

# Igualdad de Género y Permisos Parentales

## *Gender Equality and Parental Leave*

**Gerardo Meil**

Departamento de Sociología. Universidad Autónoma de Madrid. España / Spain  
gerardo.meil@uam.es

**Anna Escobedo**

Departamento de Sociología. Universidad de Barcelona. España / Spain  
anna.escobedo@ub.edu

### PRESENTATION

In the last decade individualised well-paid parental leave has become a leitmotif of gender equality policies in Europe and most developed countries. This special issue aims to summarise present knowledge and contribute to the academic and public sociological debate from the gender equality perspective. Much is already known about how different regulations impact on the use of leave, and can serve different purposes. Still, we need to know much more about the transference of successful regulations and practices from one social or national context to others, the extension of care leave to other life phases, and how policy making takes account of research evidence. In September 2017 an International Seminar of the Leave Policies and Research Network took place in Madrid<sup>1</sup>, at which a broad range of contributions provided an up-to-date assessment of the state of the art and a rich research agenda, to which the following selected academic articles respond.

Parental leave is a mechanism of labour regulation and social policy to facilitate the care of children or dependent family members, by providing the time either to address the solving of urgent care needs, or to give a greater diversity of options in relation to the use of care services, while remaining compatible

with quality of work and professional development. In this sense, leave systems are complementary to early education and childcare services, on the one hand, and to dependent adult care services, on the other. Leaves can help to redistribute working time and care time throughout the life course. They might contribute to achieving an organisation of work that is more sustainable in relation to quality of life for both children and adults, gender equality and social cohesion, redistributing resources towards households that assume care tasks, taking into account productivity and the wellbeing of a diverse and ageing workforce (in a context where the delay of the effective retirement age is set as a priority). Leave design is evolving in line with a new model of active citizenship based on the simultaneous exercise of the right and the duty to work and to care (i.e. the universal adult worker and care giver citizen model, or the dual earner-dual carer household model), which underpins the more diverse family system of post-industrial societies.

Within the framework of policies designed to promote gender equality, incentives for the use of parental leave by men have become increasingly important. This is a way of socialising men caring for their children and increasing the cooperation of spouses in strategies aimed towards the reconciliation of work and family life, thus promoting a more effective sharing of unpaid work, and contributing to improving family bonds and the care of children.

1 See [www.leavenetwork.org](http://www.leavenetwork.org)

The first measures to extend men's parental leave as a mechanism to facilitate the reconciliation of work and family life and promote gender equality, were introduced in the 1970s in the Scandinavian countries. This egalitarian motivation was first applied to the extension of the right to leave, initially exclusive to women, to men; making leave regulations gender neutral after the mandatory recovery period for women after childbirth. That freedom of choice did not translate into greater use of parental leave by men, since the proportion of fathers who interrupted their work beyond a few days after childbirth was extremely low. So, in the 1990s, new leave arrangements, designated as fathers' quotas, emerged to promote male use. Thus, in 1993, a one-month leave with a high replacement wage, exclusively for men, was introduced in Norway and in 1995 in Sweden. If it is not used, it cannot be transferred to the mother. Since 2000, further steps have been taken in this direction, as represented by the Icelandic case, where men and women are granted equal leave, within the "equal and non-transferable leave" philosophy and through the "3 + 3 + 3" scheme (a well-paid leave of three months for the mother only, three months for the father only, and the same again, to be shared between them according to their preferences) (Eydal and Rostgaard, 2015).

In addition to promoting the socialisation of men caring for their children and, more generally, their involvement in unpaid work, the objective of this new generation of parental leave is also to de-gender the use of leave. The underlying rationale is that, in so far as fathers use as much leave as mothers, the transition to parenthood and the use of parental leave as a resource to reconcile work and family life would not result in labour discrimination towards women. Thus, both men and women will gain experience in the use of leaves, and male managers and bosses will know, at first-hand, the challenges represented by work and family reconciliation.

This trend towards the use of parental leave as an instrument for the promotion of gender equality has spread rapidly among countries, first in Europe and then in other regions of the world. This trend has been fostered by directives and recommendations, from the EU since 1996, and from

the ILO as of 2000 (ILO, 2014). There is a process of globalisation of knowledge and the comparative evaluation of public policies, promoted by international institutions and their corresponding statistical offices, within the EU, the OECD, and the UN. The relatively easy translation of parental leave policies into quantifiable indicators of uses and impacts, and the rapid translation of reforms into their effective use among new generations of increasingly well-educated and informed parents, have raised great interest in, and focus on, these measures among the different stakeholders. Parental leave is nowadays becoming one of the symbols of success of the policies towards and achievements in gender equality. Evaluation and comparative research are contributing to an integral reformulation of parental leave systems in some countries, based on the accumulated experience and research results from different countries, achieving a fruitful transfer of research to the improvement and development of public policies based on scientific evidence. The reforms in Iceland in 2000, in Germany in 2007 and in Portugal in 2009 are examples of this process, while for other countries, development is more dependent on their particular historical trajectory.

The issues that have been addressed so far in the international literature, as well as in the research carried out in Spain, focus on four fundamental dimensions. On the one hand, researchers have studied the characteristics of the different parental leave systems and their relationship with welfare regimes and gender equality (over the life course). On the other hand, research has focussed on leave use and users, with conditioning or explanatory factors, where the analysis of use by men has become increasingly important. Thirdly, the relationship between the use of care leave and female employment has been analysed, including aspects such as the reincorporation of women into employment after childbirth, or labour discrimination in terms of lower probabilities of promotion and professional career development, and the increase of the gender pay gap. The fourth and last research dimension focuses on the effects of parental leave use on different aspects of family dynamics, such as decisions on fertility, the division of domes-

tic work or the strengthening of parental bonds through more continuous and intense contact with the children, especially after a divorce, with the positive effect that this has for the development of their personalities. The question of the relationship between parental leave and gender equality, however, has until now been rather focussed around the transition to parenthood, with a predominance of studies coming from the Scandinavian countries. In the present special issue we aim to deepen our knowledge regarding this relationship, contributing research results from central and southern European countries.

In the first contribution “Parental leave and beyond: some reflections on 30 years of international networking”, Peter Moss explains the emergence of the international debate on parental leave since the 1980s and the development of the International Network on Parental Leave Policy and Research: a research network that currently gathers researchers from 40 countries across the world, contributing greatly to the present monographic issue. From his 30 years’ experience of coordinating academic learning communities around the issue of parental leave and care services, Moss considers some current issues in leave policy and some possible future directions for policy and research, such as: the place of leave in wider ‘reconciliation’ and ‘equality’ policies, the need for appropriate statistics and indicators, and the voice of the child in formulating leave policies.

Where laws confirm a framework of rights, opportunities and institutional legitimacies for the whole or majority of the employed population, the resulting social uses depend on the values and cultural patterns present in both families or households, and companies or work centres. The analysis of social uses allows us to understand barriers and potentialities.

So, in the second contribution, “Parental leave in Spain: use, motivations and implications”, based on the survey “The social use of parental leave 2012”, Gerardo Meil, Pedro Romero-Balsas and Jesús Rogero-García analyse characteristics of use, motivations of leave users and consequences of use for professional careers, paying special attention to gender differences in Spain. The analysis reveals that while use of paid leave does not show

very marked gender differences, unpaid leave is mainly used by women and by those who have better working conditions. The motivations are mainly related to parenting (spending more time with the baby, prolonging breastfeeding, etc.), but in couples’ use strategy the objective of preserving their employment is also present.

The use by men of parental leave and its contribution to the development of new forms of fatherhood and gender equality is currently the focus of academic debate. The institutional reforms show their potential to tackle or stop processes of change, in particular as shown in the following analyses of the Spanish, German and Swiss cases.

In the third contribution, “Can an egalitarian reform in the parental leave system reduce the motherhood labour penalty? Some evidence from Spain”, José Andrés Fernández-Cornejo, José Andrés Fernández-Cornejo, Lorenzo Escot, Cristina Castellanos-Serrano and Daniel Franco-Romo analyse the impact of the Spanish 2007 egalitarian-oriented reform in the parental leave system. Based on a sample of dual-earner couples with children, residing in Madrid’s metropolitan area, they provide empirical evidence showing that fathers who took longer leaves tended, subsequently, to be more involved in the care of their children, and that when the father is actively involved in the care of his child the mother tends to experience a lower work penalty.

In the fourth contribution, “Couples and Companies: Negotiating Father’s Participation in Parental Leave in Germany”, Stefanie Aunkofer, Michael Meuser and Benjamin Neumann report on the findings of a study of fathers on parental leave in Germany. Drawing on interviews with couples and human resource managers in different companies, they analyse how fathers’ parental leave is negotiated within couples and how employers deal with male employees who claim parental leave. They identify conducive and obstructive factors for paternal leave, both at the workplace and at home within the couple. They also conclude that, in German organisations, taking two months’ leave has become routine, but also marks a threshold of the extent to which organisations expect to be able to manage fathers’ leave.

In the fifth contribution “The Swiss Leave Scheme at Crossroads: Gender equality implications of Parental and Paternity Leave Proposals”, Isabel Valarino analyses leave policy proposals submitted from 1995 to 2014 in Switzerland and their potential implications for gender equality. Content analysis results show that only a few proposals would create incentives for fathers to use these leaves, promoting gender equality, while conversely, there were several proposals that would produce further gender inequalities, or create inequalities based on social class or citizenship.

The monograph concludes with a sixth contribution, which looks in depth at the pioneering case of the use of individual non-transferable fathers’ quotas. In “Conflicting Ideas in the Norwegian Debate on Parental Leave for Fathers” Berit Brandth and Elin Kvande analyse the conflicting arguments that have arisen since the first pioneering fathers’ quota was introduced in 1993. Norwegian family policy, and particularly the fathers’ quota, has been the subject of heated political debate over the 23 years that it has existed. The article describes this debate from the fathers’ point of view, where the question of earmarking versus choice has a prominent place, concluding with a discussion of how these two binaries have influenced fathers’ uptake and appreciation of parental leave.

In the book review section, two recently published volumes, dedicated exclusively to this topic, are assessed. Both books point out that the uptake of parental leave by men is an important step towards gender equality; one that has considerable symbolic power and the potential to transform society. Nonetheless, this mechanism is just one amongst others (as the Nordic study shows) indicative of a broader structural change that is redefining the role of men in care-giving via the different personal crossroads and family transitions that occur over the life course, especially when there is a family split involving children.

#### ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Spanish Ministry of Economy and Competitiveness, Project Reference CS02013-44097-R

#### BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Eydal, G. B. and Rostgaard, T. (eds.) (2015). *Fatherhood in the Nordic Welfare States. Comparing care policies and practice*. Bristol: Policy Press.
- ILO (2014). *Maternity and Paternity at Work*. Geneva: International Labour Organisation.