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Fathers in Charge? Parental Leave Policies for Fathers in Europe

Despite the fact that most parental leave policies in European countries have also entitled men, take-up rates by fathers have been low. In turn, the traditional male breadwinner model has prevailed in the EU, even though the level of education of men and women has converged fully. At the same time, fathers do want to spend time with their newborn children (Huerta et al. 2013). A trend towards the implementation of parental leave policies for fathers – also known as "daddy months" or "daddy quotas" – has emerged. The potential goals of these policies are greater gender equality, both in the family and in the labour market, a better work-life-balance for families and stronger bonding between father and child. Encouraged by state regulations and the EU-Directive 2010/18/EU[2] parental leave take-up rates have been rising over the past decade, but still remain low.

In general, there are three different types of leave policies for parents: maternity leave, paternity/paternal leave and parental leave. *Maternity leave* (or pregnancy leave) is only available for women around the time of childbirth focusing on the pre- and post-birth health of mothers and newborns. It covers 23 weeks on EU-average (European Parliament 2015). *Paternity leave* is only available for fathers and regulates employment-protected (short-term) leave during and after child-birth in order to support the mother, to care for older children or to spend time with the family. Depending on the country, it has to be taken immediately or in the few months after child-birth. *Parental leave* is available to both mothers and fathers and usually covers a longer employment-protected period, which normally follows on from maternity/paternity leave. Parental leave can be either an individual right or a family entitlement sharable between parents. As a measure to boost the take-up of parental leave by fathers, some countries offer father-specific parental (and home care) leaves ("daddy months"), which are reserved exclusively for fathers. Other countries offer bonus weeks that are only available if both parents use a certain portion of the family entitlement and are lost otherwise. This is also known as the "use it or lose it"-approach.

To analyse fathers' involvement in childrearing in EU-28 states, we focus on paternity leave, as well as on those parts of parental leave that are solely reserved for fathers, subsequently referred to as father-specific parental leave. This means that the sharable portion of parental leave, which is almost exclusively taken by mothers, is not part of our analysis.

Paternity leave systems and father-specific parental leave systems differ considerably across countries in terms of their *duration* as seen in Figure 1. The attractiveness of take-up to fathers also depends on the compensation offered for the given period. Figure 1 also shows the *full-rate equivalent* pay in weeks for the fathers' leave period. If parental leave is paid at much lower rates than previous earnings, or not paid at all, it can put stress on household budget situations. This is especially true for male breadwinner families, which are not uncommon as men's hourly earnings in EU-28 countries are still on average 16.9 % (Eurostat 2016) higher than women's.

A deeper look into the policies of EU countries provides insights into how fathers are integrated and considered in paternal leave policies. The average paternity leave period granted in EU-28 states is 1.3 weeks, while the father-specific part of parental leave is 4.5 weeks on average. The average compensation for the total leave period equals the full-rate wage of 2.9 working weeks. Even though these differences seem vast, there are some similarities among EU countries, which enable us to identify four different types of systems.

The most common system includes a relatively short period of paternity leave with a very high compensation rate in combination with no father-specific parental leave. This is the case in the Baltic states, Greece, the Netherlands, Spain, Malta and Italy, as well as in the Eastern European countries Bulgaria, Slovenia, Hungary and Romania. Denmark and the United Kingdom also only offer paternity leave, but differ from the others in that their compensation rate is much lower. The periods of paternity leave in the countries mentioned above range from one (Italy and Malta) to thirty (Lithuania) days.

By contrast, Germany, Austria and Croatia offer no paternity leave at all. However, these three countries reserve parts of their parental leave solely for fathers. The compensation rate for these periods is comparably lower in these countries, as it ranges from 34% to 80% of the previous wage.

France, Luxembourg, Portugal, Belgium, Finland and Sweden have mixed systems in place whereby fathers are granted both paternity leave and father-specific parental leave. These countries lead the EU in the absolute leave time granted to fathers. Finland and Sweden have high compensation rates at 70% and 76% respectively, while the rates of the other countries range from 20% to 54%. This shows that those countries with the longest time periods granted solely to fathers do not necessarily offer the highest compensation rates.

Finally, Cyprus, Slovakia, Ireland and the Czech Republic do not offer any periods of paternity leave or father-specific parental leave.

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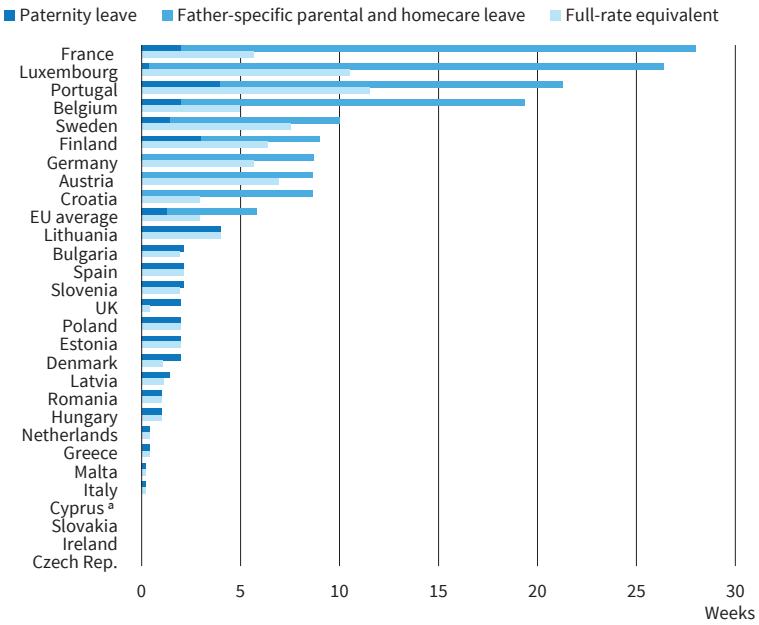
[2] The Directive determines the right of parents to spend at least four month of parental leave with the child, with one month to be taken by each parent. In other words, the EU gives path to a one month "father´s quota" with the official goal of promoting equal opportunities and treatment between men and women.

Figure 1

Parental leave policies for fathers in EU-28 countries

Weeks of paid paternity and paid parental leave that can be taken only by the father & full-rate equivalent, 2015



Note: Full-rate equivalents shown are capped or subject to taxation in some countries.
[a] Only southern part considered.

Source: OECD Family Database.

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As almost all of the father-specific leave periods are optional, it must be noted that we have only talked about opportunities to date. The take-up rates by fathers are certainly relevant too. When comparing take-up rates in Europe, the situation in Sweden deserves our attention. Sweden was the first country worldwide to introduce a parental leave policy with earnings-related benefits available for both parents in 1975. However, fathers' take-up rates still remained low. A dramatic shift occured when a one month father's quota was implemented in 1995. Previously, only half of Swedish men took at least some parental leave, whereas almost 90% of fathers have decided to take leave after their child´s birth since 1995. It was not only the total share of fathers that increased substantially, but also the amount of days taken. While the average number of leave days by fathers was 25 prior to the reform of 1995, it rose to 35 days after the reform (Duvander and Johansson 2012). Similar developments can be observed in Norway and Finland where father-specific parental leave was introduced in 1993. In all three countries the compensation rate is relatively high (66 to 100%). With these characteristics the Nordic countries are generally considered to represent a typical dual earner/dual carer regime (Nordenmark 2015).

In Germany, a similar shift has been observed since the introduction of "daddy months". Prior to the implementation of two months of father-specific parental leave in 2007, the share of fathers who took any parental leave was 3.5%. It has since risen to 35.7% in 2015 (Federal Statistics Office 2017). In France, father-specific parental leave is compensated at a rate of 20% of the father's former wage and unsurprisingly, it is rarely taken up. By contrast, the compensation rate for paternity leave in France is 93.5%, which has led to 62% of fathers making use of it (Koslowski, Blum and Moss 2016). The case of Portugal is interesting in that ten days of paternity leave are obligatory for the father. However, its lack of enforcement keeps take-up rates below 100%. The take-up of parental leave by fathers has also increased in Portugal since the father-specific parental leave was introduced in 2009 (Koslowski, Blum and Moss 2016). More traditional countries like Italy, Greece, or Spain, where the male breadwinner model has been predominant, tend to offer long periods of parental leave without or at a low replacement rate and few father-only entitlements. This was also the case in Germany until 2007. In contrast to the Nordic welfare states, these types of systems can be labelled as conservative welfare state systems (Boll, Leppin and Reich 2014).

While research on the topic of labour market participation by women and mothers is abundant, the effects of fathers' parental leave-taking have not been studied in the same depth to date. Empirical research is mainly conducted in countries with long experience of state regulations on paternity leave. Many studies find that the impact of paternal involvement has mixed results in terms of the division of labour in households.

Cools, Fiva and Kirkeboen (2015) find that the introduction of a four-week paternal quota in Norway and the subsequent increase in fathers' leave-taking behaviour[3] had positive effects on children's exam scores at the end of compulsory schooling. This is particularly true in families where the father has a higher level of education than the mother. The children's improved school outcomes cannot directly be linked to the four weeks fathers spent at home, but that time might have led to a change in household roles in the longer run. Rege and Solli (2013) find for Norway that the introduction of a four-week paternal quota goes along with a shift in time and effort from market to home production. As a result, and in line with Cools, Fiva and Kirkeboen (2015), childcare-related tasks are distributed more equally within families (Rege and Solli 2013). Evaluating a reform in Sweden in 1995, Ekberg, Eriksson and Friebel (2013) do not find a permanent

[3] Fathers' leave-taking rose from 2.6% for children born prior to the reform in March 1993 to 24.6% for children born in April of the same year right after the introduction of the reform.

impact on time input of the father in the household. Though the fathers`use of parental leave increased by 50%.

In a study on German leave-taking fathers, Boll, Leppin and Reich (2014) provide evidence for the fact that father-specific parental leave led to an increase of over one hour/week spent on childcare. Schober (2014) also finds evidence that the 2007 German reform and the subsequent higher parental leave take-up rates of fathers led to an increase of 36 minutes in the time they spent on childcare on weekdays in the child's first year, compared to children born prior to the reform. 18 to 30 months after the reform fathers still spent 26 minutes more with their child. By contrast, Kluve and Tamm (2013) find no significant changes in the time spent on childcare for fathers. They study the effects of the 2007 German parental leave reform by comparing the behaviours of parents with children born just before and right after the implementation.

Huerta et al. (2013) conduct a study on fathers' leave-taking and fathers' involvement in childcare in four OECD countries. They find that fathers who take leave for over two weeks were more likely to be involved in childcare during the child's first year of life than those who did not take any leave. Even when children were two to three years old, fathers who had taken leave were still more involved.

Few papers study some other possible impacts of paternity leave. Cools, Fiva and Kirkeboen (2015) find neither proof of increased female labour market participation nor of positive effects on fertility or marital stability due to the paternity leave reform in Norway. Rege and Solli (2013) examine the effects of the same reform and find that fathers' four week leave decreased future earnings by 2.1% and that mothers' labour supply was unaffected.

Finally, it is important to mention that the take-up rates of leave by fathers in EU countries depend on many factors other than the availability and compensation of "daddy months". Those include the flexibility of leave arrangements, the degree of job protection of parental leave, the workplace culture and the availability of affordable childcare, as well as the current gender norms and cultural expectations. All in all, an ongoing trend towards the implementation of well-designed policies for fathers' involvement in child-rearing can be observed in EU countries. Fathers' use of parental leave is largest when it is well-paid and accompanied by other family-friendly policies such as flexibility regarding working hours. However, persistent positive effects are not to be expected immediately, but need to be evaluated in the long run, as prevailing societal norms only change gradually.

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