



Nordic experiences with parental leave and its impact on equality between women and men

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Nordic co-operation on gender equality

The main goal adopted for Nordic co-operation on gender equality is to promote the further development of a united Nordic approach to the issue and a common Nordic platform, within the framework of broader European and international co-operation. Co-operation measures must make a contribution to the programmes implemented at national level in each of the five Nordic countries, adding to their impact and enhancing their results. Gender equality aspects must be implemented in all areas of society and in the areas covered by the Nordic Council of Ministers' own programmes and projects.

Nordic co-operation

Nordic co-operation, one of the oldest and most wide-ranging regional partnerships in the world, involves Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Norway, Sweden, the Faroe Islands, Greenland and Åland. Co-operation reinforces the sense of Nordic community while respecting national differences and similarities, makes it possible to uphold Nordic interests in the world at large and promotes positive relations between neighbouring peoples.

Co-operation was formalised in 1952 when *the Nordic Council* was set up as a forum for parliamentarians and governments. The Helsinki Treaty of 1962 has formed the framework for Nordic partnership ever since. The *Nordic Council of Ministers* was set up in 1971 as the formal forum for co-operation between the governments of the Nordic countries and the political leadership of the autonomous areas, i.e. the Faroe Islands, Greenland and Åland.

Preface

This report examines the development of laws on parental leave and offers comparisons of the experiences derived from the differing laws of the five Nordic countries: Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Norway and Sweden. The report is based on information from various individuals as well as book and article sources on the subject.

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1. Introduction

This report was compiled for the Nordic Council of Ministers. It deals directly with the laws that govern parental leave in Denmark, Finland, Norway, Sweden and Iceland. The report characterizes the various countries' parental leave laws from a historical perspective in order to examine the laws' outcome. It is also concerned with identifying ideas that will help make the laws more effective to better serve as tools in the fight for equality.

Parental leave has a long history. At the outset, people were mainly concerned with the health of the mother and child. The laws that govern parental leave in the Nordic countries have been amended regularly over the years, but the greatest change took place when the concept of paternity leave became a reality. In part, paternity leave has attained a special standing, which the report will explain and because of which paternity leave will take up somewhat more space in this report than maternity leave. The special considerations related to paternity leave are mostly a result of its political nature.

The first parental leave laws were naturally quite politically charged, because they improved women's opportunities for paid work outside the home. The politics of paternity leave, however, is of an entirely different nature. It is no exaggeration to say that paternity leave is a radical measure in the context of gender equality. The intent of the law is two-fold: first, the measure clears a way for men into the home, a kind of platform from which to jump in further, so that they can become more involved in the upbringing of their children. In that sense, fathers are getting a unique opportunity to form close connections with their children starting at birth – a connection that, it is hoped, will continue and develop through the years.

A second aim of the measure is to create a more gender-equal labor market. As fathers, with the help of paternity leave, increasingly occupy a presence in the home, it becomes easier for mothers to re-enter the labor market after childbirth. It is also believed that when men take the same length of parental leave as women, it will help make the labor market more gender equal in terms of opportunities, as the "cost" of childbirth is distributed more equally among men and women.

In a nutshell, paternity leave can help calibrate the position of women and men in the home and the labor market. As opposed to the way it is often characterized, gender equality is really about balance, and it is for that reason that we can claim that paternity leave represents a huge step on the road toward a more gender-equal society.

Each of the Nordic countries has chosen its own, individual approach in organizing paternity leave. This offers an array of different methods for study and comparison to determine if one approach has perhaps served better than others. We will discuss the variations that make the Nordic countries different from one another in paternity leave regulations in order to identify best practices. We will also discuss issues that seem to prevent paternity leave from attaining the goals that are set for it.

Before proceeding, we should note that the parental leave laws analyzed in this report assume 'parents' to mean one woman and one man in all cases. This is not always true, but it seems that legislative authorities take for granted that this represents reality for everyone. Since those laws are the subject of this report, the discussion may be affected to some extent by that underlying assumption.

2. History of parental leave laws

Nordic urban societies were engaged in active development during the 19th century. As people began to move to the cities, the labor market changed radically, and as industrialization gained ground, women began to work in the professions. Before, women's main responsibility was to take care of the home, which they did at the same time as they cared for children, who also began to contribute in domestic tasks at a very young age. It became difficult for a woman entering a profession and working outside the home to also take care of her children. Most working mothers took their children along to the workplace or had older children or relatives look after them while they themselves were at work. The newly evolved situation required that changes be made for women who worked outside the home and who now needed certain rights in the labor market that had not been necessary for men.

2.1 The first parental leave laws

The first Nordic laws regarding parental leave were instituted around 1900. The laws were intended to meet the needs of women who had entered the labor market. They only affected women who worked as wage-earning workers in factories, and they merely required that employers not allow women to work in the first few weeks after giving birth. Different countries had different regulations regarding the length of that period. There was no compensation for time not worked.

Table 2.1 The first parental leave laws¹

	Denmark	Finland	Iceland ²	Norway	Sweden
Year	1901	1917	1946	1892	1900
Length	4 weeks	4 weeks	–	6 weeks	4 weeks
For whom	Women in factories	Women in factories	–	Women in factories	Women in factories

Parental leave as we know it did not exist. Today, people are protected against termination when they take advantage of parental leave, and receive compensation for their wages while on leave (Olsen 2000, 68). The first laws were enacted primarily to combat infant mortality. The aim was

¹ Olsen 2000, Bjørnson & Haavet 1994, Haataja 2004.

² Iceland had no comparable law. The country took the first step in 1946, but chose a different direction, to be discussed later.

also to protect the health of the mother and the child and strengthen the connection between working mothers and their children (Brandth & Kvande 2003, 62).

Although the first laws only granted rights to women working in factories, gradually laws were passed to include other professions with female workers and to lengthen the period of leave permitted.

Women who worked outside the home came from various social classes. Most were single mothers, poor, or married to men who were unable to work (for example, see Olsen 2000, 76).

Many other women worked outside the home, but their work – in temporary positions, such as magazine delivery or cleaning persons – was often not considered an actual source of income for their families. In the early 1900s, parental leave laws in Denmark, Finland, Norway and Sweden favored poor women, since factory work was meagerly paid. It was only several decades later that most working women were able to benefit from parental leave.

2.2 Parental leave and concerns about declining population figures

In the first decades of the 20th century, all of the changes enacted in parental leave laws were guided by the principle that it was necessary to protect the health of mothers and children. The law was also discussed in connection with concerns among the authorities in most European countries about declining population levels in that part of the world.

In the 1930s these concerns led to establishing committees in Denmark, Finland, Norway and Sweden to monitor the situation within those sectors and find solutions to the problem. Some countries held the view that women's paid work was contributing to the declining population figures, as women who worked outside the home were not able to take care of as many children as previous generations only working within the home. There were debates about whether women's access to the labor market should be curtailed, instead of creating regulations, such as parental leave laws, that made it easier for women to work. The idea was scrapped, and the rest of the work was never completed, as it was interrupted by the Second World War (see, for example, Olsen 2000; Bjørnson & Haavet 1994).

2.3 Job security for new mothers and pregnant women

As pointed out earlier, parental leave laws were targeted at women, to protect the health of the mother and the child, and to provide mothers leave from work and time for rest after childbirth. It was emphasized that

for women to be able to work outside the home, they required different conditions. Circumstances were often difficult for women, because the work safety conditions that had been designed for men were not suitable for women.

It can be argued that employers have used their power over the labor market to deepen the gender divide by dividing the genders into two groups with women taking care of reproduction and with men in charge of production in society (Olsen 2000, 72).

Pregnant women and women who went on maternity leave were frequently fired because of their family responsibilities. Trade unions focused on men and did nothing to safeguard women against this type of discrimination (Olsen 2000, 76). Sweden was the first of the Nordic countries to prohibit the termination of pregnant women or women on maternity leave. It took several more years until the rest of the Nordic countries followed suit and forbade such termination.

Regulations that prohibited the termination of pregnant women or women on maternity leave were based more on women’s rights than on the idea of protecting the health of the mother. The same principle guided changes in other comparable laws (Olsen 2000, 76).

Table 2.2 Prohibition to terminate employment³

	Denmark	Finland	Iceland	Norway	Sweden
Year	1989	1971	1987	1977	1939

2.4 Maternity leave becomes a reality

Between 1946 and 1964 the Nordic countries enacted laws on maternity leave and the payment of benefits to new mothers. The laws meant that wage-earning working women were safeguarded and received payment and a leave of absence immediately following childbirth. The legislation of different countries varied somewhat, including the sums that were paid as compensation, and some countries had special criteria that women had to meet⁴. According to the first maternity leave laws in Iceland and Sweden, women could not use any part of their maternity leave before birth, while the other countries allowed it. All Swedish and Finnish women had the right to maternity leave regardless of whether they were employed in the labor market or not. Neither Denmark, Iceland or Norway offered such a possibility (Haataja, 2004). Parental leave legislation was oriented in the health of mothers and children, but the law also brought improvements to women in terms of their independence and financial responsi-

³ This refers to a prohibition against terminating a woman’s employment in the event of pregnancy, maternity leave or time at home due to a child’s illness.

⁴ Discussed later in this chapter.

bilities, particularly in Sweden and Finland, where the laws applied to all women.

Table 2.3 Maternity leave⁵

	Denmark	Finland	Iceland	Norway	Sweden
Law on maternity leave	1960	1964	1946	1956	1955
Length (weeks)	14	14	14	10	12

2.5 Women's labor market participation

After 1960, when the number of women in the labor market had multiplied, various opinions proliferated in the Nordic countries regarding whether men should continue to be considered as being responsible for providing for the family, or if the model should be that each family had two providers. The greatest conflict between the two viewpoints was whether housewives should then be paid, or if the goal should be to have both parents employed and arrange for public day care for children and better support for parents who were employed (Bergquist, Kuusipalo & Stykárssdóttir 1999, 138).

The arguments that were used to advocate for having children at day-care centers were oriented in pedagogical concerns suggested that the good, old way of bringing up children had become old-fashioned and out of date. In Sweden, the argument for paying stay-at-home mothers was guided by the principle of giving women the right to choose whether they wanted to work or stay at home (Bergquist, Kuusipalo & Stykárssdóttir 1999, 139).

In Finland, other viewpoints prevailed. Women there had long been an important part of the country's labor force, for example in agriculture and industry, and it was less common for men to be the family's sole earner. But the economic stability that settled in Finland around 1960 helped bolster the view that Finland, unlike the other Nordic countries, should promote the role of men as providers, a system that was common in other European countries. This viewpoint was part of the country's great social modernization scheme, which saw women's participation in the labor market as a sign of an impoverished and old-fashioned agrarian nation (Bergquist, Kuusipalo & Stykárssdóttir 1999, 145–146).

Women's participation in the labor market in the Nordic countries had, nevertheless, become an undeniable fact, and it became therefore necessary to offer public day-care and financial assistance to parents, so that both parents were able to earn wages *and* take care of their children. The Nordic women's movement fought for women's freedom and right to

⁵ Laws referred to here are not comparable in all situations, but they are compared here because of their many similarities.

paid work outside the home. Child-care services and parental leave became part of Nordic gender equality politics, and both were connected to the idea of a properly functioning welfare system. New changes to laws were no longer solely concerned with the health of women and children but also with women's rights and with improvements in child rearing and education.

Although for decades the prevailing attitude in the Nordic countries has been that public day care is the best option for children, it is only recently that all children have the right to attend a day-care centre. For a long time, access to day care was restricted on the basis of the parents' position in the labor market and their marital status (Guðný Björk Eydal 2000, 107).

3. Fathers as parents

There have been two different approaches in terms of granting the same right to parental leave to men as to women. Some countries have assigned fathers their own period of parental leave, or the parents have together been assigned an amount of leave time to share amongst themselves. Sweden was the first country in the world to give parents a portion of shared leave and therefore also the first country to grant fathers the right to stay at home with their small children. This happened in 1974, when parents obtained the opportunity to a seven-month parental leave to be shared by both parents. Next, fathers in Norway (1977) and Finland (1978) obtained the right to a two-week paternity leave following the birth of a child. In Denmark, a law was enacted to provide fathers with the right to two weeks of leave as well as a shared period that both parents could take together simultaneously, but this occurred slightly later (1984) than in the other Nordic countries. Iceland enacted a law in 1981 to make it obligatory for women to use the first month of maternity leave following childbirth, but thereafter left it open to the parents to decide how the two remaining months of parental leave would be divided, as long as the arrangement had the mothers approval.

Table 3.1 Paternity leave and joint parental leave (number of weeks)

	Denmark	Finland	Iceland	Norway	Sweden
Paternity leave	1984	1978	1998	1977	1980
Length	2	2	2	2	2
Joint parental leave ⁶	1984	1980	1981	1987	1974
Length when law was enacted	28	37	8	33	24

In 1990, a provision was written into the parental leave legislation of each Nordic country to give both parents the right to parental leave. There were, however, major differences in the length of time allowed and portion of the total amount of leave parents could divide between themselves. Iceland had the shortest total shared parental leave period, at six months, while the longest was in Sweden, where parents had the right to 12 months. The shared portion of parental leave was shortest in Denmark, whereas in Sweden it was 100 % (Haataja 2004).

⁶ The portion of parental leave that parents can divide.

Each Nordic country has gone its own way. Many nuances are the same in terms of the general direction that the countries have chosen, but there are many differences. We will discuss each country's history from a legislative perspective, including everything from the first laws on parental leave to the laws that govern us today.

3.1 Denmark

Denmark's first parental leave law was enacted in 1901. The law allowed for a non-paid time period during which it was illegal for a mother to work. It applied to the first four weeks following the birth of a child. The law concerned women who were employed by the industry and worked in factories. It was possible to gain an exemption from the law and return to work sooner, but this required a statement from a physician willing to certify that neither the mother's nor the child's health would suffer from this. Economically strapped mothers could seek social assistance without loss of their citizen's rights. The law only applied to 10 % of women working outside the home (Hansen 2003).

Eight years after the law's enactment an evaluation was carried out to find out how the law worked in practice. It came out that adherence to the law was poor. The reason, among other things, was that women could not afford to be without pay for four weeks. The law was criticized by various organizations that argued that women were looked down upon when they sought social assistance, that working women were unaware of their rights, that the rest period following childbirth was too brief, and that women could not afford to be without pay (Hansen 2003).

In 1913, women who paid into special funds for illness or assistance received financial help during the rest period following childbirth. Within a few years, the law also encompassed many gainfully employed women as well as those working in service occupations, as teachers, and as public officials employed by the authorities. Gradually, women were able to stay home for a greater number of weeks after giving birth to a child (Hansen 2003).

In 1919, women who worked in the public sector obtained the right to half-time pay during maternity leave, but the same right was not extended to women working in the private sector. The compensation was paid out over a maximum of six weeks, but women were permitted a leave of absence of up to 3–6 months without pay (Hansen, 2003). Fourteen years later came new labor law regulations, stipulating that all female wage earners had the right to sick-time pay during the first fourteen days following childbirth. In the intervening years, some trade unions were also able to secure increased maternity rights (Olsen 2000, 73).

There are at least two examples in Danish law of the traditional way of viewing men as providers. The first instance, from 1919, is included in

the unemployment law. It states that assistance to providers and the child allowance is to be paid to unemployed fathers but not to unemployed mothers. Another example can be found in the Danish tax law from 1922, which classifies married men, but not women, as providers, regardless of whether or not a couple has children. In this way, the law and the situation that prevailed in the labor market gave men, with or without children, better rights than women both in terms of taxes and wages (Olsen 2000, 70).

The Commission on Population Issues, addressing the problem of the population decline that had begun in the early 1900s, filed a report in 1935, which was to serve as the foundation for legislative changes. The proposal characterized women primarily as mothers and housewives, but not as wage earners. The emphasis was on maintaining and promoting the existence of the traditional family model, ignoring the existence of single mothers, who represented a growing group. While improving the status of women one way, there was no intention to improve their status in the labor market; rather, the law would create opportunities for women to assume the responsibility for the family, as was consistent with their role (Olsen 2000, 74). The Danish Parliament debated the legislative proposal but never enacted it into law. The proposal for the first law in 1938 on permanently employed workers (both in the public and the private sectors) included a clause concerning parental leave, but it was removed when the law was passed, on the basis of a request by the Commission on Population Issues (Hansen 2003).

The 1960 law on maternity leave granted women the right to 14 weeks of leave and compensation in an amount comparable to the sick-time allowance, a fixed sum (Hansen 2004). It also became possible to begin the leave eight weeks prior to the expected date of birth. The law applied to all employed women, and also housewives were entitled to two weeks' pay. Certain occupational groups had succeeded in attaining greater rights to parental leave – for example, women in the public sector had the same rights as all permanently employed women (including both the public and the private sectors). It was also forbidden to terminate female employees within nine months of giving birth as long as they had informed the employer of their pregnancy more than three months before the expected date of the child's birth (Olsen 2000, 84).

When women began to be receive pay while on maternity leave, it became much easier for them to work outside the home. The restructuring of the welfare system carried out soon after 1960 sought women's contributions in care work and various other public sector occupations. The maternity leave legislation quickly became out-dated, as women required greater flexibility when having children. Critics of the law attacked the length of time that it was possible to be on leave before the birth of a child. Women whose jobs required heavy physical work needed to take the majority of their maternity leave in the last weeks of pregnancy. Be-

sides, women were not safeguarded against termination during pregnancy and maternity leave, which compromised their job security and went against the prevailing climate of the times (Olsen 2000, 85).

According to a re-evaluation of the maternity leave law commissioned by the state of Denmark, the main focus remained on the health and well-being of mother and child. It was felt that the law worked in accordance with its objectives, and that, hence, there was no need to change it. In 1980 a minor amendment was passed to stipulate that the right to leave was extended so that in the event that women used some of the leave prior to giving birth, that time would not be deducted from the 14 weeks that everyone was entitled to following the birth of a child (Hansen 2003).

In 1984 the right to parental leave was extended from 14 to 20 weeks, and parents were permitted to use six of those weeks between themselves. Fathers were granted their own two weeks of leave after the child was born, and this time period was not deducted from the length of the woman's maternity leave – although fathers only had the right to compensation if the mother was a current wage earner, whereas all women were entitled to compensation (Hansen 2003).

In 1989 a new law was passed that prohibited the termination of women on the grounds of pregnancy and also forbade employers from terminating any parent who was on parental leave because of a newly born or adopted child. In the same year, officials in the public sector were granted the right to a longer period of parental leave and a compensation that was comparable to the wages they had been earning before the leave. Mothers were allowed eight weeks before the expected date of birth (this was deducted from the total time allowed) and 24 weeks after the child was born. The last ten weeks could be distributed between the parents as they wished (Hansen 2003).

Since 1991 Danish fathers have had the right to compensation during paternity leave, regardless of their partner's employment status. When paternity leave was first created, the intention was to give parents the opportunity to be at home together with their children the first six-month period of the child's life, because it was thought important for both parents to care for their children at an early age. The guiding principle was that this would make it easier for women to go out into and remain in the labor market, particularly women of child-bearing age. But for a long time, any discussion in Danish Parliament about men's rights in the home was not especially prominent (Olsen 2000, 92–93).

It did emerge, however, in discussions of the law, that it would be important for fathers to have a more extended paternity leave, to have an opportunity to establish a closer connection to their children. Some even argued that mothers should not be permitted to dominate so completely over child care, with fathers being sent back to work after just 14 days, but

this viewpoint did not gain acknowledgement in the legislative process (Drews 2003, 15).

In 1997 Danish fathers were granted an additional two weeks of leave in weeks 25 and 26 of the leave period, which could not be signed over to the mother. This right was taken away in 2002 (Bergman 2004, 235).

Denmark's high unemployment rates in the early 1990s spurred the government to further legislate child care in order to minimize official unemployment. According to the law, parents were entitled to one year of leave before the time of the child's ninth birthday, a law that only applied to working parents. This required sanctioning on the part of the employer, as well as hiring a temporary employee to fill in and manage the parents' work responsibilities during parental leave. This type of leave was compensated with 80 % of the current unemployment benefit. Danes did not take advantage of the law partly because they lost the right to a guaranteed spot at a day-care centre once the period of leave was over, if the child was less than six years of age. Moreover, the compensation was considered too low. In addition, hiring temporary replacement workers was probably not very popular among employers, particularly in the private sector (Olsen 2000, 98).

Even though the law on parental leave did not function exactly as the authorities had intended, it was retained and patched up with various amendments. The legislation continued to address unemployment, but also to minimize waiting lists at day-care centers. The new law eliminated the demand for replacement workers, but children between the ages of three and six remained outside the official day-care system during the parents' leave. As before, the compensation was 80 % of the unemployment allowance (Olsen 2000, 100).

The entitlement was reduced to 70 % in 1996 and to 60 % a year later. The year 1995 saw the highest rate of usage of the leave system, both among mothers and fathers – fathers comprised 8.6 % and mothers 91.4 % of the parents who took advantage of the leave system. The number of people taking the leave declined in tandem with the dwindling of the compensation, and in 1997, only 7 % of the men who had the right to parental leave took advantage of it (Drews 2003, 23–24). The law was finally repealed upon the enactment of the new 2002 law (Dews 2003, 12).

Since the first legislation on caring for children was enacted in 1964, it has been considered important to guarantee each child a day-care spot in Denmark's public day-care system, rather than pay for parents to stay at home to care for their children. The welfare of the child dictates this arrangement, but consideration is also now given to the needs of the labor market (Guðný Björk Eydal 2000, 108). Children are entitled to all-day day care, and there are many different care options for children under three. All of this makes it easier for parents to return to work after parental leave ends (Greve 2000, 93).

Existing legislation on childbirth and parental leave was adopted by the Danish Parliament in March 2002 and was enacted that same year. The legislation aims for an open and flexible leave system, where mothers and fathers can freely decide how to divide the leave. The law affords women four weeks of leave before the expected birth of the child. Mothers are required by law to take the first two weeks following the birth of their child off from work and are entitled to 12 additional weeks.

Mothers thus have the right to a total of 18 weeks of leave. Fathers are entitled to two weeks, which must be used before the child reaches 14 weeks. Beyond these earmarked weeks, both parents are entitled to up to 32 weeks of leave from their jobs, but each is only entitled to financial compensation up to a total of 32 weeks.

Parents have the option of extending the 32 weeks of shared parental leave up to 40 weeks, if they work part time simultaneously and are able to take their parental leave together. It is also possible to save five weeks of leave for later use, though it cannot be used after the child turns nine years old. Thus, full compensation is capped at a total of 52 weeks (Drews 2003, 11–12).

3.2 Finland

Finnish women have long occupied an important role as providers for their families, working both in agriculture and industry. It was less common in Finland than in the other Nordic countries to have only one provider in the family (Bergqvist, Kuusipalo & Styrkárssdóttir, 1999, 145). In fact, after 1919 married women no longer had to obtain a spouse's permission to earn wages outside the home (Haataja 2004).

The first law to prohibit women from working as a result of childbirth was passed in 1917 and applied to women who worked in factories. The law gave women four weeks of leave, to be taken immediately following the birth of a child. Two years later, in 1919, women working in shops, offices and the official public sector were granted the same rights in the form of six weeks of leave without pay following the birth of a child. No information is available about the extent to which women utilized such rights (Haataja 2004).

In 1922 a new law was ratified that prohibited the termination of women during maternity leave. A total prohibition to terminate women on the basis of pregnancy and birth was adopted in Finland in 1971.

Economic wellbeing in the early 1960s spurred discussions about whether to adhere to the model that prevailed in other European countries, in which the man is the sole provider in the family. The fact that married women were also wage earners was seen as an indication of the country's poverty and of being out of step with the times. Ideas about stay-at-home mothers' pay emerged, but never materialized into reality,

and instead, women's labor market participation kept growing (Bergquist, Kuusipalo & Styrkársdóttir, 1999, 146).

In 1964 Finland adopted a law on maternity leave. The law applied to all women and provided a fixed allowance for women who were unemployed as well as a percentage of their wages to women working outside the home. Women were entitled to three weeks of leave before and six weeks of leave following the birth of a child. In 1971 the maternity leave was extended to three months. It was possible to use the first month before the child was born and take the two remaining months afterwards (Haataja 2004).

Men in Finland did not become eligible for parental leave until 1978, when they were granted two weeks upon the birth of a child. The two weeks were deducted from the total leave of the mother, and few men took advantage of it (Haataja 2004). In 1991 fathers were given a kind of bonus in the form of their own individual right to parental leave. The period was extended to three weeks, but this resulted in a two-week reduction in shared parental leave. Starting in 2003, fathers are also entitled to a kind of extra leave: if the father uses at least two weeks of shared parental leave, he has the opportunity to take off two more weeks. These two weeks can be taken in the last two weeks of the total amount of shared parental leave, but only if the mother has already returned to work (Bergman 2004, 235).

Since 1985 parents in Finland have been able to earn a special home-care allowance while staying at home with their children, until the children reach the age of three. The authorities have not invested in improving the overall child-care system, with the result that parents with children under the age of three have had few other options than stay at home to care for their children (Haataja 2004).

Finland's current parental leave law allows for a total of 44 weeks, four of which are earmarked for the father and 12 for the mother. Mothers can go on leave up to eight weeks before the child's expected birth. Shared leave can be up to 23 weeks and parents themselves can decide how they want to divide those weeks. Parents are not permitted to save a portion of the leave for later use, but must use all of it at one time (Haataja 2004).

Since 2003 parents have also had the opportunity to work part time during parental leave, although the rules require that both parents are able to reach an agreement with their employer to only work 40–60 %. Parents are not eligible for the general child-care allowance while on parental leave. Single parents can therefore not use this benefit, nor can it be used to extend the length of the leave (Haataja 2004). Women who are employed in occupations that can harm their own or their child's health may extend the period of leave taken before the child's birth (Haataja 2004).

3.3 Iceland

In some ways, Iceland has been a special case, when comparing the country's parental leave laws to those in other Nordic countries. For one thing, the laws were enacted quite late, and Iceland has always been slower to follow in making improvements and amending legislation. It was only in 1946 that a so-called birth allowance was introduced (Guðný Björk Eydal 2000a, 436). The law made all women eligible for the fixed-amount allowance. Furthermore, working mothers gained the right to an additional compensation over three months; however, married women could only receive that amount in the event that their husband was unable to provide for the family (Guðný Björk Eydal 2000a, 436). The law was amended in 1950 to eliminate the additional assistance to working women. The birth allowance was to approximate the amount of money that mothers needed to pay for childbirth at a hospital. In those times, health and hospital care were free of cost, but because having children was not considered a health condition, women were asked to pay for the assistance that they received at the hospital during birth. Guðný Björk Eydal (2000) asserts that the law only contributed to giving women the right to give birth without paying extra for health and hospital care (114–115).

In 1954 women who worked for the state obtained the right to three months' pay during maternity leave. Individual trade unions achieved the same benefit for some privately employed women, but the overall impact of the law was not as significant as had been expected (Guðný Björk Eydal 2000a, 437).

These laws were important, however, because they indicated how necessary it was that women receive financial assistance during maternity leave. It took until 1975 for working women to receive the right to paid maternity leave, when the law governing unemployment assistance was amended to give women three months of maternity allowance (Guðný Björk Eydal, unpublished).

In 1988 a law was passed that stated each woman's right to three months of maternity leave and six months of maternity allowance. According to the law, women who worked at home had the right to one-third of the allowance earned by women who were employed outside the home (Guðný Björk Eydal 2000a, 438). The total compensation was made up of the birth allowance, which was a fixed sum, as well as "birthday assistance" in an amount that depended on the mother's position in the labor market. The amount was bound to the number of hours that the mother had worked in the last 12 months prior to the expected date of the child's birth (Bergquist, Kuusipalo & Styrkársdóttir, 1999, 155). The amount paid out during the leave was no longer defined as an unemployment allowance, and mothers' allowances were now paid out by the general insurance system. At the same time as the law was enacted, it also became illegal to fire women while they were on maternity leave (Þorgerður

Einarsdóttir & Gyða Margrét Pétursdóttir 2004, 20). According to the law, the mother could transfer to the father her own right to parental leave 30 days after the birth of their child (Bergquist, Kuusipalo & Styrkárssdóttir, 1999, 156).

In 1986, a committee was established to look into the parental leave system. It came out with a proposal for gradually extending parental leave to six months. This proposal was adopted, but otherwise the system of parental leave has remained largely unchanged since 1980–1999, apart from improved parental rights to care for prematurely born or sick children, as well as new rights for married fathers in 1998. The latter change to the law stipulated that at some point during the first eight weeks after the birth of a child, the father was allowed two weeks of leave. In the event that the father did not avail himself of this right, it could not be transferred. Only those men who were married or cohabited with the mother of their child were entitled to paternity leave (*Lög um breytingu lagaákvæða um fæðingarorlof nr. 147/1997*).

The method of payment for parental leave allowances was complicated during the period of 1980–1999⁷ or at least until the current law was enacted in 2000. As the law now stands, the allowance can be a maximum of 80 % of the wages of the mother or father. There is also a minimal amount paid to parents who are students, part-time employees or unemployed. Some employers pay the 20 % difference, including, for example, banks (Confederation of Icelandic Bank and Finance Employees 2005). The payment comes out of a special parental leave fund financed through an insurance that all employees are required to have by law (Act on Maternity/Paternity Leave and Parental Leave, No. 95/2000, as amended by Act No. 90/2004). In 1992 a cap was established for the maximum permissible amount of parental leave allowance, at ISK 60,000 per month, with a total maximum amount of ISK 480,000.

Since 1954, there are differences between the rights of public sector employees versus those of private company employees. Up until 1997 men who worked in the private sector were able to take parental leave if the mother transferred part of her own leave to her partner, and he was then also eligible for financial compensation. If the mother was employed by the public sector, the father had no right to compensation, and moreover, if he was employed by the public sector, he had no rights, neither to parental leave nor to compensation (Þorgerður Einarsdóttir & Gyða Margrét Pétursdóttir 2004, 21).

The law on public child care was adopted in 1973. It emphasizes the provision of child care services as opposed to paying parents to stay at home to care for their children (such regulations have never existed in Iceland). For a long time, single parents and students had no alternatives to public day care. Other children had the right to a part-time day-care

⁷ One could almost say that payment rules have changed very little (apart from the amount that is paid) since the law was passed in 1946.

slot (Guðný Björk Eydal 2000, 112). This system has been in effect for quite a long time, but in recent years the availability of day-care slots has increased, most of them full-time spots (Landshagir 2002).

Today, parents in Iceland have the right to a total of nine months of parental leave, divided so that the mother and father are each entitled to three months of leave that is non-transferable to the other parent⁸. The remaining three months can be freely divided between the parents. The leave time must be used before the child is 18 months old. The mother must be on leave for the first two weeks following birth. Parents without custody are entitled to leave if the parent who does have custody of the child agrees to it (Act on Maternity/Paternity Leave and Parental Leave, No. 95/2000, as amended by Act No. 90/2004).

Parents must inform their employer how and when they want to use their parental leave. People can either take the entire leave at once, or divide the time into shorter periods of no less than two weeks each as long as agreement with the employer is reached. If the employer does not accept a parent's request, the employer must provide a written statement as to the reason why and a proposal for how to proceed. Parents have the right to take their leave in such a way that they reduce their time at work and take out part of the leave time while they work, until the child reaches the age of 18 months (Act on Maternity/Paternity Leave and Parental Leave, No. 95/2000, as amended by Act No. 90/2004).

In addition, parents also reserve the right to unpaid leave in order to be at home with their children, which represents a new development in Icelandic legislation. Each parent has the right to 13 weeks of leave, which becomes void unless used prior to the child's eighth birthday (Act on Maternity/Paternity Leave and Parental Leave, No. 95/2000, as amended by Act No. 90/2004).

The 2000 law brought about a total overhaul of Iceland's childbirth and parental leave system. Until the present law the system had been complicated, making it difficult for parents to obtain a clear understanding of their rights. When a special clause regarding paternity leave was included in the law, it was the first time that equality between the genders was given serious consideration, including the right of a father and his child to shared time together and the right of both parents to be able to combine work and family responsibilities.

3.4 Norway

Norway was the first Nordic country to pass a law prohibiting women from working immediately following childbirth, albeit without any financial assistance. The year was 1892, and like similar laws in Denmark,

⁸ Fathers obtained their rights in increments, starting with one month in 2001, two months in 2002 and finally three months in 2003.

Sweden and Finland, applied to women in industrial jobs, who worked in factories. The maximum leave was six weeks, but with a statement from a doctor stating that the health of the mother and child was found to be good, women could return to work four weeks after giving birth. Starting in 1909, all women began to receive a small compensation during maternity leave, and new mothers got the right to take all of the six weeks of leave prescribed in the law. Six years later women obtained the right to cease working four weeks prior to the expected date of birth (Björnson & Haavet, 1994, 126–127).

A law passed in 1915 stated that factory employers could not deny women the right to breastfeed their children during working hours. This, like the rule that prohibited women from returning to work immediately after giving birth, were aimed at minimizing infant mortality. In addition, a rule was introduced that a heated room had to be provided in all factories with 10 or more female employees. According to Björnson and Haavet, in their book *Langsomt ble landet en velferdssamfunn* (Slowly the country became a welfare society) (1994), organizations representing employers did not like such rules, and the arrangement that would have enabled women to feed their children was never implemented in real life. Gradually, however, employers acknowledged women's right to breastfeed their children during working hours, and by 1936 it was common practice to give women at least two 30-minute breaks each day to feed their children (ibid. 127).

Paid parental leave was presented in Norway as part of a process of strengthening the national health insurance system. In 1956 gainfully employed women earned the right to 10 weeks' paid leave. The leave was extended to 12 weeks in 1971, and six years later to 18 weeks. In 1977 Norwegian men got the right to stay at home for two weeks after the birth of their child, at a pay to be determined in agreement with their employers. Gradually, in the course of the 1990s, the leave-time pay was increased, and so was the length of the leave itself. In 1993, it became possible for mothers to go on their maternity leave three weeks before the expected date of birth, and in the same year Norwegian fathers got their own month-long leave that could not be transferred to the mother. Norway was the first country to grant this right to men.

A law concerning public child care was passed in Norway in 1975 – other Nordic countries already had similar laws. Norway had placed less emphasis on the universal right of all children to day-care compared with Denmark, Iceland and Sweden. Access to day-care centers has been fairly restricted and the focus has been to provide part-time day-care slots primarily for children three years and older (Guðný Björk Eydal 2004).

Norway currently operates under a system of cash assistance that was first implemented in 1998. Within this system, when children are not sent to a day-care centre, parents can receive pay for remaining at home and caring for them. The financial compensation is the same as that paid by

the state for each child in public day-care centers operated by the authorities. Parents are also entitled to financial compensation if the child only uses the public day-care system on a part-time basis, and the amount of the compensation is determined by the time spent by the child at the day-care centre (Þorgerður Einarsdóttir & Gyða Margrét Pétursdóttir 2004, 14). The reason for this system is that the state wants to give parents the opportunity to share as much time as possible with their children, increase the freedom of choice available to families, and to balance out the compensation paid to parents regardless of what type of child care works best for each parent (Þorgerður Einarsdóttir & Gyða Margrét Pétursdóttir 2004, 15).

In 1999, 63 % of children whose parents were receiving financial compensation were at home with a parent, while 37 % were cared for by someone else. The first data on the system showed that parents who were receiving compensation did not work less, and in 96 % of the cases it was the mother who took advantage of the system. The cash assistance system therefore contributes to the maintenance of traditional gender role models both in the labor market and the home (Þorgerður Einarsdóttir & Gyða Margrét Pétursdóttir 2004, 15).

The total amount of parental leave that Norwegian parents are entitled to currently is 42 weeks. The financial compensation is calculated on the basis of their wages, based on the last 12-month period preceding the birth of the child. The period of parental leave can be extended up to 52 weeks, but only at 80 % of a parent's wages. All mothers are entitled to compensation, but a father's right to leave depends on whether the mother was working at least six of the 10 months preceding the birth of the child. The financial compensation for fathers on parental leave is calculated on the basis of the duration of the mother's employment, not on the basis of how much the father himself worked before the child was born (Brandth & Kvande 2003, 65).

Parental leave is divided in such a way that mothers are able to go on leave up to three weeks before the expected birth of the child, and six weeks following childbirth are earmarked for the mother. The father is entitled to one month, which, as mentioned earlier, is non-transferable⁹. Beyond that, parents can divide amongst themselves either 29 weeks with full pay or 39 weeks with 80 % of pay, and they must inform their employers of the arrangements no less than four weeks before the expected birth of their child (Brandth & Kvande 2003, 65–67).

In 1989 the law stated that parents could work part time and receive reimbursement for the income difference (a so-called 'time account'). This system was intended especially to encourage fathers to combine work and paternity leave (Brandth & Kvande 2003, 66). Beyond the

⁹ Fathers were entitled to two weeks of leave immediately after the birth of the child, but this time was not included in the total leave time, because fathers had no right to financial compensation. Conversely, fathers are often paid by their employers, even when they are not legally entitled to assistance from general trade union funds (Brandth & Kvande 2003, 65).

shared block of parental leave time, each parent has the right to up to one year of leave of absence from work without pay, per child (Brandth & Kvande 2003, 65).

3.5 Sweden

In 1900 a law was passed in Sweden to prohibit female factory workers from working in the four weeks after giving birth. It was only in 1913 that women began receiving financial compensation while on maternity leave, but only if they had been making payments into a health insurance fund. This system stayed in place until 1932 (Olsen 2000, 75).

There was a lot of opposition to women working as wage earners in Sweden in the early

1900s. For example, women were prohibited from working night shifts in factories, because it was thought that it was harmful to women and their children. In 1932, new laws were enacted that stated that women who paid into health insurance funds were entitled to special mother's assistance as well as compensation for payment to a midwife.

Mother's assistance was the same amount as the sick-time assistance paid out by the health insurance funds. The state continued to pay part of the amount back to the health insurance funds. Mothers who were not members of such health insurance funds were eligible for compensation from the state that was comparable to the amount paid back to the health insurance funds by the state¹⁰. In 1932, the longest possible period of maternity leave for women not paying into a health insurance fund was 30 days (Olsen 2000, 76).

The leave was extended to three months in 1937. The compensation amount was also increased slightly, but remained quite small. Then, two years later, the period of leave was increased to four and a half months. At the same time, women working in the public sector were granted the right to full compensation for their wages (Olsen 2000, 76).

A total prohibition to terminate women's employment on the grounds of pregnancy or maternity leave or staying at home to care for a sick child was enacted into law in 1939. Also, women who suffered health problems during pregnancy could apply for state assistance in the event that they needed to take time off from work. The maximum amount of leave was extended to six months in 1945, but the 1931 system of payments remained in effect (Olsen 2000, 76).

Maternity leave was introduced in Sweden in 1954 and applied to all women regardless of whether they were gainfully employed. Women became entitled to three months of financial assistance out of the six months of maternity leave that they could take. Women also received a

¹⁰ It is clear that this sum only amounted to a portion of the compensation paid out by health insurance funds to "their women".

fixed amount paid out over three months, as well as additional compensation for each child already born. Eight years later the amount of the compensation was increased, and women were paid for all of the six months of leave. The compensation was 60 % of the wages they were earning before pregnancy. They were also eligible for free dental care during pregnancy and for nine months following childbirth (Olsen 2000, 77).

Since the interwar period, there have been numerous discussions in Sweden as to whether men should bear greater responsibility for the home and for children. Some in the Swedish Parliament have asserted that because women and men have the same opportunities in working life, the same should also apply to family life and caring for children. The parental leave system of the first half of the 20th century focused on equality between the genders, including the development of shared parental leave that took into account three primary factors: concern about declining birth rates, a need to encourage women to participate in working life, and a desire to free men from their traditional gender roles (Haas, 1992, 19). Swedish fathers were the first in the Nordic countries to have the legal right to parental leave, obtained in 1974, when the law regarding shared parental leave was introduced. They were also the first to obtain the right to stay at home for up to 10 days to care for a sick child. Two years later the law was supplemented with a rule that parents could extend their leave by working part time while on part-time parental leave. In this way, Sweden was also the first country in the world to give parents the opportunity to be on part-time leave and stay at home to care for sick children (Haas, 1992, 20). According to the law, as of 1974, parents could divide seven months of leave between them, and the compensation was raised to 90 % of previous pay. Women were granted the right to take off up to 60 days before the expected date of birth, regardless of whether the father had taken time off. The father could also take a 10-day leave after the birth of the child (Olsen 2000, 83).

Since the 1980s, Swedish authorities have tried to provide all children with the opportunity to be cared for at a day-care centre, and parents who have opted to care for their children at home instead have not been eligible for any additional compensation (apart from the parental leave package) except during 1993–1994. At that time parents with children aged 1–3 years were able to apply for assistance for up to 24 months to take care of their children instead of enrolling them at a day-care centre. The law was instituted after the Moderates and the Christian Democrats were in office, but was repealed promptly as soon as the Social Democrats returned to power (Björnberg & Guðný Björk Eydal, 1995, 370).

In 1995 Sweden established “father’s and mother’s months” – one month dedicated solely to the father or mother. Fathers were granted the right to one month’s leave, the ‘father’s month’, that could not be transferred over to the mother, and in the same way, mothers were given one month that could not be transferred to the father. Mothers continued to

retain the right to two months of leave before the estimated date of the child's birth. Eight years later, both mothers and fathers were each given one additional, dedicated month that was not transferable to the other parent (Bekkengen 2002, 11–12).

Since 2002 parents in Sweden have had the right to parents' allowance for a total of 480 days. Parents can hand over days to the other parent with the exception of the 60 days that are earmarked for each parent. The remaining 360 days can be disposed of in whatever way determined best by the parents; they can either take all of the remaining leave simultaneously, or one of the parents can take all of the 360 days. The leave time compensation is 80 % of the wages earned by the parent in the 12 months preceding the birth of the child, up to a fixed income ceiling. Parents without income prior to the birth of the child receive a fixed amount during the entirety of the leave period. Parents have the right to use the parental leave simultaneously, and there is also the opportunity to work part time during the parental leave period. For example, people can work shorter days and be compensated for the difference in pay, up until the time that the child turns eight (Swedish Social Insurance Administration 2004; Nososco 2004, 47).

3.6 Summary

Even though there are a number of similarities between the Nordic parental leave systems, each country has chosen a somewhat different path in terms of individual regulations. Iceland occupied a special position long into the 20th century, taking a huge step forward when the current law came into effect. Men obtained not only independent rights but also shared parental leave rights, the out-dated system of compensations was radically modified, and parents were given better opportunities to utilize their rights without endangering the family's economic situation.

Over the last decades Danish parents have had the opportunity to enjoy longer parental leave periods than in any other Nordic country, apart from Sweden. The emphasis has been on giving parents as much flexibility as possible to use their leave in ways that best suit their needs. But the idea was never to activate fathers or challenge them in any particular way to use their parental leave. This is illustrated by the fact that the two weeks that had been earmarked for the father alone were eliminated in 2002, just as the other Nordic countries were shifting in the opposite direction.

Norway has tried to challenge fathers to take advantage of parental leave by enacting a 1993 law that created the 'father's month' and by offering parents opportunities to shorten their workdays after the birth of a child, while simultaneously on parental leave. This improves parents' possibilities of combining professional and family responsibilities, but

since fathers' right to leave is bound up with the mother's employment contribution, this results in fewer men taking advantage of paternity leave.

Of all Nordic countries, Finland gives individual parents the shortest parental leave period, and the leave comes with more restrictions than in any other Nordic country. There is less flexibility, as the entire leave must be taken at one time. Starting in 2003, however, parents have been able to use part of the leave by working part time, but there are restrictions on this practice too, and not all parents are entitled. If used, both parents must agree to work part time.

For the last one hundred years Sweden has been the Nordic country that has spearheaded of the movement toward rights and flexibility for new parents. It continues to occupy this role, and today's Sweden offers the longest parental leave period and the most flexible parental leave system of all the Nordic countries.

Table 3.2 The system of parental leave

	Denmark	Finland	Iceland	Norway	Sweden
Maternity leave before birth	4 weeks	5 weeks	(4 weeks)	3 weeks	9 weeks
Maternity leave after birth	12 weeks	12 weeks	13 weeks	6 weeks	8 weeks
Paternity leave after birth	4 weeks	2/4 weeks	13 weeks	4 weeks	8 weeks
Shared parental leave	32 weeks	23 weeks	13 weeks	29/39 weeks	52 weeks
Shared leave during the total leave period (%)	61.5	54.8	33.3	69.0	76.5
Parental leave compensation as a percentage of total wages (%)	100	70	80	100/80	80–100 ¹¹
Is it possible to work part time, on part-time leave?	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Can parents be on leave simultaneously?	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Total length	52 weeks	42/44 weeks	39 weeks	42/52 weeks	68 weeks
Paid parental leave ¹²	Up to 52 weeks	Until child is three	No	Until child is three	No ¹³

¹¹ The compensation is different in Sweden. For example, those who work for the public sector receive full pay, but other workers often receive 80 % of their wages. Wages determine the amount of the compensation during the first 12 months, after which it becomes a fixed sum.

¹² This refers to the leave that exists over and beyond parental leave and permits parents to be paid for staying at home with their children.

¹³ Legal right to work part time until the child reaches the age of eight.

4. The use of parental leave

The outcome of the legislation on the parental leave rights of fathers can be described by saying that the more fathers take advantage of the system and use it, the better the outcome. The fact that men use parental leave presumably has various effects – it is hoped, for example that paternity leave will help achieve greater equality between the genders on the labor market.

If the assumption is that a positive result of the various laws is as many people as possible utilizing the prescribed rights, it is possible to measure the outcome by various means. One is to investigate how many men are in fact taking advantage of the opportunity for parental leave. The book *Social Protection in the Nordic Countries 2002* (NOSOSCO 2004, 50) contains information about the number of men and women who utilize their right to parental leave to some extent.

Table 4.1 Number of people receiving benefits on the basis of pregnancy, birth or adoption in 1995 – 2002¹⁴

	Denmark	Finland	Iceland	Norway	Sweden
Men					
1995	41 003	40267	10	25166	130 786
2000	45 559	42 294	1 421	33 806	166 661
2001	45 372	43 590	2 840	35 096	186 177
2002	44 897	44 624	3 816	34 505	210 000
Women					
1995	90 335	108 429	5 066	76 088	327 846
2000	82 657	97 359	5 097	80 368	275 214
2001	81 440	96 135	5 861	79 835	280 856
2002	79 481	95 277	6 266	78 703	295 000

Table 4.2 Share of men in relation to women

	Denmark	Finland	Iceland	Norway	Sweden
1995	45%	37%	0%	33%	40%
2000	55%	43%	28%	42%	61%
2001	56%	45%	48%	44%	66%
2002	56%	47%	61%	44%	71%

¹⁴ Source: NOSOSCO, 2004:50.

When we compare the number of men using their parental leave to the number of women, it looks like the distribution is most equal in Sweden. In 2002, the proportion of men who utilized their parental leave right was approximately 71 % of the number of women who did. Iceland came second, with just about 61 % men, followed by Denmark with approximately 56 % men, Finland with close to 47 % men, and finally Norway with a little less than 44 % of men. In recent years the development has been relatively stable in Denmark, Finland and Norway, but men's usage in Sweden has increased more quickly, while the greatest growth trend has taken place in Iceland. In 1995 the proportion of men who went on parental leave was less than 1 % of the number of women who did. But by 2000, the percentage had risen to 28 %, to 48 % in 2001, and finally to 61 % by 2002. Sweden and Iceland are the only countries where the proportion of men has topped 60 %.

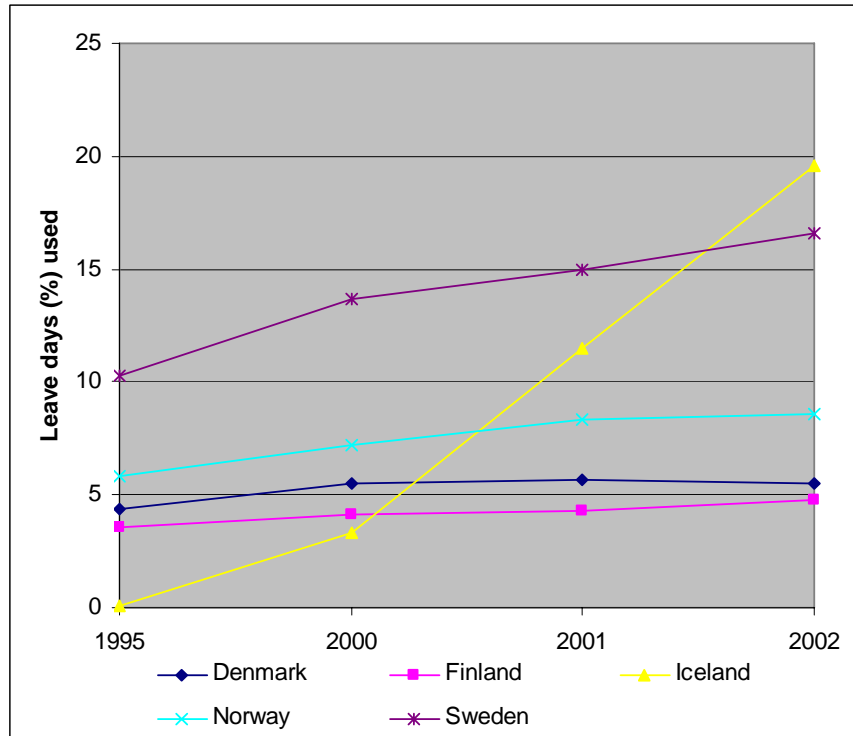
In 1995 the proportion of men in 1995 was highest in Denmark (around 45 %), Sweden was next (approx. 40 %), thereafter came Finland (approx. 37 %), followed by Norway (approx. 33 %), and trailed by Iceland (less than 0.2 %). Differences between the Nordic countries, with the exception of Iceland, were not as great as they had been ten years before. The proportion of men using parental leave increased in every country, and the development was clearly strongest in Sweden and Iceland.

Another way to take stock is to measure the amount of leave that men use. Even if a large number of men take advantage of parental leave, it only tells a partial story. When we look at the way in which parental leave was distributed among men and women up until 2002; in other words, how many men and women went on leave in each country, women clearly use the considerable majority of available parental leave in each country.

Table 4.3 Share of parental leave days used by men

	Denmark	Finland	Iceland	Norway	Sweden
1995	4.4%	3.6%	0.1%	5.8%	10.3%
2000	5.5%	4.1%	3.3%	7.2%	13.7%
2001	5.7%	4.3%	11.5%	8.3%	15%
2002	5.5%	4.8%	19.6%	8.6%	16.6%

Figure 1: Leave days (%) used



Source: Norsosco bls. 50.

The numbers for Denmark, Finland and Norway are very similar in 1995 and 2000–2002, with men taking from 5 to 9 % of all paid parental leave days, while women account for more than 90 % of parental leave days. The three countries have developed apace with one another, and the number of leave days used by men has increased slowly but steadily, with Norway at the forefront with men accounting for 5.8 % of all parental leave days used in 1995 and 8.6 % in 2002.

Men in Sweden have long taken up a larger portion of the total parental leave days used than men in other Nordic countries. In 1995, men used 10 % of all parental leave days, and this figure has continued to increase gradually, reaching 16.6 % in 2002.

Iceland has deviated somewhat from the trend. For a long time, men accounted for almost none of the parental leave (their share was 0.1 % in 1995), but when the laws were amended and the conditions for taking paternity leave were improved sufficiently, men’s share of the total leave time has grown rather rapidly. In 2000 their share was still fairly low (3.3 %), but in 2001, after men were granted an individual right to a one-month-long paternity leave, the percentage of men participating jumped right away to 11.5 %. A year later, one more month was added to the parental leave time allowed to Icelandic men, and that year men accounted for 19.5 % of all parental leave days used. Even though men did

not even account for one-fifth of all paid parental leave days, they represented the largest share of men anywhere in the Nordic countries in 2002.

Since 2002, no new figures are available for comparison, but in 2003 the proportion of men participating in the parental leave system compared to women was up to 85–90 %, with the number of days used at an average of 94 per man. An analysis of the figures shows that the development has taken place at a rapid pace from the days when men were first granted the legal right to parental leave (Information from ‘Tryggingastofnun Ríkisins’, Iceland’s national insurance fund).

5. Flexibility and shortcomings in the laws that govern parental leave in the Nordic countries

As shown earlier, men in Norway and Finland are less likely to take advantage of their parental leave rights than men in other Nordic countries, and development in these two countries, as well as Denmark, has been slow to take off. An examination of the relevant laws in the three countries reveals greater restrictions on men's rights, when compared with Sweden and Iceland.

It is clear that the more restrictions there are on individuals' rights, the more difficult it is for them to avail themselves of those rights. When the system makes it too complicated for people to use their rights, fewer people will demand them. Rights in and of themselves are not meaningful unless people also have realistic possibilities to use them. It looks like the laws that govern parental leave in certain Nordic countries contain shortcomings that make it less likely for parents to be able to take advantage of parental leave.

Below, we will deconstruct the parental leave system of each Nordic country, identifying both the factors that help parents avail themselves of parental leave, as well as those that complicate people's ability to use parental leave.

5.1 Norway

In Norway, fathers' right to parental leave is contingent on the labor market contribution of the mother of the child. This means that men are eligible for compensation during parental leave if the mother is gainfully employed. For example, if the woman only works 25 % of the time, the man only has the right to 25 % of his pay before going on parental leave. Moreover, if a woman is not employed at all, a man has no right to compensation for leave time.

To contrast the law with reality, we should note that of all women aged 16–74 years in Norway who were in gainful employment in 2003, approximately 41 % worked part time. Moreover, about 31 % of women aged 16–74 years were not employed by the labor market at all in 2003¹⁵. We can assume that the oldest group will not have children, but the figure

¹⁵ Source: Statistics Norway 2005.

nevertheless offers an indication of the size of the group of men who are not eligible for compensation for parental leave, because the mother of their child is either not employed, or are only entitled to a partial compensation because the mother is employed part time.

As a comparison, only 11 % of men in Norway in the same age group were working part time in 2003, and fewer men than women, or 23 % of men aged 16–74 years, were unemployed. If the right of men to use parental leave were not bound to the mother, more men than women would earn the right to parental leave. Thus, the fact that more women than men were working part time has reduced the number of men with a right to a parental leave allowance.

It can be argued that by tying men's right to parental leave to the mother's labor market contribution, the authorities are diluting the effectiveness of the parental leave system. The most central argument in favor of paternity leave is that it helps to achieve greater gender equality in the labor market, but with restrictions such as the current ones in place, it undeniably slows down any such development. It seems ironic that because women's position in the labor market is weaker, the effect that paternity leave could have on gender equality in the labor market is diminished – at least with regard to the restrictions written into the legislation.

One must point out, however, that in spite of shortcomings, certain measures have been employed to facilitate the efforts of parents to combine work and family life. First and foremost, there is the “father's month” adopted in Norway in 1993, which, gave new fathers a specially earmarked right to parental leave for the first time.

There is a lot of flexibility in Norway's part-time leave system, which enables parents to spread out the leave over a longer period. It makes it possible for parents to, for example, only work a few days per week or a few hours per day while taking advantage of parental leave the rest of the time. The system was indeed designed to make it easier for fathers to combine working life with paternity leave.

5.2 Finland

One of the greatest problems in Finland is the lack of flexibility that parents have to manage their parental leave. First of all, all of the leave must be taken at one time, i.e. it is not possible to use a few weeks or months, return to work, and then take the rest of the leave. There is no question that the requirement of having to take all of the leave at once makes it more difficult for parents to take advantage of the system.

There are also certain restrictions if people want to use some of their leave while remaining at work part time, for example working half of the day and staying at home the other half to care for a child (50 % leave).

For this to be possible, both parents must obtain agreement from their employers, because half-time leave is an option only if both parents are granted permission by their employers. It is thus not possible for just one parent to be on full-time leave while the other is on part-time leave. This kind of system is also limited by the fact that it is not possible to work less than 40–60 % of the time parents were working before the birth of a child, and it is not possible to use public day care at the same time. It is also not permissible to be on part-time leave after the child reaches the age of 10 months, the same cut-off point that applies to full-time leave. It is therefore not possible to extend the time period within which parental leave must be completed – all of the leave must have been taken by the time the child is ten months old, regardless of whether parents used the full- or part-time leave option.

Finland also offers a so-called ‘father’s bonus’, which entails that men who have used two or more weeks of the shared parental leave are entitled to two additional weeks. For this to happen, two more requirements need to be fulfilled. One, the mother must return to work before these additional two weeks can be used, and two, the two weeks must constitute the last weeks of the parental leave period.

This additional compensation is in many ways well thought out and can be seen as a kind of reward for fathers who have used part of the shared parental leave, and also as a final spurt to extend the parents’ leave time. But because there are so many restrictions about how the weeks can be used, it is easy to imagine that few people are able to avail themselves of them.

Although there is little flexibility in Finland, the fact is there is paternity leave at all is something that can by no means be taken for granted in the western world in spite of continual debates about gender equality in recent years. Apart from the significant restrictions that are placed on the use of parental leave in Finland, in some ways the system functions similarly to the Icelandic system – for instance when comparing the length of the time that is available for leave. But when it comes to flexibility and measures by authorities to encourage fathers to take advantage of family leave, it must be said that in this Finland is behind the rest of the Nordic countries.

5.3 Denmark

Denmark is the only Nordic country to take steps *away* from previously granted opportunities for paternity leave. The only leave currently earmarked for fathers is two weeks, which must be used before the child is 14 weeks old. Before this, fathers were entitled to two additional weeks, but that right was eliminated in 2002, five years after its inception. Everything points to men being more likely to use parental leave when it is

specifically targeted at them. The conclusion is that Denmark is the only Nordic country to take a step backward in this regard.

Men in Denmark got a shorter paternity leave period than men in other Nordic countries (although the differences between Denmark and Finland are minor) after part of paternity leave was taken away from men. The Danish Parliament has discussed paternity leave as something imposed by force on fathers (Drews 2003, 40), and one must wonder if it reflects the views of the country's general public to see paternity leave as something that does not represent a good alternative for Danish families, and instead limits the possibilities that are available to families. Denmark also has a quota for mothers, but that has not emerged as a "forced measure" issue in debate in the same way as the fathers' quota.

The most positive aspect of the Danish system is its flexibility. Parents are allowed to decide how they use their family leave, as a large portion of it is shared leave. There is also flexibility in the fact that parents are allowed to work part time simultaneously while on parental leave, until the child reaches eight years of age.

5.4 Iceland

For a long time, Iceland was left in the dust by other Nordic countries with regard to parental leave, especially paternity leave, and by not adopting income-dependent parental leave compensation, but with the current law, passed in 2000, men have rapidly begun to avail themselves of their right to parental leave. At the moment, it is Iceland of all the Nordic countries that boasts more fathers who use parental leave than the other countries. It is true, however, that the length of the leave is less than in the rest of the Nordic countries.

There is no doubt that earmarking part of the leave package for fathers specifically has helped change the situation. Iceland and Sweden are the only countries that grant an equal amount of individual, earmarked time to both fathers and mothers. In Iceland, this right is three months per parent. There is also a degree of flexibility in that people are allowed, for example, to take off several shorter periods and work part time while on leave, although the arrangement requires the approval of the employer.

5.5 Sweden

It seems that Sweden has achieved more than any other Nordic country in the area of parental leave. Even though the amount of time that is earmarked for men (two months) is a month less than in Iceland, the total leave package is longer than anywhere else.

Sweden also boasts the greatest degree of flexibility – people are allowed to use shorter leave increments over a longer period of time, up until the child turns eight. Note that the right to parental leave does not expire until children turn eight, and people can save portions of their leave for later use.

Sweden's parental leave legislation seems to have been developed on the basis of encouraging parents to take time off, as opposed to setting up barriers against it. It is of course a matter of opinion how long the period of parental leave should be, but in comparison to other countries it seems like Sweden has the best laws. The duration of the leave is longer and the flexibility greater than in other Nordic countries.

5.6 Discussion

The intention here is not to rank the Nordic countries on the basis of achievement, or label them with a seal of approval or disapproval. The most important thing is to come to an understanding of what methods work best, and what considerations should be kept in mind when devising parental leave laws.

The goal in designing parental leave systems should be to make it easier for parents to take care of their children, and with paternity leave in particular, to get fathers to participate more actively in bringing up their children, as well as to promote greater gender equality in the labor market. But in order to achieve these goals it is necessary to speculate about which methods will yield the best results.

What is most important in paternity leave – what practices work best? First, the length of the leave must be determined. The longer the leave, the more likely it is to achieve the goals that are set for it. Different countries place a different value on this, and the decision about how much each country can consider spending to reach the stated goal is of course a political decision.

Another factor to consider is the percentage of pre-childbirth wages that people are entitled to during parental leave. The percentage is rather high in all Nordic countries, 70–100 %, but it is a matter of opinion whether or not the lowest percentage is a good thing. For low-income individuals who struggle to get by on their wages to begin with, parental leave with 20–30 % off existing wages hardly represents a realistic alternative.

At the other end of the spectrum are the well paid, who may wonder how much they will “lose” if they go on leave – the amounts can be significant. On the other hand, the higher the leave-time allowance, the more money goes to those with the highest pay. It may be the children of the wealthiest parents who lose out on being together with their parents. We can choose to look at parental leave in different ways, but it is clear that

the lower the percentage of pre-childbirth wages that is paid out to parents, the fewer the parents who will find it possible to take time off, especially in the case of long-term leave.

What matters most – is it more important to offer a higher allowance and shorter leave, or is the length of the leave most important and the amount of the allowance less so?¹⁶ As the percentage is quite high in all Nordic countries, 70 % or higher, one can assume that the path that has been chosen represents a middle road. Naturally, the best case scenario would be if everyone got 100 % of their pay as well as a long leave, but the economic realities of countries are rarely so glowing as to not force people to choose what is most important.

Another factor that plays a large role is the issue of flexibility. When there are more restrictions on taking time off, fewer people avail themselves of the opportunity. But when parents are given more options to use their leave in different ways, it becomes more possible for them to use it fully. Parents are not always able to use the entire leave period at one time, and it is therefore beneficial if they can take time off in shorter increments.

It is also absolutely critical that people are able to combine parental leave while working simultaneously. Sometimes it is possible to be on part-time leave and work half days, and it is important that parental leave laws include this option and that restrictions are kept to a minimum.

As mentioned earlier, some of the Nordic countries could clearly use some improving in terms of flexibility. There are frequently many restrictions, particularly in the case of paternity leave, and certain factors can affect people's ability to take time off quite negatively. Several of the countries, however, do offer a number of different options for parents in terms of part-time leave, for example.

The reason for the inflexibility may lie in trying to save money. In other words, all of the restrictions may be in place to reduce the amount of money paid out by the state by simply making it so difficult to use parental leave time that the fewest possible people are able to do so to the extent that they are formally entitled. This report does not claim that this is in fact so, but many things indicate that certain restrictions create a situation in which parental leave does not meet everyone's needs adequately, and consequently fewer parents use their right to parental leave. This applies particularly to fathers. It is important to point out that if attention is not directed at the ability of parents to use their rights, the aims of the laws will not be met.

¹⁶ The assumption here that when deciding about the length of the leave period and the amount to be paid, at issue is a fixed allowance. A decision regarding one has an impact on the other. This does not have to be so, it could be possible to decide about one issue without heeding the other. In Norway, individuals can freely choose if they would prefer to receive 100 % of their pay or remain on leave longer at 80 % of their pay.

6. Why some men do not take advantage of paternity leave

There are many reasons why men may not consider it realistic or possible to use paternity leave. Some research has tried to determine the causes for this, and what follows is a summary of several investigations that will hopefully provide some indication of the factors that prevent Nordic men from taking the parental leave to which they are entitled, and identify measures that can be taken to rectify the situation.

6.1 Five factors that may prevent people from using their parental leave

In a report on the Nordic parental leave system ('Orlovsordninger i Norden') Jan Høgelund (1996, 21–22) asserts that there are five primary reasons why men in the Nordic countries are less likely than women to use parental leave. First, according to him, there is a lack of information; men are not aware of their rights. A person who does not know his or her rights does not, in fact, have genuine access to those rights. It rests on the authorities therefore to make sure that they provide adequate information to parents about their rights.

Høgelund also points out another issue in the research that indicates that men frequently forgo their right to parental leave on economic grounds. The household simply cannot afford to go without the money that the difference between wages and parental allowance amounts to. These men would probably use their leave time if they received full compensation for it, asserts Høgelund. Money often plays a large role, especially for people who have little of it, and for such people paternity leave may look like a luxury that the family simply cannot afford.

The third factor has to do with the length of the leave. If both parents are only entitled to a short leave, it is less likely that the father will use his share of the shared leave. But the longer the duration of shared leave time, the more likely it is that he will use some of it. In Sweden, for example, the trend is for men to take longer leaves because of an increase in the combined parental leave time for both parents.

The fourth factor identified by Høgelund is the situation that prevails in Norway, where the father's opportunity for parental leave is connected to the mother's labor market contribution. The result is that fewer men can go on leave. Men's right to leave is not an individual right, and others are excluded from the right to parental leave altogether (when the mother

is not gainfully employed), while some men are only eligible to shorter leave than they would be if the leave were not tied to their partner's labor market contribution.

Finally, Høgelund underlines the importance of flexibility. He says that if, for example, men are more likely to use part-time leave than women, it is important to meet this demand and make the rules more flexible.

6.2 Paternity leave: use among different groups

Berit Brandth, Elin Kvande and Asgeir Winge conducted a study in two Norwegian cities (Brandth and Kvande 2003, 219–223)¹⁷, which revealed that men who work the most, 41 hours or more per week, are less likely to use parental leave than men who work less, or only 31–40 hours per week. This middle group, however, was more likely to use parental leave than those who worked 30 hours or less per week. The reason may be that those who work less are less able economically to use their leave, or that their position in the workplace is not as strong as that of someone who works full time, making it more difficult to get time off. The differences between the groups were not radical, however; 70 % of those who worked most took time off, 79 % of those who worked 31–40 hours per week did so, and 75 % of those who worked the least used their parental leave.

When looking at the quantity of hours worked as overtime, it appears that a mother's hours of overtime had no effect. Overtime hours worked by mothers entailed greater income for the family and less time available to the home on the part of the woman. One would think that this latter factor would make it necessary for the man to participate in the home and that the former would make it possible for the man to work a little less. But it is difficult to determine a pattern here, because even as women often worked overtime every week, it did not increase the likelihood of men taking parental leave, compared with the situation in which men took parental leave and women mostly did not work overtime.

There is another reason why men work overtime. Approximately 78–82 % of the men who work overtime every other week or less use parental leave, but only 65 % of those who work overtime every week do so. One must wonder whether the men who work so much overtime have really become so indispensable in their jobs that they cannot be spared, even to care for their own children.

It is interesting to see how the status that people have at work is connected to their use of parental leave. It seems to make no difference

¹⁷ All men in Trondheim and Orkdal in 1994 and 1995, who had had children in the last 12 months were sent a questionnaire. After all those who could not be found were excluded, 2,194 men received the questionnaire. The response rate was 62.8% (Brandth & Kvande 2003, 219).

whether the mother is a director or chief. The spouses of women in top management positions use parental leave at a rate of 79 %, and at a rate of 78 % when women occupy middle management positions. The differences between the partners of these women and of women who are not top managers are minor; the use of parental leave is at 76 % for the latter. The proportion of men who take paternity leave is 77 %, whether they are middle managers, top managers or not managers, but it is interesting to see that only 49 % of the men in the top-management group take paternity leave. The research of Brandth, Kvande and Winge found no other group that uses parental leave as little as men in top management. This probably indicates that these men have a much harder time taking time off from their jobs. However, these men also have higher salaries than other people, and may feel that the amount of money they would “lose” is more significant than the benefit they and their families would gain through paternity leave. The fact that the compensation paid to fathers is bound to mothers’ labor market contributions is also significant, because men’s losses would be even greater if the spouse had the same position on the labor market as they.

6.3 Does the current mentality prevent men from using their leave?

Why don’t Danish fathers use more paternity leave (‘Hvorfor danske fædre ikke tager mere barselsorlov’)¹⁸ (2003) is a paper by Lea Vedel Drews clarifying the reasons for why fathers in Denmark do not use more parental leave. She bases her findings on the research of Bente Marianne Olsen (2000), Mogens Nygaard Christoffersen (1990)¹⁹ and Søren Carlsen (1992)²⁰, as well as on debates in the Danish Parliament regarding the present parental leave laws. Drews found that there is no formal barrier, in the law for example, that prevents Danish fathers from using their parental leave. It is the mentality that presents the greatest obstacle.

Drews points out that the norm is for the mother to take the time off. When a man uses leave beyond the quota assigned specifically to him, he is using a portion of the shared leave, and the prevailing attitude is that it belongs to the mother, not the father. The “shared” leave is generally considered more of a continuation of maternity leave, instead of a right shared by both parents.

According to Drews, the time taken off by the mother on the grounds of childbirth itself is a given, even a law of nature, which therefore need

¹⁸ *Why don’t Danish fathers use their parental leave more*

¹⁹ Christoffersen, Mogens Nygaard (1990). Barselsorlov [Parental leave]. In Danish. Copenhagen: The Danish National Institute of Social Research. Report 90:18.

²⁰ Carlsen, Søren (1992). “De obligatoriske 14 dage” [The obligatory 14 days]. Report [in Danish] on the use of father’s and parental leave by men on Danish radio. Copenhagen: Equal Status Council.

not be debated. Men's use of parental leave beyond the time allotted for them specifically depends on the standing of the family and today, paternity leave is still not seen as a natural consequence of having children. Whereas maternity leave is a norm accepted as natural by everyone, it is sometimes seen as unusual and almost unnatural for the father to use part of the family leave. In the end, the "shared" portion of parental leave functions as part of the mother's leave quota, and a mother who does not use the full extent of the family's parental leave is seen as not fully meeting the expectations associated with the image of "natural" motherhood.

Drews's discussion of Olsen's (2000) research shows that "good mothers" are happy to take as much time off as possible. This entails that men can only use the two weeks assigned exclusively to them, and that if they want to extend their leave, they have to resort to vacation time or unpaid leave to spend time with their children. Moreover, the research shows that in order to change such preconceptions, the shared parental leave has to be divided equally between parents. If the shared portion is merely viewed as an extension of maternity leave, men will obviously not use up a great deal of it. If the intention is to encourage men to take a larger part of the leave, the solution may lie in earmarking a greater share of the total leave time for the father. Otherwise, the image of the "good mother" will block men from using their parental leave.

6.4 Who are the men who don't use their leave?

A study by Johanna Lammi-Taskula (2003) suggests several explanations for why Finnish men use less parental leave than Finnish women. Lammi-Taskula interviewed Finnish parents in 1999²¹, and in the cases where the father did not use his parental leave, she investigated the reasons behind the decision.

One of the most important reasons seems to be that parents frequently felt that it was primarily the woman's domain to take care of the children. It was more common for mothers to express this view than for fathers²². Lammi-Taskula also discusses the correlation of this viewpoint with education – university-educated women were less likely to express this view than other women.

This explanation – that it is the mother's opinion that determines the use of parental leave on the part of the father – is completely out of the question: the research showed a correlation between the ideas of the mothers and the use of leave by fathers. When mothers felt that child rearing was primarily the woman's job, it was more likely that the father did not take advantage of his right to parental leave.

²¹ The study was carried out in 2001–2002. A questionnaire was sent to the parents of children born in 1999. Responses were received from 3295 mothers and 1413 fathers.

²² It turned out that fathers too held this view, but not as frequently as mothers, and it was more common for those who did not use parental leave to hold these views than for those who used theirs.

There is little indication that lack of information among fathers contributed significantly to their non-use of parental leave. In the author's view, the reason has more to do with an absence of discussion between parents regarding the possibility of the father using parental leave. It is interesting that in those instances when parents sat down to discuss the possibility of the father using their parental leave and determined their finances in light of paternity leave, it was much more likely for him to use the paternity leave. The mere fact of discussing the issue increased the chances of the father using the leave.

One factor that men identified occasionally as an obstacle to using paternity leave was that it was so difficult to take time off from work, but this seems to have more to do with their own sense and expectations, instead of a barrier that emerged from a discussion with an employer. Lammi-Taskula points out that it is not necessarily the employer who stands in the way of paternity leave – it can be the man himself who evaluates the situation in such a way. Another factor connected to this and mentioned by men was their role as the family's provider. This reason, however, emerged less frequently in discussions with their spouses, and it seems therefore that the idea of the man as the family's provider was more important to the men themselves.

The idea of being "indispensable" in the workplace may play a role in this. It looks like many women consider child rearing to be their role and not that of the father, which seems to coincide with men's stated reasons for remaining at work. It may be that men see the workplace as their place to be and women see the home as their primary arena. In this way the general mentality can act as an important barrier to the use of parental leave by men.

6.5 After the leave

Many Nordic studies have shown that the use of parental leave among men is dependent on factors beyond their social and economic status. There is a correlation between women's education and their position in the labor market, and the use of parental leave among men. In other words, it is possible to say that the use of parental leave among men is dependent on the position and status of the mother (for example, see Olsen 2000, Bekkengen 2002, Lammi-Taskula 2003).

In each Nordic country, the aim of the parental leave system is to achieve greater equality between the genders at home and in the labor market. In recent years and decades, discussions about ways to improve parental leave have focused on increasing the use of leave among fathers – and this report is no exception. It is important, from the perspective of gender equality, that men assume greater responsibility in the home than previously and participate in an active way to bring up their children. The

introduction of paternity leave has been a significant step toward increasing men's participation in family life.

Fathers' increased participation often means taking time away from work, simultaneously weakening their position in the labor market. It does not necessarily follow, however, that women's situation will improve in response. The point being made here is that this development does not necessarily bring men and women toe to toe in the labor market – rather, it may mean that parents will be seen as a second-class workforce and that men with grown children will retain their privilege in working life. Mothers continue to be the ones to bear primary responsibility for looking after the children, weakening their position and often reflecting in their pocketbooks. The case today, as before, remains that it is more economically viable for families if the father returns to work following parental leave, while the mother only does so when no other option for child care is available (for example, a day-care centre slot).

In the countries that pay parents to stay at home to care for their children, instead of making day-care centers available, the authorities cannot be said to be trying to improve women's position in the labor market or create greater gender equality – even though both have been stated aims in designing the Nordic parental leave systems. Conversely, such measures contribute to maintaining women's weaker position in the labor market (Olsen 2000, 101–102).

In a paper entitled 'Nordic child-care policies and the case of Iceland' (2000), Guðný Björk Eydal discusses the central characteristics of the trend that each Nordic country has followed in solving the issue of child care. It emerges that Denmark and Sweden offer far better options for child care compared with other Nordic countries. They focus keenly on the welfare of children while also remaining mindful of the needs of the labor market, and offer all-day day care rather than half-day care and make it possible for children to attend day-care centers at a younger age.

In Guðný Björk Eydal's view, in Norway pedagogical considerations, not the needs of the labor market or the parents' status therein, steer the measures implemented by the authorities. Parents are entitled to an allowance in exchange for staying at home with small children, and part-time day care is more common than all-day day care. According to Guðný Björk Eydal, Finland offers a combination of public day-care institutions and compensation for parents to stay at home with children less than three. Iceland's system resembles the Norwegian one and places a greater emphasis on pedagogic considerations. In spite of the fact that Norwegian parents there are not entitled to an allowance for staying at home, there is no guarantee that there will be room for their children at a day-care centre (108).

6.6 Summary

Without a doubt, people need to plan for the time that follows parental leave. If the time gap between the end of leave and the start of day-care is long, it is the parents alone to whom the entire responsibility falls.

This issue must be considered from a gender equality standpoint in the same way that parental leave itself. Especially in light of the differences in pay that exist between genders, it is often more economically viable for the family if the woman rather than the man takes care of the children after parental leave ends.

If we do not focus on this issue, we may find women's position in the labor market growing ever weaker. As efforts are made to improve paternity leave, we also need solutions that will make it easier for women to return to work after parental leave. Solutions where the state pays for parents to stay at home only worsen the problem, because it is much more likely that it is the woman who will be responsible for the home and the children; after all, it benefits the family more economically to have the woman at home when the man is earning a higher salary.

If the authorities are serious about achieving greater gender equality in the labor market, an intention alone is not enough in the absence of realistic possibilities for parents to return to working life after parental leave ends. For as long as wage differences between parents remain a fact, men and women do not enjoy equal opportunities. Economic considerations weigh heavily in the equation when parents are making decisions, and more often than not the decision is for the man to continue working for his wages and for the woman to stay at home with the children.

7. Conclusion

There is no doubt that the introduction of paternity leave in the Nordic countries represented a huge step forward for gender equality. Nowhere in the world is paternity leave such an important part of the family leave system, and Sweden is the queen among equals in this regard. After Iceland's current law came into effect, development there too has been rapid and the differences in paternity leave between Iceland and Sweden are now minor – Icelandic men have been quick to learn to use their rights.

From a gender equality standpoint, the introduction of paternity leave is a positive development, and it is clear that Nordic authorities have great ambitions in this area – judging by the multitude of factors that have been taken into consideration when writing the laws. The authorities have done an outstanding job and in many cases invested large amounts of money to further this challenging project. But we need to consider whether the project has achieved its aims. Everything indicates that there are restrictions that work against the original goal and reduce the usage of parental leave. We must examine whether the resulting savings are real, or if in the end we are spending more than we are saving.

It is apparent that the gender equality perspective was part of the process of writing parental leave laws, but the many restrictions that are placed on parents in the law are contradictory to the stated aims. This is an indication that there is a lack of political will to place the focus on equality between men and women in the way that is needed.

The first law on shared parental leave was written in Sweden 30 years ago, yet Sweden's women continue to use up 83.4 % of paid leave time. There are many indications that people still think of the shared leave days as the natural extension of maternity leave. We must work toward normalizing and naturalizing the image of a man who uses his right to parental leave, so that men really do have the same rights as women to use a family's shared leave. Society is divided according to gender, and the prevailing views on gender say that taking care of children is more a woman's than a man's job.

The legal restrictions that apparently stand in the way of men using their rights to the full extent must be eliminated, so that the stated goal of the law – to achieve equality between the genders – becomes a reality. If this is not done, the only possible conclusion is that there is a lack of ambition to make the goal a reality and that the parental leave law is merely an illusion rather than an important vehicle in the process to achieve greater equality between men and women.

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