

Parental Leave Schemes – What are the Determining Factors for their Success?



By: Therese Wallin, October 2011

Many youngsters battle with difficulties from an early age. Criminality, substance abuse and unemployment, are some of the issues faced by today's youth. These forms of hardship are no longer limited to a minority of individuals; their prevalence has come to be comparatively extensive. This state of affairs has shifted the focus away from single troublesome individuals, to questioning the general responsibility of parents.

With many families spending little time together, youngsters may turn elsewhere for guidance and risk ending up feeling rather discouraged. Consequently, parents and children will struggle to develop a relationship in which the former can be vigilant about their offspring's progression. To create a lasting bond, any child-adult involvement must necessarily begin at an early stage. This requires that both mothers and fathers invest time in their child. A prerequisite for this is to ensure that no parent will suffer negative consequences in doing so, in other areas of life.

A majority of parents struggle with balancing a professional career with parenthood. Coupled with the biological reality of the situation, the mother's career is often the one that suffers the most with parenthood. However, many detrimental effects can be heavily mitigated through good parental leave schemes. Such policies can ensure that parents will not be exposed to unfair disadvantage at their workplace. They also prevent parents from having to choose between their career and family life.

Although the benefits of maternity leave are increasingly recognised, an equally strong momentum for paternity leave is lacking. Only a few countries actively stress the importance of fathers' involvement in parenting. One such country is Sweden, which was the first to transform maternity leave into parental leave.¹ This was a move by politicians endeavouring to further gender equality. Consequently, the legislative provisions ensured that neither parent became overwhelmingly disadvantaged at the workplace.²

It may be questioned whether legislating is the best route to gender equality in the labour market and the home. There is a strong argument that it is more desirable for this to come about as the result of a natural and voluntary trend. As this is not always the case however, 'family friendly' policies can spark off a positive societal change. Nevertheless, it is important to recognise that their introduction may be received negatively, largely because they risk being perceived as creating unfair advantages for women. Yet, conversely to such a perception, such schemes arguably effectively create an equal disadvantage for both parents, ensuring that neither party suffers excessively. They also enable parents to stay at home with their child and participate in their upbringing, sharing domestic responsibilities.³

Many parents intend to split any leave as equally as possible. However, such good intentions may be hindered in the absence of support. Combined with financial circumstances, these conditions often result in the woman staying at home and doing mostly unpaid housework.

¹ Katrin Bennhold, *In Sweden, Men Can Have It All*, Published 09/06/2010
<http://www.nytimes.com/2010/06/10/world/europe/10iht-sweden.html> (last accessed 23/08/2011)

² Katrin Bennhold, *In Sweden, Men Can Have It All*, Published 09/06/2010
<http://www.nytimes.com/2010/06/10/world/europe/10iht-sweden.html> (last accessed 23/08/2011)

³ *Parental leave*, http://www.sweden.se/eng/Home/Work/The-Swedish-system/Employment_based_benefits/Parental-leave/ (last accessed 22/08/2011)

Consequently, it is important that employers cannot punish, or hinder, any parent from taking leave.⁴ This enables both parents to take leave, thereby creating a balance between their professional and family life. Well beyond supporting individual families, positive outcomes are likely to infiltrate society generally. Bengt Westberg, former Swedish deputy prime minister, argues that an equal society is conditional on the existence of an equal home.⁵ Hence, resources must be invested both in the public and private sphere. It is not sufficient to only look at the labour market and working conditions for women. Statutory guarantees of parental leave must be given to men as well.

Despite the presence of equality on the agenda in many countries, the generosity of parental leave policies varies greatly between countries. For instance, employed mothers in the United Kingdom are entitled to a year of Statutory Maternity Leave.⁶ This is a significant amount of time, particularly when compared to the two weeks of Ordinary Paternity Leave for employed fathers.⁷

However, the system recently opened up to allow fathers to take a longer period of leave if the child in question was due on, or after, 3 April 2011. Having satisfied this criterion, the father may be able to take a maximum of 26 weeks' Additional Paternity Leave. This period is supplementary to the two weeks of Ordinary Paternity Leave. Importantly, it is only an option for families where the mother of the child returns to work prior to not having utilized the full period of her available maternity leave.⁸ Any pay available is, similarly, only given on the

⁴ Katrin Bennhold, *In Sweden, Men Can Have It All*, Published 09/06/2010
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⁵ Katrin Bennhold, *In Sweden, Men Can Have It All*, Published 09/06/2010
<http://www.nytimes.com/2010/06/10/world/europe/10iht-sweden.html> (last accessed 23/08/2011)

⁶ *Statutory Maternity Leave*,
www.direct.gov.uk/en/Parents/Moneyandworkentitlements/WorkAndFamilies/Pregnancyandmaternityrights/DG_10039631

⁷ *Ordinary Paternity Leave*,
http://www.direct.gov.uk/en/Parents/Moneyandworkentitlements/WorkAndFamilies/Paternityrightsintheworkplace/DG_10029398

⁸ *Additional Paternity Leave and Pay*,
www.direct.gov.uk/en/Parents/Moneyandworkentitlements/WorkAndFamilies/Paternityrightsintheworkplace/DG_190788

condition that the mother has not already obtained her full amount of benefits.⁹

Certainly, this expansion of the scheme can be considered to be a step in the right direction. However, it does not guarantee fathers a significant time of leave, nor does it address any pressure that companies may exert. It is therefore difficult to foresee any major improvements on a more equal division of housework and childrearing.

With many countries aiming to dispose of traditional gender stigmas, equal parental leave is not always seen as a tool for the cause. Dr. Gary Barker, a development psychologist in the United States, stresses that men must be made aware of how gender equality benefits them. Such education is likely to decrease incidents of violence and oppression of women. Moreover, he points to documented positive effects from men's participation in caring for their children and family. These include health benefits, a smaller risk of taking sick leave, as well as more contented female partners.¹⁰

Despite such documented positive effects, there is concern that the erosion of traditional gender roles will have detrimental consequences. According to the author Ingemar Gens, the dissolution of gender roles risks a gender identity crisis.¹¹ Yet, in reality, many couples are today in modern relationships where traditional gender roles have already, to some extent, evaporated.

Regardless of opposing views, it is difficult to conceive of any severe detrimental consequences of increased shared paternal leave. For any parental leave scheme to operate successfully, flexibility is likely to be crucial. Perhaps it is because of this that the Swedish model has attracted so much praise. The system allows for a variety of arrangements, including enabling parents to be off for extended periods of time, single days, or partial days.¹² Moreover, significant resources have also been invested in services outside the home that relieve parents.

⁹ *Shared Parental Leave Plans Announced*,

<http://www.eurofound.europa.eu/eiro/2011/02/articles/uk1102029i.htm>

¹⁰ Katharine Child, *fight Gender Inequality by Empowering Men*, Published 12/08/2011

<http://mg.co.za/article/2011-08-12-fight-gender-inequality-by-empowering-men> (last accessed 31/08/2011)

¹¹ Katrin Bennhold, *In Sweden, Men Can Have It All*, Published 09/06/2010

<http://www.nytimes.com/2010/06/10/world/europe/10iht-sweden.html> (last accessed 23/08/2011)

¹² *Parental leave*, http://www.sweden.se/eng/Home/Work/The-Swedish-system/Employment_based_benefits/Parental-leave/ (last accessed 31/08/2011)

These include subsidised preschool for children from an early age and state-sponsored elderly care. Taken together, these circumstances allow for parents to spend more time with their children.¹³

A family friendly society is important; it enables children to grow up in a prosperous and supportive environment. Parenting is a huge responsibility, but can successfully only be done with support from wider society. Some parents do not wish to return to work after the birth of a child. However, many do aspire to get back into the workforce and balance career achievements with a happy private life. Such aspirations are not limited to either gender.

¹³ Katrin Bennhold, *In Sweden, Men Can Have It All*, Published 09/06/2010
<http://www.nytimes.com/2010/06/10/world/europe/10iht-sweden.html> (last accessed 23/08/2011)