Parliamentary Assembly
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COUNCIL OF EUROPE
CONSEIL DE L'EUROPE

Doc. 13208
14 May 2013

Parental leave as a way to foster gender equality

Committee Opinion[1]
Committee on Social Affairs, Health and Sustainable Development
Rapporteur: Ms Carina OHLSSON, Sweden, Socialist Group

A. Conclusions of the committee

1. The committee welcomes the report prepared by Mr Andrea Rigoni on behalf of the Committee on Equality and Non-Discrimination, considering that it is the appropriate time to address this issue, which is currently becoming a challenge for an increasing number of European countries. The draft resolution is very much to the point, clearly putting the emphasis on measures to increase the proportion of men taking parental leave in order to take care of their newborn or very young children.

2. The Committee on Social Affairs, Health and Sustainable Development believes that certain social and economic realities necessitate an additional focus on proposing realistic steps towards more gender equality, not only in the use of parental leave schemes but also in the labour market in general, and in the sharing of care responsibilities when parental leave has ended.

3. The Committee on Social Affairs, Health and Sustainable Development would therefore like to suggest a few amendments to the draft resolution as set out below, notably to increase its impact in member States.

B. Proposed amendments

Amendment A (to the draft resolution)

In the draft resolution, replace paragraph 3.2 with the following paragraph:

> *"mobilise sufficient resources to support the implementation of parental leave schemes through financial incentives, information and awareness-raising campaigns aimed at the general public and promotional measures encouraging men in particular to use their leave entitlement;"*

Amendment B (to the draft resolution)

In the draft resolution, replace paragraph 3.3 with the following paragraph:

> *"incorporate parental leave in a framework of policies, in particular adequate early childhood education and care policies, allowing both parents to reconcile private and working life according to flexible arrangements corresponding to their specific wishes and requirements."*

1. Reference to Committee: Doc. 12654 Reference 3812 of 3 October 2011. Reporting committee: Committee on Equality and Non-Discrimination See Doc. 13207. Opinion approved by the committee on 25 April 2013.

Amendment C (to the draft resolution)

In the draft resolution, at the end of paragraph 5, add the following words:

> *", and the reintegration of both women and men into the labour market by offering them flexible employment and childcare schemes once parental leave has ended."*

C. Explanatory memorandum by Ms Ohlsson, rapporteur for opinion

1. The report by the Committee on Equality and Non-Discrimination deals with a very important issue. As the report rightly mentions, parental leave for both the mother and the father of a family started to become a social reality in my own country, Sweden, already in the 1970s. However, in Sweden, this development did not take place all by itself but was actively promoted by public authorities at various levels.

2. The Swedish example, as well as similar examples in other countries, has shown that social progress can truly be achieved following governmental action if sufficient means and resources are employed. However, for such an ambitious social objective to be achieved, it needs to be jointly defined as a priority and actively promoted by various social partners acting hand in hand, and all conditions need to be united to make the project a success in the long run.

3. As rapporteur for opinion, I warmly welcome the report prepared by Mr Andrea Rigoni. It includes a well-researched explanatory memorandum and a draft resolution which is succinct and well focused, clearly putting the emphasis on measures to increase the proportion of men taking parental leave in order to take care of their newborn or very young children.

4. The explanatory memorandum lists a number of innovative measures taken by member States in past decades, which may directly inspire stakeholders in other member States considering launching similar policies. Moreover, the text elaborates on action required with regard to the successful implementation of new parental leave schemes, such as the need to couple these with awareness-raising campaigns.

5. Nevertheless, the draft resolution merits a few minor additions in order to increase its chances of having an impact on member States' policies regarding parental leave. There are certain aspects it superficially touches upon, for example by referring to Resolution 1921 (2013) of the Parliamentary Assembly on gender equality, reconciliation of private and working life and co-responsibility, but which are, in my view, more directly related to implementing new parental leave schemes than is presented in the draft resolution.

6. This is, in particular, the case for the integration of women, and in particular mothers after the birth of their children, into the labour market according to appropriate and flexible conditions, and the need to make sufficient public financial resources available to establish and promote new parental leave schemes, not least by creating financial incentives to generate more interest amongst men to share parental leave periods with their partners.

7. The recent example of Germany, where a so-called *"Elterngeld"* (parental benefit) was introduced in 2007, allowing parents to benefit from up to 67% of their net income for a maximum of 14 months (if shared between the two parents at a 12 months/2 months ratio), showed that such financial incentives are an effective means to promote new parental leave schemes, and in particular the interest of men in these. However, this new policy, in its initial phase, cost the German Government around 4 billion euros per year. Those promoting new parental leave schemes must therefore also realise and admit that social innovation of this kind also has a financial cost.[2]

8. For me as a women and as a parliamentarian from Sweden, where we have many years of experience with gender-neutral parental leave schemes as I have just described above, the objective of innovative parental leave schemes should not only be "to promote the take-up of parental leave by fathers" and thus to promote gender equality within parental leave arrangements. It should also be to ensure that such new arrangements contribute to more gender equality generally and in the long term, by facilitating the access of women to employment corresponding to their qualifications and time requirements – and by ensuring that care arrangements are shared equally between women and men when the parental leave has ended.

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2. *Elterngeld – Doppelt so hohe Ausgaben* (Parental benefit – Expenses have doubled), Manager Magazin Online, 4 January 2008, www.manager-magazin.de/.

9. There is no point in facilitating the return of women into their work places after child birth if the medium and long term solutions to reconcile private and working life are not satisfactory and viable for both parents. Especially in a gender perspective, modern parental leave schemes are clearly inseparably connected with policies promoting a better reconciliation of private and working life for women and men. This aspect should once again be emphasised explicitly.

10. I would therefore like to suggest a few amendments to the text, in order to allow the Assembly to propose steps towards more gender equality, not only in the use of parental leave schemes but also in the labour market and thus society in general.

11. **Amendments B** and **C** are thus intended to ensure that greater emphasis is put on the interconnection of policies related to parental leave with general policies aimed at improving the reconciliation of private and working life for women and men in the long term. **Amendment A** for its part introduces the, entirely realistic, reference to a sufficient level of resources to be made available for the policies that are asked for. Additional resources will certainly be required, be it for more ambitious schemes offering financial incentives or for awareness-raising and promotional measures “only”.