

Parental leave, Care Policies and Gender Equalities in the Nordic Countries

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Content

Introduction	7
Summary	9
1. Parental leave, care policies and gender equality in the Nordic countries <i>Árni Páll Árnason</i>	13
2. Welcome <i>Kristín Ástgeirsdóttir</i>	17
3. Gender Equality: Transforming Family Divisions of Labour <i>Dr. Janet Gornick</i>	19
4. Nordic mothers and fathers on leave: towards equal sharing? <i>Dr. Johanna Lammi-Taskula</i>	21
5. Nordic mothers and fathers on leave: towards equal sharing <i>Ann-Zofie Duvander</i>	25
6. Parental leave and gender pay gap – What, if any, are the effects of different systems of parental leave on gender pay gap? <i>Dr. Ingólfur V. Gíslason</i>	33
7. Child care policies – Is there a Nordic model of day care for children? <i>Dr. Guðný Björk Eydal, Dr. Tine Rostgaard</i>	39
8. What is best for the children? – Care policies in a child perspective <i>Prof. Berit Brandth</i>	41
9. Workshop: Parental leave use in the Nordic countries & Parental leave and gender pay gap <i>Erla Sigurðardóttir</i>	43
10. Workshop: Child care policies – What is best for the children? <i>Arnar Gíslason</i>	53

Introduction

Erla Sigurðardóttir

During the Icelandic presidency of the Nordic Council of Ministers, the conference “Parental Leave, Care Policies & Gender Equalities in the Nordic Countries” took place in Reykjavik on 22 October 2009. The conference was arranged by the Centre of Gender Equality in Iceland on behalf of the Ministry of Social Affairs and Social Security.

One of the Icelandic presidency’s priorities in 2009 was to integrate a gender-equality perspective into all areas of co-operation. The Nordic countries’ efforts to promote gender equality through paternity and maternity leave have attracted a great deal of interest. Nordic welfare systems are known for ensuring social security for all, with special emphasis on families with children. Hence, many countries have shown interest in the development of Nordic care policies.

Although the Nordic countries have much in common, individual nations have chosen different ways to support parents. The conference on parental leave, care policies and gender equalities gave insight into the different policies adopted within the Nordic countries.

Preliminary results from a Nordic research project “Parental leave – child care policy – gender in the Nordic countries” were presented at the conference. The research project looks at how parental leave is used in the Nordic countries, how it affects the relationship between parents and children, and the status of men and women in the labour market. The project is headed by Dr. Ingólfur V. Gíslason and Dr. Guðný Björk Eydal, from the University of Iceland. Other members of the research team are Dr. Tine Rostgaard, The Danish National Institute of Social Research, Dr. Johanna Lammi-Taskula, The National Institute for Health and Welfare, Finland, Dr. Berit Brandth, Department of Sociology and Political Science, Norwegian University of Science and Technology and Dr. Ann-Zofie Duvander, Swedish National Social Insurance Agency.

The keynote address was delivered by Dr. Janet Gornick, professor of political science and sociology at the Graduate Centre of City University of New York and Director of the Luxembourg Income Study.

This report contains notes from the conference, speeches, workshop discussions and links to PowerPoint presentations.

Summary

Erla Sigurðardóttir

What family forms are recognised in established Nordic and welfare policies? Which family values and parental models should be given political priority in a multi-ethnic society? Would part-time leave be ideal from a gender equality perspective? These were some of the questions raised at the conference where researchers presented their preliminary results, compared the differences between the Nordic countries and discussed how we reach the goal of a gender-equality, friendly welfare state with reconciliation between personal and professional life where we serve the needs of men, women and children.

In his welcome speech, Iceland's minister of social affairs and social security, Árni Páll Árnason, noted that the most extensive Nordic project on gender equality during the period the Icelandic presidency of the Nordic Council of Ministers on gender equality, was the research that seeks to find out how parental leave is utilised in the Nordic countries.

Reconciliation between personal and professional life is one of the pillars of gender equality policies. Kristín Ástgeirsdóttir, director of Centre for Gender Equality in Iceland, pointed out that these policies must be researched, discussed and developed in order to serve the needs of men, women and children. When the Nordic countries moved towards a two bread winner's model, care services for children (kindergartens), maternal and paternal leave to serve the new born babies, and leave for parents of young children were developed in order to make it possible for mothers to earn their living. We must know what effect these services have or do not have. Care policies do not only concern our young citizens, but also the sick and elderly. An ageing population in the Nordic countries calls for new policies. The gender perspective will be very important when it comes to such types of leaves.

Dr. Janet Gornick presented the highlights of her recent book, *Gender Equality: Transforming Family Divisions of Labour*, co-authored with Marcia Meyers. In their book, Gornick and Meyers propose a set of work-family reconciliation policies – paid family leave provisions, working time regulations, and early childhood education and care – designed to foster more egalitarian family divisions of labour by strengthening men's ties at home and women's attachment to paid work.

Dr. Johanna Lammi-Taskula and Dr. Ann-Zofie Duvander compared the policies implemented in each Nordic country by showing interesting

differences between countries; depending on how easy it is to keep a position in the labour market and how flexible the leave is.

This also determines whether women with high income go back to work early or not. High income women may want to go back early to prevent losing their position at work. We see that women lose out by being away a long time. On the other hand, these high-income women may be able to afford the leave, either because of their position or due to the benefits during their leave.

Women with low and middle incomes may have a harder time taking a long leave. But we see, at least in Sweden, that when the father has a high income and the family can afford a long leave, that low income mothers stay home longer.

We know that public sector women use longer leave, perhaps because they are secure, or possibly because these are female dominated jobs where it is easier to take leave. Public sector employers seem to be used to their employee's long leaves and this reduces the anxiety of career damage due to long absences.

The same arguments can be made for large employers with many employees. In Sweden it is quite common to receive extra benefits on top of the 80% from the employer. And the ones who do take longer leaves may do so because they work for family-friendly employers. This happens because these mothers can afford it, and also because it is often men and women in *good* positions who get extra benefits so that they may use these privileges.

In summary, we can say that women in good positions who have a choice, use this choice differently, either with very long leave or very short leaves. I am talking here about the high-income women. When comparing the Nordic countries, we see a similar pattern – when the system is flexible you get variations. For example, child-care allowance increases the choice variations between women, while the stricter leave, as we see in Iceland, produces fewer variations. This is a very tentative conclusion taken from earlier studies.

If we turn to fathers' share of leave, we see a mirror image of the earlier figure. We see the same problems with the statistics as with mothers' share. Here again, the right-to-leave use is essential.

Also, the question of counting the fathers' share is not so clear-cut. Anita Haataja has written a very nice Working paper at KELA in Finland about this issue. She points out the lack of comparable statistics and that you may get different results if you include or exclude paternity leave, that is, leave that can only be used by the father.

Because this type of leave does not exist in Iceland and Norway, and is only available to employed fathers in Sweden, the issue raises some difficult questions. I am in total agreement with Anita Haataja that we need more cooperation between the authorities collecting social security statistics.

Another problem here is that Norwegian fathers during most of this period are only able to use leave through the mothers' right – that is, she must be eligible through her work for him to use leave.

Finnish fathers mainly use paternal leave but may get bonus days if using the parental leave which makes the base of days change depending on the usage.

I also want to mention that it is not clear what leave actually mean. If the leave is short, the mother may be home during the same period. In Sweden we joke about fathers using leave during the hunting season and not to be with their child, but I think that in general the periods are now so long that this is not a fair suspicion and that fathers most often are the main carer during their leave period. This may however not be true always and in all countries.

In some countries you can use the leave simultaneously and in some you cannot.

There are many more studies on fathers leave use than on mothers which has been the focus and often used as a measure of gender equality.

I already told you about the first child and an argument used for and by fathers is that fathers like to try leave use, but once they have tried they do not want to do it again. Because of the similar finding for mothers I would like to question this explanation and believe that it has to do with family economy and child care availability. However it seems that one leave period does not always give a taste for more, unfortunately.

Obviously the legislation is very important and Iceland is the best example. We find as for women, fathers in the public sector, in female dominated work places, and fathers who get extra benefits from the employer use more leave, perhaps because it is easier at such work places. Also, if other fathers at the work place have used leave, the chance that a new father will use leave is larger.

We find that higher income, up to the ceiling of the benefit in Sweden, will increase the leave use. I think we need more studies here. As the ceiling changes, benefit levels will also change. And if fathers use increases enough, it may be that the whole pattern will have changed.

It has also been found in various studies that higher education among mothers and fathers leads to more leave use among fathers. This is often explained by more gender-equal attitudes in this group. Also, women with a higher education may want to go back to work quicker than other women because they have more interesting jobs to return to and would lose out more by being away.

We need to do more here, but one important point is whether we should look upon fathers' leave as an indicator of gender equality or of child orientation among men. Child orientation may not always be the same as a gender equal attitude. However, child orientation among fathers may indirectly lead to more gender equality in the family and in the

labour market. But the two concepts are not synonyms, even if we sometimes in the literature see them as used interchangeably.

I mentioned that the cooperation regarding statistics on social security is not always well developed between the Nordic countries. This makes it difficult to compare numbers, but it also shows a variety of perspectives which may tell us, for example, a little about how parental leave is viewed in different countries.

I will now show you some examples of information I gathered from the homepages of the authorities that are responsible for statistics on parental leave in the Nordic countries.

5.2 Denmark

Statistikbanken produced by Statistics Denmark is a very good source of all sorts of tables. They have created a measure of parental leave use during the first and second year after a child is born to capture most parental leave use. This means that some children are measured for just over 12 months (the ones born in December) and others for up to 24 months (the ones born in January). However, they believe that very little of the leave is left uncovered by this measure. As you can see, it looks like the leave use is very stable since 2003.

Fathers' leave days increase from 19 to 24 day during the period, while mothers' days decrease by 3 during the period.

5.3 Finland

KELA, the Social Insurance Institution of Finland produces statistics on a number of aspects concerning parental leave. An example is the average benefit – as you can see. They show where fathers and mothers on leave are employed, and we can see that administration, commercial work and self employed fathers use the least leave.

They show leave use by region. Åland has the most frequent users, and I can't help but point out that Åland also has strong bounds to Sweden.

However, in Sweden it is the Northern regions that have many users, while Lapponia in Finland has the least frequent users.

5.4 Iceland

On Iceland, the information is produced by the Childbirth Leave Fund and is difficult for a Swede to interpret because the information is only in Icelandic. The title and explanations of tables are, however, in English. It is clear that the patterns have stabilized since leave introduction, and that

fathers use one third and mothers two thirds. What is interesting now, of course, is what happens in times of sharp economic recession. So far, fathers follow the minimal use-pattern so as not to forfeit any leave, while mothers maximize their days by also using the days one may share.

5.5 Norway

The Norwegian Labour and Welfare Administration produces statistics on a regional level just like Finland.

They also present the distribution of length of leave among the users, and we can clearly see the changes in legislation from this. The first daddy month, which is 20 working days, was introduced in 1993. And as you can see, the normal pattern of use in the beginning of 2000 is 20 days.

In 2006, another week was added, and another in 2007 so that it was 6 weeks or 30 working days. This is now taking over as the most common length of leave. (In 1/7 2009 10 weeks – too early to see).

Few fathers use longer leave than legislated and this group has grown very slowly.

I would interpret this to mean that fathers follow the legislation closely in their leave use. Perhaps it takes time before the pattern has changed so much that we get more fathers who use long leave. There is an obvious parallel to Iceland here.

5.6 Sweden

But now I will show you another way of presenting the statistics, and where we do see an increase in users that goes beyond the legislation. This is Sweden, and we measure the share of parents who have used equal share of the leave.

Not exactly 50% each, but somewhere in the range of a 40-60% split between the mother and father. We measure leave use when the child is 8, after which one cannot use any more leave.

As you can see, for children born in 1993 over 4% shared the leave equally.

This figure dropped when the daddy month was introduced in 1995. It may be that what we see is that the legislation conformed users, so that both fathers who earlier had used more leave, and fathers who earlier had used no leave, started to use one month.

But then you can see that the share of those who use leave equally grows after a couple of years. For children born in 2001 we only follow them until they are aged 7, and the children born in 2003 are followed until they are 5 years old. Nevertheless, the share of equal users increases and the final figures will likely be at least a little higher than this. So al-

most one tenth of Swedish parents have shared the leave equally between them by the time the child is two.

This way of showing the numbers indicates a development even from a low level. I would love to see similar figure on this for the other Nordic countries to discover if it reveals that conforming to the legislation is also hidden in the data.

So, to sum up, we have variations in policies between countries and we need to define these differences as they may explain differences in usage.

Mothers and fathers' leave use is at very different levels, but some factors seem to influence the usage in similar directions. For example, work situation seem to restrict and enable leave use in a similar way for mothers and fathers.

It is very difficult to compare statistics because of difference in policies, but also because of difference in the gathering and presentation of data.

We need to improve this situation so that we can learn from each other regarding both efficient policy reforms and illustrative ways of presenting the development in the take-up of parental leave.

PowerPoint presentation: [http://formennska2009.jafnretti.is/D10/_Files/Ann-Zofie%20Duvander%20and%20Johanna%20Lammi-Taskula.pdf]

6. Parental leave and gender pay gap – What, if any, are the effects of different systems of parental leave on gender pay gap?

Dr. Ingólfur V. Gíslason, Associate Professor at the Department of Sociology, University of Iceland.

The gender pay gap has for some decades been regarded as one of the most serious obstacles to the gender equality desired by the Nordic countries. Countless conferences have been held about the problem, reports have been written and studies have been made. And when one compares all that material on the one hand and the development of the problem on the other one is reminded of the old saying that when all is said and done, there is a lot more said than done. But within the realm of the research program presented here it is of course necessary to consider this problem and compare the gender pay gap with the different systems of parental leave and, on the whole, different care policies. But this is very much a work in progress and no conclusions will be presented, only ideas and suggestions.

Terminology is important here at the beginning. When discussing the gender pay gap 3 to 4 different concepts are in use. One refers to total earnings. This includes earnings on the labour market, capital interests and diverse public benefits such as economic compensation during parental leave, sick leave benefits and so on. Women's total earnings as percentage of men's total earnings are usually higher in the Nordic countries than their earnings in the labour market which shows that women depend to a higher degree than men on public benefits. Earning in the labour market is one of the factors commonly used to measure the gender pay gap. This purely shows the salaries paid to men and women within a given society. But most people would agree that it is fair to take into consideration the amount of time spent within the labour market i.e. that those working 40 hours should get more than those working 20 hours. So, the most common way to measure the gap is to take into consideration that men generally work longer hours than women in the labour market, then to divide the earnings by the hours so that we get an average hourly pay. And finally, when we try to measure the gap more specifically we often introduce other variables deemed to be important to explain the

problem away – such as education, responsibility, age and so on. Generally speaking, the more variables we use, the less pay gap we see.

If we use Iceland as an example, we see that the total earnings of women as a percentage of the total earnings of men were 69.2% in 2007. In the labour market, the gap is wider; women earn 61.2% of what men earn. And if we divide the working hours into the earnings, we see that women earn about 80.7% of what men earn. And when we finally introduce different variables studies often find a pay gap of around 14%, although the results vary considerably. Also, a few studies, made after the economic crash here in Iceland a year ago, have shown the gap diminishing so it's not all bad! These figures are very similar in all of the Nordic countries, the gap is somewhat wider in Iceland than in the other Nordic countries but there is no major difference.

One of the preliminary results of this study is that we sorely lack comparable data regarding the gender pay gap, and this is something that has been pointed out before, perhaps, most forcefully, in the Nordic project Evaluating Equal Pay, which published its report in 2006. And we lack historical data. But even though what we have may not be strictly comparable, we can see that the historical picture is roughly similar in the Nordic countries. So continuing with Iceland as an example, here is the development, on the one hand, for total earnings in the labour market, where we have data from 1980, and, on the other hand, earnings after taking working hours into consideration – but there we only have data from 1991. And the picture in the other Nordic countries is roughly similar. We see that the gap has been closing during this period. There is a slow but steady development regarding total wages up to the middle of the nineties, a rather sharp rise towards the close of last century and the beginning of this one, but the last years have been characterised by stagnation. When we look at the hourly wages we see a roughly similar picture, though the stagnation period begins sooner there. In Norway, to take another example, we see a similar closing of the total gap from the seventies up to 1992 where it began to flatten out. And the picture there, as regards hourly wages, confirms that there was a positive development up to the middle of the eighties, but relative stagnation since then – which leads to a slightly smaller gap in Norway than in Iceland.

We know a lot about what produces the gender pay gap. The main factor responsible for this situation is the gender segregation within the labour market and the accompanying fact that women are concentrated in jobs that pay far less than the jobs where men are concentrated. If we could loosen this segregation we would, at least to a high degree, have done away with the problem of the gender pay gap. Women dominate in care giving jobs and teaching, jobs that are also mainly within the public sector. This has historical reasons and that are tied to the traditional gender roles of women. When the married women, the mothers started to pour out into the labour market in the sixties and seventies, they first en-

tered jobs that could be seen as a continuation of the jobs that women have traditionally done in the homes: caring for children, the sick and the elderly and educating the children. This was probably because it could be regarded as *safer* to enter these jobs while working women were still something frowned upon and regarded with suspicion. On the other hand, these jobs were also mainly within the public domain, and social rights and benefits were better and more family friendly than on the private market.

This leads to the second reason for this segregation. Women chose jobs that were comparable with their traditional roles as housewives. They chose jobs where *part time* was an option and jobs that were cyclical in a similar way as schools. So they entered the labour market while still being housewives and choose jobs that gave them the opportunity to combine these roles. They were mainly in the public sector.

This is still a fact and is why the difference in men's and women's responsibilities within the families is listed here as the second factor explaining the gender pay gap. We have many studies showing that having a family with children has very different effects on men's and women's labour market careers. Plainly stated, the more children a man has, the longer hours he works and the better he is paid. The more children a woman has, the fewer hours she puts into the labour market and the less she is paid. If we could equalize the family responsibilities, the housework and the child care, AND allow that to be reflected within the labour market, we could eliminate around 20–25% of the gender pay gap.

Finally, there is what we could call blatant discrimination, where a woman is paid less than a man without regard for any variables except their sex. This is best illustrated by an historical example from Iceland: For many years, both men and women worked together there carrying salted fish or coals on stretchers with the man holding one end, and the woman the other. The women were only paid 50 to 60% of what the men were paid, even though it was obvious that the job was exactly the same. Such blatant discrimination probably still exists but this explains very little of the gender pay gap. In fact, the closer we come to comparing individuals, working at the same job, within one company, having similar educational background and similar responsibilities, the less likely we are to find any difference in the salaries.

So it appears to me that whether we look at the historical circumstances that lie behind the gender segregation of the labour market or the gendered life situation of today, it tends to boil down to the same thing. Namely, that the main cause behind the gender pay gap is the gendered division of labour in and around the family. We still have the general view in society that because women are mothers (or potential mothers) they are not as reliable in the work force as men. They cannot be counted on to be able to give the job high priority if needed. Therefore they are not as valuable as men on the labour market.

And of course we are not talking fantasies here. Women are not as active as men in the labour market due to engagements within the family. We know that they take the lion's share of the parental leave (and are met with hostility in society if they share equally with the father). We also know from time studies that they still do the majority of the unpaid jobs in the home, and also that they more often than the men take the jobs in the home that have to be done at specific hours or at a specific time and are therefore not as flexible as the men. And this shows in opinion polls among employers. We see them expressing the views that women as managers outperform men in some fields. They are for example seen to be better in human relations. But, and that is a major "but", they are also seen as more tied to the family than men, and not being able to work overtime if that is required.

And this fact concerning *women with families* spills over onto all women. Women as a group are regarded as primarily family oriented while men as a group are regarded as primarily work oriented. We also see this in the reactions of employers when men show themselves to be more family oriented than expected. Women lose out on pay and career opportunities when they take parental leave. But it is highly interesting to see that men who take long parental leaves lose even more than the women. The idea seems to be that the women really can't help it, but that the men have a choice – and choosing the family means that they are highly unreliable.

We have seen similar ideas in experiments. One Swedish experiment showed that women were less likely to be called to job interviews than men even though their CVs were exactly the same, only the names were different. In a similar vein, an Icelandic experiment showed that when people were put in the situation of deciding on salaries for a particular job, they invariably valued women lower than men even though their CVs were exactly the same. Again, what seemed to be the deciding factor was that women were thought to be less able to work long hours than men.

But it is interesting to look at the stagnation period that we have been experiencing in the last years in this light. For a number of things have been changing. Women's educational revolution has continued, and they are, on the whole, better educated than men. Women have also somewhat increased their time in the labour market, the percentage of women who work part-time has (slowly) been going down. And the men have also changed their behaviour in a number of ways. More fathers take longer parental leave now than before. Time studies in the Nordic countries show that men take about 40% of the housework. So, we should be looking at a narrowing of the gender wage gap, but we are not seeing it.

So, are there any solutions? Well, theoretically, we could give up all forms of parental leave. The neo-liberals favour that. After all, people freely decide to have children so why should the state interfere to help them there? Again, theoretically, it could lead to a situation where those

women who decided to have a child, either left the labour market or went back to work two days after having the child. That should lead to less anxiety among employers and to a narrowing of the wage gap. This is, though, a highly unlikely scenario. In the first place, this is not in line with discussions about what is best for our children. Secondly, there is always the possibility that the famous *maternal instinct* would get the better of the women so that they would give the family priority. So in all probability, they would still be regarded as more unreliable than the men. Thirdly, it would lead to a decline in fertility. Fourthly, it would lead to a great loss in human capital if well educated women left the labour market to become housewives.

Secondly, we have what the Nordic countries have generally been striving for, namely a more equal sharing of the parental leave between parents. And we have been moving in that direction even though we still have a long way to go. And it has been discussed for many years in the Nordic countries why parents don't share more equally, since it is quite possible. Often the discussions have tended to end in blaming the fathers, that they are not really interested in sharing. But many studies have shown that women (the mothers) are not particularly interested in sharing the parental leave. For many reasons, they want to take the greater part of the leave. It seems that here we are faced with a classic dilemma between what is best for a group and what is deemed to be best for (or by) individuals within that group. It would be best for gender equality (and therefore women in general) if parental leave was shared equally between parents. But the individual mothers that have to make the choice are not thinking about society's great goal of gender equality when they decide. They are thinking about the baby that they have given birth to and themselves and the relationship with the child.

So I really do not foresee an equal sharing in the near future. We can certainly design laws on parental leave that will work towards that goal better than other designs, but this will be a slow process and the labour market will be even slower to take notice.

And finally, there is the possibility of reversed roles, that we will see mothers returning to work two days after giving birth and the fathers leaving the labour market to become full time housefathers. And these certainly exists but not in any great numbers. And it is probable that we would mainly see this happening in families with highly educated mothers in high managerial positions. I really don't see it spreading much outside that tiny group.

But what to do if we want parental leave to work in the direction of gender equality and, hopefully, to a narrowing of the gender pay gap. There are many things to be taken into consideration.

We have to think about the requirements of the labour market which does not want to lose employees for a long period of time.

We have to consider the necessity of equalising parenthood and housework which calls for a period where the father is solely responsible for the child (or children) and the household.

There is the subject of breast-feeding which seems to indicate that the mother should be at home for at least 6 months.

The necessary physical restoration of the mother works in the same direction.

We know from a rapidly growing number of studies that it is good for the social and intellectual development of children to have close attachments to both its parents from an early age.

And finally, we have to consider the child's best interests, whatever that may be. But it is generally thought to mean that the child should be solely taken care of by its parents for at least 12–18 months.

So in conclusion, I would wager a guess that parental leave probably increases gender pay gap. It does so by allowing more women access to the labour market and is therefore good for gender equality in general. It is also very good for our children. But to answer the question that is at the head of this talk, we have so far no indications that one of the systems of parental leave in the Nordic countries is better than the others when it comes to the gender pay gap. But, as I stressed earlier, that does not mean that we cannot think of a system which would help to narrow the gender pay gap while also taking into consideration the requirements of the labour market and the importance of doing what is best for our children.

It would be very good for all involved if we could share more equally a relatively long parental leave, at least a year long. This is however, heavily resisted from many diverse groups.

And finally, I think that it is perhaps time for us to voice the thought that we have reached the end of the road in regards to the gender pay gap. That a society based on market economy will always tend to devalue women in the labour market due to their ability to have children, and that that devaluation is around 10–12%. But let's hope that this is a pessimistic thought.

Therefore it is quite possible that a parental leave system that would take women out of the labour market would contribute in a positive way to the closing of the gender pay gap as it would mainly take out those with weak connections to the labour market. But it would not have contributed to gender equality, quite the contrary.

PowerPoint Presentation: [http://formennska2009.jafnretti.is/D10/_Files/Ing%C3%B3lfur_V._G%C3%ADslason.pdf]

7. Child care policies – Is there a Nordic model of day care for children?

Dr. Guðný Björk Eydal, Faculty of Social Work, University of Iceland & *Dr. Tine Rostgaard* – SFI – The Danish National Centre for Social Research.

The conference presentation focused on the policies of Nordic child care, presenting the historical development and present day situation and the overall differences and similarities among Nordic countries in policy instruments and combinations thereof. The Nordic countries were compared to other OECD and EU-27 countries in the search for the Nordic model of child care. The presentation showed that even though there are important similarities among the Nordic countries there are also quite big policy differences; in particular the countries have chosen different policies on care support for younger children.

PowerPoint presentation: [http://formennska2009.jafnretti.is/D10/_Files/Gudny_Eydal_and_Rostgaard.pdf]

8. What is best for the children? – Care policies in a child perspective

Prof. Berit Brandth – Department of Sociology and Political Science, Norwegian University of Science and Technology, Trondheim

Convention on the Rights of the Child states that the best interest of the child shall be a primary consideration in matters affecting children. “The best interest of the child” is, however, a difficult concept which is marked by values, time and context. How is it handled in research? The contribution presented results from an ongoing inventory on Nordic research on parental leave and child care services that have dealt with the question of children’s well-being. Nations want their care policies to be informed by research, but studies using children’s perspective have been surprisingly scarce.

PowerPoint presentation: [http://formennska2009.jafnretti.is/D10/_Files/Berit_Brandth.pdf]

9. Workshop: Parental leave use in the Nordic countries & Parental leave and gender pay gap

Erla Sigurðardóttir

The workshop, which was moderated by Fríða Rós Valdimarsdóttir, began with the presentation 'Parental leave use from workplace perspective: Finnish experiences' where project leader, Dr. Minna Salmi, presented results from the study "Family Leave and Gender Equality in Working Life" which deal with the take-up and consequences of family leaves from mothers', fathers' and employers' point of view.

The organisation data was collected using a web survey; they received answers from 551 personnel managers representing organisations from 62 branches, both in the private and the public sector, as well as a survey of 1400 mothers and 1000 fathers with a two-year-old child. The structures of the organisations vary from sector to sector; private companies are mostly small and display relatively even personnel gender and age characteristics. State organisations are middle-sized and mostly male dominated, while the municipal organisations are big and female-dominated with older personnel.

Dr. Minna Salmi focussed on four issues:

- What happens to professional skills during the leave?
- What happens to position and career prospects?
- What are the main problems that organisations face when leaves are used?
- Would part-time leave and part-time work be a solution?

9.1 What happens to professional skills during the leave?

Neither personnel managers nor the employees themselves assess that employees' work performance suffers significantly during family leaves. A majority of personnel managers say that leave-taking has no effect on employees' professional skills. Some report that the skills are weaker after leave but almost as many find it difficult to evaluate. It is more often in the private sector and in small organizations that professional skills are

assessed as becoming somewhat weaker after leave. Assessments are critical most often if the organisations have much history of employees using long child care leave, or if the employee's tasks have undergone many changes. However, organisation with more experience with long leaves more often notice improved skills. One could also point out that changes in the organization or in the tasks during the leave would require employee retraining irrespective of the leave taken. So, this is not just a problem connected to leave-taking.

Then how do employees themselves assess the effects of leave use on their skills? Because men predominantly take quite short leaves it is understandable that a great majority of fathers report that leave take-up has no effect on their skills. But also roughly half of the mothers see no problems with their skills upon returning from leave. However, just as with personnel managers, the employers themselves often find it difficult to answer these questions.

Negative effects are more often reported by women with other secondary level education. On average, one out of five mothers think that their skills have suffered to some degree, while only one in ten find that their skills have improved. So, broadly speaking, we can say that the employees themselves and employers' representatives seem to assess the effects of leave use on employee's skills in a rather similar manner – the majority of both groups see no dramatic effects. However, we also hear reports that women shorten their family leaves out of fear of lagging behind and missing out on developments in their profession as working life demands grow harder.

9.2 What happens to position and carrier prospects?

Half of the mothers and a large majority of the fathers believe that being on family leave has no adverse effect on their position or career prospects at work. However, one in four mothers reports that their career prospects have suffered irrespective of their educational level. The reports of negative effects are more common among women who work for the state, while municipal employees are less pessimistic in their reports. Private sector employees fall into the middle. Women state employees are also more often than women employees in general to think that their professional skills have suffered during the leave. These findings are interesting because personnel managers in the private sector more often than in the public sector find that there were changes in employees' tasks and that employees have difficulties adjusting after their leave. The assessment of the state employees might be explained by the findings in the The Quality of Work Life Surveys which show that employees in the state sector often show less satisfaction with their superiors' leadership than they do in other sectors.

Women have negative experiences connected with fixed-term employment (which is more common in Finland than in most other European countries) and this is especially the case among women in the family building phase of their lives. One in six women reported that their employment contracts ended when they took maternity leave. Mothers under 30 years of age had experienced this more often than others, as well as mothers without any vocational education and mothers with academic education. Fixed-term employment contracts in Finland are especially common in the public and state sectors. Fathers' assessments of the effects of leave use on their career prospects vary in a different and rather interesting way. Men that work in female dominated organisations more often than men working in other sectors assess that their position had become weaker. This is a bit bewildering because men are often thought to be rewarded for their active parenthood, especially by women.

Family leaves are not very common in the everyday life of many Finnish work places. In a majority of organisations, even the most usual leave, women's maternity and parental leave, had been taken by only few employees during the past two years. In one in five organisations no employee had taken leave. In a third of the organizations, several employees had lately been on different forms of leave. Besides maternal and parental leave, women had also been on child care leave rather often in a third of the organisations. However, it was just as common that no employee had taken a long care leave during the past two years.

9.3 What are the main problems that organisations face when leaves are used?

In Finland, the public debate on family leaves from the organisations' point of view has concentrated on the issues of expenses of leave take-up for the organisations. It was, therefore, interesting to discover that personnel managers did not single out expenses as the main problem. Expenses only rated fifth on the list of problems.

More often problems are reported concerning access to key employees, finding and training substitutes and reorganising tasks. The size of the organisation plays a role in the estimations. Clearly, small companies more often than large ones find that family leaves create problems. However, the order of importance of the problems remains the same. Moreover, only one in four organisations considers the problems to be severe. But structural features of the organisation also play a role here. Access to key employees, finding substitutes and expenses of leave use are more often assessed as very problematic in private sector organisations, in small organisations, and organisations with female dominated and young personnel.

But when all these factors are analysed simultaneously in logistic regression, the most important factor proves to be the size of the organisation. The probability of assessing expenses as very problematic is five times higher in small than in big organisations. But at the same time, small organisations are those who, more often than others, have no experience of family leave during the past two years. So the evaluation of problems connected to the leaves is not always based on their own experience but is hypothetical.

9.4 Would part-time leave and part-time work be a solution?

The Nordic Countries have quite varying traditions of part-time work. In Finland, there is a strong tradition of fulltime work with only 12% of women working part-time. And the main reason for part-time is not child care but rather that fulltime work is not to be found.

For a few years now, the Finnish leaves scheme has offered the opportunity of taking leave on a part-time basis. Since 2003, parents have had an opportunity to take a part-time parental leave. This option is only available if the parents share the leave. Their employers also have to agree with this arrangement.

After the parental leave, the parents can choose a combination of care forms. A partial child care leave can be taken from the end of a parental leave until the end of the child's second year at school. The idea of the part-time leave seems ideal from a gender equality perspective. It gives both parents a chance to learn to be parents while maintaining their position in the labour market thus keeping up their professional skills and securing their contact with the workplace. From women's point of view, this solution is good because it lessens the risk of their becoming second class employees – which often arises from their predominant use of the family leave. Part-time leave could promote more equal sharing of both care responsibilities and unpaid housework. The child would benefit from a stronger relationship with both parents. With part-time work and part-time leave arrangements, work organisations would not lose their key employees. But Finnish parents are not interested in this option – only a small minority takes advantage of both part-time parental leave and partial child care leave.

Who uses part-time leaves and why are they not popular? We have no findings concerning part time parental leave because the group using it is so small that it is impossible to be studied on a survey basis. But regarding the partial child care leave, we again notice that education makes a difference. We see that women with academic education more often than others choose the partial child care leave. Young mothers might not be able to choose this option because they more often have no permanent

employment contract. Also, not having a job at all often rules out the option of part-time child care leave for mothers. But highly educated mothers and fathers also frequently reported the nature of their work as inhibiting partial child care leave, while other fathers emphasised economic factors. Moreover, mothers often prefer fulltime leave, particularly during parental leave.

In spite of the low take-up of part-time leave, one out of three mothers and almost one in four fathers of 2 year-old children said that they would be interested in part-time work. They are hindered from realising this interest because of family economy. Half of the mothers and most of the fathers give this reason for not taking part-time work and even more often if they have low education. One in three mothers and one in four fathers consider the part-time option not possible in their line of work. This reason is more often used if the parent has a higher education. These parents either suspect that their workload would remain the same while the payment would be lower, or they find that rearranging their tasks on a part-time basis would be problematic. One in five mothers thinks that she cannot choose the part-time option due to the small supply of this type of work within their branch.

Work organisations, as well as parents, find part-time leave arrangements problematic. Of the 550 organisations studied, a clear majority assess that offering part-time work is, at least to some extent, difficult. Difficulties are connected to reorganisation of tasks, finding and funding extra employees. These assessments are, in a mixed way, connected to the structures and features of organisations. Experience in using part-time work seems to explain the assessment variations. If part-time already belongs to the repertoire of the organization's working time, a majority of the organisations say that it is quite easy to arrange, and conversely, if the organisation does not have experience with part-time work, it is likely to find part-time solutions difficult. There is also some variation in assessments concerning the main problems connected with part-time work. Task rearrangement is most often mentioned in public sector organisations as well as in middle and large-sized ones. Finding extra employees is difficult in female dominated organisations and funding the extra employees are problems of small private sector organisations. So it seems that both parents and organizations find that arrangements with part-time child care leave and part-time work are problematic. Employers' central organisation in Finland is not willing to encourage any arrangements which may lead to less amount of work being done and they suspect that this would be the case with part-time leaves. Employees have often taken the opposite point of view; they suspect that they would do the same amount of work for less pay. The parents seem to choose "on – off" options; either they choose fulltime child care leave, or they choose day care services and full time employment. So, my conclusion is that a wider use

of part-time leave arrangements is not probable in the near future for Finland.

The next presentation – *Paternity leave – A rational choice?* – was given by research fellow Kolbeinn Stefánsson, University of Iceland Centre for Social Research. His main interest is how to increase men's interest in taking their share of the available parental leave. Last year he was hired to provide some editorial assistance for a book – *Equal Rights to Earn and Care – Parental Leave in Iceland*.

The conclusions of the book start with the observation that when it comes to men's use of parental leave in Iceland, 1/3 of parental leave is being used by men. Iceland was apparently succeeding rather well with that part of the parental leave earmarked for the fathers. For the most part, with some variations, men used the part that was earmarked for them. Stefánsson was completely confused by this enthusiasm about the men's 33% use of parental leave. At the same time, he was disappointed by the fact that men were not really using their shared impact, and he saw this as a sign of a pro-family mentality in Iceland. On one hand, Icelandic men appear to be quite enthusiastic about their entitlement, using almost all of that which is earmarked for their use – on the other hand they use nothing of their shared entitlement, which signals a lack of enthusiasm in the whole thing.

An important issue is how we can get men to use more of their shared entitlement. A lot of the debate focuses on how to fully integrate women as breadwinners into a market economy that can be regarded as a dual breadwinner month. Stefánsson found this peculiar, and he pointed out a largely ignored idea, traced back to the American political theorist, Nancy Fraser, who believed that we should be aiming for a dual carer month. She felt that we should all be working a little less – a good idea in Iceland where there is high employment for both men and women and very long working hours.

Being a rational choice theorist, most of Stefánsson's work pokes at the theory's behavioural assumptions just to see what breaks off. There are three particularly interesting assumptions in this context. First of all, human being's review is atomistic; we are not employees in any way by social structure or context. This makes it quite easy to regard choice as free. Whatever people choose, they choose freely, and incidentally gendered occupational choices and choices concerning use of time in home and workplace, become completely irrelevant. A good example of how people perceive this is given by the English sociologist Dr. Catherine Hakim who argues quite forcefully that women actually choose to be the caretaker rather than the earner. Alternatively, we see human beings as selfish; whatever we do we, do it for ourselves. This began sometime in the 1920s as a simplifying assumption of economics – that if we assume that people are completely materialistic, the entire human society is derived from the buying and consuming of goods. Accepting this means

that we do not have to worry about measuring happiness or well being, we can simply observe people's wealth to know whether or not everything is OK.

Now, this motive actually provides a perfect explanation for why men do not use their shared part of the entitlement, i.e. because the government pays 80% of a person's income. Even though men tend to have higher incomes, it will prove to be very bad for household economies if men take more than their share. So, the rational thing for the household to do is to take the lower earner, (usually the women) and to take as much as she can from the leave. We have no motivation for men to take their part of the parental leave, but if they don't, someone must then take care of the child. So, either the woman leaves work completely, earning nothing, or you forced to provide child care. If you have the "dagmömmur" (baby-minders), type of family child care, you have to pay a considerable monthly fee, and it can also be very difficult to obtain. Behaviour and economics deal with assumptions of rational choice theory – like this idea of the endowment effect. We value something simply because we have it – and we value it more than if you are forced to pay for it. For example, if you value a \$3 cup or mug more as a gift than you would if you simply went out and bought it – you'd naturally place a higher price on it – like \$5. So, looking at it this way, men simply use their part of the entitlement because they feel it was given to them.

Apparently, it seems that we should take a look at the women's part of the entitlement. It used to be that only women had parental leave – they had six months. At some point this changed and essentially made three of these months shared, thus seemingly encroaching upon their entitlement. So, women might have also had an endowment effect regarding the shared entitlement. However, what is really interesting to a sociologist is the idea of gender essentialism, the idea that women are, for some reason, fundamentally different from men. This is an idea we tend to associate with backward societies and for good reasons. But if you believe that men and women are essentially different, you will get very different conclusions about what equality entails than if you don't. Icelandic people tend to be quite equalitarian when it comes to gender, but they also tend towards gender essentialism. We can manipulate choice by offering financial incentives which is what new classic economists and new liberals tend to think. We actually must try to influence how people view gender and this is not just the idea of gender role, and gendered division of labour. I remember that briefly, during the morning sessions, discussions concerning the idea that women are particularly vulnerable just after child birth and that six months are the minimum women require to fully recover. I think this is probably so in some cases, but it does smack of recent trends that socially label pregnancy as a kind of illness or dysfunction.

Back to gender essentialism. An international survey from 2002 regarding families and gender roles showed that women want to stay at

home with the children. The answers place us in a group with Chileans, Brazilians, Slovaks, Filipinos, Hungarians and Bulgarians. We are not really used to thinking of ourselves in these terms, and we tend to think that men and women are fundamentally different. Stefánsson comes from very progressive, educated social circles and didn't know anyone like this, but then he moved to the countryside! The large part of the idea of gender essentialism is that it is a sort of parental gift with child and parenthood. We have a set of questions, asking whether women should work in different stages of their family life. There is a widespread idea that women actually should reduce their work once they have had children and should not really assume fulltime work until the children have left the home. It is an interesting bias here that should be pointed out. There are no parallel questions such as: should men work? Or: Is what men want really a home and children? It could be interesting to see parallel responses.

We should be considering these aspects when we follow the policy. It is important to have realistic ideas about the situation people are in, how people are motivated etc. If we want to increase men's participation in the household, especially through taking their share of the parental leave, we have to look not only at financial awards but also non-financial and emotional awards. We have to be very mindful about financial constricts. By separating the idea of well being and money, we cannot comprehend the idea that sometimes people choose things that are bad for themselves, bad for their children because the financial situation demands they work more, or because they need their earnings to pay up their debts and mortgages – this is particularly true in Iceland and will probably become truer in the foreseeable future.

Finally, one of the most difficult things about social theory is to be able to formulate ideas of social norms that can operate externally of the people involved. So to conclude, Stefánsson always thought it would be simple enough to raise replacement rate to the 100% level. But given the idea of the gender essentialism in Icelandic society, we have to look simultaneously at replacement rate and financial incentives of the situation as it is today.

Dr. Solveig Bergman, director of NIKK, Nordic Gender Institute asked whether the Nordic parental policies are a success story – and if they are – who benefitted? When we look at the Nordic countries from the outside, we have, undoubtedly, come very far. And if we look at the European Union's goals for early child care, all Nordic countries have approached or gone beyond the goals set up by the European Union. The question is whether we have now reached (or are on the way to reaching) the women friendly welfare state that the feminist Norwegian political scientist, Helga Hernes stated 20–30 years ago as her goal. Today, we might modernise this goal a little bit. Instead of a *women friendly welfare state* most of us would probably talk about a *gender-equality friendly*

welfare state, allowing for the other sex. But whether we are, in fact, approaching this goal, this utopia, and just how far along the road we have come, is a source of dispute between scholars. Gender equality is still only partially realised in family and care policies, and some Norwegian scholars talk about the *gender equality light* in the Nordic countries. That is our special model; Gender equality light. Most of us would probably agree that some progress has been made, particularly compared with other countries of the world. But which parents, which mothers, which fathers, are we talking about? We need to differentiate between different groups of women, mothers, men and fathers. Their interests and needs in the Nordic countries today are no longer homogeneous.

And we also must give voice to the newcomers in our societies regarding these issues. The question is what family forms are recognised in established family and welfare policies. The Nordic Gender Institute (NIKK) finalised a report in 2009 dealing with the so-called rainbow families. I.e. families where both parents are women or men, where there is only one or are more than two parents, and different types of new family forms. This was a highly interesting enterprise, e.g. to look at how family legislation in individual Nordic countries is changing.

After this exercise with the rainbow families, we should also increasingly focus our attention on migrant families, ethnic minorities, and the minority groups in our societies, from a family policy point of view. I believe we need to discuss challenges facing the Nordic model in general, and the so-called women friendly state which have been created by migration and multiculturalism. It is important to draw attention to how not all women fare equally in our women friendly Nordic states. There is a need to embrace women, men and families, from all the different ethnic and religious backgrounds, and to discuss which family values and parental models should be given political priority in a multi-ethnic society. These are sensitive, controversial, and complex issues made even more difficult due to the lack of relevant data. The little we do know, e.g. in Norway, tells us that migrant families use public nurseries less than other families. Why is it so? Do migrant daddies use the daddy leaves, the daddy quotas that many of our countries have introduced? And if not – why not – is this an issue we should discuss?

In Norway, there is a whole year benefit – *kontantstøtte* – the right for parents to stay at home with their children until they are three years of age. The problem e.g. in Oslo is why Norwegians with ethnic backgrounds do not use (or very seldom use) this homecare benefit – this *kontantstøtte*. 80% of those who use this *kontantstøtte* in Oslo are citizens with ethnic backgrounds other than white Norwegian. Is this a problem? It is not! But for many in Norway it touches issues concerning integration, teaching children the Norwegian language before going to school, etc.

Instead of the concept of family policy, maybe we should invent another concept – in Swedish we talk about *samlivspolitik* – and try to go beyond the traditional notion of a family. Kristín Ástgeirsdóttir was the only person among today's presentations who mentioned the future challenge that is already here – an ageing population and what that will mean for us as we deal with family political issues. This is certainly something that we have to come back to very soon.

Dr. Solveig Bergman mentioned the challenges for further comparative Nordic research on parental policies. Diversity in these issues – are we also able to tackle that? Her second point (and it relates to the first one) was her belief that this project has been doing a marvellous job! She was fascinated by all these comparative statistics knowing that, even in the Nordic countries, it is difficult to compare figures.

One hears about and expects comparative statistics problems of this sort in the European Union and in the United Nations, but it is amazing to see these difficulties arise amongst the Nordic countries with their well established and long-term statistical central offices.

Dr. Bergman concluded that we need to continue with this kind of research, comparing take-up rates, policy models, etc. At the same time she had been pondering all this and some questions beg for discussion – like why do we have so many interesting differences on these issues and what are the possibilities for future discourse.

10. Workshop: Child care policies – What is best for the children?

Arnar Gíslason, Equal Opportunities Officer at the University of Iceland

With our focus very much on children and child care, various angles were explored in this workshop, not least of which being recent developments in how child care is set up in the Nordic countries and indications of an ideological shift in terms of how children and childhood are viewed. There are signs that our expectations of child care have changed, and – in line with principles of life-long learning – expectations of outcome and skills development are now quite apparent. This begs the question as to whether such changes will truly benefit the children themselves. In our discussion of cash for care schemes, it was noted that there is a massive difference in who stays at home – in an overwhelming majority of cases, it's the mother. We explored similarities and differences between countries, and discussed the merits of one of the main arguments for the cash for care scheme, that the approach is in the best interests of the children. We also discussed how ethnic minority families are affected by these changes, and the expectations that their children must now meet. All in all, it was a session charged with information and interesting thoughts on recent developments in the field.

This particular workshop, moderated by Jón Gunnar Bernburg, associate professor at the University of Iceland, began with a presentation by Professor Randi Dyblie Nilsen from the Norwegian Centre for Child Research, entitled 'A departure from Nordic child-centred ideology towards childhood as future investment and preparation? Some reflections from Norway on *barnehage* policy and practice'.

Professor Nilsen discussed the ideological shift that appears to be happening in Norway, as well as in the other Nordic countries, with regards to the role of child care centres, such as the *barnehage* (essentially, the Nordic-model kindergarten). This shift entails a move from Nordic child-centred ideology – where emphasis is on play and interaction, child-adult relations, the development of the *whole child*, and on recognizing that children and childhood have an intrinsic value – towards quite a different ideology where child care is viewed more as an investment in the future (of the children, as well as the nation itself) with the aim of preparing the child, e.g. for future education and working life. In other words, the *barnehage* may stop to be a place of *being*, with its reference point in the

now, and move towards something more of a training venue – a place of *becoming*.

Professor Nilsen demonstrated how this shift has been playing out at policy level, and how the discourse has changed significantly (e.g. children referred to as *learners*, and *barnehager* and young children spoken of in terms of *life-long learning*). She also discussed how the *barnehager* is viewed as a place where ethnic minority children are expected to learn and increase their Norwegian language skills, as a means to enable integration and equip the children with the skills considered necessary when they start attending school.

In conclusion, professor Nilsen raised the question of whether this shift, and the changes it entails in terms of child care policy and practice, is actually something that children will benefit from.

The next presentation, 'Attitudes towards childcare and other family policies in Iceland', by Þóra Kristín Þórsdóttir, lecturer at the University of Akureyri in Iceland, focused on child care and schools from a different angle. Þórsdóttir presented the findings of a recent survey, conducted shortly after the economic crash in Iceland.

Her respondents were in general quite supportive of the welfare state, both in terms of the importance of public services such as schools and day care as well as in terms of how well such services were managed in Iceland.

More than 9 out of every 10 participants felt that the public sector should: provide day care for all children that needed it (97%), take care of the ill (99.5%), and provide the unemployed with agreeable living standards (93%). However, when asked whether the public sector should provide immigrants with agreeable living standards, somewhat fewer people agreed (77%).

The survey asked specifically about how schools and kindergartens should be paid for. 84% felt that schools should be free for all, and 9% felt that this service should be partly paid by some users, but only 7% felt that this service should be partly or fully paid by all users. When it came to kindergartens, the results were less clear-cut, as 24% felt such services should be free for all, 40% felt they should be partly paid by some users, and 34% felt they should be partly paid by all users (only 3% felt that kindergartens should be fully paid by all users).

When asked whether public spending should be increased or decreased with regards to kindergartens and day care, parental leave & families with children, more women than men appeared motivated to increase spending in these areas and more men than women seemed motivated to decrease spending. For example, 27% of men thought that the public sector should spend more on parental leave, as opposed to 46% of women, and 18% of the men thought the public sector should spend less on parental leave, but only 10% of the women.

