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Parental leave as a way to foster gender equality

Report¹

Committee on Equality and Non-Discrimination

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Summary

Parental leave is the leave granted to parents, irrespective of their sex, for the care of a child. Its gender-neutral nature makes it an invaluable instrument to ensure that parents share rights and responsibilities regarding their children's care and upbringing. Parental leave is also an important tool for better reconciling work and family life for both women and men, which can lead to better gender balance in the labour market and in society at large.

Policies on parental leave vary considerably amongst Council of Europe member States, particularly in terms of the length of leave, flexibility and allowances granted to parents.

Parental leave cannot have a lasting impact on gender equality unless a significant share of men take it up. To encourage more fathers to do so, Council of Europe member States should organise information and awareness-raising campaigns and put in place incentives.

1. Reference to committee: [Doc. 12654](#), Reference 3812 of 3 October 2011.



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A. Draft resolution²

1. Parental leave, which is leave granted to parents, irrespective of their gender, for the care of a child, represents one of the pillars of policies for the reconciliation of professional and private life, as well as a tool to foster gender equality within families, at work and in society at large. It also responds to the need, increasingly expressed by men, to have more time to take care of newborn, young or newly adopted children, corresponding to a trend already visible in society, moving towards overcoming the traditional view of women as caregivers and men exclusively as breadwinners.
2. The Parliamentary Assembly welcomes the introduction in recent years of some form of parental leave in almost all Council of Europe member States. However, the Assembly notes, on the one hand, the great disparity between different systems and, on the other hand, the limited use of parental leave in practice. It therefore proposes measures aimed at reviewing the current systems by introducing elements to promote the take-up of parental leave by fathers and at co-ordinating parental leave with other policies.
3. In the light of these considerations, and recalling its [Resolution 1921 \(2013\)](#) on gender equality, reconciliation of private and working life and shared responsibility, the Assembly calls on Council of Europe member States to:
 - 3.1. introduce parental leave schemes enabling parents, irrespective of their sex, to look after their children on an equal footing. These systems should satisfy the following criteria:
 - 3.1.1. they should reserve a part of the leave for fathers, which cannot be transferred to the other parent and is lost if it is not used, and provide a system of bonuses for cases where both parents take up parental leave, as a way of creating an incentive for the take-up of parental leave by fathers;
 - 3.1.2. they should be flexible, with the possibility for parents to take the leave in one block or to break it up and to combine it with full-time or part-time work;
 - 3.1.3. they should be available to all workers irrespective of their type of contract (including those on fixed-term, part-time or temporary work contracts) and of employers (whether public or private and irrespective of the size of the entity);
 - 3.2. launch information and awareness-raising campaigns directed at parents and the general public on available parental leave schemes and encouraging men to use their leave entitlement;
 - 3.3. incorporate parental leave in a framework of policies aimed at reconciling professional and private life, including in particular adequate early childhood education and care policies.
4. In the long run, the Assembly encourages Council of Europe member States to replace the various types of leave currently available (maternity, paternity, parental, childcare leave) with a single parental leave, available to both parents and to be shared equally.
5. Convinced that social partners – employers' and workers' organisations – have an important role to play in the implementation of parental leave schemes, the Assembly encourages them to tackle obstacles and barriers in order to create a workplace culture that facilitates the take-up of parental leave, especially among male workers.
6. The Assembly calls in particular on employers and their organisations to guarantee that parents can enjoy their entitlement to parental leave irrespective of their gender, without any negative consequence for their career prospects and professional development.

2. Draft resolution adopted unanimously by the committee on 23 April 2013.

B. Explanatory memorandum by Mr Rigoni, rapporteur

1. Introduction

“When a child is born, men are still entitled to only two weeks paternity leave. These rules patronise women and marginalise men. They’re based on a view of life in which mothers stay at home and fathers are the only breadwinners. That’s an Edwardian system which has no place in 21st century Britain. ... More and more fathers want to play a hands-on role with their young children. But too many feel that they just can’t. That culture must change.”

1. These were the words that the Deputy Prime Minister, Nick Clegg, used in 2011 to announce an overhaul of the system of parental leave in the United Kingdom. I find these remarks particularly telling and applicable to the reality in Europe today.
2. More and more men play an active role in the care and upbringing of their children, from their youngest age. This corresponds to an evolution of individual behaviour, moving towards the overcoming or at least the blurring of traditional gender roles.
3. According to research conducted in the United Kingdom, nowadays fathers spend 800% more time with their children than they did in the 1970s.³ The proportion of stay-at-home fathers, although still small, has also increased: in 2011, “62 000 were classed as ‘economically inactive’ and at home looking after children, tripling from 21 000 in 1996. The figures did not include fathers working from home or part-time in order to be the main stay-at-home parent. A survey ... from the insurance company Aviva suggested there could be 600 000 men, 6% of British fathers, in that role, a further rise from the ... figures which recorded 192 000 British men as the primary carer for children in 2009 and 119 000 in 1993”.⁴
4. The present report focuses on parental leave, which is the leave granted to parents, irrespective of their sex, for the care of a child. The gender-neutral nature of parental leave makes it an invaluable instrument to ensure that both men and women share rights and responsibilities regarding their children’s care and upbringing. It also makes it applicable to same-sex families, which represent an increasing share of households in Europe.
5. Policies on parental leave vary considerably amongst Council of Europe member States. This report will cast a light on the most developed and effective models, with a view to promoting best practices. It will also propose measures to ensure that parental leave is not only a good policy on paper but that it is effectively used, especially by men.
6. In the preparation of the report, I conducted a fact-finding visit to Sweden, as I deemed it useful to collect information from the country where parental leave was “invented” as far back as 1974. My interlocutors during this visit – members of both the government and the parliament, as well as representatives of academia and non-governmental organisations – supplied valuable first-hand information on the actual implementation of parental leave and its impact on Swedish society. I made use of this information to understand the potential of parental leave schemes both in Sweden and across Europe and to identify best practices to include in the draft resolution.
7. I wish to thank once again the Swedish delegation, both parliamentarians and the secretariat, for their warm hospitality and the perfect organisation of the visit.

2. Definitions: parental, maternity and paternity leave

8. Social security systems offer different kinds of leave linked to childcare. There are two main approaches:
 - one, older and more widespread, is the traditional system of “maternity leave” intended only for women;
 - the other extends the right to leave to fathers, by introducing either a birth-related leave which can be taken only by men (“paternity leave”), or a “parental leave”, which is gender-neutral (both mothers and fathers are eligible) but often has periods reserved for mothers or fathers only.

3. Adrienne Burgess (2007), “The role of fatherhood”.

4. *The Guardian*, “Why stay-at-home dads are still the invisible men of the house”, 29 January 2012.

9. These approaches are not mutually exclusive: in many countries, parental leave does not replace but rather follows maternity leave. As it is not linked only to childbirth and infant care, parental leave is also of longer duration.

10. As it is linked to pregnancy and childbirth, maternity leave is traditionally considered mostly as a health measure. Parental leave is rather a social policy measure. It is also very clearly a tool for improving gender balance and reconciling work and family life.

11. Increasing gender equality is an objective for households and society at large. Parental leave allows more time for fathers to take care of newborn, young or newly adopted children. It allows a departure from traditional gender roles in the family – women as caregivers and men as breadwinners. This type of leave can have an impact on the balance of work and family life both for women and men, and on the implementation of shared responsibility between parents. It can also help achieve more equality between women and men at work by mitigating one of the main reasons for discrimination against women

3. What has changed in the last ten years

12. The Assembly has taken position in support of parental leave on many occasions. The first time it dealt with parental issues was in its [Resolution 1018 \(1994\)](#) on equality of rights between men and women, in which it invited member States to introduce the principle of parental leave into their legislation, as well as the concept of paid leave for one of the parents for the purpose of looking after their children.

13. This recommendation was reiterated in 2002, when the Assembly adopted a more comprehensive text, [Resolution 1274 \(2002\)](#), in which it asked Council of Europe member States to:

- enact laws encouraging parental responsibility by means of part-time work and flexible working time, including from home;
- take necessary steps to assist parents in returning to employment after a period of parental leave;
- launch awareness-raising campaigns about the need for systems of help with childcare;
- set up childcare centres.

14. Reading the explanatory memorandum to [Resolution 1274 \(2002\)](#), more than ten years later, I realise that there has been a considerable effort on the part of Council of Europe member States to introduce parental leave schemes and even to expand the eligibility criteria. However, the greatest challenge remains the implementation of policies and legislation, in two respects:

- there are large disparities in the take-up of parental leave in Council of Europe member States;
- there is an imbalance between women and men in the use of parental leave.

4. Gender breakdown of the take-up of parental leave

15. Child-related leave schemes vary considerably across Europe and are difficult to compare. Take-up rates also vary depending on a number of factors, such as whether leave is paid or not and eligibility criteria for parents. These criteria may be related to the type of work contract, as self-employed workers and those with a temporary contract are not always eligible, or the nature of the employer, since smaller companies may be exempted from leave policies. In addition, as the “Leave Network” experts underline, data on non-paid leave is not available.⁵

16. Parental leave is still mostly taken by mothers. Within the European Union, take-up rates for women are very high in the Nordic countries, in central European countries such as the Czech Republic, Hungary and Poland, but also in Germany and Italy. Rates are more moderate (between one third and two thirds of mothers) in France, the Netherlands and Spain. In countries where parental leave is unpaid, for example in Cyprus, Greece, Ireland, Portugal and the United Kingdom, rates are much lower.⁶

17. Parental leave take-up rates for fathers compared with mothers show an inconsistent pattern. They are relatively high in Nordic countries, but in a number of other countries with high take-up rates for women, very few men make use of their entitlement (7% in Italy, 6% in Denmark, 5% in Germany, 3% in France, 2% in Poland).

5. www.leavenetwork.org/fileadmin/Leavenetwork/overviews_2011/overview_09_take_up.pdf.

6. Parental leave in European companies, Eurofond, www.eurofound.europa.eu/pubdocs/2006/87/en/1/ef0687en.pdf.

18. Data published by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) in 2007 shows the ratio of fathers to mothers using their entitlement to leave (based on the number of fathers and mothers taking at least one day of parental leave). This indicator confirms the wide variations across European countries: while in Sweden the ratio was 77 fathers to every 100 mothers, the corresponding figure in countries like Cyprus, Estonia, Finland, France, Germany and the Slovak Republic was under 10. EIGE, the European Institute on Gender Equality, which used this data in its 2011 Review of the Implementation of the Beijing Platform, explains the reasons for these differences. Take-up rates are particularly low in countries where parental leave is designed as a family entitlement rather than an individual one and when it is not well paid.⁷

5. Catch 22

19. Parental leave has been available to European fathers for several decades. However, there is still a significant gender imbalance in parental leave take-up. There are several reasons for this, the most important being cultural reasons and a gender gap in pay levels.

20. Cultural reasons are essentially linked to traditional gender roles within the family. The situation that parental leave is meant to counter represents an obstacle to its full enforcement. In other words, the current social reality resists change.

21. There remains a risk of a kind of “catch 22” regarding parental leave in many European countries. Parental leave is indeed often offered as an equal opportunities measure. But if it is to promote gender equality both in the household and the workplace, then it has to be used equally by women and men. This requires gender equality to have already been achieved, or to be more advanced than is the case at present. If gender equality is not already advanced, then parental leave may retard or even reverse progress towards its achievement.

6. Is there a best system of parental leave?

22. Parental leave schemes vary widely across the different European social security systems. The main variables are length, the amount of payments, flexibility and nature of the entitlement. These elements can be combined in a variety of different ways.

a. Nature of the entitlement

- Parental leave can be considered:
 - a family entitlement, in which case it can be divided between parents as they choose (this is the case in many European countries including Austria, Denmark, France and Germany);
 - an individual entitlement (as in Belgium, Croatia, Greece, Italy, Spain, the United Kingdom and other countries);
 - a mixed, partly family, partly individual entitlement (as is the case of Iceland, Norway, Portugal and Sweden).
- Some systems in which parental leave has an individual character allow for unused entitlement to be transferred to a partner. Some others rule out this possibility: in this case, entitlements, if not used, are lost. Norway was the first country to introduce, in 1993, the father's quota on the basis of the “use it or lose it” principle. From the very start, it proved to be a success, as can be seen by its high take-up rate.
- In general, it is important to note that legal entitlements are not usually universally available: eligibility criteria often exclude some groups of workers, such as the self-employed or workers in more precarious and marginal forms of employment.

7. EIGE, Review of the Implementation of the Beijing Platform for Action: Women and the Economy. Reconciliation of Work and Family Life as a Condition of Equal Participation in the Labour Market, http://eige.europa.eu/sites/default/files/Reconciliation%20of%20Work%20and%20Family%20Life%20as%20a%20Condition%20of%20Equal%20Participation%20in%20the%20Labour%20Market%20-%20Main%20findings_0.pdf.

b. Flexibility

- This element can take different forms. Parents can, for instance, choose to use all the period provided or just a part of it. They can take the leave in one block or spread it over a longer period. Leave can be full-time or part-time and therefore be combined with part-time work. Some systems allow parents to choose longer periods of leave with lower payment, or shorter periods with higher benefits. In some cases, leave entitlements can even be transferred to carers who are not the parents. The level of flexibility varies: Slovenia for instance offers six different options to parents, Croatia offers five, Germany, Norway and Sweden offer four.

c. Benefits

- Most countries provide some form of allowance to parents taking parental leave. Payment policies vary considerably. Usually the allowance is either set at a low rate for a longer period, or is more generous but limited to less than six months. Schemes generally impose an overall ceiling on benefit payments. In a few cases (notably Austria, the Czech Republic, Estonia, France and Germany), all parents with young children, not only those who take leave, receive a benefit.

d. Length of leave to take care of children and level of earning-related benefits

- European countries can be divided into the following groups:
 - nine months or more, at a two-thirds or more replacement rate. Here, a period of parental leave is always included. It applies to the five Nordic countries, to some countries from central and eastern Europe (Croatia, Estonia, Hungary and Slovenia), and to Germany;
 - four to six months, but confined to maternity leave. Parental leave is provided but without a high level of earnings-related provision. This group includes several western European countries. Ireland also comes here, but the effect of a ceiling on earnings-related benefits needs to be taken into account;
 - a maximum of four months of earnings-related postnatal leave. This group includes Austria, the Czech Republic, Luxembourg, the Netherlands, the Russian Federation and Switzerland.

23. Sweden introduced gender-neutral parental leave in 1974. It was a revolutionary, unique leave scheme. For the first time, men had the right to take paid leave to take care of their young children. In 1967, Hungary developed childcare leave, but it was intended as a post-maternity leave for women only. In Sweden, by contrast, it was a consequence of the cultural and political climate of the country, where the objective of gender equality was shared by a large majority of people. The idea of a mutual process where women enter the traditional realms of men, and men the traditional realms of women, has been the ideological foundation of Swedish family and equal status policy for the last forty years.⁸

24. Meanwhile, all Nordic countries have elaborated and implemented comprehensive systems of quite generous earnings-related postnatal leave, including a period of parental leave. They also regularly assess and monitor their policies and practices, sometimes through projects commissioned by the Nordic Council of Ministers. One recent example is the Nordic project on childcare policies, which pays special attention to fatherhood and the role of fathers as carers.

25. At present, Iceland seems to be the country in Europe providing the most equality as regards entitlement to parental leave for mothers and fathers. Following the innovative law in 2000, there was some setback following the 2008 crisis, especially in terms of a reduction in the ceiling of payments. But the Icelandic Parliament enacted a new law (December 2012) providing five months of paid parental leave for fathers, five months for mothers and two months of joint entitlement for all parents. The time limit for use is also extended to 24 months. These changes will be enacted gradually between 2013 and 2016.⁹

26. The Government of the United Kingdom announced in November 2012 that it planned to reform the country's maternity leave scheme and replace it by a flexible parental leave system. The total period of 52 weeks currently granted to mothers could, under this proposal, be shared by parents equally.

8. Roger Klinth (2008), "The best of both worlds? Fatherhood and gender equality in Swedish paternity leave campaigns, 1976-2006", *Fathering*, Volume 6, No. 1.

9. http://thjodmalastofnun.hi.is/sites/thjodmalastofnun.hi.is/files/skrar/eydal_and_gislason-paid_parental_leave_in_iceland-2012_developmen_ts-1.pdf.

27. Although this reform goes in the right direction, it does not seem to encourage fathers to take up the leave. According to the plans, parents would be free to decide how to share the leave period. This, as the previous experiences in other countries show, generally leads to mothers continuing to take the bigger share.

28. French President François Hollande has also recently announced that a draft law to reform the parental leave system would be presented by May 2013. The reform would aim both to reduce the time that women spend outside the labour market, which is potentially harmful for their career prospects, and to encourage fathers to share responsibilities in the upbringing of children. The reform would foresee in particular a financial bonus when the second parent takes up parental leave.

29. In my country, Italy, a law passed in 2012 to reform the labour market with a view to increasing economic growth set out, among other things, rules on reconciliation of private and working life and sharing household responsibilities between spouses. The law's implementing decree introduced allowances reserved for mothers to cover the costs of babysitting or kindergarten for up to six months after the maternity leave period, but also introduced both compulsory and optional parental leave for fathers. As these periods are limited to respectively one and two days, the measure clearly falls short of reasonable minimum standards. Although the number of days is merely symbolic, I consider it as a first step in the right direction, provided that incremental reforms follow rapidly.

7. Information campaigns

30. When parental leave was introduced in Sweden, the idea of making it compulsory for men was not part of the political debate. As an entirely new kind of family benefit, and one that did not reflect the traditional roles of men and women within the family, the legislator preferred to design it as a free option rather than an obligation.

31. However, for the reform to achieve its ultimate goal – improving gender equality by means of shared responsibility for childcare – it was necessary that a significant share of fathers avail themselves of the new scheme. To this end, several campaigns were launched, starting in 1976.

32. The authorities actively promoted the evolution of societal attitudes about parenting, parental leave and gender roles through television spots, posters, brochures, antenatal and postnatal education classes and information meetings, both at national and local level. In a first phase, in the late 1970s and the 1980s, campaigns were based on images of fathers in non-traditional roles, taking care of newborn babies, changing nappies, pushing swings at the playground, and so on.

33. The first national campaign was based on Lennart “Hoa Hoa” Dahlgren, a weight lifter, the aim being to show that even a man with a very masculine image could be involved in the care of children. The campaign encouraged men to share responsibilities within the household, while underlining that this would not make them less manly.

34. Nevertheless, showing men in non-traditional roles was sometimes controversial. Later campaigns conveyed more subtle messages, focusing for instance on gender differences and the complementarity between parents. “Both are needed because we are different” was the headline of a 1991 article in a magazine on parental leave launched by the National Board of Health and Welfare, a public health authority.

35. Subsequently, in the 2002-2006 period, the focus shifted towards the need to share responsibility. The campaigns took to emphasising the similarities between women and men in terms of rights and capacities, rather than their differences. The aim to establish gender equality became more explicit. Benefits stemming from parental leave for parents, not only for men, were underlined.

36. Campaigns aimed at promoting parental leave have been conducted in numerous European countries, as research generally showed that fathers and the general public were insufficiently aware of the benefits available for parents.

37. A good example of more recent initiatives is a month-long awareness campaign called “Dads at Work”, launched in the United Kingdom by the Department of Business, Innovation and Skills (BIS) in 2010. Research conducted by the BIS had shown that while fathers valued flexible working and the possibility to take care of their children, many of them were not aware of their rights or of how to request special arrangements such as flexible working time, part-time, working from home and parental leave.

38. The survey showed that 91% of fathers with children aged 16 and under believed it important that the father had the option to take paid paternity leave. 62% thought a father's relationship with his child would suffer if he was not at home after the baby was born. However, one in three did not know that paid paternity leave had been made available by law, and about one in five (22%) was not aware of the deadline (15 weeks before the baby is due) for requesting paternity leave.¹⁰

39. The "Dads at Work" campaign was based on posters and information leaflets distributed in doctors' surgeries, hospital and antenatal clinics and directing to a specific website for detailed information. Online advertising, on websites that attract high numbers of visitors who are fathers, was also part of the campaign. This campaign provided clear information on fathers' entitlements, including paternity leave and parental leave.¹¹

8. Leading by example

40. Actions speak louder than words. It would obviously be most helpful if well-known men, respected personalities or leading politicians themselves set an example by taking parental leave and showing that it is possible to reconcile, for example, political responsibilities and fathering.

41. In 1998, the Finnish Prime Minister, Paavo Lipponen, set an important precedent by taking parental leave while in office: at the time, newspaper articles all over the world reported the news as something original if not extravagant. Since then, views on this subject have evolved. A few years ago, some opinion leaders frowned at prominent politicians who did not take time off to stay with their newborn babies; this was the case in France and the United Kingdom.

42. In the Nordic countries, examples of ministers and other politicians holding high-level posts taking paternity or parental leave are becoming more frequent. In 2011, two Ministers of the Norwegian Government, Mr Knut Storberget (justice) and Mr Audun Lysbakken (family affairs) took parental leave following the birth of their respective children. Asked to comment about it, Prime Minister Jens Stoltenberg said: "I miss them, ... But it can't be that men are more indispensable to the workplace – or to the government – than women."

9. Incentives for fathers to take parental leave

43. As women's average salaries are lower than men's, mothers tend to apply for parental leave more than fathers. If the period of parental leave is unpaid or the allowance is not proportional to the wages, take-up by fathers tends to represent a bigger loss of income for the household. To fully counter this situation, it would be necessary to eradicate the gender pay-gap and/or to provide substantial incentives for men to take parental leave.

44. Gender-neutral parental leave schemes which implicitly include fathers do not appear to promote greater father involvement. Fathers appear to need stronger incentives, and reassurances, to use their parental leave entitlement. Lower take-up rates by fathers in less secure and poorly regulated occupations indicate the significance of financial loss as a disincentive. Moreover, a fair amount of flexibility is beneficial for a higher take-up of parental leave by fathers.

45. It is relevant to follow developments in countries outside Europe, especially those with a tradition and record of monitoring and evaluation of their policies, in particular as regards parental leave. Australia, for example, introduced in January 2013 its "Dad and Partner Pay" regulation, following hearings and studies in previous years. A recent study concludes that uptake of parental leave by fathers will increase if the government provides well-compensated, flexible, parent-specific and publicly promoted parental leave.

46. The workplace culture remains of substantial importance for the take-up of parental leave, especially for fathers. Employers play a critical role in the way they design and implement working time arrangements in their companies and organisations. Comparative research in European companies shows that the existence of statutory entitlements indeed tends to act as a major driving force for initiating parental leave and other extended care leave options at establishment level. Companies deploy a range of strategies to manage the take-up of parental leave, reflecting to some extent the national labour market conditions. European countries with a leave system that provides a high earnings-replacement rate also have the highest proportion of companies with (male) employees taking parental leave.

10. <http://homedad.org.uk/?p=38>.

11. www.direct.gov.uk/en/Parents/Moneyandworkentitlements/WorkAndFamilies/.

47. Research on knowledge workers in two Norwegian companies revealed that such post-industrial work is both seductive and demanding. Such companies offer new forms of work organisation and flexibility, but often in the interests of productivity, rather than of fathering.

48. Another way of increasing the proportion of fathers taking up parental leave is the introduction of compulsory elements into the schemes. As already mentioned, several countries, especially in the Nordic region, have chosen this option. In Denmark and Norway, for instance, one month of the extended period of leave is a “use it or lose it” option for fathers. They can choose to take it or not, but they cannot transmit the benefit to the mother of the child.

49. Norway, Sweden and Iceland have reserved a period for fathers.¹² Iceland radically reformed its parental leave system in 2000. The period has been extended to nine months, one third of which has to be used by the mother, one third by the father and the last third is to be shared between the parents as they wish. The father’s share can therefore not be less than one third of the total period.¹³ With the reform of 2012, Iceland went further in the same direction (see paragraph 25).

50. Another form of incentive for fathers is different forms of bonus, such as additional leave days (this is the case in seven countries). In Finland, fathers can take 24 bonus days if they take the last two weeks of parental leave.

51. Sweden has introduced a “gender equality bonus”, that is an economic incentive for families to divide parental leave more equally. The parent using most parental leave days gets a tax deduction during the time the other parent uses parental leave. The more equally the parents share the parental leave, the more bonus they receive (up to a maximum of approximately €1 210 per child).

52. In Germany, the length of benefit payment is extended to 14 months for fathers who take at least two months of leave. While this solution of adding two months of leave to the standard leave period entailed considerable higher costs than a more punitive “use it or lose it” option, it was of strategic importance because it enabled the German Government to overcome political resistance to a measure seen as crucial for any successful attempt to raise the paternal take-up of leave.

53. In Portugal, a bonus is offered to families where the father shares part of the maternity leave. Proposals to emphasise the gender sharing of leave were prepared through public debate and hearings, to commission a study on the expectations of fathers, and negotiation with the social partners. Portugal is also the only country making it obligatory for fathers to take two weeks of leave.

10. Conclusions and recommendations

54. As President Obama said: “I came to understand the importance of fatherhood through its absence – both in my life and in the lives of others. I came to understand that the hole a man leaves when he abandons his responsibility to his children is one that no government can fill. We can do everything possible to provide good jobs and good schools and safe streets for our kids, but it will never be enough to fully make up the difference.”

55. Parental leave is potentially an excellent way to overcome rigid gender roles and promote gender equality, both in family and professional life. It is also a very good way to respond to the need of many men to play a hands-on role in bringing up their children.

56. For these goals to be achieved, parental leave schemes need to be correctly designed and effectively enforced. The elements of length, financial support and flexibility should be combined in such a way as to maximise the impact on gender equality.

57. The Nordic countries have been pioneers of parental leave and still lead the way. They were the first to introduce it, to promote it and to assess its implementation. Although this does not mean that the Scandinavian model can be exported as such to other Council of Europe member States, the experience of these countries helps us identify some successful features.

12. Ekberg, Eriksson, Friebel, “Parental leave – A policy evaluation of the Swedish ‘Daddy-Month’ Reform”, 2005, Institute for the Study of Labour: <http://ftp.iza.org/dp1617.pdf>.

13. Gislason, “Parental Leave in Iceland – Bringing the fathers in. Developments in the wake of new legislation in 2000”, 2007, Ministry of Social Affairs of Iceland: www.jafnretti.is/D10/_Files/parentalleave.pdf.

58. The counterparts I met during the fact-finding visit to Sweden made it clear that the parental leave system is part of the country's social and cultural landscape and has had a strong impact on people's mindsets. While perfect gender equality has not yet been achieved in the world of work and in family life, childbearing and household responsibilities are increasingly shared between partners and men bear a considerable part.

59. Another element that emerged from our meetings is the fact that both the Swedish authorities and the Swedish people are aware of the importance of parental leave and this system is unlikely to be questioned or reduced. This is an indication even for countries undergoing a spending review process: even though parental leave can be costly, its positive effects in terms of participation of women in economic life and in gender balanced economic growth make it worthwhile.

60. My main recommendations are:

60.1. as regards the design of parental leave schemes:

- Council of Europe member States which have not already done so should introduce gender neutral parental leave schemes aimed at allowing and encouraging parents to share responsibilities in the upbringing of children;
- reserving a share of the leave for each parent, which cannot be transferred to the other parent and is lost if it is not used, increases the chances of fathers taking up parental leave, as do bonus schemes encouraging both parents to take up parental leave;
- parental leave schemes should include a fair amount of flexibility, including the possibility to take it in one block or to break it up or to combine it with full-time or part-time work;
- parental leave should be available to all workers irrespective of their type of contract (including those on fixed-term, part-time and temporary work contracts);
- two key policies need to be included in discussing policy frameworks to support employed parents with young children: parental leave and early childhood education and care (ECEC). Particular attention should be given to whether they are co-ordinated, namely that an entitlement to parental leave leads immediately into, or coincides with, an entitlement to an ECEC service;
- parents should have the right to work part-time or flexible hours because of their child's age or a disability. Employers should consider such requests and refuse them only if there is a clear business case for doing so;
- parental leave is not only a gender equality and employment issue. The interests of the child are equally important and should be taken into account when drafting any leave policy;
- viewed from a longer-term perspective, policy makers should consider replacing the various types of leave (maternity, paternity, parental, childcare leave) with a single parental leave, with equal quota for mothers and fathers. Although it is understood that maternity leave remains justified on health and welfare grounds, both for mothers and for infants, it also should not damage women's economic and social opportunities. In this respect, the model developed in Iceland looks interesting with its division of a single postnatal period shared between mother, father and family use;

60.2. as regards measures to promote the take-up of parental leave:

- Council of Europe member States should organise information and awareness-raising campaigns. Specific messages should be conveyed to men, both to inform them of available parental leave schemes and to present their positive aspects;
- social partners – employers and trade unions alike – have an important influence on attitudes towards and practices regarding parental leave across Europe. They should therefore be encouraged to tackle obstacles and barriers in order to create a workplace culture that facilitates the take-up of parental leave, especially among male workers.