**Towards Gender Equality**

**Our experience of Parental Leave - the fathers’ stories**

In an open session with delegates 4 fathers in different professional circumstances shared their experience of taking parental leave and how it impacted their family lives. At times amusing but always moving the 4 men revealed the social culture and impact of the parental leave system in Iceland. In a separate interview each shared the impact of the system on their lives.

L. R Faithers O. Magnusson, G. Hauksson, Olafur Magnusson, Account Manager, Capacant Gallup.

I always thought men and women were exactly equal till I took parental leave to care for my child. I learned quickly that both are vital for the child’s welfare but play different roles in the home. I had to learn to be an effective male role model for my child. Hunting and fishing are fun, but real men also make the time to look after their children. They impact on my wife was very positive, I took off to support her after childbirth and returned to work when she regained her strength.

Gudjon Hauksson, Sociologist, Icelandic Statistical Office.

Taking parental leave and looking after my child has greatly raised my personal confidence and self esteem. I know now I can do it and did not believe that before taking leave. Without the leave system here I may not even have had children as it would have been so disruptive to the domestic life of my wife and I. The leave system has enabled us to share our domestic responsibilities and make us both freer while caring for our family. Most men my age (30-35) in blue and white collar jobs take parental leave. It’s just the thing to do, a part of our social culture.

Thorolfur Arnason, M.D. /CEO Skyrr (Former Mayor of Reykjavik)

"Before taking parental leave I thought childcare was easy but dull. Now I know better! After actually caring for my child while on leave I realise what a challenging and responsible role child caring is, especially if like mine, the child is a poor sleeper! My wife has had the opportunity to maintain her professional career and my daughter is strongly bonded with me. I still have my career but I also now have the confidence that I really can care for my children in every way".

Halldor Gronvold, Deputy Secretary General, Icelandic Confederation of Labour

"In Iceland we have been able to build consensus in society as a whole around the main principles of parental leave legislation. These are the non transferability of leave rights between mothers and fathers; flexibility in the uptake of leave for the convenience of all parties; and the removal of economic obstacles to the uptake of leave, or ensuring that while on leave salaries reflect the earnings of employees in the labour market.”

"It is my sense that we have achieved the main thrust of our objectives with the current system, but together with academics and employers we are working on a programme of research to further clarify the impacts of the system on working mothers, fathers and their children.”

Halduur Bjarni Arnarsson, Political Adviser to Minister of Social Affairs and Social Security.

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This project is supported by the European Commission’s Programme for Employment and Social Solidarity (2007-2013) and was established to support the implementation of the objectives of the EU in the areas of employment and social affairs and thereby to contribute to the achievement of the Lisbon Strategy Goals in these fields.

Editorial Board
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For further information see
Commission DG-E:
Towards Gender Equality

Care patterns reflect equality

Social values have changed - “You are weird if you don’t take parental leave”

Perspective


Key Learnings and Observations

Workshops examined the Icelandic parental leave system and compared it to the systems of attending delegate nations. They also considered the impact on gender equality of current arrangements in delegate nations, and sought to identify 2 specific measures in the Icelandic system that may be transferable to delegate nations. We report some of the delegates’ observations here.

Workshop 1. Moderator Barbara Roche – Focus Consultancy

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Delegates</th>
<th>Impact on Gender Equality</th>
<th>Specific Transferable learnings</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Sweden</td>
<td>Sweden uses a gender equality bonus paid through tax relief. Companies are benchmarked on a 12 point equality index.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Finland</td>
<td>The impact of our system is high as female employment rates are high, but the cost on SME’s is prohibitive.</td>
<td>Transferability of the Icelandic system is difficult as families decide who should take leave and when.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Bulgaria</td>
<td>The maternity leave system has changed to enable women to be in continuous education even on maternity leave. There are financial incentives, training courses to promote female employment, and at 59% this is close to the Lisbon target.</td>
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<td>Portugal</td>
<td>The system tends to reinforce gender stereotypes in the labour market as mothers get far more leave than men and though it’s transferable to men it’s rarely done. There is no strategy to deal with this inequality at present.</td>
<td>The flexibility of the Icelandic system is very inspiring, as is the 3 months leave option.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Poland</td>
<td>Women are more educated than men in Poland but the social stereotype of women as carers holds them back in the labour market. Pension arrangements that penalise uptake of leave, and gender differentials in pay mean that women tend to be less economically active than men.</td>
<td>The extension and of day-care and childcare are transferable to useful and transferable learning is the flexibility of the system.</td>
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Impact on gender equality

The impact on Gender equality is hard to measure precisely, notably because female participation was already very high in Iceland; nevertheless it has affected household organisation and roles. Of course there have been a few rare examples of men being penalised in employment for taking parental leave, and this reflects both the increasing desire of men to live up to their parental obligations, and the reality that not all employers favour the system.

Economics and future growth

Overall the Icelandic system is good and effective. We now need to focus on the childcare systems that address the pre-school gap between parental leave and attendance at pre-school establishments. The government has pledged to address this matter even if the economic times are tough and we are confident that this goal will not be abandoned.

Efficiency is the main challenge

Parental leave is part of the reconciliation policies we are promoting at European level together with other measures like childcare services and flexible work life arrangements, all of which help parents care for their children while maintaining effective work lives. The challenge is that parental leave is a tool used mostly by women and to improve its efficiency as a tool we need to encourage its use by men as well. Otherwise, the systems lead to a perpetuation of existing gender stereotypes and in part lead to the persistence of gender pay gaps. Research indicates that countries which encourage male parental leave have more equality of participation for men and women in the labour market. Examples are seen in Iceland and the Nordic countries. In Sweden, 40% plus of parental leave is taken by fathers and there is a correspondingly higher participation of women in the labour market and a more equitable share of domestic responsibilities. Europe wide parental leave systems are very diverse with great differences from country to country in the entitlements of men and women. The support and involvement of social partners is critical in promoting the take up of paternity leave. Social partners at the EU level are currently renegotiating the rights provided to parents with a view to making the system more efficient.

Impact on equality

The Icelandic Parental leave system has dramatically changed people’s ideas of what it means to be a father. The system has been in place for 8 years and its full effect has been evident in the last 5-6 years. Everyone now recognises the key role of fathers in child rearing.

The system came about through strong lobbying from the women’s movement, labour unions and other social partners including the Icelandic Equality Council and even Men’s Groups attached to the council.

Expert’s View

Svala Jonsdottir - Independent Country Expert

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