

Fathers' use of parental leave. What do we know?

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Nevena Zhelyazkova

Maastricht Economic and social Research institute on Innovation and Technology (UNU-MERIT)

email: info@merit.unu.edu | website: <http://www.merit.unu.edu>

Maastricht Graduate School of Governance (MGSoG)

email: info-governance@maastrichtuniversity.nl | website: <http://mgsog.merit.unu.edu>

Keizer Karelplein 19, 6211 TC Maastricht, The Netherlands

Tel: (31) (43) 388 4400, Fax: (31) (43) 388 4499

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Fathers' Use of Parental Leave. What Do We Know?

Nevena Zhelyazkova
Maastricht Graduate School of Governance
Maastricht University
Maastricht, the Netherlands

nevena.zhelyazkova@maastrichtuniversity.nl

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Abstract

This paper reviews the literature on fathers' use of parental leave. Parental leave is a work-life reconciliation instrument with great potential to bring about a more equal distribution of paid and unpaid work between men and women. However, policy evaluation studies reveal that simply making parental leave available to men as an option does not lead to a marked increase in the number of male users. There is evidence that incentives in the policy design, such as earmarking part of the paid parental leave only for men on a use-it-or-lose-it basis, can raise the number of male users. Still, this evidence comes primarily from the Scandinavian context and the question whether such outcomes could be replicated in other countries remains open. Theoretical understanding of male use of parental leave is usually based on multidisciplinary frameworks. The economic theories typically focus on the relative resources in the family and there seems to be an absence of an integrated framework for analysis at the individual level. Several empirical studies provide support for the importance of the difference in a parenting couple's earnings for fathers' use of parental leave. Socio-economic characteristics, such as age, individual income, education, marital status, and number of other children, can also play a role in the decision of men to take leave. Situational factors, such as the sector of employment, or the size of the enterprise are similarly important.

Keywords: work-family reconciliation, parental leave, fatherhood

JEL codes: J130, J160

1 Policy Background

1.1 What Is Parental Leave?

This article begins with a definition of parental leave, as leave policies can be defined in multiple ways often leading to ambiguity and confusion. Below, I provide a brief outline of parental leave and related leave policies, for which I follow the definitions established in the European Commission directives and the definitions provided by the International Leave Network¹. In short, parental leave can be defined as a state-guaranteed right to time off for working parents so that they can take care of a young child at home. The first defining characteristic of parental leave is that it is explicitly granted for the purpose of caring for a young child.² Parental leave must therefore be distinguished from maternity leave, which is a health-related benefit providing time for the physical recovery of mothers after birth,³ or paternity leave, which is a brief employment interruption granted for the father upon the immediate time of birth of a child with the understanding that this represents a significant life event and the father needs some time to adjust to his new role and to provide support for the mother.⁴ A second defining feature of

¹www.leavenetwork.org

²The minimum parental leave standards for the European Union(EU) member states are set out in Council Directive 2010/18/EU of 8 March 2010 and give each working parent the right to a minimum of four months of job-protected leave for the purposes of caring for a young child at home.

³In the EU legislation maternity leave is framed as a health and safety measure and regulated by Council Directive 92/85/EEC of 19 October 1992, whereby every pregnant woman is entitled to a minimum of 16 weeks of job-protected maternity leave, paid at the same level as sick leave in the member state or higher.

⁴Introduction of paternity leave in the EU was approved by Members of the European Parliament as of 20/10/2010. The proposal was for the introduction of a minimum of two weeks leave available to fathers upon the birth of their child, which should be compensated at 100 per cent wage rate. Even though this was the first time paternity leave was approved at the European Union level, similar leaves were already in place in a number of member states, although their duration is usually less than two weeks and they are not always paid. For example, Belgium, Denmark, Estonia and Portugal all have explicitly defined paternity leaves of 14 days or more and involving a full or partial compensation. In other countries, such as Greece and the Netherlands, the provision of paternity leave is limited to three days only, while in other cases, such as in Sweden, Ireland and Germany, the paternity leave is a fraction of the total leave allocated to the family and, although fathers

parental leave is a job-protection guarantee, which ensures that a parent will be able to return to the same or an equivalent work position at the end of the leave. Thus, parental leave must be distinguished from measures such as cash-for-care benefits, which provide only income support to parents who leave or reduce their paid employment for the purposes of caring for a child, without the right to resume it after a certain period. Third, parental leave is defined as a gender-neutral measure, which means that both mothers and fathers have the right to use it. Finally, parental leave, must not be confused with family leave,⁵ which is typically granted in the form of a number of days per year, which parents can use to take care of children, usually up to an older age, in cases of emergency or illness.

Apart from the three defining characteristics of parental leave mentioned above (for the purposes of care of a young child, job-protection and gender-neutrality), parental leave varies substantially across countries based on its duration (how long is the leave?), compensation (do parents receive an income transfer during the leave? is it the same for everyone or a percentage of the previous salary?) and flexibility (can the leave be broken in parts or must it be taken in bulk?). Furthermore, Wilkinson et al. (1996) and Moss and Deven (2006) emphasize differences in policy schemes in terms of transferability between parents (can fathers use unused days of leave by the mother or vice versa?) and eligibility rights (what conditions must parents meet to be able to use the leave?). In addition, De Henau et al. (2006) refer to the accrual of pension rights during the leave (is time on leave counted towards one's right to pension?).

1.2 From a Mother's Right to a Gender-Equality Measure: Historical Developments

Parental leave policies, as they exist today in the European Union, are a relatively recent phenomenon. This section traces the historical development

can use it, it is not explicitly reserved for them.

⁵Council Directive 2010/18/EU of 8 March 2010, in addition to parental leave, also entitles parents to the right of family leave, in cases of emergency or illness of their child, whereby the presence of the parent is rendered indispensable due to the nature of the circumstances.

of leave policies, as they reflect important changes in the perceptions of gender differences in industrialized countries. Leave policies were initially introduced to protect pregnant female workers from heavy work conditions, which threatened them and their baby's life and health. Later on, leave policies took a job-protection component, which demonstrated that their goal had shifted from the protection of the health of pregnant women to the preservation of job opportunities of young mothers who wanted to return to the labour market after birth. Presently, parental leave policies are also available to fathers, which adds to their goals also the involvement of fathers in parental care and to an aim to bring about a more equal distribution of paid and unpaid work.

Historically, the origins of leave policies as we know them today, can be traced back to the last decades of the 19th century when maternity leave was first introduced in Germany, soon to be followed by a number of industrializing countries. Ruhm and Teague (1995) describe the first maternity leave policies as "paternalistic" (p. 2) measures, aimed explicitly at protecting the health of the pregnant woman and the newborn. In many cases it was compulsory for women to use the leave. The policies not only failed to include a job-protection guarantee, but, were, in fact, often aimed at encouraging working women to return to the roles of mothers and housewives, as society and tradition expected them to do (Frank and Lipner 1988 in Ruhm and Teague 1995).

It was not until the late 1960s and 1970s, that public and political attention started to shift from the issue of health protection of mothers to questions of discrimination and unfair treatment of pregnant women and female workers in general. In this period, legislation prohibiting the dismissal of pregnant women during maternity leave was introduced. Furthermore the legislation making it mandatory for female workers to interrupt their work due to pregnancy was re-considered in view of making women less preferred workers to be hired in the first place (Brocas et al., 1990). While these changes reflected an overall public consensus of the changing role of women and a trend towards an acceptance of the idea of a female career continuing post-childbirth, women remained the predominant population covered by maternity protection legislation with almost none or minimal attention being paid to the role of men in the upbringing of children. In fact, if anything, the legislation served to actively exclude men from their caring role in the

family, by restricting the eligibility for family leave and benefits to women.

In the 1970s, for the first time the work-care conflict began to be reframed as an issue of gender equality in general, rather than only a women's problem, and the Scandinavian countries led the way. In 1974, Sweden was the first country in the world, to introduce a gender-neutral parental leave, for which not only mothers, but also fathers were eligible (Chronholm, 2009). Three years later, in 1977, Norway followed by transforming its maternity leave to a leave available to fathers in cases where the mother preferred to return to work (Brandth and Kvande, 2009). In both countries the reforms reflected the new gender-equality political formulation of the work-family conflict, aiming at involving men in care, thus leading to more equal roles in the family. At the same time, the reforms supported women's careers, as mothers could more easily return to the labour market after giving birth if fathers assumed part of the care for the newborn (Chronholm, 2009; Brandth and Kvande, 2009). Most importantly, the reforms sent a powerful signal about a new expectation of men to be active participants in the upbringing of their children (Brandth and Kvande, 2009).

Although developments in other European countries did not immediately follow this trend, at the international level the idea of men as equal participants in the upbringing of children gained increased recognition. In 1981, the International Labour Organization adopted the *Workers with Family Responsibilities Convention No 156* and its accompanying *Recommendation No 165*, which aimed to protect both male and female workers from dismissal and unfair treatment due to the needs of workers to attend to private family responsibilities. Around the same time, in 1983, the European Commission put forward its first proposal for a directive on parental leave and leave for family reasons (Fusilier, 2009). Based on background studies carried out in the member states, the European Commission stated that leave policies for the purposes of care for young children, after and additional to maternity leave, which were exclusively for mothers, were discriminatory measures. Therefore, it was proposed that such leave policies should be replaced by one of general parental leave, which should, in principle, be gender-neutral and made available to both mothers and fathers. Moreover, the proposal explicitly stated the idea that equality of the roles of men and women in the family is a prerequisite for the equality in the labour market (Fusilier, 2009). The policy implementation plateaued for over a decade due to strong oppos-

ition by the United Kingdom (UK). Nevertheless European countries caught up with the Scandinavian way of thinking and by 1996 when the European Commission's Directive on parental leave was finally adopted, most countries in the European Union had already introduced some form of parental leave in their national legislation. The only exceptions in the then EU15 were the UK, Ireland, Belgium and Luxembourg, where no such measures existed and the transposition of the directive resulted in significant policy innovations (Fusilier, 2009).

1.3 The Goals of Parental Leave: Work-Family Reconciliation, Gender Equality and Child Wellbeing

This section discusses the goals of parental leave. It is important to think about the goals of the policy, as the assumption of what it is supposed to achieve is usually the fundamental premise on which policy evaluation studies are built. Based on the European directive and my review of the academic literature, I find that parental leave is most often considered an instrument aimed at fostering work-family reconciliation and gender equality between parents. From the perspective of mothers it is usually analysed to what extent parental leave policies provide them the opportunity to spend some time at home with their child *and* to return to work subsequently. When fathers are the focus of the analysis, the main question is, if and to what extent they will participate in the care for their newborn by taking leave. Finally, from the perspective of the children, researchers typically try to establish links between availability of parental leave policies and positive outcomes for child development.

According to the formulation of the most recent European directive on parental leave (Council Directive 2010/18/EU of 8 March 2010) it aims to support the work-family balance of working parents and, at the same time, to promote the equal treatment of men and women within both spheres. What constitutes equal treatment? Within the text of the directive, we find that equal treatment is sought both on the labour market and in the allocation of family responsibilities. The opening article of the directive makes a reference to *Article 153 of the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union*, which

justifies legislation at the European Union level on matters pertaining to equal treatment of men and women in the labour market. In the annexed framework agreement of 2009, we find support for the intended equality in unpaid work in *Article 8*, which reads:

Whereas family policies should contribute to the achievement of gender equality and be looked at in the context of demographic changes, the effects of an ageing population, closing the generation gap, promoting women's participation in the labour force and the sharing of care responsibilities between women and men(L 68/20);

In his book *Why We Need a New Welfare State*, Esping-Andersen (2003, chap. 3) devotes an analysis to what is meant by gender equality. In his view, a reason why there is often confusion around the term stems from the fact that it encompasses two separate, albeit complementary objectives, which he refers to as the objective of “*equity*” and the “*broader ‘equality’ challenge*” (Esping-Andersen, 2003, p. 70). The first objective refers to seeking policy solutions that could compensate women for the trade-offs, borne solely by them due to the lack of compatibility between career and motherhood. Problems related to this dimension manifest as the wage penalty for motherhood, and inequalities due to labour market inactivity or prolonged interruptions due to child-care. The “broader equality” objective, on the other hand, refers to removing any gender foundations of the distribution of opportunities and outcomes across the life course and the resolution of problems such as occupational segregation, the gender pay gap and unequal participation in unpaid work. In the analysis of Esping-Andersen (2003), we find that the current trends in changing the gender behaviour tend to weigh on the first objective, which leads to women's employment biographies resembling men's more and more. Working towards a gender egalitarian society, however, would require a behavioural change on the other side of the spectrum, as well, or in the words of Esping-Andersen (2003), “if we want more gender equality our policies may have to concentrate on men's behaviour” (Esping-Andersen, 2003, p. 70).

Parental leave is considered a policy instrument with the potential to advance the equality goals, in both dimensions, as it can effectively alter

both male and female work-family trajectories. In terms of measuring the extent to which a parental leave program is effectively an equality instrument Bruning and Plantenga (1999) suggest two key indicators: return rates of leave takers and male take up rates. These two figures could provide a rough idea of the extent to which female users of the leave are able to return to their previous employment successfully via the job-protection mechanism of the leave, and the extent to which men, too, are spending time outside work to take care of small children.

The focus of this paper is on reviewing the main findings from the literature pertaining to male take up of parental leave. The main idea of making parental leave gender neutral is that not only mothers but also fathers will participate in caring tasks, which would relieve women from carrying the sole burden of the costs of the caring responsibilities. Apart from the short-term interruption, male participation in parental leave is expected to change the distribution of paid and unpaid labour in the household in the long term (Duvander and Jans, 2009). The assumption is that if men take parental leave in their child's early years, they will be equally likely to develop a comparative advantage in caring tasks relative to women (Reich et al., 2012) and then, they should have the same inclination as mothers to take sick and family leave if needed, thus making the probability of short-term absences equal also in the longer term (Reich et al., 2012).

Recently academic attention has also been directed on the outcomes for children if their fathers' take parental leave. Increasingly scholars are beginning to highlight the importance of parental leave for both gender equality and child wellbeing (Duvander and Johansson, 2012; Marshall, 2008). The importance of fathers' involvement for children's development is well established in psychology literature. For example, Johnson et al. (2013) have found fathers working long hours to be a factor related to problematic behaviour in boys, whilst the same was not true for the working hours of mothers. Another study from developmental psychology, shows that infants cared for by both mothers and fathers (shared parental leave) develop finer abilities to recognize faces and emotions at the age of 14 months Gredebäck et al. (2012). A number of other studies are listed in a review by Pattnaik and Sri-rarm (2010). Nevertheless studies linking specifically the access and usage of fathers to parental leave policies are only recently beginning to emerge. The work of O'Brien (2009) provides a comprehensive review of studies treating

the question of how parental leave policies relate to better father-child relationships, and in turn, to positive child-development outcomes. The overall conclusion is that the available scientific evidence suggests that parental leave policies do have the potential to enhance father-infant relationships and to contribute to child wellbeing. However, taking the perspective of the child as a central point of the analysis O'Brien (2009) warns about new forms of inequality that are beginning to appear from a very early age: namely the difference between children who grow up in "parental time-rich" (O'Brien, 2009, p. 209) households and those who have limited access to parental time and resources. O'Brien (2009) relates this inequality to the design of parental leave policies, as they must ensure that parental time does not come at the expense of reduced financial flow into the family, as would be the case with unpaid parental leave schemes.

2 Review of Policy Evaluation Studies

There are two main sources of information on take up rates: government reports and academic policy evaluations. Whilst one would expect that governments are aware of how many parents use the leave provisions they make available, it is remarkable to what extent countries differ in terms of whether they collect and provide such information. Policy evaluation studies typically take advantage of variations in policies across time or across countries (or regions) and analyse the behaviour of individuals, based on a "natural experiment" set up. Such studies are powerful informative tools, which can be used to understand the importance of policy design and the extent to which it has the potential to affect the behaviour of individuals. The main finding put forward in this review, based on figures found in reports and on studies evaluating parental leave reforms, is that, in the absence of special incentives for men to take parental leave, they will take it much less frequently than women and for shorter durations. Evidence for this statement comes from studies in countries where the most recent developments have only involved making the right to parental leave available at all (to both women and men) with no special incentives to encourage a more equal distribution in take up of the leave between parents. It appears that the majority of leave provisions fall within this category. In the comparative tables on parental leave provided

by Moss (2012), one finds that only eight out of the 29 countries that are represented in the *International Leave Policies and Research Network*,⁶ provide parental leave and a specific incentive for the father to use it as of the year 2011. The situation is further complicated in countries where, apart from lack of special incentives, there is lack of payment for parental leave,⁷ as lack of payment further discourages fathers from using leave (O'Brien, 2009).

Figures on take up of leave where no special incentives for fathers are available, reveal a larger share of female users. For example, in the UK, a report by Smeaton and Marsh (2005) states that only a small fraction of fathers took parental leave in 2005. The reported figures are 10 per cent of the fathers eligible in 2002 and 8 per cent in 2005 took parental leave.⁸ In Spain, Escobedo and Meil (2012) report that between 1995 and 2005, 96 per cent of leave users were mothers. Lapuerta et al. (2010) analyse the factors associated with parental leave take up and conclude that parental leave in Spain does not contribute to gender equality. On the contrary, it serves to reinforce traditional division of labour as men are not likely to use parental leave. In addition, only families in relatively advantageous positions can use the unpaid parental leave in order to devote parental time to their children, as others would not be able to afford the associated loss of income. For comparison, in Luxembourg where parental leave was introduced as an individual-based entitlement for both men and women in 1999, and where it is compensated, it is estimated that women take about 84 per cent of all parental leaves, while men take 16 per cent, based on the data on all parental leaves taken between 1999 and the beginning of 2004 (Plasman and Sissoko, 2005). Despite mothers being the majority of leave takers, in Luxembourg the percentage of fathers taking leave is amongst the higher in Europe (Plantenga and Remery, 2005), which could be explained by available compensation for the leave.

Several interesting academic studies performed in a classic before-after analytical framework, which allows a clear link to be made between legislation and behaviour of individuals are available from the United States (US).

⁶Austria, Croatia, Finland, Germany, Italy, Japan, Portugal and Sweden

⁷Greece, Ireland, Spain, the U.K.(see Moss, 2012)

⁸O'Brien and Moss (2012) refer to newer data, which are not directly comparable with the report of Smeaton and Marsh (2005), but might suggest that there is an increase in the number of fathers taking parental leave.

There, federal-level legislation on parental leave was introduced relatively recently (1993). Whilst the legislation is formulated in gender-neutral ways, there are no special incentives for men to use it.⁹ It must be noted that the US context is very different from the European one, as in the European Union all countries provide paid maternity leave. Thus the leave taken by parents in the US could be more comparable to maternity leave than to parental leave in Europe, as it is of a short duration. In addition, the leave is unpaid. At the same time, however, a number the studies from the US deserve special attention, as the regional and temporal variation in the introduction of leave provisions provides valuable insights into the causal effect of policies.

In this literature review, I focus on findings related to the gender distribution of leave take up. Studies from the US typically report an unequal gender distribution in taking the leave. Peterson (2004) quotes data collected by a commission established by the US Congress. Amongst the main findings was that the usage of leave mandated by the *Family and Medical Leave Act (FMLA)* in 1993 was not gender balanced, with women making up the majority of leave takers (58 per cent) and being much more likely to use the leave to care for sick family members than men, who usually used the leave for themselves. Take up of leave by men after the introduction of the FMLA was the central focus in the study of Han and Waldfogel (2003). The study used a panel data set from the period 1991-96, which tracked weekly labour force participation and absences from work due to unpaid leave (paid leave was not recorded). While there was partial evidence that leave entitlements increased leave taking in women, for men no significant effects were observed. A later study by Han et al. (2009) found similar results covering a larger time period. On the descriptive level, on average just 3 per cent of fathers reported taking leave during the month of the birth of a child and less than 1 per cent reported taking leave in the three months following it, whilst about half of mothers exposed to parental leave legislation were not working in the month following the leave. There were some noticeable increases in the

⁹In fact, the leave available to parents in the US is not exactly parental leave, but falls with the broader scope of the *Family and Medical Leave Act (FMLA)*, which could be used for a variety of reasons including caring for a newborn child. It must be noted that there is a great level of variation in state-mandated rights to leave as well, with some states such as California offering paid leave and some states offering none. In addition, some states provide the right to take leave under Temporary Disability Insurance (TDI) schemes (Kamerman and Waldfogel, 2012)

fraction of fathers taking leave over time, as the number of fathers reporting leave in the month birth grew from 1.1 per cent in 1988 to 6.1 per cent in 2004. Nevertheless, this trend could not be described as anything more than, “that a small but growing fraction of fathers take paternity leaves, usually for a very short duration” (Han et al., 2009, p.42). The regression specifications yielded significant associations between availability of leave legislation and men’s leave taking only for this period (the birth month). In contrast the association for women was significant and with larger coefficients. Thus, the overall conclusion is that, in the absence of special incentives for men to take leave and when the leave is unpaid, women will be more likely to take leave.

The second finding, based on policy evaluation studies, is that incentives to take the leave can lead to marked behavioural changes in fathers. The most effective policy instrument seems to be earmarking a part of the leave for fathers only on a use-it-or-lose-it basis, in combination with income-replacement compensation. However, these effects have been observed to vary with the policy design. Furthermore, we mostly have evidence that this is an effective design in the Scandinavian context, which may or may not mean that similar political reforms will lead to the same outcomes in other cultural and institutional contexts.

Based on a review of the policy developments in five Nordic countries (Sweden, Denmark, Finland, Iceland and Norway) Haas and Rostgaard (2011) identify three key stages in the development of parental leave legislation. The first stage is simply opening the right to take parental leave to men, as historically it was reserved only for women. The second stage is making certain periods of leave available exclusively for fathers, so that they cannot transfer their entitlement to the mother of the child. Finally, some countries also introduce, as a third step, special incentives to families where fathers use parental leave. Apart from comparing the policy design of the five countries, the authors also discuss take up rates of men. The most notable conclusion is that in the three countries where parental leave is partially earmarked for the father, fathers make almost full use of the leave available to them (in Iceland the increase of father’s participation was very sharp, whilst in Norway and in Sweden it was more gradual). In Finland and Denmark where no leave is earmarked there is not a high percentage of men participating in parental

leave.¹⁰ A further review of empirical studies evaluating reforms related to parental leave in any of the three stages is provided later in this paper. The overarching conclusion is that simply making parental leave available and gender neutral is not enough to make the proportion of male and female parents using it equal. The other conclusion is that the context within which reforms are introduced is very important; similar measures produce different results in different social-political systems.

Sweden is the pioneer in earmarking a period of the total family parental leave for use by men without the right for transferring it their female partners. The first reform in 1995 earmarked one month for both men and women (the rest can be shared by parents). The reform is called ‘daddy month’ because mothers used almost in full their earmarked month even before the reform, therefore it was clear that fathers were the target group (Ekberg et al., 2013). A thorough evaluation of the reform is provided by Ekberg et al. (2013) who investigate the effectiveness of the Swedish daddy month via a natural experiment. They analyse whether the introduction of the daddy month changed male behaviour in the short term (measured by male take up rates of parental leave following the reform) and in the long term (via measuring the rate of male take up of family leave). The results showed a significant increase in the number of father using parental leave if they were subject to the daddy month parental leave rules. The total share of men using parental leave increased by 50 per cent, while the percentage of fathers taking one month of parental leave increased from 9 per cent to 47 per cent. However, there seemed to be no effect on the probability of fathers to participate in the care of children in the following years (for example when they were sick), as there was no significant difference between the percentage of men taking sick leave before and after the reform.

Duvander and Johansson (2012) analyse the same reform in the same natural experiment design and find similar results. They also extend the study to analyse in the same way the second daddy month added in 2002, and the gender equality bonus introduced in 2008. The results of the second daddy month are also positive, as they increase the fraction of leave used by fathers,

¹⁰Daddy months were abolished in Denmark in 2002. In Finland there are days available to the father in addition to parental leave, however, they are not exactly a father’s quota because they are given as a bonus if the father takes a part of the parental leave available to the family (Haas and Rostgaard, 2011).

however, they are not as strong as the first one. Furthermore, comparing the treatment group for 1995 and the control group for 2002 (which were subject only to one daddy month), showed that the fraction of fathers using any leave at all has decreased to 70 per cent from 75 per cent, which could mean that there was an initial very strong response and then a tapering off of the effect. There was no effect from the gender equality bonus. The authors juxtapose their results with the experience of Iceland where a three-month period was reserved for the father out of a total of nine months provided for the family, and a majority of fathers use the full three months (Duvander and Lammi-Taskula, 2010 in Duvander and Johansson (2012)). Duvander and Johansson (2012) suggest that perhaps a sharp increase in the earmarked period would be as effective or more effective than a gradual introduction of the reform, as in Sweden.

Consistent with the positive empirical evidence from the Scandinavian countries, the European Commission makes an explicit recommendation in the parental leave directive that entitlement to parental leave should be an individual right and non-transferable between parents. Whilst it is still up to each member state to make the leave an individual or family-level entitlement, at least one month must be non-transferable. This is documented in clause 2 of the annex to the agreement:

The leave shall be granted for at least a period of four months and, to promote equal opportunities and equal treatment between men and women, should, in principle, be provided on a non-transferable basis. To encourage a more equal take-up of leave by both parents, at least one of the four months shall be provided on a non-transferable basis. The modalities of application of the non-transferable period shall be set down at national level through legislation and/or collective agreements taking into account existing leave arrangements in the Member States(L68/18).

The legislation in some countries is changing following the successful experience in Scandinavian countries. In the German context Kluge and Tamm (2012) analyse as a natural experiment the Elterngeld reform from 2007, which added two months to the total parental leave available for the family (12 months), if fathers participate. The authors equate the reform with

earmarking two months for the fathers, similarly to the “Daddy Months” in Sweden. The results showed that about 16 per cent of the fathers participated in the leave and the majority of them used exactly two months, which was the minimum requirement. These results are far less dramatic than in Sweden, but they still demonstrate that the effects of earmarking parts of the leave are partly transferable outside the Scandinavian countries.

3 Theoretical Understanding of Male Use of Parental Leave

There seems to be an absence of an integrated theoretical framework, which could be used as a starting point for understanding male use of parental leave. The general trend in the literature is that researchers point to at least several theoretical frameworks developed in economics, sociology and sometimes psychology to explain fathers’ behaviour (for example see: Tanaka and Waldfogel (2007); Geisler and Kreyenfeld (2011); Sundstrom and Duvander (2002)). It is beyond the scope of this paper to review all these theories from different fields, thus I focus on the major economics theories.

One striking finding from the literature on parental leave is that women’s behaviour is usually analysed at the individual level, while men’s behaviour is considered in the family context. For example the central premise in the theoretical framework on women’s take up of parental leave by Klerman and Leibowitz (1997) is that individual women compare the utility of staying at home and caring for their child with the opportunity cost of continuing their career. Other examples of theoretical model of mothers’ use of parental leave at the individual level can be found in Burgess et al. (2008) and Ondrich et al. (2003).

Economic studies on male use of parental leave tend to point to either Becker’s(1981) New Home Economics (Reich et al., 2012) or bargaining theories (for example see: Amilon (2007)). The fundamental premise of Becker’s approach is that the man and the woman in the couple specialize either in work outside the home or in household production, as this maximizes the

resources for the household. According to this theory, the separation of labour typically correlates with gender, as men (at the time of developing the theory) were more educated and thus had a comparative advantage relative to women in paid work. Women, on the other hand, due to their biological role in reproduction have a comparative advantage in household production. In bargaining models, the distribution of participation in household tasks is considered to be an outcome of bargaining between the spouses based on their relative resources. In both of these theories the starting point of analysis is the family, and thus men's decisions are analysed as conditional not only on their individual characteristics, but also on their partners'. Most notably, one would expect that the factor explaining who will take parental leave would be the relative difference between the earnings or the earning potentials of the two partners (Geisler and Kreyenfeld, 2011). Both bargaining and home economics theory would suggest that men would take parental leave and in general share in household work if the female partner in the couple earns more on the labour market. Thus, taking both these theoretical premises would require gathering information for both partners in the couple and not only one.

There are not many studies on male use of parental leave, which test premises based explicitly on economic theories. In principle to test for the importance of earnings disparity one would need to incorporate not only the individual incomes of both parents, but also the difference between them in the analysis. One example of such a study is the analysis of Geisler and Kreyenfeld (2011) where the focus is on evaluating how the difference between men and women in terms of age, education and earnings affects whether men take parental leave. The results are consistent with economic theory based on relative resources, as the men who are most likely to take parental leave are the ones younger than their partners, and less educated than their partners. An important omission of the study is information about the income of the men and their partners, as this variable would be the best indicator of the relative opportunity cost of taking parental leave in the family. Another study incorporating relative incomes of the partners was performed by Lappegård (2008) in Norway. The results lend (partial) evidence to the economic theories based on relative resources. Notably the variable representing the income of the mothers as a proportion of the income of the father (as a measure of equality in earnings) explained fathers' leave taking behaviour better than individual incomes of the two parents. The overall results were

consistent with the hypothesis that more equal earnings would result in a higher probability for fathers to take leave. Interestingly, however, this was not the case for couples where the mother earned significantly more than the father, where the probability for fathers' leave use was lower. Lappegård (2008) explains this with the specific composition of families in this group, where due to the limited labour force participation of the father the overall income was lower than in other families. In Lappegård (2012) more equal distribution of earnings between the two parents in the couple was also associated with greater probability of fathers to use leave, although this was not the central focus of the analysis. Further support for the importance of relative resources comes from the study of Marshall (2008) in Canada, where the odds were more than twice higher for fathers to take parental leave if their partners earned the same or more than them. The relationship seemed to be particularly pronounced in Quebec where the odds were three and a half times higher.

Although positioning men's decisions on using parental leave certainly has its merits, it must be noted that this approach has certain limitations. To begin with, some scholars have also warned that in view of the complex endogenous relationships between marital status of men and their work behaviour, and the constantly increasing complexity of family relationships, studying individuals and not families is more appropriate for understanding the labour supply of men (Lundberg, 2005). Second, family-level theories have been developed for the more broad phenomenon of household tasks and not parental leave, and there is evidence showing that these are different (albeit related) categories (Ishii-kuntz and Coltrane, 1992). Finally, analyzing leave taking behaviour at the family level may be more appropriate in contexts where the leave is a family right, for example in Sweden or Germany. A number of countries, however, such as Luxembourg, Belgium and others provide leave as an individual entitlement, and men must make the decision whether to use the leave, and not whether to share it with their partner (as it cannot be transferred).

4 Review of Previous Research on Individual Level Factors in Male Use of Parental Leave

This section presents a summary of the main factors, which have been identified as predictors of male use of parental leave in previous studies. It is important, however, to keep in mind that the same socio-demographic characteristics might have very different effects in different contexts.

4.1 Nationality and Age

Nationality and age could be related to leave taking behaviour of fathers in several ways. To begin with, nationality can reflect fathers' cultural background. Fathers coming from cultures where more men take parental leave might be more likely to be willing to take leave than fathers from cultures where fewer men take leave. Similarly, age could be inversely related to leave taking, if younger fathers share less traditional views than older fathers on the distribution of paid and unpaid work. At the same time, however, both nationality and age could be linked to the position of fathers in the labour market, which could in turn affect their opportunity cost for taking the leave. Fathers who are immigrants in their country of residence might hold more precarious positions, which make it more difficult for them to use leave. Similarly younger fathers could be less established in their career than older fathers, which could mean that it would be easier for older fathers to negotiate a leave of absence with their employers.

In the empirical literature, it is difficult to find clear-cut effects. Nationality, when other controls are included does not seem to be a major factor of taking parental leave in Germany. Geisler and Kreyenfeld (2011) found no significant differences between German and non-German fathers, except in a model which did not take into account partner's characteristics, where non-German fathers were less likely to use parental leave. With regards to age, in Norway Lappegård (2008) found that fathers aged between 29 and 35 were more likely to use parental leave than other fathers. In Sweden Sundstrom and Duvander (2002) tested the effect of age as a continuous variable without

a quadratic specification and found that the share of leave taken by fathers in a couple tended to be higher for younger men. The study by Geisler and Kreyenfeld (2011) found age to be a significant predictor of taking parental leave depending on the model specification. In the model without partners' characteristics, age seems to have a positive linear effect with older fathers being more likely to take leave. However, the only significant difference in the model is found to be between fathers aged 30 to 35 (the reference group) and fathers between 26 and 30. Age was entered in the regression relative to the partner's age, where men who were younger than their partners by two or six years were significantly more likely to take leave compared to men in couples with no age difference. The odds of taking parental leave were even higher if the age difference was higher. These effects were observed even when controlling for educational differences between the partners in the couple.

4.2 Education

Educational level is one of the key variables in studies related to fathers' leave taking behaviour. The causal effects between education and leave taking, however, can run in different directions. This ambiguity is mentioned by a number of researchers (for example, see Lappegård, 2008). On the one hand, higher educational level could reflect higher earning potential and, in turn, a higher opportunity cost of taking the leave. On the other hand, educational levels could be positively related to the probability of fathers to take parental leave. More educated fathers are generally more likely to spend time engaging in child care activities (Reich et al., 2012). Nielsen (2009) suggests that more educated couples may be more informed of changes in policy related to their right to take parental leave. The authors point out the study by Han et al. (2009), which provides some support to this line of thought, as well-educated fathers were found to be more likely to respond to changes in parental leave policy.

The empirical evidence seems to suggest that the education of not only the father, but of *both* parents in the couple is important for fathers' leave taking. This finding is supported by the studies of Nielsen (2009) in Denmark, Marshall (2008) in Canada, Lappegård (2008) in Norway, and Sundstrom

and Duvander (2002) in Sweden. In Germany, Geisler and Kreyenfeld (2011) found no effect of education on the probability of taking parental leave. The variable was tested first in a logistic regression without controlling for partner's characteristics. Partner's educational characteristics were then included in a another specification relative to the men's level of education. In couples where the woman was more educated than the man, men were significantly more likely to take parental leave compared to couples where both had vocational degree.

4.3 Individual Income

The level of individual income can serve as a proxy for the opportunity cost of the father to take leave, which is especially relevant in the case of a low paid or unpaid parental leave scheme. At the same time, parents who have higher incomes might be more likely to have savings and additional resources they could use to fund a period of income reduction due to the leave. Generally, subjective studies suggest that parents find economic consideration most important when making decisions about how to organize their parental leave (Duvander, 2008 in Duvander and Johansson, 2012). When analyzing the effects of individual income on probability of taking leave, it is important to have a good understanding of the funding of the leave. If the leave is unpaid or paid at a flat-rate, individual income will indicate the opportunity cost of the leave in terms of foregone earnings. However, this will not be true if the leave is compensated on an income-replacement basis.

Empirical results seem to run in both directions. Positive associations between fathers' individual income and probability of taking leave have been reported by Lappegård (2008) in Norway and by Sundstrom and Duvander (2002) in Sweden. On the contrary, Ekberg et al. (2013) found that lower income levels were associated with higher levels of male take up of parental leave. Nielsen (2009) found that there are stronger effects of a reform in Denmark providing economic incentives for parents in the public sector to take leave for men who were lower paid. The effect of individual income on fathers's leave taking was negative, controlling for education and partners' characteristics.

4.4 Family Characteristics

Fathers' family situations affect their decisions to take parental leave in a number of ways. Here, I focus on three of the factors, which are addressed most often: marital status, parity and gender of the child/children. The marital status of a couple (i.e. cohabiting vs. married) can be seen as a reflection of the level of commitment between the two partners and the probability that they will continue to stay together. The effects, however, differ across contexts. In Germany, Geisler and Kreyenfeld (2011) found that cohabiting fathers were significantly more likely (the odds were about 1.8 higher) to take leave than fathers who were married. Other studies found the opposite effect - married fathers were more likely to use leave than cohabitant ones (Sundstrom and Duvander, 2002; Lappegård, 2008).

The order of births also matters, as there is evidence that parents make different decisions when the child is the first-born and when there are already other children in the family. With regards to parity, it seems that fathers are most likely to use leave for the first child. Nielsen (2009) found that there are stronger effects of a reform in Denmark providing economic incentives for parents in the public sector to take leave, for men where the child born is the first child. Similarly, in Germany, Geisler and Kreyenfeld (2011) found that the odds of a father to take parental leave became significantly lower if there were two children already in the family and lowered even more if there were three or more other children, compared to one child in the family. In Norway, Lappegård (2008) also found that first-time fathers were more likely to use leave. The study by Sundstrom and Duvander (2002) also confirms this result. Sundstrom and Duvander (2002) hypothesize that the division of housework labour becomes more gender-based when the number of children increases, as the overall volume of work increases and thus specialization yields greater returns.

It is also important, when there are other children, what their age is. In Germany, Geisler and Kreyenfeld (2011) found that the probability for a father to take leave decreases with the age of the child. The gender of the child can also be an important predictor. Lundberg (2005) cites evidence from the *Panel Study of Income Dynamics* according to which fathers increase work hours when a child is born; however the effect of a son is two

times stronger than the effect of a daughter (Lundberg and Rose (2002) in Lundberg, 2005). To complicate matters further, Lundberg (2005) cites additional evidence from the *German Socio-Economic Panel(GSOeP)*, according to which sons are more likely to be residing with their fathers than daughters (Choi, Joesch and Lundberg (2005) in Lundberg, 2005). Although the latter findings do not refer directly to parental leave, they demonstrate important relationships between the gender of the new born child and fathers' work and family engagement.

4.5 Workplace Characteristics

Workplace characteristics have also been found to be important factors for parents' decisions to take leave or not. Even if the right to parental leave is guaranteed by the state, it still remains up to each individual father to apply for the leave and to arrange it with his workplace organization. Thus one can expect that different workplace characteristics would facilitate leave taking to a different extent. A study specifically dedicated to the role of the workplace for fathers' leave taking was performed by Haas et al. (2010) in six Swedish companies. The study addressed the role of factors related to the company culture, factors related to fathers' perception of support to take leave within their immediate working groups, as well as individual-level factors. The results revealed that workplace characteristics do play a role in whether fathers take leave and in how many days of leave they take.

Workplace characteristics that are usually easy to measure and include in the analysis are the general nature of the industry, public vs. private employment sectors, size of the enterprise, and distribution of gender in the occupational category or in the enterprise. There seems to be a consensus in the literature that men working in the public sector are more likely to use leave (Lappegård, 2012; Nielsen, 2009). Men also tend to be more likely to take leave if they work in larger organizations. In the study of Anxo et al. (2007) relative to small enterprises, men working in medium and larger enterprises had a significantly higher probability of taking leave, and the marginal effect increased with the increase in the size of the enterprise. A similar finding is reported by Whitehouse et al. (2007) in Australia, where men working in small organizations were the least likely to use parental

leave. Interestingly in Lappegård (2012), in families where the father worked in medium or large-size organizations it was more likely that he would take longer leave.

As far as the sector of employment is concerned, first, there are not many studies that include it, and, second, it seems like there are differences in constructing the definitions. In a comparative study of men taking parental leave across European countries based on *The European Establishment Survey on Working Time and Work–Life Balance (ESWT) 2004–2005*, Anxo et al. (2007) found significant differences in the probabilities of men working in industries with different NACE codes¹¹ to use their right to parental leave. In Lappegård (2008), men working in health and social services had greater probability of taking parental leave than men working in other sectors. At the same time men working in the finance and business sector had significantly lower odds to use leave relative to the health and social services group.

Other important workplace characteristics documented by Anxo et al. (2007) include the scheduling of the work and flexible workplace arrangements. If there was night work required, men were more likely to take parental leave, whilst shift work and weekend work did not make a significant difference. There were positive effects seen from both flexible working arrangements and life balance arrangements on men taking parental leave. Possibly these reflect an overall company culture supporting parenting. Interestingly Anxo et al. (2007) found no effects of the age composition of the company on men’s probability to take parental leave; however, a higher share of women working in the company decreased the probability of men taking parental leave. The role of gender distribution in the enterprise was analysed in Lappegård (2012). Contrary to what the authors expected, fathers were more likely to take longer leave if they worked in organizations with an equal distribution of gender.

¹¹NACE codes are the codes assigned to different occupational sectors according to the European statistical classification of economic activities

5 Other Research Topics Related to Male Use of Parental Leave

Two main topics emerged as a result of the literature review and they are reviewed in detail below. One of the main topics is whether leave policies are causally linked to long term changes in the behaviour of fathers. This question is important because children need their parents' attention well beyond the initial years of their lives. Although care requirements are most intensive for babies and toddlers, school-age children also may need to be cared for at home, after school or in the case of accidents, illness, etc. European member states are required to grant parents the right to family leave for such circumstances. However, just as with parental leave, if only women take it this will jeopardize their position in the labour market and make them less-desirable workers, perceived as more likely than men to require brief work interruptions. Thus the extent to which fathers tend to take family leaves relative to mothers deserves special attention even by itself. In conjunction with parental leave, however, take up of family leave is sometimes used as a measure of long-term father involvement and the question being raised is whether fathers who take parental leave are also more likely to take family leave in the longer run. Another topic, which has recently begun to emerge is the study of work-related consequences for fathers taking parental leave. The study of this question has some parallels to the study of wage-penalties due to women's career breaks. Both of these topics are elaborated below.

There are two studies, that do not really fit under any of the other headings of this paper, but deserve special mention, because they are concerned with rather interesting research questions. The first hypothesis was tested in Ekberg et al. (2005) and addressed the hypotheses that fathers take more leave when there are major sports events. The second study, by Laflamme et al. (2012) analysed whether fathers expose their children to higher risk of injury if they take parental leave. Both studies have rejected the claims and both studies are from Sweden. These studies are interesting because the research questions they answer, to the best of my knowledge, do not have a parallel in the literature addressing mothers' take up of parental leave. In a way, the existence of such studies suggest that there is still the need to reassure the academic community and the general public of both the sincer-

ity of the motivation of fathers who take parental leave and their abilities to perform the job properly.

5.1 Long-Term Changes in the Distribution of Paid and Unpaid Work in the Family as a Result of Men Using Parental Leave

A summary of the possible ways in which parental leave policies can increase male participation in child care is provided by Reich et al. (2012):

To sum up, parental leave policies have a threefold effect on fathers' childcare. First, they can lead to a higher participation by fathers in parental leave leading to higher childcare participation rates and a higher number of minutes spent with the baby. Secondly, they can have long-lasting effects, i.e. fathers' taking parental leave resulted in higher childcare productivity and increased interest in spending time with their children in the long run. Thirdly, as policies actively promoting fathers' involvement with their children reduce fathers' loss of identity when performing childcare tasks, even fathers who did not use parental leave might become more engaged with their children. Nevertheless, the scope of family policy to change intra-family decisions on childcare participation and time allocation is limited by the prevailing norms and ideologies in a society.(p.7)

A growing body of research looks even further into male take up of leave and considers if it leads to any behavioural changes, which could lead to a longer term shift in the traditional separation of paid and unpaid work in the family. For example, the analysis of the daddy month reform in Sweden in 1995 by Ekberg et al. (2013), included an analysis of any long-term effects, by comparing sick leave usage (in order to care for sick children) by fathers who took parental leave and who did not take it. The study found no substantial results in that aspect, however the reform did decrease the number of months used by mothers. An evaluation of the reform in Norway

from 1993 by Kotsadam and Finseraas (2011), which earmarked four weeks of parental leave for fathers, showed some evidence for long term changes in male behaviour as a result of increased participation in parental leave. Men who had children after the reform were more likely to participate in household tasks, such as laundry, and had fewer family conflicts about housework. The evaluation was performed via a “before and after” comparison. However subjective attitudes towards gender equality did not seem to be affected. Tanaka and Waldfogel (2007) linked fathers’ leave taking in the UK to higher levels of child involvement in terms of the following behaviours: changing diapers, feeding and getting up during the night. As fathers whose employers provided leave were five times more likely to take any leave when a child was born, the authors concluded that availability of parental leave is linked to an increased level of fathers’ involvement.

Karu (2012) points out that one potential problem with male use of parental leave is that their female partners frequently take other forms of leave, such as annual vacation or sabbatical leave at the same time. As a result the father cannot develop his human capital in child-care and become comfortable with handling small children, which means that mothers are not completely relieved from caring responsibilities as fathers never become comfortable with handling small children. The analysis of Karu (2012) shows that in Estonia about 43 per cent of mothers did not work while their partners were on parental leave.¹² This effect was especially pronounced for younger couples and where the mother did not work before the leave period.

5.2 labour Market Consequences of Taking Parental Leave for Men

Kluge and Tamm (2012) found no labour market effects of increased male take up of leave as a result of the reform in 2007 in Germany, which earmarked two months of parental leave for men. The percentage of men taking leave was rather low (about 16 per cent) and most of them used the so-called

¹²In the Estonian system, it is possible that parents receive parental leave benefit also if they only reduce their hours of labour market participation or also if they continue working but earn below a certain threshold

“Elterngeld” (parenting money) only for the minimum required period of two months. Therefore, according to the authors, because of the short period of time, it is not surprising that there were no labour market consequences for the fathers. In Denmark, Nielsen (2009) found no negative effects of leave taking on fathers’ wages or their probability of promotion. There was a negative effect for mothers, however. Nielsen (2009) explains the difference with the different average duration for men, which is much shorter than for women.

Other studies, however, found negative consequences for fathers taking parental leave. Albrecht et al. (1999) found that taking parental leave has negative consequences for men and not for women in the Swedish context. The authors state that these results can support signaling theory, as there is a much stronger self-selection for men than for women into taking leave. Thus it seems like taking parental leave is correlated with lower job commitment for men, which is why men who take parental leave face a wage loss after their return. For women, given that the majority take leave in the Swedish context, employers cannot distinguish between lower and higher level of commitment based on taking leave. Another study supporting potential negative effects for men taking leave comes from the USA. There, Allen and Russell (1999) used hypothetical scenarios to assess the attitudes of participants towards men who take parental leave. He found that participants would be less likely to recommend for rewards men who took leave of absence for parental reasons.

6 Issues of Data and Measurements

I would like to devote a small section to the problem of data at the end of this study, as one way or another, most of the reviewed papers discussed issues related to data, whether it be availability, accuracy or the definitions they used to construct the leave-related variables. The problems of data availability on parental leave usage of men, are to an extent the same as the problems with the data on women. The general issue is that not enough data are collected and that there are no reliable ways to distinguish parental leave from other forms of leave. For a general discussion on the problems

found in self-reported data sources one can refer to Chan et al. (2012). In addition, scholars have criticized the way leave take up rates are computed and analysed. Below, I would like to highlight two suggestions by academic scholars on the methodological approach to measuring the parental leave used by men, as they could lead to quantitative changes in the results.

Bruning and Plantenga (1999) criticize the use of take up rates (defined as the ratio of those who use the leave over those who are eligible to use it), as they only consider leave taking without consideration of duration and eligibility. Take up rates can be very high; however, if eligibility is very strict, then the leave is not really relevant. Thus, Bruning and Plantenga (1999) suggest using user rates. The user rate would be calculated as the fraction of parents using leave out of the total number of parents with children of the same age in a country. In a comparative study of eight European countries, the difference becomes clear. The take up rates of men are very high in Finland, Sweden and Norway. However, the authors point out that the high take up rates reflect taking of paternity leave or earmarked leave in Sweden, which is of rather short duration, rather than high numbers of men sharing parental leave with their partners equally. As data on total working parents are not available, user rates are computed as the share of parental leave users from the total workers. Thus they reflect the fraction of workers on parental leave from the total labour force. With this measure, the share of men on parental leave is so small it is practically zero, while for women it varies up to 8 per cent in Austria.

Haataja (2009) makes a specific distinction between paternity and parental leaves. The author writes a very informative and interesting section on how the statistical offices in Nordic countries report the usage of these leaves by fathers, highlighting the fact that the figures are not always comparable, as sometimes the leaves are reported together and sometimes separately. The central focus of the paper is to separate the use of paternity and parental leaves in the five Nordic countries and to see to what extent there are differences and similarities when the data are presented in this way. One of the main findings is that in Denmark and Finland, fathers predominantly used paternity leave only, that is they hardly participated in parental leave. In

Iceland, probably due to the structure of the leave there,¹³ fathers take the highest share of parental leave in the world (Haataja, 2009).

In the study of Lappegård (2008) on Norwegian fathers' leave taking in the period from 1992 to 2000, one finds another interesting juxtaposition of how different measures of fathers' leave taking can highlight different trends. For each year, the authors present the figures corresponding to three different measures: the percentage of leave days used by fathers out of all leave days available to the family,¹⁴ the percentage of fathers who took leave out of all who were eligible (the take up rate), and finally the average duration of leave used by fathers. The figures revealed that the introduction of an earmarked period of one month for fathers in 1993, has led to an increase in the take up rate from 2.3 per cent in 1992 to 85 per cent in 2000. However, the average duration of leave taken has remained at around one month (24 days) for the entire period from 1994 to 2000, which means that although more fathers are taking leave, the majority of them are taking only the minimum period allocated to them.

7 Conclusion

The review of empirical studies related to male use of parental leave in industrialized countries has highlighted several interesting trends in the literature. To sum up, the main finding is that in the absence of special incentives to use parental leave, the majority of users will continue to be women. Thus instead of fostering more equality in care, parental leave would on the contrary serve to reinforce the traditional gender division of paid and unpaid work. Second, it appears that making the leave paid and non-transferable (in part or as a whole) can induce fathers to use parental leave. Factors related to male take up of parental leave appear to be education, family characteristics

¹³At the time of writing the paper of Haataja (2009) in Iceland the parental leave was available in the ratio 3:3:3, meaning that there were three months for the mother, three months for the father and three months of transferable leave, which could be used by either parent. As of February 2013, the ratio became 5:5:2 (International Leave Network, 2013).

¹⁴In Norway parental leave is a family entitlement.

and workplace characteristics.

A few interesting observations appear also in terms of the general academic approach towards the question of male use of parental leave. To begin with, there are only a few studies available and they come primarily from the Scandinavian context, although there seems to be a trend of increasing attention paid to this topic in other contexts. Second, the theoretical approaches to studying the choices of men to use leave or not seem to markedly differ from the ones applied to the study of women's choices. The choices of men seem to be positioned in the context of the family, which means that the decisions of the female partners are implicitly or explicitly incorporated in the analysis as well. Women, on the other hand, tend to be considered as individuals making an independent decision on their own. Finally, some publications are beginning to discuss the questions of defining and measuring male use of parental leave, as different conceptualizations can lead to different outcomes.

Further research would be especially beneficial if it would focus on understanding how effective leave provisions outside the Scandinavian context are. In addition, it would be useful if a more thorough economic framework is developed, which takes into account not only the negotiation process in the couple, but also includes the individual reasoning of the father. Such a model would be particularly important in view of the constantly changing family arrangements, where fathers are not necessarily married to or cohabiting with mothers. In addition, there appears to be surprisingly little attention paid to the timing of parental leave taken by men, even though most leave in the European Union can be taken up to several years after the birth of the child. For example, it could be the case that fewer fathers take parental leave in the first few months after the child is born, thus making them appear less likely to use leave than mothers. However, fathers may be more likely to use their right to parental leave when the child is older. Life-course, longitudinal studies would therefore be of interest.

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