

Our experience of Parental Leave - the fathers' stories

In an open session with all 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 practical face 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 Fathers O. Magnusson, G. Hauksson

Olafur Magnusson,
Account Manager,
Capacent 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 great fun, but real men also take and make the time to look after their children. The impact on my wife was very positive. I took time 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 now.

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Editorial Board
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L -R Fathers T. Arnason, H. Arnarsson

Hrannar Bjorn Arnarsson, Political
Adviser to Minister of Social
Affairs and Social Security.

"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"

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

When I was young, the parental leave system did not exist so I missed the opportunity open to parents today. As CEO of one of the biggest IT companies in Iceland I can see how the system has allowed women in particular to climb the corporate ladder. The system has caused us to change our corporate values and style. We are a family friendly business, and we have to be, to attract the best recruits in their 20's and 30's. Everyone takes parental leave so we structure our work differently – using groups so that parental leave absences do not spoil the flow of work. The work load is shared in the group and this gives employees the freedom to go on leave while the business continues to function effectively.

The views and opinions expressed in this publication do not necessarily reflect the views or positions of the European Commission

The Social Partners

The cooperation and involvement of social partners is an important feature of the parental leave system and its supporting legislation in Iceland. Without the support and lobbying of the partners, the system could not have been established.

Parental leave is "Normal"



Altheidur Sivertsen,
Attorney,
Confederation
of Icelandic Employers

"As employers we don't have any particular problems with the implementation of the system. Flexibility is important to us because it helps us manage any disruptions to the flow of work when employees take parental leave. It's definitely true that we immediately plan for absence from work on leave when employees announce they are expecting children. We view this as normal! I believe the impact on gender equality is positive when fathers take parental leave, and we support that."

Consensus is the Key



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."

For further information see
Commission DG-E:
<http://ec.europa.eu/social/main.jsp?catId=418&langId=en>

Towards Gender Equality



Issue Two Parental Leave

Contents

Page 1:

- Gender Equality Programme reaches Iceland
- Iceland is committed to Gender equality Goals

Page 2:

- Care patterns reflect equality
- Social values have changed
- Perspective column
- Expert's View

Page 3:

Key learnings and observations

Page 4:

- Our experience of Parental Leave
- The fathers stories
- The Social Partners

Gender Equality Programme reaches Iceland



Workshops examined transferable learnings

The Learning Exchange Meeting on the "Parental Leave System in Iceland" was held in Reykjavik on 22-23 October 2008. Attended by 50 delegates from 14 EU states and representatives of the Directorate General Employment and Social Affairs of the European Commission, the event was generously hosted by the Icelandic Ministry of Social Affairs and organised by Focus-Cartermill. The programme is financed with the support of the Progress

Programme. Social partners in Iceland were represented by the Icelandic Confederation of Labour and the Confederation of Icelandic Employers, and academic experts from the University of Iceland supported the event with research papers and presentations. The Exchange meeting is the second of six in the rolling programme of exchanges planned over the next three years to promote Gender Equality within the EU.

Iceland is committed to Gender Equality Goals



**Permanent
Secretary
Arnrljotsdottir**

Ragnhildur Arnrljotsdottir, Permanent Secretary, Ministry of Social Affairs & Social Security introduced the exchange with a brief overview of the parental leave system in her country. She affirmed that Iceland still holds to its gender equality goals despite the enormous financial challenges confronting Iceland at this time. "The aim of our system," said the Permanent Secretary, "is to achieve gender equality in the labour market."

Started in 2000, leave entitlement in Iceland has lengthened in stages from 6 months to the current 9, divided into 3 blocks (3 reserved for the mother, 3 reserved for the father, 3 that can be shared freely). The new system enables economically active parents to receive eighty percent of their normal wages, financed by a specially created fund. Employers are obliged to meet employees' wishes as regards timing of the leave, and there is a legal right to return to employment at the end of the leave period. The fact that one third of the total leave period can't be transferred between the parents is one of the success factors of the system.

Asked about the actual impact on gender equality of the leave system, the Permanent Secretary explained that research into the impact of parental leave and other legislation has always been an issue. More funds are being voted for the special budget on gender equality research which will answer some of these questions and enable a refinement and improvement of the legislation.

Care patterns reflect equality



Associate Professors Gislason and Eydal, University of Iceland

In a presentation to the seminar Gudny Björk Eydal, Associate Professor, University of Iceland, explained how patterns of care had been influenced by the parental leave policies in Iceland.

Tracking research conducted in 2001 and 2007/8 on leave entitlement has revealed a major shift in care patterns with fathers taking far greater part in caring for their children. Other legislation has also impacted care patterns, with the universal right to subsidised day care (though there is a user fee charged) playing an important role. The research is very clear that parental leave and day care legislation have had a profound impact on the equal sharing of childcare between parents.

Social values have changed - "You are weird if you don't take parental leave"

This is the conclusion arrived at by Ingolfur V Gislason, Associate Professor, University of Iceland, in his analysis of the prevailing social attitudes to parental leave in Iceland. It is also a measure of the depth to which the parental leave system has changed attitudes in Iceland.

In '94-'98 very few fathers took paternity leave. In 2000-2002, the numbers rose, and now 88% of fathers take paternity leave. In a Gallup poll held in March 2003, 85% of respondents thought it "positive" that fathers took parental leave while 73% of employers were in favour of their employees taking parental leave.

Social values have changed so much in favour of male parental leave that fathers are spending more and more time with their children, but still the sharable period of 3 months is taken mostly by the mothers.

Perspective

With a Europe wide view of parental leave systems, Laurent Aujean from the European Commission Directorate General Employment and Social Affairs shared some views and perspectives on parental leave and its impact on gender equality.



Laurent Aujean from Directorate General, Employment & Social Affairs, European Commission

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.

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

Delegates	Impact on Gender Equality	Specific Transferable learnings
Sweden	Sweden uses a gender equality bonus paid through tax relief. Companies are benchmarked on a 12 point equality index.	Icelandic men get 3 months leave while Swedish fathers only get 2 – more time should be given to Swedish fathers.
Finland	The impact of our system is high as female employment rates are high, but the cost on SME's is prohibitive.	Transferability of the Icelandic system is difficult as families decide who should take leave and when.
Bulgaria	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.	The flexibility of the Icelandic system is very inspiring, as is the 3 months leave option.
Portugal	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.	The flexibility of the system is very useful as is the participation and involvement of social partners.
Poland	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.	The extension and of day-care and childcare are transferable. Another useful and transferable learning is the flexibility of the system.

Workshop 2. Moderator Dr. Jane Pillinger – Focus Consultancy

Delegates	Impact on Gender Equality	Specific Transferable learnings
Norway	Hard to prove the direct impact on gender equality because inside families there are still gender equality issues.	Most of the positives from Iceland are already in practice. We have long leave periods with great flexibility.
Ireland	Our system reinforces the leading role of mothers. A good parental leave system with rights to paid maternity and paternity leave leads to real gender equality.	Paid leave for fathers and compulsory leave for fathers would be most beneficial.
Latvia	Our system has positively affected gender equality, but salary differences encourage mothers to stay at home as they earn less.	Non transferrable leave for fathers and corporate or employer support could be applied in Latvia to great impact.
Czech Republic	Flexibility in our system allows parents to choose how to organise leave. Making it compulsory for fathers would be a real advance.	Compulsory leave for the father and its take up can be used. The flexibility of taking leave in blocks would also help our system.
Denmark	Flexibility of the system for fathers would be a real advance. Funding of leave for both private and public sector employees would be a major advantage also.	The Icelandic attitude of fathers spending time parenting their children would be an advance.
Greece	Making leave compulsory for fathers would really affect equality. 47% of women are in the labour market but positive incentives for parental leave just don't exist.	Compulsory leave and the fathers' right to stay at home with children is a useful learning. The establishment of a fund to finance it is also important.
Belgium	Problems arise for mothers after children reach age 3, and the so called sandwich children – families with children and dependent family members – are not adequately catered for.	A bigger political and business support would be important. Another aspect is more flexibility in working hours.

Expert's View

Changed Social Values



Svala Jónsdóttir - Independent Country Expert

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.

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 favoured 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.