Take-up of leave

Information provided in country notes on take-up of leave has many gaps, making systematic cross-national comparisons impossible. Mostly, there is no information on take-up of unpaid leave and limited information on paid leave, except for occasional survey data. There is the further question of what proportion of parents are eligible for leave, where again there is no consistent and comparable information. Eligibility conditions vary between countries and types of leave, making cross-national comparisons even more difficult. Ineligibility may be related to self-employment, temporary contracts, other conditions related to prior employment history or the exemption of smaller employers from leave policies. The absence of good comparative data on eligibility and take-up not only makes cross-national comparisons impossible: it also makes it impossible to compare the situation of different socio-economic groups within and across countries, for example access and use of leave by different income, social class and ethnic groups and by workers with different employment statuses; and to make proper evaluations of different leave policies. Mostly, only broad generalisations are possible; much less can be said about the relationship between leave use and individual, family or workplace diversity.

Generally speaking, paid Maternity leave appears to be extensively and fully used by mothers who are eligible; in many cases, it is obligatory to take part or all of the leave.

EIRO (2004)1 conclude that “the available figures show a relatively significant take-up rate for Paternity leave.” This conclusion is borne out in the country notes: two-thirds or more of fathers are reported to take paid Paternity leave in Denmark, Finland, France, Sweden, the Netherlands and the United Kingdom.

Where Parental leave is unpaid, as in Ireland, Portugal, Spain and the United Kingdom, there are no regular statistics on use, but take-up is thought to be low by both mothers and fathers (i.e. irrespective of gender, few parents take leave schemes that are completely unpaid). For instance, in Spain in 2013, 28,038 people started some period of Parental leave, which corresponds to 6.6 per cent of the births in that year and only two per cent of children under three years old. While in a 2012 survey in the UK, only 11 per cent of parents with a child under six years reported taking Parental leave.

Where leave is a family entitlement only, fathers’ use is low (i.e. where leave can be shared between parents, fathers take only a small proportion). However, where Parental leave has both an individual entitlement element and is relatively well paid, fathers’ use is higher – though not equal with use by mothers. This can be seen in the three Nordic countries in this study, where Parental leave meets these two conditions:

Iceland: In 2011, 83.7 per cent of fathers took a period of leave (paternity and/or parents’ joint rights) for every 100 mothers taking some leave, and fathers took about a third of all days of leave taken by parents (an average of 91 days leave compared to 176 for mothers). Overall, 15 per cent of fathers took some of the parents’ joint rights, and 39.7 per cent took less than their three months of designated Paternity leave; 95 per cent of mothers took some period of parents’ joint rights while 1.1 per cent used less than their three months.

Norway: With every expansion of the father’s quota, fathers have increased their uptake the following year. During 2012, 21 per cent of the fathers took exactly 12 weeks (60 working

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days), compared with only 0.6 per cent in 2011; the ‘father’s quota’ increased from ten to 12 weeks between these two dates. In 2013 fathers took 46 days Parental leave on average, and in 2014 49 days. The sharable Parental leave is for the most part taken by mothers and has in practice become a Maternity leave. In 2012, only 15 per cent of fathers took any of this part of Parental leave (i.e. in addition to the father’s quota).

Sweden: The great majority of fathers of children born in 2004 (88.3 per cent) took Parental leave at some stage before their child’s eighth birthday, mainly starting when their children were 13 to 15 months of age. Fathers of children born in 2003 took on average 91 days of Parental leave during the eight years they could use the leave, and mothers took 342 days. In 2011, 44 per cent of Parental leave benefit recipients were men, compared to 56 per cent who were women, though on average mothers took 95 days and fathers 37 days during that one year. So mothers still take most Parental leave, although the proportion of total days used by men has slowly increased: in 1989, fathers took about seven per cent of all Parental leave days used in that year; by 2013, it had increased to about 25 per cent.

While Denmark presently does not have a father’s quota, in the period 1998-2002 a quota of two weeks with benefit or full pay depending on the work contract was in place. Recent analysis of register data of Parental leave take-up among more than one million fathers in the period 1990-2007, show that the introduction of the fathers’ quota had a clear effect on fathers’ take-up of leave. Although the length of the quota was relatively short, not least in comparison with other Nordic countries, it had a significant effect on fathers’ take-up: from 12 per cent of those becoming fathers in 1997 to 36 per cent of fathers in 2001, when at its height. From 2002, following the ending of the quota, there is a drop to 22 per cent of fathers. Interestingly, the number again begins to slowly increase after 2002. This development suggests that fathers increasingly take Parental leave, regardless of whether or not there is a legislated father’s quota. The hypothesis is that this is partly due to the introduction of father’s quota arrangements in some of the labour market agreements, which started to set in as of 2003. Another reason is believed to be the cultural shift in (male) attitudes to fatherhood and in men’s role in childcare for the young child, which the introduction of the father’s quota may have encouraged or at least supported.

In all four Nordic, mothers continue to take more leave than fathers. The difference is greatest in Denmark, where statistics from 2010 and 2011 show that Danish fathers on average only took 7.2 per cent of the Parental leave period, followed by Norway, where fathers accounted for 18 per cent of Parental leave days taken in 2011, and Sweden, where fathers take about just under a quarter of all days (24 per cent) in 2011. The greatest share of paid leave taken by men, 33 per cent, is in Iceland, with its 3+3+3 leave scheme; mothers take both their individual entitlement and the greater part of the family entitlement.

These figures can be viewed from different perspectives – as reflecting how care continues to be strongly gendered or as reflecting a gradual shift towards men taking more responsibility for care. The most significant changes in fathers’ behaviour seem to be taking place in Iceland and Sweden, where leave-taking has begun to move beyond a month.

It is also striking that fathers’ use of leave does respond to policy changes. The example of Norway has already been given, but other countries also illustrate this point;:

Finland: the number of fathers taking the father’s month increased from 1,700 men in 2002, the year before the introduction of the bonus scheme for fathers taking at least two weeks Parental leave, to 17,625 in 2011. However, only 2.5 per cent of fathers took a longer period of Parental leave in 2011; and the average length of leave of fathers who do take Parental leave has fallen, from 64 working days in 2002 to only 19 in 2011.
Germany: The 2007 Parental benefit reform had the explicit aim to raise the take-up of leave by fathers and recently published data by the Federal Statistics Office\(^2\) show that the proportion of fathers taking parental benefit has risen significantly and steadily since its introduction in 2007. Parental benefit was taken up by 31.9 per cent of fathers of children born in the second quarter of 2013, i.e. recipients between April 2013 to September 2014.

Iceland: with the extension of father-only leave from 2001, the average number of days of leave taken by men in Iceland has more than doubled (up from an average of 39 in 2001 to 103 in 2008).

Portugal: the five-day Paternity leave (introduced in 1999 and made obligatory in 2004) was used in 2000 by 11 per cent of fathers, increasing to 27 per cent in 2002 and to 36 per cent in 2003. The proportion of fathers taking this leave subsequently increased by about two per cent per year, to 45 per cent in 2007 and 2008 (take-up is underestimated as these statistics exclude employees with special social protections regimes, e.g. civil servants, bank workers). The same trends may be observed for the 15 additional Paternity leave days, also introduced in 1999; the proportion of fathers taking these days has risen from 4 per cent in 2001 to 37 per cent in 2008.

The same trends may be observed since 2009, when ‘Paternity leave’ became ‘father-only Parental leave’ and ten days became obligatory. Take-up of leave increased to 56 per cent for the ten compulsory days and 47 per cent for the additional ten days. In 2010 and 2012 take-up increased again, first to 62 and then to 68 per cent for the ten compulsory days; and to 52 and then to 58 per cent for the ten optional days (percentages based on the number of fathers who take leave in relation to the number of estimated births for 2012). If, again, take-up is calculated in relation to the total number of Initial Parental leaves granted, then the proportions in 2012 increased to 81 per cent for the ten obligatory days and 69 per cent for the ten optional days.

Data on take up of the new ‘initial Parental leave’ (replacing Maternity leave), which also came into effect in 2009, points to an increasing take-up rate of the ‘sharing bonus’ by parents. In 2012, 75,553 initial Parental leaves were granted and take up of the ‘sharing bonus’ (at least 30 days) increased to 22.3 per cent of these leaves; in other words, 16,848 fathers stayed at home for 30 or more consecutive days, on their own, during the five or six months of total ‘initial parental leave’.

Québec: take-up of leave by fathers was already higher in 2004, with 22 per cent of fathers using some leave compared with nine per cent elsewhere in Canada. The Paternity and Parental leave scheme, introduced in 2006, has had a substantial impact on fathers’ participation: in 2006, 56 per cent of eligible fathers in Québec took a period of Paternity and/or Parental leave, rising in 2011 to 84 per cent; in the rest of Canada, take-up of Parental leave by fathers was 11 per cent.

Sweden: the proportion of leave days taken by men in Sweden doubled between 1997 and 2004, with the introduction and then the extension of a father’s quota, though the doubling to two months had a less dramatic effect than the initial introduction of a quota.

It is noticeable from these examples that the pace of change varies between countries. This may reflect a number of mediating factors, for example the design of policy (e.g. level of payment, flexibility of use) and possibly also the socio-cultural climate (e.g. levels of awareness about gender equality, extent of support for change in gender roles).

All these examples are of paid leave. The importance of payment can also be seen in Catalonia, where there was a strong take-up by public employees of a scheme that enabled parents to reduce their working hours when they have a child under one year without loss of earnings. Nearly a quarter of parents who used this option were fathers. This scheme was ended in 2012 as a result of budget cuts.

As noted earlier, there is little information on take-up among different socio-economic or ethnic groups within countries. Where it exists, it points towards women being *less likely* to take Parental leave, or to take it for shorter periods, if they are: self-employed; work in the private sector; higher educated; and/or higher earning. Fathers are *more likely* to take leave or to take it for longer periods if: their partners have higher education and/or earnings; if they work in female-dominated occupations or the public sector; or if they are higher educated.

To summarise on take-up:

- Unpaid or low-paid leave of whatever kind has low take-up;
- Leave specifically for fathers (e.g. Paternity leave, fathers’ quotas in Parental leave) is well used if paid at or near income replacement level;
- Fathers take only a small portion of Parental leave that is a family entitlement;
- Leave is used differentially not only by women and men, but by parents with different education, income and employment both individually and in relation to their partners – the impact of leave policies, therefore, is not uniform.