

# **TIME TO MODERNISE PARENTAL LEAVE!**

**Four steps towards an equal working life**

**T**he Nordic welfare model is unique in the world, thanks to the focus on parental leave and childcare. It has given women and men the opportunity to combine parenthood with working life. But in spite of the good conditions, men are still only taking a small part of the parental allowance. No country has yet managed to break the patterns that result in women getting poorer wages, being promoted less frequently, doing more part-time work and receiving lower pensions.

According to the Institute for Evaluation of Labour Market and Education Policy, IFAU, women and men earn about the same amount and are managers to roughly the same extent before they have their first child. 15 years later, the income differentials between the mother and the father have risen by an average of 32 percentage points. When couples share parental leave more equally, the chances of taking more equal responsibility for home and children in the longer term are also increased.

## What are the benefits of an equal distribution of parental leave?

- ➔ For every month the father is on parental leave, the mother's future salary increases by about 7 per cent. The father's increased leave has more effect than if the mother reduces her leave to the same extent (Johansson 2010).
- ➔ Women living in a relationship where the housework is equally distributed are less stressed (Grönlund, Öun 2018).
- ➔ When fathers have taken parental leave, the children are more likely to turn to both parents for comfort and care (Evertsson, Boye, Erman 2015).
- ➔ The quality of welfare would increase, since the need for substitutes would be reduced and employers would be better placed to plan their activities.
- ➔ Society is better supplied with a skilled workforce and women and men have more equal opportunities to reconcile parenting with jobs and careers.

## How is gender equality achieved in parental leave?

A new study of the Nordic parental insurance systems reveals the factors that have yielded good results for gender equality. The most important conclusions are these:

**1 The amount of parental leave taken by men depends on the number of earmarked months.** When the earmarked time increases, men's leave also increases and when it decreases, men's leave is reduced. Experience shows that when insurance is divided into thirds, in practice this means two thirds for the mother and one third for the father, i.e. very far from a shared responsibility. Financial incentives such as the equal opportunity bonus in Sweden have had no proven impact on the amount of parental leave taken by men.

**ACTION: Individualise parental insurance.** The only way to fundamentally challenge unequal patterns is to divide the right to parental leave and parental allowance equally. This presupposes, however, that the parental leave is long enough to ensure that the mother has enough time for recovery after childbirth and for breastfeeding.

**2 Access to childcare from an early age has a positive effect on gender equality.** In several of the Nordic countries there is a gap between the end of the insurance and publicly subsidised childcare becoming available. The gap is often filled by women taking unpaid leave or being forced to resolve the situation in other ways.

**ACTION: Parental leave and childcare should fully cover the need for care.** Paid parental leave must be long enough to cover the child's need for care at home and make it possible to share the leave without risking the mother's possibility of recovery. There must be access to subsidised childcare when parental leave ends.

**3 The parents' being at home at the same time is good for the mother's recovery - but a limitation is required.** When the child has just been born, joint parental leave can contribute to joint responsibility and facilitate the recovery of the mother. However, the risk of long-term joint leave is that fathers do not have experience of being responsible for the child. The time should be limited.

**ACTION: It should be possible to take parental allowance at the same time for first two months of the child's life.**

**4 One of the main reasons for women's lower incomes is the widespread use of part-time work.** There should be a right to work part-time during the child's early years, but this right should be shared more equally.

**ACTION: Encourage more equal sharing of part-time work.** We propose that parents should each have the right to reduce working hours by up to 12.5 per cent. Sole parents should be able to reduce their working hours by up to 25 per cent.

The report »Parental leave? More than a kitchen table question – a comparison of the Nordic countries' parental leave system from a gender perspective« by the Swedish Women's Lobby in collaboration with the Norwegian Women's Lobby and the Icelandic Women's Rights Association can be read in full at:

[sverigeskvinnolobby.se/foraldraledig](http://sverigeskvinnolobby.se/foraldraledig)

### Reference list

Evertsson, M., Boye, K. & Erman, J. (2015) *Fathers on call - A study on the sharing of care work among parents in Sweden. A mixed method approach.* Families and Societies Working Paper Series, 27(2015).

Grönlund A och Öun I (2018) *Beyond the Mummy Track? Part-time Rights, Gender, and Career-Family Dilemmas.*

Johansson E-A (2010) *Effekten av delad föräldraledighet på kvinnors löner.* IFAU rapport 2010:5

# Parental leave in the Nordic countries

The diagrams show percentage of days taken by men (2017)

**ICELAND:** Length of parental leave: 39 weeks  
Percentage of days earmarked for fathers: 33%  
Percentage of days taken by men (2017): 30%.



**SWEDEN:** Length of parental leave: 69 weeks.  
Percentage of days earmarked for fathers: 19%  
Percentage of days taken by men (2017): 29%.



**NORWAY:** Length of parental leave: 49 weeks 100% compensation level, 59 weeks 80% compensation level  
Percentage of days earmarked for fathers: 31%  
Percentage of days taken by men (2017): 20%\*.



**FINLAND:** Length of parental leave: 53 weeks.  
Percentage of days earmarked for fathers: 17%  
Percentage of days taken by men (2017): 11%.



**DENMARK:** Length of parental leave: 52 weeks.  
Percentage of days earmarked for fathers: 4%  
Percentage of days taken by men (2017): 11%.



\*The number of earmarked weeks was increased on 1 July 2018 and cannot therefore be seen in the statistics yet.