

**Artículo / Article**

**Enabling or promoting gender equality through parental leave policies / Permitir o promover la igualdad de género a través de la política de permisos parentales**

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**ABSTRACT**

*The Nordic welfare states pioneered parental leave arrangements for fathers and not just mothers to care for their young children at home during their first year of life. The parental leave rights for fathers consist of one part that is family based and one part that is individually given to fathers. The article aims to show how these two types of leave have influenced the fathers' experiences and appreciation of parental leave. Findings show that family based parental leave rights given to parents to share seem to enable gender equality, but as there is no pressure on fathers to use them. They are defined as mother's rights and thus they have less positive effects than individual, non-transferrable leave. Individual parental leave rights such as the father's quota is better able to promote gender equality in parental leave use and childcare.*

**Keywords:** Fathers, parental leave, gender equality, Norway

**RESUMEN**

Los Estados de bienestar de los países nórdicos fueron pioneros en la introducción de permisos parentales para los padres, y no sólo para las madres, para cuidar de sus hijos durante el primer año de vida. El derecho de los padres al permiso parental consiste en una parte reconocida como un derecho familiar y otra parte reconocida a título de derecho individual. Este artículo persigue mostrar cómo ambos tipos de permiso han influido en las vivencias y valoración de los padres del permiso parental. Los resultados obtenidos muestran que la parte del permiso parental reconocido como derecho familiar, que ambos progenitores deben compartir, pero no fuerza a los padres a usarlo, *posibilita* la igualdad de género. Los derechos individuales al permiso, como es la cuota para el padre, permite una *promoción* más efectiva de la igualdad de género en el uso de los permisos y en el cuidado de los niños.

**Palabras clave:** Padres, permiso parental, igualdad de género, Noruega.

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## INTRODUCTION

The aim of Nordic gender equality policies is to advance the dual earner/dual carer model, i.e. to create a society where both men and women, mothers and fathers, participate in the labour market and share housework and childcare. The Nordic welfare states thus pioneered parental leave arrangements to make employed fathers and not just mothers able to care for their young children at home. To reach this aim a special father's quota was introduced in 1993 as part of the parental leave scheme in Norway. It meant reserving a portion of the parental leave for fathers which is lost if they fail to use it as it cannot be transferred to the mother. The father's quota gives male employees the right and obligation to provide care during the child's first year of life. The principal aim of this leave is to break away from the primary understanding of men serving as breadwinners and women as caregivers even if they are employed outside the home.

Before the introduction of the father's quota, parental leave was a family based scheme that both mothers and fathers could use. It was thus optional for fathers, something that distinguishes it from the individual father's quota. Family based leave is still the longest part of the leave in the Norwegian parental leave system.

Over the years it has existed, the father's quota has been widely used, and a large majority of eligible fathers use all or part of this leave (Kitterød et al. 2017). This high use of the father's quota may suggest that an individual right is necessary to ensure that fathers make use of parental leave. Most fathers use exactly the father's quota but the share of eligible fathers using more than the quota, i.e. use some of the family based leave, has increased. Mothers, however, take most of the family based leave days, and their total leave is considerably longer than fathers'.

In this article, which is based on interviews with 20 fathers who have used parental leave, we will examine fathers' understandings of and experiences with the father's quota and the family based right. We are interested in exploring the significance of these two parts of the leave for the development towards equal gender relationships in family and working life.

## DUALISTIC PARENTAL LEAVE POLICIES

In comparative research on gender equality, the Nordic welfare states are analysed as including regulations that support both working and caring for mothers and fathers (Pascall 2012). The family policies in these countries are based on the ideal of a symmetric family of two worker-carers. Equality between men and women is encouraged through an individual earner-carer regime (Sainsbury 1999). Important policy measures in this regime include publicly funded parental leave schemes, universal, high quality day-care and access to reduced work hours. These are the same social arrangements as Gornick and Meyers (2009) pinpoint as important in order to create a dual earner/dual caregiver society.

There are, however some important paradoxes in the Norwegian and Nordic family policy (Ellingsæter, 2006, 2012; Eydal et al., 2015; Salmi and Lammi-Taskula, 2015). Research has pointed out, for example, that Norwegian family policy is dualistic, branching in two directions, one towards a traditional gender division through for instance home care allowance and the other towards a more equitable division of family and work (Ellingsæter, 2006). This dualism is also found in the internal design of the parental leave system, for example between the earmarked father's quota and the parental leave that can be shared between the parents. Kimberly Morgan (2008:404) warns against a "partial transformation of policies and societies, rather than a full embrace of the dual earner/dual caregiver model". Partial reforms may be helpful to parents and bring some progress towards gender equality, but some of these reforms may reinforce a traditional division of labour between mothers and fathers.

A comprehensive research literature on parental leave has evolved during the last twenty years. In fact the study of parental leave is in the forefront of comparative social policy research focusing on gender equality (Ray et al. 2010). This strong interest in parental leave policies must be understood on the basis of these policies having the potential to change women's position in employment and engaging men in caregiving. Parental leave policy rights and designs vary substantially across countries (Blum, Koslowski and Moss, 2017) and

the effect of the different leave systems on gender equality is also debated. Peter Moss and Fred Deven (1999) have denoted the question of what effect parental leave has on gender equality as a Catch 22, meaning that in order to promote gender equality parental leave has to be used equally by parents. However, for this to happen equality has to be more developed than can be observed in any country at present. If gender equality is not already advanced, then parental leave may delay or even represent a “pitfall” when it comes achieving equality (p.14).

In their analysis of what is needed to achieve “strong gender equality” in family and working life, i.e. where gender does not count, Brighthouse and Wright (2008) focus on three types of leave policies that can impact development of gender equality in different ways. These are: 1) policies that *prevent* equality as they preserve women’s role as mothers, for example maternity leave, unpaid leave and cash allowances, 2) policies that *enable* equality, such as parental leave granted to the family. Such policies may enable egalitarian strategies within families, but they put no pressures on fathers to use them. 3) policies that *promote* equality. The example of this latter type of programme is paid leave granted to individuals rather than families, where the leave lapses if it is not used. Brighthouse and Wright find the latter type of leave necessary for breaking down the cultural barriers to gender equality in family and working life.

This article explores fathers’ experiences of family based parental leave and the father’s quota, i.e. the two leave programmes that, according to Brighthouse and Wright (2008), may enable or promote equality. Statistics from NAV (the Norwegian Labour and Welfare Administration) (2014) show that fathers’ use of parental benefits has increased on average by 20 days over the last ten years, amounting to an increase of 77 per cent. Over this decade, the length of the father’s quota increased from four to 14 weeks. Documented findings from a number of countries have shown that the shared parental leave (which is optional for fathers) is mostly used by mothers (O’Brien et al., 2007; Lammi-Taskula 2007; Ray et al., 2010; Haas and Rostgaard 2011; Fougner 2012; Gíslason and Eydal 2013). It has been pointed out that optional leave is not strong enough to bring

about a new division of work between the mother and the father where there is more gender equality (Brandth and Kvande 2012).

Thus, studies have shown that when family policy programmes are optional, traditional gendered patterns are generally followed. The father chooses paid work more than the mother, who chooses care-giving. The provision of choice does not manage to break such patterns. Nonetheless, it is argued that more freedom to choose and flexibility in the programme are important features that may make it attractive for fathers (Bruning and Plantenga 1999; Rostgaard 2002; Rantalaiho 2009). Studies have also shown that it is important to have a statutory right that does not have to be negotiated locally or in central collective bargaining agreements. In Denmark, where the legislation does not give men a common/universal right to leave, open negotiations are widely used, and these are often characterized by unspoken gendered expectations (Bloksgaard 2013).

Studies of the Norwegian leave programme comparing the father’s quota to the more optional schemes of shared, family based parental leave and cash allowances were conducted some years after the introduction of the father’s quota (Brandth and Kvande 2001; Brandth et al. 2005). This research documented that mandatory leave for fathers made it easier for them to use the father’s quota to set boundaries against the demands of work, thus reserving uninterrupted father-child time. It was also pointed out that a statutory earmarking of the father’s quota lifts the decision of who should take leave from the family up to the institutional level, where it would apply to “all” fathers. This obviated the mother and father’s need to negotiate between themselves as to who should take leave and have the caregiving responsibility for the child. The father’s quota became a pre-negotiated right for men, also in terms of the workplace, and it was supposed to eliminate the need to negotiate individually with the employer over the use of the father’s quota. The analyses of the advantages of the father’s quota were conducted when it was set at four weeks and had only existed for a relatively short period. This article examines the impact of the expansion and maturation of the father’s quota. Do the same advantages/effects also apply today?

Using Brighthouse and Wright's conceptual framework, this article explores how the two leave policies of family based or individual right, are experienced by the fathers in our study. How are they differently experienced and what are the factors behind enabling and promoting processes?

### THE NORWEGIAN PARENTAL LEAVE SYSTEM FOR FATHERS

As early as 1909 women in Norway gained the right to six weeks paid maternity leave. From the beginning, labour protection of working women was the policy's central aim. Out of consideration for their health, women were not allowed to work the first six weeks after birth, and it was regarded as reasonable to compensate women for loss of income during the period they remained at home. In 1946 maternity leave was extended to twelve weeks. The next extension came in 1978, when the leave became 18 weeks with full compensation.

What was totally new in 1978 was that some of the leave could be shared between the parents, moving away from the idea of maternity leave as an individual right for women. By granting fathers the right to leave if the mother went back to work, the legislation signalled a new view of men's responsibilities and participation in caregiving. It also signalled that mothers were expected to be employed, and it ensured women's right to combine parti-

cipation in the labour market with giving birth and providing care. The idea of equal rights, which was strong in the 1970s, was behind this legislation. The leave was given to the family as both parents were accorded rights and obligations in relation to family and work.

Fathers, however, rarely used this common family based leave so the policy did not promote more equal parenting. To advance that goal, an individual, non-transferable leave of four weeks for fathers was introduced in 1993. At the same time the total leave period was extended from 35 to 42 weeks with 100 per cent wage compensation. Proponents argued that a quota would give a strong signal to parents as well as to employers that men as well as women are parents with obligations and rights as caregivers. Children's need for their fathers was also emphasized in the debate. Since then the individual father's quota has developed gradually, extended to 14 weeks and then reduced to 10 weeks in 2014 following the politics of the parties in power.

The Norwegian parental leave system is work-related and based on the principle that parents "earn" the right through participation in working life. To qualify for parental leave, both mothers and fathers have to be in the workforce for six of the last ten months prior to birth. This type of eligibility encourages both parents to combine work and family obligations as it is built on the model where both mothers and fathers should be employed.

**Table 1.** Norwegian parental leave; changes in the distribution of weeks with a 100 % wage compensation\* between mothers and fathers during the project period

Year	Total parental leave length	Individual parental leave for mothers	Family based parental leave*	Individual parental leave for fathers (Father's quota)	Paternity leave at birth
2009	46	3 + 6	27	10	2
2011	47	3 + 6	26	12	2
2013	49	3 + 14	18	14	2
2014**	49	3 + 10	26	10	2

\* If parents choose 80 % wage compensation, the family based leave period is prolonged by ten weeks. \*\* Since 2014 there have been no changes, but the government has announced an increase in the father and mother's quotas to 15 weeks each from July 1, 2018. This means 16 weeks remain for the family to share.

**Table 2.** Overview of the sample

	Name	Educational level High, Medium, Low	Occupation	No of children	Type and length of leave FQ = Father's quota FL = Family based leave
1	Tore	H	Assistant doctor	1	12 weeks FQ
2	Lars	H	Civil engineer	1	12 weeks FQ
3	Steinar	H	Civil engineer	2	12 weeks FQ
4	Martin	H	Researcher	2	10 weeks FQ plus 6 weeks FL
5	Roberto	H	Civil engineer	2	10 weeks FQ
6	Erlend	H	High school teacher	2	10 weeks FQ
7	Fabio	H	Architect	1	10 weeks FQ plus 6 weeks FL
8	Arne	H	Adviser in the cultural sector	3	10 weeks FQ
9	Simon	H	Ph.d student	1	12 weeks FQ
10	Hans	M	Communications adviser	1	10 weeks FQ plus 16 weeks FL
11	Didrik	M	Masters student and temporary worker	1	40 weeks FL
12	Geir	M	IT worker	1	10 weeks FQ
13	Dag	M	IT worker	1	10 weeks FQ
14	Steffen	M	Police officer	2	10 weeks FQ
15	Max	L	House painter	1	11 weeks FQ
16	Kristoffer	L	Mason	1	12 weeks FQ
17	Emil	L	House painter	2	40 weeks FL
18	Sivert	L	Electrician	2	12 weeks FQ plus some FL
19	Mons	L	Photographer	1	12 weeks FQ
20	David	L	Fire prevention officer	1	10 weeks FQ

As seen from the table, the leave scheme has been evolving during the period our research project has existed. One stable characteristic is that both mothers and fathers have individual, non-transferable rights in addition to a joint, family based right. Mothers have an earmarked period of 13 weeks, of which three have to be taken before birth. Twenty-six of the weeks (or thirty-six if a lower payment is chosen) are family based and thus optional for fathers. Included in the total parental leave period is also the individual father's quota of 10 weeks. Currently, the total parental leave period is 49 weeks, with 100 % wage compensation. Of these weeks, fathers may use a total of 36 with 100 % pay. In addition to parental leave, fathers have two weeks of paternity leave to be taken after

the birth of the child to assist the mother. Wage compensation during this leave is based on collective agreements.

## DATA AND METHOD

The analysis is based on an interview study of 20 fathers who had taken parental leave. The interviews were carried out in 2012 and 2013, which for most of the fathers was the second year after the child's birth. Thus, the fathers in the sample had rights to 10 and 12 weeks of individual leave and 27 or 26 weeks of family based leave if they chose 100 per cent compensation. The fathers were recruited by contact with various workplaces and then

snowballing recruitment was used. The interviewees had to have become fathers after the fathers' quota was expanded to ten weeks in 2009, as we were interested in their experiences of relatively long leaves. The length of the leave taken by the sample varied; most fathers had taken the father's quota of 10 or 12 weeks, but six had also taken more than the father's quota, i.e. part of the family based leave. Two of them (Didrik and Emil) had taken all the family based leave available, as the mothers were not eligible. Some of the fathers could remember the total length of the leave, but had problems recollecting the exact division between the fathers' quota and the family based leave.

We endeavoured to find interviewees with varied social backgrounds. About half (9) had higher education (masters' level), while the other half had either a medium level education at the bachelor level (6) or no formal education beyond high school (5). The experiences of the fathers may thus be somewhat biased, and we cannot rule out that a greater share of blue-collar workers would have produced other stories. The fathers did, however, have a wide range of occupations, including engineers, artisans, teachers, office workers, consultants, and administrative, healthcare, and technical staff. They worked in organizations of various sizes and compositions.

As Norwegian leave rights are employment based, i.e., accrued by the participation of both parents in working life, all the fathers and most mothers were in paid employment prior to the birth of their child and had a right to parental leave. Half of the fathers were employed by private companies, but only one was self-employed, and one, a student, was temporarily employed. Except for this father, all worked full time. All the fathers lived together with the mother and the child. At the time of the interview, the child was between one and three years of age, "and the relevant child could be the father's first...". As seen from table 2, only one father in the sample had three children. Most fathers were in their thirties, though they ranged between 27 and 43.

Informational letters were sent in advance to the participants to explain the purpose of the study, the ethical research rules, and the rights of the informants. To preserve anonymity, the full name and contact details of the interviewees were not re-

corded, and fictitious names have been used in all the analyses. The interviews were semi-structured and lasted between one and two hours. The fathers were generally interviewed in their homes, but some interviews took place in a café or at their office. The fathers' experience with the leave was recent at the time of the interview, and their understandings were based on both what they observed and what they experienced themselves.

We examined each transcript in order to identify the father's understanding of how family based parental leave and the father's quota functioned in the gendered field of caregiving. Each transcript was first examined to identify themes in the ways fathers related to the two types of parental leave rights available to them. Several themes that are connected with the parental leave literature emerged in this descriptive stage. While focusing on clear themes, we also paid attention to the different stories and situations of the interviewees, highlighting positive as well as negative cases. Some of the interviews were particularly rich. In presenting the findings, we have therefore chosen to alternate between person oriented and thematic oriented analysis. Case stories are sometimes contrasted to disclose important elements. Sivert and Emil, for instance, are both working class fathers who have used the family based leave but under different conditions and with very divergent experiences at work.

## FATHERS EXPERIENCING FAMILY BASED PARENTAL LEAVE

In this first part of the analysis we will examine how the fathers experience the family based parental leave which according to Brighthouse and White (2008) *enables* equality. It differs from the individual based father's quota because the parents may choose how to divide this leave between them. This portion of the leave amounts to 26 weeks. Since it can be shared between the parents it appears to be gender neutral, but it is mostly used by mothers (Fougner 2012).

Sivert's story is an example of a father who challenged to a certain degree the expectations

for how parental leave should be shared between the mother and the father as he had chosen to use both the family based leave and the individual based father's quota of leave. In addition to his own experiences he also gives us insight into his workmates' expectations on this theme. He worked as an electrician, had two children, stayed home on leave with both children and both times used part-time leave. With his first child he stayed home for 13 months with 50 per cent leave because the mother was a student and had not earned the right to take leave through employment. This meant that he used all of the family based parental leave, but had no right to the father's quota. The second time he also stretched his leave over a long period of time, by using both the father's quota and part-time family based parental leave alternating with the mother. This was something his wife, Solveig, actually preferred, as she wanted to go back to work on a part-time basis a bit earlier than if she had taken all the family based leave herself. "Actually, she gave some of it to me. She wanted me to have it", he said confirming that they both see it as her leave. Therefore, he called it an "easy choice" when he decided to take extra leave.

Even so, he found that his colleagues in his male-dominated construction business workplace reacted and found his use of family based parental leave strange and he explains: "You know, they use what they have to [the father's quota] and nothing more. That's the usual way. So they said to me many times: 'Quite the little woman, aren't you?'"

We see here how parental leave and caregiving for children is still considered as being gendered as feminine by his workmates. In spite of the long tradition with father's quota in Norway this was a recurring theme in several of the interviews, family based parental leave is still mothers' leave. Sivert, however, challenged the comments from his colleagues, that he was doing "women's work", when he said: "Nah, I told them: Why shouldn't I be doing that? At least I know my kids. I really get to know them well!" He experienced being home with two of his children as very meaningful. The reactions expressed by his workmates reveal that in parts of working life fathers are not expected to use the parental leave that they can share with their spouse.

Sivert's experiences illustrate how caregiving continues to be a field where the mother is seen as the obvious main actor. Commenting on the family based parental leave he said:

That's how it is; the wife is home with the kids, like. That's what's still left hanging there. I believe it might take a long time before we think that it's okay for the father to stay home. If the intention is that the mother shouldn't stay home the whole time, it [taking leave] should not be made a completely free choice.

This extract from the interview shows that the process of making caregiving for small children into an equitable field may take a long time if the design of the parental leave is to be based on policies "enabling" equality.

Lars, a civil engineer, was married to Lise, a registered nurse. Their daughter was two and a half years old when the interview took place. They planned their leave so that Lise was home full-time for ten months first, and then both took part-time leave of five months. When asked how he wanted the period of leave to be, he stated: "I think about it as a... really as mother's leave, actually". This attitude was also seen in the plans they had for their next child, who was due quite soon. He did not consider taking more than he had to (the individually based father's quota), and on top of this, he was uncertain as to whether he would take all the father's quota weeks. At the time he of the interview the quota had been extended to 14 weeks (2013). He would even have preferred the option of transferring some of these weeks to the mother - which, however, was not possible without losing the payment. Lars and Sivert's stories reveal that even if the family based parental leave is gender neutral in character, it is still perceived as the mother's leave in many families.

Steffen, a policeman, who was married to Susan, a case-processing officer in the public sector, confirmed this. They had two children, and he had been home on a part-time father's quota with both. At the time of the interview they were expecting child number three. We asked him about their plans for sharing the parental leave and he told us that he would have given the whole leave, including the

father's quota, to the mother if that had been possible, and his rationale for this was as follows:

Because she likes being home more than I do. She wants to be home. I want to be home too, and I've done that twice now. But I think it is quite exhausting, really, I have done it twice. With the third child I don't think... then... that we should do it... then we need to do it a bit differently.

He reveals ambivalence; he says he wants to stay at home with his third child like he did with the two other children. On the other side, he experienced it as exhausting and in the end he would like the mother to have more leave and his reason was: "No, I think it is a mother's leave, really". Again we see an example that family based parental leave is primarily linked to the mother, and therefore he was also open to giving his wife his quota as well, because:

She enjoys it, in a way. And then I don't see anything wrong with that, in a way. I think that... there is something special between mother and child when kids are so young. And I don't really see any point in this being controlled by the authorities, making me stay home, because I manage to prioritize the kids quite well outside my working hours anyway.

He was willing to take part in providing childcare, but he still expressed a somewhat unwilling attitude, feeling that the mother was primarily the most suitable person for this work when the children were young. During the interview his ambivalence disappeared and he ended up feeling that it is best for the young baby daughter to have her mother at home. Consequently, his wife got the main responsibility for their children and the parental leave period was not used to create equality in the care work.

That many fathers still had traditional attitudes when it came to caregiving for small children is something we also saw above in Sivert's story about his colleagues and friends:

If you're in your mid-thirties, then you're right in the middle of pursuing a career, right? Then they are so old-fashioned, sadly, that they believe that it's the wife who should do it [childcare]. And it's a bit frightening, I think, that nothing has changed all

these years and they still have this division of roles where she prepares dinner and minds the children, or 'babysit' children... True, they also said that; that they couldn't join the Friday night in the pub because they had to 'babysit' their own kids. I don't think you can babysit your own kids. Poor choice of words!

Sivert reacted to how many of his mates did not prioritize their children, and they had what he felt was an old-fashioned view of the division of work between the mother and father in a family. He suggested that more should be expected today when the issue of equality had been on the agenda for such a long time. When fathers he knew talked about how they had to babysit their own children, he felt it illustrated how imbalanced the division of caregiving responsibilities still was in many families. Even if it was a poor choice of words, it was still quite a fitting description because the mother is the one with the main responsibility while the father can "babysit" his own children. These fathers continue to prioritize work over children and let the mother bear the main responsibility for childcare.

Emil represents another father who used the family based parental leave. His vocational training was in the construction trades and he was working as a house painter. He was married to Eli, who was a newly educated registered nurse, and they had two daughters aged two and four. He was home on leave with the youngest for 12 full months (parental leave and holidays), because the mother was a student and had not earned the right to parental benefits that are based on employment. When asked during the interview whether he had problems at work when he decided in favour of such a long leave, he said:

No, I... It was easy, because the boss simply had to accept it. That's the way it is, really. He [the company] would just have to accept a bit less work then. He had to." He stated that he did not have a bad conscience in relation to his workplace, nor was any substitute hired for him: "It's not so simple in the house painting trade, you know, because you don't know what you get. You can't just hire somebody, really. It's hard to find good people, because they are, they are probably doing well where they're working already. That's the way it is..."

This story illustrates how the parental leave rights, which are based on both parents having been in the working life, may function for fathers. Because the mother was a student the father had to take the family based parental leave, making him part of a minority practice. At the same time, Emil's story is an example of an employer accepting and adapting to the fact that men have caregiving obligations.

Sivert and Emil's experiences are examples of how a family based policy may enable equality. They both use this leave, but there are very different factors behind their uses. For Sivert, his choice is due to his wife wanting to return to work early, and this fits with his own wishes even if he has to go against gender norms at work. For Emil, the main factor behind his usage is his wife's lack of eligibility and an employer who does not obstruct the necessity of him taking such a long leave. In spite of these positive examples, the experiences we have described primarily illustrate that family based leave is still seen as women's responsibility in many contexts in the Norwegian society. Even if family based parental leave enables equality between parents, it does not seem to lead to a radical shift in the attitudes and practices of caregiving within families.

## FATHERS EXPERIENCING INDIVIDUAL PARENTAL LEAVE

In this part of the analysis, the focus is explicitly on the father's quota, which is an individual parental leave for fathers and, according to Brighthouse and Wright (2008), a policy that may promote equality. In order to explore the fathers' experiences with the father's quota we will focus on the different design elements that are characteristics of this individual parental leave for fathers.

While some of the fathers in our sample took a large portion of the total parental leave, their main experience was that colleagues only took precisely what they had to, which is to say the father's quota. Sivert said: "The people I know, they only take just what they have to. Not an hour more! Don't know what they are afraid of, really. But, we all have different priorities. That's how it is. Some feel the job

is more important than anything else. I don't share that idea. Good for me. And for the kids!" As this citation shows, the fathers comply with the rules as laid down by the state, and many of them felt that the number of father's quota weeks was enough. For many fathers it was not probable that they would take any leave if there was no earmarked portion for the father which would lapse if not used. Lars explained this:

Actually, for us it was never a question that I would have more than what I had to have. Now, the leave is quite long, really, in my opinion, that is 12 or 14 weeks ... So for us it's quite natural. Both of us, she and I, want her to have the largest portion of it. And when it becomes 14 weeks at any rate she would have liked to have a bit more, or at least the opportunity...

They agreed that he would take what he had to, but more than that, i.e. taking more of the shared parental leave, was not something the couple would consider.

As we have seen above, Sivert defined himself as a father who prioritized in a different way than the other fathers, believing that both he and his children had benefited from his choice. Therefore, he was also very positive to the father's quota scheme:

If we are to eliminate the differences, these roles, and want equality, then this is how it has to be done. It's a simple measure to achieve more equality, I think, but it could have been... But it could have been longer, the father's quota, I think it's a bit short.

Lars and Sivert have different opinions about the length of the father's quota, but their stories both illustrate the importance of an earmarked leave for fathers. Lars would have preferred the leave to be shorter while Sivert sees it as a tool to achieve equality and would prefer it to be longer. The father's quota is perceived as fathers' time. The fact that the father's quota cannot be transferred to the mother, i.e. cannot be made optional for fathers as the family based parental leave is, promotes fathers' use of it. An important reason for this is that if the father's quota is not used, these weeks of

leave are lost, which will undermine the children's opportunities to be cared for in the home during their first year. The father's quota as an individual right for the father simplifies any negotiations with the mother. If the leave had not been designed like this, the mother would have taken the whole leave. It seems that for many it is still not obvious that the father should choose to stay home with the child, and to avoid making the leave only a mother's leave, it was important that things were not "made completely free". Fathers felt only to a little degree that the family based parental leave that was for them, and any use of it, was challenged by their personal and other's understandings of the gendered character of childcare.

In addition the fathers experience how the father's quota as a separate statutory quota is an important "bargaining chip" in relation to employers. If it were to disappear, in many cases it would be more difficult to take leave. Kristian, a craftsman, who had a 2 years old daughter and was married to Kari, a registered nurse, elaborated:

It's a law and... And that's very important. It's the most important thing, actually. Because if, for example, it becomes the way the Conservatives want it, that there should be no statutory quota, but that all the leave should be voluntary [for fathers], then it would be... then it would be a major problem for men to get... very many men would have problems at work to take this voluntary leave. Really. I'm sure. That's what would happen to me at any rate, guaranteed! Yes. And I think that would be the result in very different industries and professions too. Finance and all that.

Kristian illustrates how the father's quota promotes equality for employees who are Fathers. By being a separate, individual right it helps in their negotiations over leave with their employer. Martin, who was a researcher, expressed the advantage of the father's quota as follows: "I think it's important that we have a portion that is reserved for the father, and which lapses if it isn't used. I believe it will benefit equality that the father does not just have the opportunity, but that he rather *has to* take the leave". He thought that this obligation to use the leave, which legally rested with the fathers, en-

sured that employers did not have a discriminatory practice in relation to this. If the fathers had to negotiate individually with the employer to be granted leave, it might also lead to differential treatment of fathers, depending on their status with management.

Steinar, a civil engineer with two daughters, believed that having an earmarked quota for the father is an unconditional strength in relation to the workplace. He thought in terms of money, reasoning as follows:

The employer might push a lot, wanting you to postpone or drop it, but if you then say that "Well, you recommend that I should drop it, but if I do, I'm giving away three months of 'holiday', are you willing to give me that as pay? That's what it's worth, a quarter of a year with pay; do you want to give me that?" I don't think that very many employers would say yes to that. So in that way... you have in a way, quite a strong argument that is quite easy to translate into money, and that's a good thing to have when it comes to employers.

Here he translated the value of the father's quota into money, and found this was an argument that might work to his advantage in the negotiations with the employer. If fathers need to be tough when negotiating with working life, money may be an argument that might work. Using the relationship to the child as an argument would not be as forceful, Steinar felt. "It's very, very difficult to use that argument in an across-the-table negotiation with the employer," he stated, even if it depended on the attitude of the employer. He had worked for positive bosses who believed he should take leave even if it was detrimental to the job: "It's quite clear that the project we are involved in will have to be put on hold, and we'll lose customers because of that, but too bad!"

According to the parental leave rules, the organization of the leave must be agreed with the employer. This leads to the leave being adapted to the job. Kristian states: "... I really think it was a bit like... like what I felt then, that I would need to take the leave to fit with the pressures at work". Situations with a heavy work and pressure would imply negotiations over when the leave should be

taken. Then, what might happen is that: "...the boss doesn't want the employees to take leave. They would actually have to go into the office and plead for it. Even if this is something they would have a right to, it would be very difficult. At least if the company is swamped with work ... it's never suitable, you know," Sivert said. Negative bosses do exist, but his own experiences of a compliant manager strongly contrasted what he said about the experiences of some friends.

We find many examples of how this individual right for fathers is accepted and respected in working life. The fact that there is an earmarked legal right to leave leads many companies to avoid putting barriers in the way of their employees who want to take leave. Most fathers presented their plan and had it accepted by management. "I'm quite lucky in having a very flexible employer, you know, so this ensured that we just sat down and counted days," Steinar said. Steffen had a similar experience: "I brought a list and asked if it was okay, and then he [the boss] looked at it and said it was okay".

When asked what he thought about the father's quota, Lars said first and foremost it was a great opportunity and an expression of the welfare state at its best. He added "it feels like something you ought to... that it's something you should take, really. (...) It feels like there's pressure on you to take it. That... if you want to be a good parent, or a good father, then you have to take the daddy leave." The importance of this pressure was expressed in several ways: "I think it's good that they are calling for the father to be at home in this way. It's possible to choose not to take it, and then you simply lose those weeks. If it's so important that the father is at work, then it simply needs to be that way. Then you have some pressure on you," said Steinar, who felt it was a good thing that the father's quota lapsed if fathers did not use it.

Fabio, who originally was from Italy, also saw how the father's quota was not only an opportunity, but an obligation which might have direct consequences for equality in working life:

The obligation to take leave ensures that the employer does not treat people differently. Without any obligation to take the father's quota it will be more common that the mother is home with children,

and then an employer will be more sceptical to hiring a young woman of mothering age - that it will lead to differential treatment if there's no father's quota.

He saw how the obligation that is inherent in the father's quota might lead employers to stop discriminating between female and male employees, rather seeing men as employees and caregivers in the same way as women.

We have seen how individual parental leave rights for fathers promote equality through making the negotiations with the mothers and with working life easier for them. In addition the fathers experience that having an individual right for parental leave has represented a personal opportunity and motivation to provide childcare. Emil illustrates this:

I think it was a wonderful journey," he said. Several others state, on the other hand, that their leave would probably not have been as long, or they would have taken it when the child was a little older. Lars was one of these fathers: "I might have wanted to take that leave when the kid was a bit older, really.

Another reason why an individual, non-transferable leave promotes gender equality is that it "pushes" avoidant fathers into taking leave. For some of the other fathers, there would be no leave at all if there were no quota for the father. Mons, who had just finished his father's quota period together with his first child, was one of those who stated that it was the "obligation" that was built into the father's quota that led him to take leave. "It sounds a bit deplorable," he said, "but I think, to be perfectly honest, that it's right. I would not have taken it if it was not an obligation". The reason was his work situation. He worked as a freelancer and had to work when he got assignments. Roberto was another one who would not have taken leave without the quota. Roberto was an engineer, had two children and was originally from Spain. He was unaccustomed to the idea that fathers are expected to be home with caregiving responsibility for babies, and he was uncertain how his employer would react. Roberto nevertheless took the father's quota with both his children, six weeks the first time and

ten weeks with the youngest child, and after this, he was very positive and grateful for the experience it gave him. Simon would also have liked to avoid taking leave because he was so busy completing the experiments he was conducting for his doctoral thesis when he had to take the father's quota. He decided to take the father's quota because it would have lapsed. Steffen had his own version of the same issue in terms of work, but his solution was to switch departments so that he could have work duties that were easier to be away from. Martin also stated that he was not planning to take the father's quota with his first child the way his work situation was at the time. "But it was against better judgment," he said in hindsight.

Some employed fathers are hesitant skeptical to taking leave from work, and for them the father's quota is an important signal that male employees also have caregiving responsibilities. "The father's quota is not only an incentive in relation to the employer, but also an incentive for fathers themselves," Steinar said, adding: "They can choose whether to work or take leave, they will be receiving their wages anyway, so then they could try to stay home. I think many don't enjoy it. But I think it's healthy for them, just experiencing what the mother does". The fact that so many interviewed fathers pointed to the importance of having a special quota for fathers may suggest that without it, a family based leave for fathers would not be sufficient, as it has not become embedded as an accepted and taken-for-granted practice for fathers.

## CONCLUSION

While previous studies have shown that parental leave given individually to fathers works well when it comes to fathers taking leave, this article has explored the reasons why this may be so. In looking at fathers' own experiences and the way they compare individual- and family based leave, several factors stand out as important.

First of all, family based leave is experienced as mother's leave. The fathers describe how they see mothers as more suited to care for the child the first year. Since at some work places colleagues

react negatively when fathers opt for this leave, the fathers must be particularly motivated and/or circumstances like mothers' lack of rights or wish to return to work may be behind this choice. Mothers must consent to fathers using this leave and this may be both a possibility and a hindrance.

When we consider the father's experiences with the father's quota, which is an individual parental leave for fathers, we see a different picture. Because the father's quota is non-transferable to the mother, the fathers regard it as *their* time with the child. The fact that it is a pre-negotiated, statutory right diminishes negotiations with the mother. The fathers also experienced that the individual right represented an unconditional strength in negotiations with their workplaces where it is accepted and respected. The individual right to parental leave is also experienced by the fathers as a motivating factor for them to take care of their baby. For other groups of fathers it represented a "push" into taking leave, which they would not have done if there was no individual, non-transferable leave.

Our data shows that the individual father's quota has the potential of creating a radical shift in the traditional roles connected to childcare. Family based parental leave, on the other hand, has not got the same transforming power. It represents a policy that *enables* equality in caregiving between parents, while the father's quota *promotes* gender equality in caring. The individual parental leave for fathers in Norway is as we have seen only 10 weeks, while family based leave is the longest part of the parental leave system in Norway and is used by a minority of fathers. This suggests that a parental leave system based on individual rights for parents is necessary to ensure that fathers make use of parental leave. If the principal aim is to encourage "strong gender equality" (Brighthouse and Wrigth, 2008) in the field of caregiving, parental leave policy regulations should be developed as individual rights for parents. In line with this, the political debate in Norway is now focusing on doing away with family based parental leave and instead splitting the total parental leave in two equal parts, giving 6 months of individual paid leave to the mother and the same to the father. This has been suggested

by an expert committee appointed by the ministry of family affairs (NOU 2017:6). These type of policies would fully embrace the dual earner/dual carer model.

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