 28 weeks (6,5 months) for each parent, regardless of when it is used. In addition, just over 6 weeks (1,5 months) is paid at another low level of 180 SEK a day for each parent. Thus, each parent has 34 weeks (or 8 months) of benefits (see details in Duvander & Löfgren 2023).

In addition to the payments through SSIA most employed parents receive Parental leave pay (föräldralön) that has been negotiated in collective bargaining agreements. This applies to all sectors but varies in length and payment depending on agreement. The most generous agreement is the one applying to the state sector which gives parents 10 per cent extra below the ceiling and 90 per cent of the income above the ceiling for a year of leave (Duvander et al, 2024). In the private sector, agreements are negotiated at industry level and separately between white- and blue-collar professions (ISF, 2018a). Over time these agreements have become more generous and now cover most of the labour market (Duvander et al, 2024) but in most cases they only affect the benefit amount, not the length of leave. In practice the collective agreements negotiated by the parties at the labour market indicate that more than the state is involved in parents' rights and that those rights are more varied than at first glance.

The parental benefit is taxed. Tax rates in Sweden are lower for income from work than income from benefits so income tax is higher for a person on parental leave than a working one. In some cases, this leads to a gender-equalizing effect when the mother works and the father is on parental leave. As taxes are also progressive, it is quite complicated to calculate what is the most economically efficient division of the leave (Crafts & Rothmaier, 2024). Self-employed individuals contribute to the social security system with a separate tax and are eligible for the same parental benefits as employed individuals (Duvander & Löfgren, 2023).

Flexibility

There is great flexibility in how the leave can be used. As mentioned, the parental benefit can be used up until the child is 12 years old, and as parts of days, but only 14 weeks (96 days) can be used after the child turns four years old. Since 2024, parents can use 9 weeks simultaneously during the child's first 15 months. This is an extension of the first "double month" which was introduced in 2012, and which led fathers to start using the leave earlier in the child's life (ISF, 2018b). Parental benefit can be used throughout the preschool years, for instance for extending a summer holiday or taking days off at Christmas. Even though the employer has the right to deny parental leave requests more than three times per year, mostly such requests are agreed upon. It is common for parents to save part of the benefit for this kind of flexibility, and it is not uncommon to have some days left unused by the time the child turns 12 years old. Before 2014 the parental benefit could be used until the child turned eight years old. Among parents to children born in 2010, 70

per cent had days left when they turned eight (in 2018). For many there were only a few days not used, on average 33 days per child, but 1/5 of the parents had 9 weeks or more unused (SSIA, 2019a).

Financing

The social security system in Sweden is mainly financed through contributions in the form of employers' fees which also the self-employed contribute to. In 2024, the employer's fee was 31.42 per cent of the salary and the self-employed contribution was 28.97 per cent. Out of these fees, 2.6 per cent is dedicated to parental insurance contribution (Swedish Tax Agency, 2024).

Other relevant policies

There is no paid maternity leave in Sweden but two weeks on leave before or after delivery is as mentioned compulsory. There is a pregnancy benefit that can be used the last two months of pregnancy, but only if the job is physically demanding or dangerous and a doctor's certificate is needed. Around 25 per cent of pregnant women apply for pregnancy benefit and around 25 per cent apply for sick leave at some point during pregnancy. Around 95 per cent of those who apply for those benefits receive it. However, it is also possible to start using the parental benefit during the last month of pregnancy. Only around 30 per cent of pregnant women use neither pregnancy benefit, sick leave nor parental benefit before delivery. Still, they may use holiday days or other ways to reduce work hours in the end of pregnancy (SSIA, 2022).

The former paternity leave is now gender neutrally labelled as "10 days in relation to birth" (10-dagar vid barns födelse). These days are dedicated to the parent who is not giving birth, most often the father, but can also be used by other closely related individuals, for instance in case of a single mother. These days can be used during the first two months and principally the same flexibility and benefit applies as for the parental benefit. However, these days are only available when the user is normally working and for fathers without employment no paternity leave exists.

In addition to the parental benefit, there are several other benefits and policies that facilitate the combination of work and family. The temporary parental leave (tillfällig föräldrapenning för vård av sjukt barn, called vab) for care for sick children is available for 120 days per child and year for children under the age of 12 and can also be used by someone else than the parents. The temporary parental leave is generous in days and replaces 77.6 percent of the lost income up to a ceiling, but most parents only use a few days. Another benefit is the child carer's allowance (omvårdnadsbidrag) with the main objective to improve the financial means of parents of children with disabilities. The benefit covers needs above the usual care needs and supervision of a child (SSIA, 2018a). In 2023, 91,227 parents received child

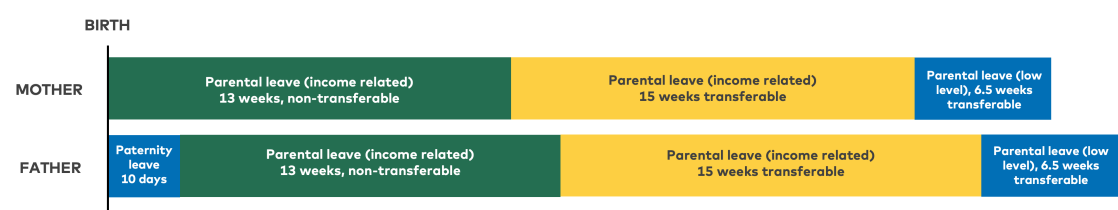
carer's allowance for 90,659 children. The benefit amount per month in 2023, averaged at 4,054 SEK for women and 3,039 SEK for men (SSIA 2024b). Approximately four per cent of all children under 19 in 2024 were eligible for child carer's allowance (own calculation from SSIA, 2024c, SCB, 2024).

Parents have the right to reduce their normal working hours by up to 25 per cent during the child's preschool years, with accompanying income loss. This right also includes the right to return to the original working hours at any point in time (Duvander & Löfgren, 2023).

The entitlement to Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) applies to all children from the age of 12 months. For employed parents, preschool is provided on fulltime basis, and on part time for parents on parental leave for a younger sibling, students, unemployed or similarly out of the work force. The municipalities have the obligation to provide a place for all children applying for ECEC with relatively short notice of a few months. Together with the heavily reduced and means-tested fee for ECEC, put in place at the turn of the century, ECEC is aimed at facilitating parental employment and the household economy (Prop. 1999/2000:129). In 2023, 91.7 per cent of all two-year-old children in Sweden where enrolled in ECEC (Swedish National Agency for Education, 2024). In theory there should be no gap in between the end of leave with parental benefit and preschool. However, the present individual leave and the 13 reserved weeks can create a care gap if both parents are not using their part of the leave.

In Figure 1 the structure of the parental benefit is laid out but make note that the flexibility in leave makes the way parents use the leave much more varied.

Figure 1. Structure of paid parental leave in Sweden 2024



Leave reforms

Since the turn of the century the Swedish parental leave has developed and been reformed on various aspects, from the benefit levels to eligibility criteria and when it can be used.

Benefit level

The benefit level at the basic level (for parents without sufficiently high income) was lagging behind during the economic crisis in the 1990s. Therefore, in 2002 the level was doubled from the more or less symbolic sum of 60 SEK a day (which in no ways was sufficient to live on) to 120 SEK a day. Thereafter it was gradually increased to the current level of 250 SEK in 2016. The main reason for the increase at the basic level was to secure economic security for all families. During this period the basic level was also set apart from the 13 weeks with the lower benefit for all parents (6,5 weeks to each parent with 180 SEK a day).

When the parental leave insurance was introduced in the 1970s, the benefit was 90 per cent of the parent's previous income. During the 1990s economic crisis it was reduced to 80 per cent and in 2006 the benefit replacement was reduced further, from 80 per cent to 77.6 per cent. At the same time the ceiling of the benefit was raised from 7.5 price base amount to 10 price base amount (see Duvander & Löfgren, 2023) with the aim to facilitate men with high earnings to use the leave. The ceiling is normally annually indexed but had lagged behind and a substantial share of men had an income above the ceiling at the time. These changes met little debate or interest, perhaps as the collective agreements had developed to increase the payments during the leave, and a decennium into the new century most parents were covered for income loss above the ceiling, also those in the private sector (Duvander et al., 2024).

Gender equality

A reform that met more interest was when the Social democratic government extended the reserved month to two months. The first reserved month was introduced in 1995 by a Conservative-Liberal government and was debated intensively at the time (Duvander & Cedstrand, 2022). This reform changed the pattern of use dramatically as a majority of fathers started to use the parental benefit (Duvander & Johansson, 2012). The extension to 9 reserved weeks (two months), in 2002, was less debated but still in focus for the development of gender equality reforms. At the same time the leave was extended by just over four weeks, which meant that fathers could increase their leave without inflicting on mothers' leave. The extension of the leave to 69 weeks (16 months) led to both women and men increasing their use of benefit days (Duvander & Johansson, 2014). The second

reserved month mainly led to an increase in leave among middle income men, as the high-income men already used two months on average, and the low-income men did not on average extend their leave in accordance with the reform's intentions.

In the early 2000s, gender equality was at the core of the political discussion about parental leave. There were strong advocates for completely individualizing the leave and thereby making it impossible for one parent (read mother) to use more than half of the days. But there was also a strong resistance towards more reserved months. The Conservative-Liberal government tried a new way to increase men's share of the parental leave by introducing a gender equality bonus in 2008. However, the bonus was complicated to use and initially did not show any change in the gendered use of the leave (Duvander & Johansson, 2012). The regulations were later simplified but it was deemed as a not very successful way to incentivize sharing of the leave, so the policy was eventually abolished. In 2016 the new Social democratic government instead introduced a third reserved month, thereby extending the reserved period to 13 weeks. This led to men using the leave somewhat more, but for every extension introduced in the reserved period, the change in fathers' use has been slighter. The reforms however led to that 40 per cent of fathers use more than 3 months of parental benefit (SSIA, 2019b).

More flexibility

Another recurring subject is the flexibility of the leave, how it can be used, by whom and when. Several changes have taken place, in order to both reduce the flexibility in some respects, but also as to increase it in other. Before the introduction of the double days in 2012 only one parent could use the leave benefit at a time, but the double days made it possible to share the care of the children during four weeks of parental benefit together. Often this was a period to transition from one carer at home to another. Initially, the double days had to be used during the child's first year but the time span and the days that can be used together have since been expanded. The double days are used by a significant share of the parents, and it is often deemed a popular reform (ISF, 2018b).

Another reform that received a lot of attention and debate is the opening up for others than the immediate and original parents to use parental benefit. In 2019 it was made possible for a parent to transfer four weeks of his/her (unreserved) parental benefit to a co-resident partner. This was extended to just over six weeks in 2024, together with the change that parental benefit can be transferred to anyone suitable according to the parent. It could thus be transferred to for example a non-resident partner, a sister, a grandfather or close friend. The opening up to other users was motivated by new family forms and also by parents' need for more flexibility to combine work and family. The self-employed were a group specifically

mentioned as possibly having difficulties finding the space and time to use the leave. The reform has however been heavily criticized, especially for its possibilities to affect gender equality, as men are expected to transfer days to female close kin or even a nanny. Furthermore, the control of who is using the leave, and do not work at the same (which is illegal), is made difficult when the circle of users is opened up. It has also been pointed out that this reform is a clear step away from an individual social insurance that applies to all residents in Sweden.

...and less flexibility

Along with those measures to increase the policy's flexibility, steps have been taken to ensure that the aim of taking care of newborn children is not lost. It was deemed that the flexibility in some cases was actually too great, and parents used the leave too flexibly. Hence, in 2014 age restrictions were introduced, stipulating that most of the leave had to be used during the first four years of the child's life. This restriction led to that some more days were used earlier in the child's life but as most of the parental benefit was always used during the first year, the age restriction has not affected the uptake to any large extent. However, it has contributed to a slight change towards a more gender equal use of parental benefit days as men have increased their use of days before the child turns four more than women have (ISF, 2020).

The group of parents that immigrate to Sweden with preschool children has been more affected by reforms in the 2010s. Before 2014 an immigrating parent got access to the full parental benefit when arriving with children in preschool age. This was restricted with the argument that long parental leaves for immigrant parents may both hinder the integration of children in ECEC as well as hinder parents from participating in activities for labour market integration, such as language studies. As parental benefit is paid by the state while labour market integration activities and ECEC are municipal responsibilities, there is a clear short-term incentive for the municipality to encourage parental benefit use. Hence, to further restrict the possibilities to use the parental benefit for children born abroad, restrictions based on the child's age at immigration were introduced in 2017. However, research had shown that that parents immigrating with children did not use very much leave before the reform, and such use did not clash with other activities if it was not a very long leave (Duvander & Mussino, 2021). Nevertheless, early evaluations of the reform indeed showed that it led to a reduction in use of parental benefit during the first two years in Sweden for immigrating parents, but the reform has not affected children's enrolment in preschool, parents' participation (or pass rates) in language classes, or earnings or participation in labour market policy interventions (IFAU, 2024).

Leave use

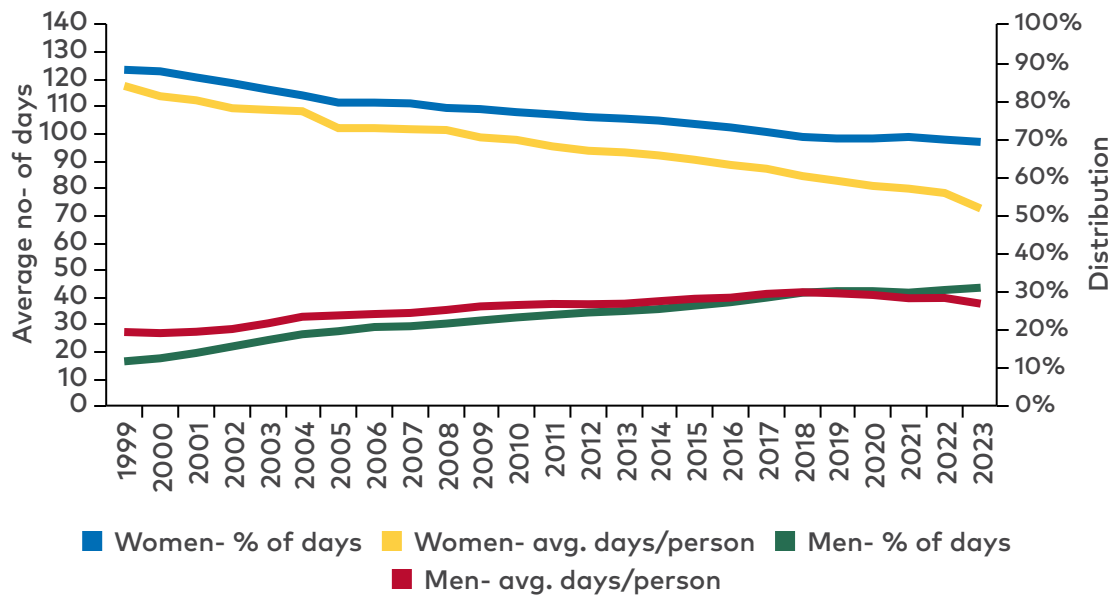
When describing how the leave use has developed there are several measures that can be used. On a national level the number of days of parental benefit is of course dependent on the number of children born, but also on how many days parents use the first year and how many benefit days they save for later use. In the 2010's the number of parental benefit days taken increased while the number of children born remained stable. This was mainly due to men taking more parental benefit days. During the pandemic (2020-2022), the number of days taken decreased, mainly because parents to children older than one year used fewer days. Due to fewer children born, this pattern continued in 2023 when the number of benefit days decreased by four per cent compared to 2022 (SSIA, 2024b). Below we focus on changes and differences by gender, parents' origin and educational level.

Parental leave use by gender

The gendered share of recipients has shifted by three percentage points during the last 20 years. In 2003, 57 per cent of the recipients were women and 43 per cent men, compared to 2023 when 54 per cent of the recipients were women and 46 per cent were men (SSIA, 2024b).

In Figure 2 we show the annual use by women and men since the turn of the century. Men's share of parental benefit days has increased from around 10 per cent in 1999 to 30 per cent in 2018 but has remained around the same level since then. The average number of days per year for women has decreased over the period from 120 to just over 70. At the same time the average number for men has increased from almost 30 to just under 40 days.

Figure 2. Average number of days of parental benefit and share by men and women (1999-2023)



Source: SSIA (2024d)

Staying with the cross-sectional numbers we find that the total amount of benefit has followed a similar trend as the average number of days. In 2003 women got 80 per cent of the total payments for parental benefit, in 2023 women got 64 per cent (SSIA, 2024d).

On average, the daily amount paid was 25 per cent higher for men than for women, which is due to the difference in men's and women's earnings levels. In addition, as women more often use their low-level days (180 SEK), and more often use the benefit on the basic level (250 SEK), this also results in lower average daily amount. Men who would receive the basic level more often refrain from using the parental benefit (ISF, 2017).

As parents in Sweden have the right to take parental leave both with and without benefit, SSIA has also started to publish figures on unpaid days. It should be clear that this is an estimation and not a precise measure as there is no documentation regarding unpaid leave days in the Swedish administrative data. SSIA cannot be sure whether the parent has worked during the days in between the benefit days. However, investments in correctly estimating the paid and unpaid days on leave have been done and discussed intensively (Duvander & Viklund, 2020; ISF, 2013; ISF, 2023; SSIA, 2018b; SSIA, 2020). When taking both paid and unpaid parental leave into account, both gender inequality within parental couples and inequalities

between socioeconomic groups becomes apparent as it is mainly middle to high income parents who use unpaid days. However, in proportion to their paid leave it seems that women and men use as much unpaid leave. The consequences in absolute number of days are of course very different as women use more benefit days (ISF, 2023).

Parental leave by origin

When turning to other ways to categorize parents than gender, one obvious divide is between parents from different origins. We know that immigrant women use the parental benefit to the same extent as native-born women but a much larger share of the days are used in the first year, they are thus not using the flexibility and unpaid days as much (Mussino & Duvander, 2016). Also, we know that immigrant fathers are more often refraining from using any benefit and that that they have been slower than native-born fathers in increasing their use (Ma et al, 2019). A major underlying factor to any differences is different positions on the labour market and this is clearly visible in the benefit level of various groups (see Table 1). We see that women more often than men use the basic level of benefit and that the proportion varies greatly between parents of various origins. The reason that men more seldom use the parental benefit at the basic level is mainly that men with no income refrain from using the benefit, but also a somewhat better position on the labour market among immigrant men than immigrant women.

Table 1. Parental benefit at the basic level and average payment regardless of compensation level in 2023 by region of birth

Parents' region of birth	Proportion of beneficiaries at basic level only, per cent		Average amount (regardless of benefit level), SEK per day	
	Women	Men	Women	Men
Sweden	2.1	0.6	712	843
The Nordic countries*	5.5	1.3	710	853
EU 27**	7.9	1.8	646	819
Rest of Europe	12.7	2.0	590	786
Sub-Saharan Africa	34.4	6.3	414	679
Asia except Middle east	28.0	4.8	505	779
Middle east, North Africa and Turkey	31.3	5.8	451	704
North America	12.0	4.3	678	806
South America	12.4	3.0	602	783
Oceania	8.3	4.4	718	843
All	7.4	1.6	650	814

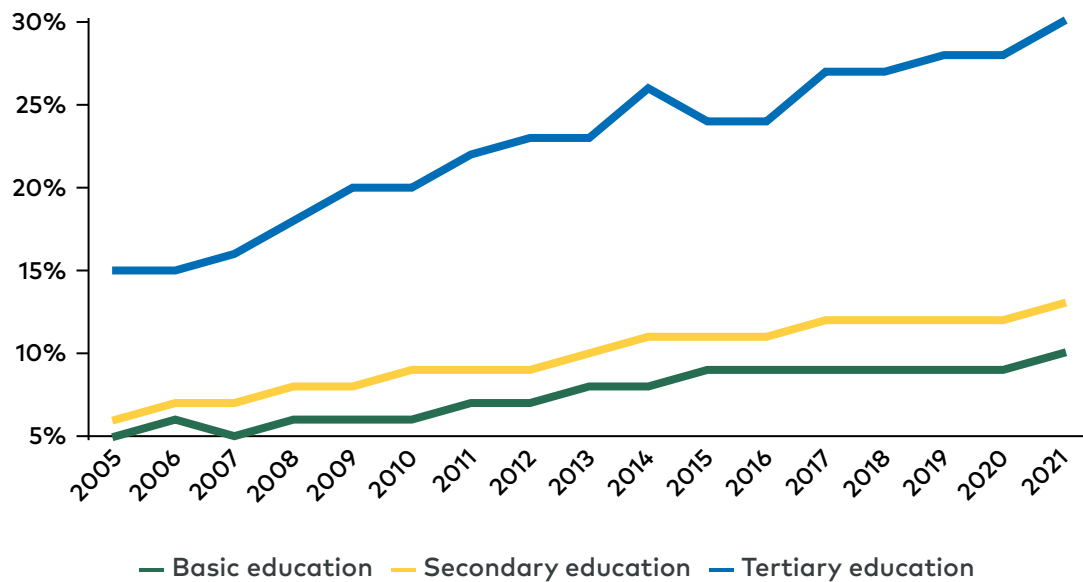
*Except Sweden, **except the Nordic countries, Source: SSIA (2024b)

Socioeconomic position

The share of parents who use the parental benefit more or less equally has increased during the last years. SSIA publish a measure of parents using somewhere between 40 to 60 per cent of the days each, as to indicate gender equal use. Figure 3 shows that since 2005 the proportion of parents using the benefit equally according to the SSIA measure has doubled among parents of all

educational groups, but the differences remain large. It is very clear that the highly educated parents much more often share more or less equally, and the difference compared to parents with lower education remains throughout the period up to children born in 2021. The reason for the temporary drop in 2014 is probably connected to the age restriction introduced at the time.

Figure 3. Proportion of parents who shared parental benefit days equally (40/60) when the child is two years old for children born 2005-2021



Source: SSIA (2024g)

Discussion: Parental leave in country context

It is evident from the review so far that the Swedish parental leave is still changing and adopting to changing societal and parental needs over time. The use of the parental benefit is developing and increasingly so towards a gender equal use. It is a vibrant area of research and much of the studies, evaluating reforms or following the development of use and its consequences, are found in grey reports at the government agencies, especially Swedish Social Insurance Agency (SSIA) and The Swedish Social Insurance Inspectorate (ISF). We can be confident that the development is followed and that the parental leave will remain an important part of the Swedish family policy with large political interest. And we can be sure that the parental leave will continue to develop in various directions. But does the

parental leave set-up and use matter for social sustainability in Sweden? We take the question to discuss whether parental leave development during the last 20 years matters for gender equality, social equality between parents and economic security of families with young children.

Regarding gender equality the parental leave has no doubt lead to more gender equal sharing of the caring of the child during the first period of life. We also know that this matters for future income careers (Nylin et al 2021; Billingsley et al 2024). Nevertheless, the negotiating over leave still takes place between parents, and the leave is still unequally divided. We want to point out a group that is paying for the now strong policy incentives to share the leave between parents, which is the parent who takes responsibility when the other parent does not do so. In a typical case, when fathers are not using their benefit days, the child is left with a shorter leave period, which in some cases leads to a childcare gap before ECEC is available. In cases when the reason behind the non-use is a conflict, it may be that the other parent will not transfer benefit days, and in all cases the benefit days that are reserved cannot be transferred. Such a situation may arise when the parents live together but also, and more concerning and more common, when parents are not living together. These mothers may find themselves in a precarious situation where it falls on them to make sure that the other parent steps up and uses his leave (Duvander & Lundqvist, 2025).

The intersection between incentives for gender equality and the child's best interest can be seen as in conflict here. It calls for attention to situations when parents have joint custody on paper, but one parent is left with full responsibility due to the other's lack of engagement. Also, other reforms have made this group of sole responsible parents more vulnerable, in particular the automatic sharing of child allowance and state withdrawal of maintenance support. A worrying development is if fathers get more rights but do not use them, leaving their children with less time with their parents in total, as well as putting the mothers in difficult situations. An unintended consequence could in addition be more filing for sole custody among these mothers. Currently in Sweden there is a debate about parents' right to sole custody in relation to the other parent using violence, which has led to a legal change to make it easier to get sole custody under such circumstances (MFoF, 2024). From this may follow more discussions about other situations where sole custody is suitable.

Regarding the question of social equality, we can see different patterns of parental leave use in different socioeconomic groups. Parents in higher socioeconomic positions seem to be more likely to extend their leave with unpaid days. For parents with lower socioeconomic status, the unpaid leave is less accessible.

For those who are not well established in the labour market, the incentives to work before becoming a parent might be hard to follow, as the possibility of a stable

position on the labour market is slight. And for parents in a precarious work situation, parental leave might increase the precariousness as it can be hard to come back to the earlier position after being absent for a while. In addition, precarious workers are rarely covered by collective agreements that top up the parental benefit. Further, for the most vulnerable parents, who are not established in the labour market at all, there is a risk that the parental benefit, even at the basic level, can become an alternative source of income instead of unemployment benefits. The consequence in the long run may be delayed labour market entrance.

Regarding the question of economic security of families with young children, the raised basic level can be seen as an effort to secure the economic situation for all families with young children. Women with weak economic positions have been seen to increase their use of parental benefit after this change. However, the importance of the raised basic level should not be exaggerated as the most vulnerable still need to complement the parental benefit with municipal financial assistance to achieve a decent standard of living (Duvander & Lundqvist, 2025). The administrative inefficiency of a system with benefits from various sources can for sure be discussed. In addition, while women in stronger labour market positions share leave with the father increasingly and thereby use less benefit days, we can see increased differences in income trajectories between different groups of women. This follows a general trend in Sweden with increased income and earnings inequality.

We also want to draw attention to the recent change, allowing other than parents use parental benefit. This is a clear step away from the individual income-related insurance that aims to cover temporary exits from the labour market due to childcare for a newborn child. If a national social insurance that is aimed to make time-off work possible is transformed into a benefit that can be used in different ways, perhaps for someone else to look after the child while the parent continues working, the social insurance has fundamentally changed. What this will lead to is still not known, but it enables even greater variations in use. SSIA will investigate whether the reform changes the uptake and who is using the leave, but so far it is too early to evaluate the effects of this reform as it was just implemented. It is likely that the potential change, if it happens, will be gradual. The change makes it clearly possible that with time the idea of a national parental leave insurance to cover temporary exits from work to care for children, will change.

A major concern receiving increasing attention in Sweden is that the fertility has declined the recent decade, similarly to the trend in the other Nordic countries. The total fertility rate was in 2000 1.54 per woman which increased steadily to 1.98 per woman in 2010. Except for a temporary stagnation during the first period of the pandemic, it has since declined to 1.43 per woman in 2024. It seems that all groups of men and women are delaying childbearing, in all areas of Sweden and at all income and educational levels, for women of all parities (number of children) and at

all ages up to age 40 (Ohlsson-Wijk & Andersson 2022). The Swedish parental leave has earlier been seen as a major reason for relatively high fertility in Sweden so the recent change obviously challenge how parental leave may continue to incentivise childbearing.

We want to conclude with referring to the aim of the parental leave in Sweden; to make it possible to combine family and work, which implies the goals of gender equality and economic equality between families with and without children. The parental leave has been reformed over time as different measures are needed to meet these goals today compared to when the parental leave was introduced in the 1970s. Yet, it is too early to conclude whether the recent changes of the Swedish parental leave policy are actually going in a direction of sustainable policy, and the answer is in part a political one. While gender equality has taken major steps forward, economic and social inequality between parents have actually increased. It may therefore be argued that changes aimed at adapting to a new situation of increased inequality, primarily based labour market restructuring, are needed. One way forward to achieve social sustainability would be to consider labour market policies and family policies together. To broaden the concept of sustainability also to the ecological pillar would require more radical changes. Perhaps this is the time to construct new dimensions of social policy.

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CONCLUSION

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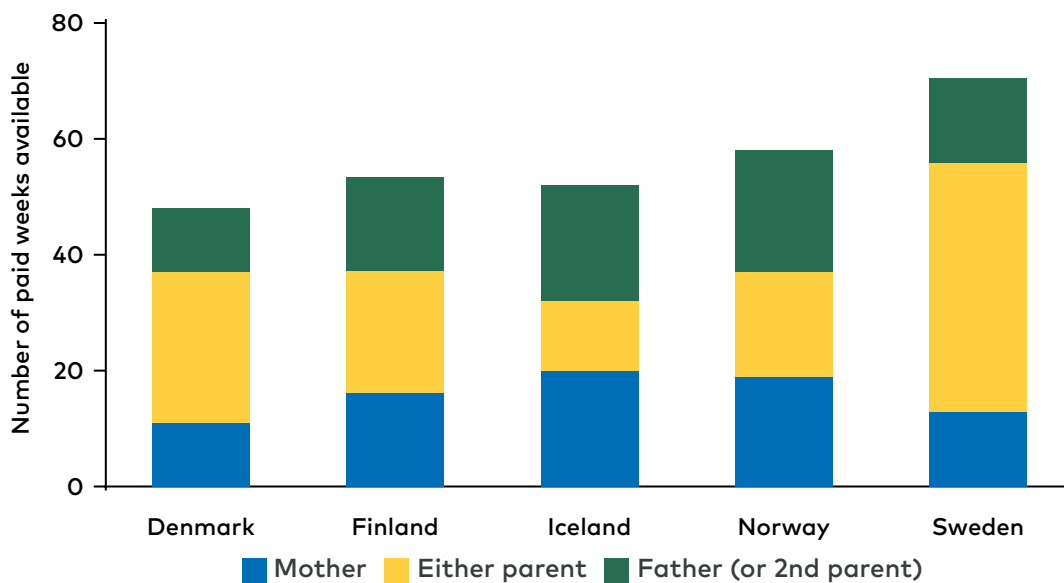
Since the late 1980's, the challenge of sustainable development has been discussed. Sustainable development should balance the present economic, ecological and social needs and meet these needs without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs (UN, 1987).

Social justice is an important element of social sustainability. To achieve social sustainability, all members of society need to have equal social rights and equal opportunities for wellbeing, irrespective of background aspects such as gender, ethnicity, age, or health. In all the Nordic countries, gender equality has been high on the agenda for several decades.

The reconciliation of paid employment and care responsibilities is one of the key challenges to gender equality. Thus, policies and practices supporting such reconciliation and reducing gender-based discrimination in both the labour market and in family life are in the heart of social sustainability. Paid parental leave policy may be a key factor for social sustainability if it is structured in a way that is accessible to all parents.

The Nordic countries have since the 1970's been forerunners of reconciliation policies such as parental leave rights with economic compensation for loss of income, and affordable and high-quality childcare services (ECEC). These policies aim to ensure equality between parents, regardless of their gender, as well as between children. While there are many similarities of the "Nordic model", the development of parental leave and childcare policies over time has been somewhat different in each Nordic country. For example, cash-for-care benefits have been more popular in Norway and Finland, and up until recently, Denmark did not have a father's quota to its system of paid parental leave (Gislason & Eydal, 2011; Ellingsaeter, 2024). The current leave schemes (not including pregnancy leave) in the five Nordic countries are presented in Figure 1. As can be seen, in 2025 Iceland has the longest periods reserved for each parent (the so-called quotas) while the total leave period is longest in Sweden.

Figure 1. Number of paid weeks available to parents in the Nordic countries after birth.



Source: Dobrotić et al., 2024.

In general, leave policies have during the past decades been developed from transferable parental leave, that has mainly been used by mothers, towards leave quotas that promote a more equal sharing of care responsibilities between parents. Childcare services enabling parents' paid employment are today understood as children's right to early childhood education and care (ECEC) irrespective of their social background.

In this volume, we have provided a description of the goals and development of leave policies during the past 20 years in the Nordic countries, with the aim of understanding how these policies may contribute to social sustainable development. This we have done by placing focus on how gender equality and other forms of inequality intersect, in terms of eligibility, usage and outcomes. Next, we point out some convergences as well as differences between the five countries and discuss how these convergences and differences may contribute to social sustainability in the Nordic societies.

The differences between the Nordic countries in parental leave policies have been related to the duration of well-paid leave, the level of compensation during leave, flexibility in leave use, and the existence and characteristics of non-transferable leave quotas. For example, while Norway and Sweden were the first countries to introduce a father's quota in the 1990's, a decade later Iceland took the lead in

gender equality with a three-month long fathers' quota, but the total length of well-paid leave was shorter than in the other Nordic countries. Finland was a latecomer in introducing the fathers' quota and has had the most familistic leave policy promoting "freedom of choice". In Denmark, fathers' leave use has been encouraged through collective agreements rather than national legislation up until very recently. In Sweden, the quotas have been introduced gradually, each reform passing with less debate than before.

Looking at the past two decades, however, we can see some convergence in the Nordic countries' leave policies. Today, all countries have statutory leave quotas for each parent. Denmark was the last country to join the "quota club" in 2022, not because of Nordic inspiration but due to the EU directive on work-life balance that imposes a minimum of four months of parental leave for each parent, of which two months should be non-transferable. There are however disparities in the length of the individual leave period for each parent: it is longest in Sweden (eight months including both the transferable and non-transferable leave period) while the Danish quota of 11 weeks is the shortest one. Also, some countries give a possibility to transfer part of the reserved leave to the other parent, while others don't. This changes the length of the quota when understood as non-transferable and puts Iceland in the lead with 4,5 months, followed by Finland with about four months.

The introduction of longer leave quotas for fathers, as well as the increased flexibility in leave use such as the possibility to take part-time leave, or use leave during a longer time span, has been reflected in the increased take-up of leave by fathers in all countries. We can also see similar socio-economic disparities in leave use in all countries. In all countries mothers still use the majority of parental leave days, but more equal sharing takes place among parents with high education level than among those with lower level of education. Highly educated fathers take more parental leave whereas mothers with higher education level use shorter leave periods.

Another convergence – but also an exception - can be seen in the terminology of leave schemes as gender neutral terminology is now more common than before. Sweden offering "parental leave" rather than "maternity leave" was the forerunner already in the 1970's; while there is a short period of colloquially called "paternity leave", the official term is gender neutral "temporary leave in connection to a child's birth or adoption". While gender-neutral parental leave has existed since the 1980's, gender-specific "maternity leave" and "paternity leave" were removed as late as in 2022 in Finland. But the same year the introduction of the gendered quotas in Denmark brought along also gendered terminology.

The transferability of leave between legal guardians – biological, adoptive or foster parents - has been part of the Nordic leave policy for a longer time. More recent development has focused on possibilities to transfer leave also to other caretakers

in the child's life. Today, parents in the Nordic countries can transfer part of their reserved leave to their cohabiting partner who is a social parent of the child – but not in Iceland, where this is possible only if the spouse adopts the child. Transferring parental leave to grandparents has been discussed in all countries and in Sweden it has been possible since 2024 as leave can now be transferred to anyone. In Norway, grandparents can use the short paternity leave if there is no partner to assist the mother after the birth of a child.

Eligibility to parental leave and the related benefits in Norway and Denmark is based on employment or activity in studies or job seeking. In Finland, Sweden and Iceland, all parents who live in the country are eligible to parental leave, but those with no prior income that have not been active in the labour market, such as students, receive a minimum benefit. Asylum seekers, however, are not eligible to leave benefits in any country, as their social security is part of the migration system.

The provision and use of childcare services is closely linked to the leave possibilities and the use of leave by parents. All Nordic countries except Iceland have a universal right to affordable early childhood education and care (ECEC) after parental leave, thus leaving no gaps between these important childcare policies. During the past decade, the enrolment of children under 3 (of which those under 1 year are mainly at home with their parents on parental leave) in ECEC has been highest in Denmark and Norway (around 60 per cent) and quite high in Sweden and Iceland (almost 50 per cent), while in Finland it has been clearly lower (less than one third) due to the cash-for care policy. Recently, the participation rate among young children has decreased in Denmark as there is concern among parents about the quality of childcare services.

The Nordic Welfare States' development of leave policies include some important aspects that align with reaching the goals of social sustainable development. These include tackling – but not totally removing - inequalities between women and men, between socioeconomic groups, and between diverse family forms. The gender-neutral terminology reflects the leave rights of for example other than biological or heterosexual parents. Also, parents may not have to share residency with the child to be able to take parental leave. However, regarding socioeconomic differences those may actually have increased as it is the resourceful parents that share the leave most, and parents without income or with low education fall behind.

Today, the Nordic societies face several new challenges: fertility has been falling for over a decade; the COVID-19 pandemic brought along social isolation and mental health challenges; labour markets are changing; and climate change and wars have increased fear and insecurity of future. These challenges may be reflected in the patterns of childcare choices and parental leave use in the future.

Our country specific reviews of the last 20 years indicate that in some aspects, the Nordic countries still differ and it seems that the speed and order of reforms are quite different. Nevertheless, our conclusion is that there is a convergence not just in parental leave policy but also in how leave is taken and shared between parents. Therefore, we suggest that the parental leave can be discussed, transformed and adapted in similar ways in all countries to respond to the future challenges.

How parental leave adapts to falling birth rates is one major question. The answer may on the one hand be universal economic security and eligibility for all, on the other hand also income-related benefits during leave that promote the reconciliation of parenting and paid employment. Income related benefits are the corner stone of the national social insurance packages in all the countries but may actually become less universal when sufficient income and stable labour market participation are harder to attain. This indicates the need for other support systems for parents, within the parental leave with minimum benefits, but perhaps foremost outside the parental leave system.

A challenge that needs to be tackled is the role of the labour market and the possibilities of young adults to secure more permanent positions and income. Also, collective agreements play different roles in defining parental leave rights, quotas and the level of benefits in the different countries. In countries where collective agreements are more important, the disparities between parents who are covered by the more generous agreements and those who are not may be larger regarding leave possibilities and leave use.

A further challenge is how gender inequality is best met in parental leave design. It is clear that the leave reforms that have introduced fathers' quotas and made them longer have had a positive impact in a more equal sharing of leave and childcare responsibilities. Gender neutral language in the policy may also play a role in changing people's mindset towards addressing childcare as a universal rather than gendered responsibility.

And last but not least: we believe that parental leave policies and childcare services can contribute to the resilience and wellbeing of all families in insecure and turbulent times. In future policy development and research, the challenge remains of taking into account also ecological sustainability.

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ABOUT THIS PUBLICATION

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