

Policy challenges and suggestions regarding men's roles in families and work, Lisbon, Nov 19, 2015

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Parental leave is often regarded as a way to increase gender equality. As you know, there exists a variety of parental leave designs in European countries, indicating that several ways are being tried out in order to reach this goal. The aim of gender equality poses challenges for parental leave designs.

The question is: what aspects of a parental leave design will lead to increased gender equality? Fifteen years ago Peter Moss and Fred Deven (1999) argued that for parental leave to be equally taken by mothers and fathers, it required gender equality to be achieved already. If gender equality was not already advanced, they claimed, parental leave might retard or even reverse progress towards its achievement. This way they reminded us of the importance of context.

The parental leave they had in mind was shared parental leave, open for both mothers and fathers to use. Such a policy may easily fall into the gender pattern that already exists. So, is it possible to design parental leave in a way that changes this gendered path dependency and promotes gender equality in terms of fathers taking on more childcare?

Much research has shown that certain elements of the leave design work better towards this end than others. These elements are:

- **Individual leave for fathers.** Leave that is statutory and earmarked for fathers makes men claim ownership to it. It is regarded as *their* leave, and their importance as a father and care person is recognized. This has strong symbolic value.

- **Non-transferable leave.** If the individual leave for fathers cannot be transferred to the mother, and is forfeited if not used, this seems to be an important motivating factor for fathers. Not only does the father himself lose valuable time to be with his child, also the child loses time of parental care – which is important in the first year of the baby's life. Non-transferable leave for fathers also seems to get reluctant men to take it. Moreover, individual, non-transferable leave does not have to be negotiated with the employer nor with the wife.

- **Generosity.** Men generally earn more than women, and if taking leave damages the family economy, there is less chance that fathers will afford to take it. To uphold their wages during leave confirms an important part of their masculine identity. They are still breadwinners while being home to do childcare. Masculinities and values of care do not have to be incompatible to one another.

In Norway, when an individual, non-transferable and generously paid leave for fathers was introduced after 15 years of shared parental leave, the take-up rate for eligible fathers rose from 4 to 74% in four years.

But, gender equality is not only a question of fathers taking leave; it is also a matter of **what fathers do when they are on leave.**

- **Solo fathering.** Research has shown (ref. new book) that fathers who care for the child alone, while the mother returns to work, obtain some other effects than if the mother stays home at the same time. Solo fathering seems to influence the development of fathers care competence positively. They become more confident care persons. If the mother is also at home during the parental leave period for fathers, she remains the primary parent and fathers become mother's helper. Parental leave for fathers may be designed to stimulate fathers to be home alone during their leave, for instance by not allowing mothers to take their leave when the father is also at home.

- **Flexible leave.** Watch out for flexibility! – It works against gender equality and fathers' building of care competence. Designing the parental leave for fathers so that it is possible to take it as part-time leave, to split it up in small blocks and spread it over several years, will allow work to gain priority over care during the leave. Flexible leave means that work easily invades care, produces a double stress and promotes half-way fathering (Brandth and Kvande 2015), particularly for fathers in work-intensive, flexible and boundary-less jobs.

To conclude: Parental leave for fathers is not a catch-all. It does not catch all fathers, and it does not catch all aspects of gender equality. Gender equality can be measured in many different ways. Father's increased involvement in childcare is but one aspect, and parental leave for fathers cannot be expected to promote gender equality in terms of closing the gendered pay gap, strengthening women's careers in working life, or decreasing gender segregation in the labor market. But it may, if we get fathers to use it, raise fathers' awareness of childcare, increase their participation in care work and improve father-child relations.

References:

Brandth, Berit and Elin Kvande (2015) Fathers and flexible parental leave. *Work, employment and society*. Doi: 10.1177/0950017015590749

Moss, Peter and Fred Deven (1999) *Parental Leave. Progress or Pitfall?* Brussels: NDI/CBGS Publications.