
This article is based on a verbal presentation given to the Quality of Childhood Group in the European Parliament in April 2010 and hosted by MEP Gerald Häfner. Notes taken during the presentation were formulated into the article below, which has been checked and approved by Professor Peter Moss.

Improving the Quality of Childhood in the European Union: Parental Leave Policies

by Professor Peter Moss

co-author of the book 'The Politics of Parental Leave Policies, Children, Gender and the Labour Market'.

SUMMARY

In 2009 the International Network on Leave Policies and Research, to which Peter Moss belongs, published the book 'The Politics of Parental Leave Policies, Children, Gender and the Labour Market'.

The European Union has a policy and a legal framework for parental leave, but this represents a minimum standard, which many member states exceed. Member states are also free to decide on whether to provide a benefit payment to parents taking leave and, if so, the level of income replacement during this period of leave. For these reasons, there are large variations in leave provision between member states.

What are the basic components of a good parental leave policy?

For Maternity Leave: Peter Moss is in favour of 4 to 5 months maternity leave after the birth of the child. This is roughly in line with the position of the European Commission and the European Parliament.

*For Parental Leave: The period of maternity leave should then be followed by 12 months of parental leave. In this regard Peter Moss is in favour of the **Icelandic Model**, which would mean the 12 months being divided as follows:*

- *4 months for the mother*
- *4 months for the father, and*
- *4 months for the family to decide on which parent will take the leave (the leave may be taken by the father or by the mother).*

Level of Pay:

Peter Moss favours a pay level of at least 80% of earnings, because at this level people will really make use of the period of maternity/parental leave.

Lessons learned from designing leave policies:

- *Maternity and Parental leave can be affected by a wide range of policy considerations including:
maternal health, infant well-being, fertility policy, labour market policies, gender equality, children's rights, family policies, and so on.*

- *There are similarly main potential actors and stakeholders in the policy area of parental leave, including those with an interest in labour market, fertility, family and gender equality policies.*

Germany, Iceland and Québec are examples of recent big changes to parental leave policies, all three increasing the period of well-paid leave which is only available to be taken by fathers.

What steps need to be taken on the European level?

Peter Moss assessed that the European Union is drifting with regards to parental leave. There is no sense of direction, and no move towards agreeing the principles which should underlie policy.

- *The first thing that the European Union could do is to develop a set of targets. In this context Peter Moss proposed 'Barcelona Targets' for Parental Leave for 2020. The targets he proposed would be: 20% of all parental leave taken in the EU to be taken up by fathers; and all EU member states to provide 12 months of parental leave, with a minimum of 4 months of 'mother only' and 4 months of 'father only' leave paid at a minimum of two-thirds of previous earnings.*
- *Eurostat should start to collect statistics on the topic.*
- *The European Union should develop a recommendation on parental leave, more detailed than the current Directive, thus providing a sense of direction and encouragement to the member states. This might form part of a revised and updated version of the 1992 Recommendation on Childcare, which set out a broad and integrated approach to the reconciliation of employment and family responsibilities, covering not only leave policy, but services for children, workplace measures and measures to support more equal sharing of family responsibilities between women and men.*

Today I will address the question of parental leave as well as other types of leave. However, the underlying theme is, in fact, time and its allocation, for what is it used, how is it valued? I will look at the allocation of time over an entire life course.

The International Network on Leave Policies and Research

In 2009 the International Network on Leave Policies and Research, to which I belong, published a book entitled 'The Politics of Parental Leave Policies, Children, Gender and the Labour Market'. I and my colleague Sheila Kamerman, a professor at Columbia University in New York, edited the book.

This network builds on the work undertaken between 1986 and 1996 by the European Commission Network on Childcare, of which I was the coordinator. The International Network on Leave Policies and Research was created in 2004. It is informal, but it works and people like to contribute to it.

The following countries are part of the network:

- The Czech Republic
- Belgium
- The United Kingdom (U.K)
- Estonia
- Finland
- France
- Germany
- Hungary
- Slovenia
- Iceland
- The Netherlands
- Norway
- Portugal
- Spain
- Sweden
- Russia
- Australia
- Canada
- New Zealand
- The United States of America (U.S.A)

Other activities of the network include:

- An annual seminar
- Every year the network publishes an Annual Review of Leave Policies, containing nearly 30 country studies. The current state of affairs in each of the countries is described and discussed, including recent changes in policies, current research projects and new publications. The latest review for 2010 can be accessed at <http://www.bis.gov.uk/assets/biscore/employment-matters/docs/i/10-1157-international-review-leave-policies.pdf>
- Other more specialised activities on a certain theme. For example, a seminar is planned for 2011 on fathers' take up of parental leave.

The structure of this article will be as follows:

- What are the basic components of a good parental leave policy?
- What lessons can be drawn from comparing the policy making process in different countries?
- What steps need to be taken on the European level?

At the end I will expand on the concept of 'Life Course Time Credit' which is at present being experimented with in Belgium.

Some basic facts:

- 1883 –1960s: maternity leave policies; The U.K only introduced part-paid maternity leave in the 1970s, Australia in 2010; the USA is the only OECD country without a universal entitlement to paid maternity leave.
- 1919: ILO Maternity Protection Convention defining minimum standards for maternity leave.; 1970s –1990s: childcare/childrearing leave (Hungary, 1967); and parental leave (Sweden, 1974). Parental leave means that the leave is available to both men and women. Sweden is leading the way on this issue.
- 1983: the European Commission proposes a Parental Leave Directive.
- The 1990s: European legislation, i.e. the EU Directives setting minimum standards on Maternity Leave (1992) and Parental Leave (1996). The directive covering Maternity Leave was adopted on the basis of health and welfare considerations, the Parental Leave Directive on the basis of gender equality. There is increasing realisation that if fathers do not take up their parental leave then parental leave will contribute to gender inequality.

Definitions:

Maternity Leave: this form of leave is only for women.

Paternity Leave: this is leave for fathers to be present when the birth takes place to support the mother, and the days just before and after this time.

Parental Leave: by definition this is equally available to men and women. It is not a health and welfare measure but a care measure. There are different forms:

- a) it can be an individual right for the man and the woman;
- b) it can be a family right, leaving it to the family how the leave is taken up;
- c) it can be a combination of (a) and (b).

At this moment leave policies in the various countries are evolving and a blurring of the distinct types of leave is occurring. For example, in the Czech Republic, Poland, Portugal and Spain it is nowadays possible for mothers to transfer part of their maternity leave to the father. Or to take another example, in Iceland, Sweden and Norway parents receive a period of post-natal leave, where the mother is entitled to a set amount of leave, as is the father, and there is an additional period of leave that is left to the family to decide whether it will be taken by the mother or the father; there is no separate period of Maternity or Paternity leave.

The European Commission has recently proposed a change to the Maternity Leave Directive. At present it is 14 weeks and the proposal is to increase it to 18 weeks, in principle to be paid at full earnings.

EU Parental Leave

A new EU Directive on Parental Leave has recently been agreed, which increases parental leave from 3 months to 4 months, with one month that is non-transferable, i.e. at least one

month of leave for the father which cannot be transferred to the mother. The Commission recognises the importance of payment during parental leave, but the directive is not binding in this respect. For paternity leave no minimum standards have been set. The pay level is an important aspect because parents don't take the (full) leave if it is not fully paid.

The European Union has a policy and a legal framework for parental leave, but the member states are free to decide on the pay levels during this period of leave. For this reason the variation in arrangements is very wide.

To give a few examples:

- In Germany maternity leave consists of 8 weeks after the birth of the child at 100% of earnings.
- In the U.K maternity leave consists of 52 weeks, 6 weeks of which is paid at 90% of earnings, but with the remainder paid at a low flat rate or unpaid. I do not recommend the U.K arrangement to other countries because it is far too long (it is difficult to justify a period of 52 weeks leave only for women) and insufficiently paid.
- In Spain parents can take parental leave until a child is three, but it is unpaid.
- In Sweden parental leave is 480 days at 80% of earnings. This is the first time that the notion of days has been used in parental leave legislation. The Swedes have done this on purpose to stimulate the parents to use it in a flexible way, for instance to spread it out over a longer period.

I wanted to find a yard-stick by which to compare the different national arrangements for parental leave. I came to the following: the number of months of leave at two-thirds of earnings. The European Commission has also been using this indicator to categorize the various arrangements in Europe. It gives a good snapshot of how generous an arrangement is.

Using this yard-stick the ranking order for parental leave in Europe is as follows (going from worst to best):

The countries at the bottom of the league table in Europe are:

- The U.K
- Austria
- Belgium
- The Netherlands
- Spain
- Italy
- Poland

The countries doing best are:

- Denmark
- Norway
- Sweden
- Slovenia
- Germany, which has recently overhauled its parental leave policies
- Estonia
- Hungary.

This top league is an interesting mixture of Nordic countries and countries in Central and Eastern Europe.

The basic components of a good parental leave policy

My picture of what constitutes a good leave policy is as follows: (I would like to stress that these are my ideas, and other people may hold other points of view.)

For Maternity Leave:

I am in favour of a period of 4 to 5 months maternity leave after the birth of the child. This is roughly in line with the position of the European Commission and the European Parliament.

For Parental Leave:

Maternity leave should then be followed by 12 months of parental leave.

I am in favour of the **Icelandic Model**, which consists of dividing the leave period equally between periods of mother-only, father-only and family leave. However I would increase the period of leave currently found in Iceland from 3 to 4 months per period:

- 4 months for the mother
 - 4 months for the father, and
 - 4 months for the family to decide on which parent will take the leave (this 4 months may be taken by the father or by the mother).
- and the **Swedish Model**, which can be used in very flexible ways, for example:
- it can be used part time, or full time
 - the entitlement to parental leave can be saved and "banked" to be taken up later, for instance when the child is six and goes to primary school.

Level of Pay:

I favour a pay level of at least 80% of earnings, because at that level people will really make use of maternity and parental leave.

Another element in this whole picture deserves to be looked at. In almost all countries there is a ministry responsible for maternity, paternity and parental leave and there is a separate ministry which is responsible for policies in the field of early childhood education and care.

These two sets of policies are not integrated, which they should be; for example in many countries leave finishes before there is an entitlement to a place in a good early childhood service. The Nordic countries again show the way here, for example in Sweden well-paid leave runs for 13 months, while all children are entitled to a place in a preschool centre from 12 months.

Each EU member state should monitor the use of parental leave

I would also like to emphasize the importance of setting up a good monitoring and research system that takes up the following questions:

- Who is using the parental leave, who is not using it?
- Why are the parents using it, or why are they not using it?
- If a parent takes up the parental leave on offer, does it have consequences for their career? Is it good, neutral or bad for the career of the person in question?

In general the Nordic countries collect the best statistics, but even so among this group of countries there are gaps. Where leave is unpaid, it is usually the case that there are no statistics in use.

A key component of a good parental leave policy is that it should be designed in such a way that both the mother and the father will use it. If it is only used by the mothers, it is bad for gender equality; a good leave policy is taken by both parents. This is good for the family and good for the children. This means periods of well-paid leave for fathers and for mothers only to use; leave that is a 'family' entitlement is invariably used mainly by mothers. The worst kind of leave, in terms of gender equality, is long periods of 'family' entitlement that is low paid or unpaid; this will either not be used at all or only used by women. In my view, rather than such long periods of leave, the aim should be a shorter period – 12-15 months – of well-paid leave either divided equally between mothers and fathers or, as in Iceland, divided equally between a father, mother and family entitlement. A degree of flexibility in use is also desirable, for example, the possibility to take leave either full time or part time, and the possibility to use part of the leave period at a later stage of parenthood.

When designing a good leave policy the policy makers have to manage a challenging balancing act to meet the needs of the various players:

- Are the needs of the child being met?
- Are the needs regarding maternal health being met?
- Is it attractive enough for fathers and for the family for the fathers to take their share of the parental leave?
- Is it sufficiently good with regards to gender equality?
- How does it work from the point of view of the labour market and the demographic challenges of that society?

The example of Iceland:

Until recently Iceland had a poorly organised leave policy. In 2002, however, the government decided to implement a completely new system, based on 9 months of post natal leave at 80% of earnings divided equally between a father, mother and family entitlement. This principle of equal shares is attractive, and might be extended to 4 month shares to bring the leave period up to one year.

The example of Germany

Before the unification, parental leave in West Germany was rather conservative. Parents (which usually meant mothers) could stay at home until the child was three years old, with a low level of payment, and the provision of early childhood services was very limited. The parental leave system in East Germany was, on the other hand very different, with a shorter (one year) period of well paid leave followed by extensive provision of early childhood education and care services.

In 2007 the German government reformed its parental leave system following the example of East Germany before 1991. The main elements of the new system are:

- The parents are entitled to 12 months leave at 66% of earnings;
- If the father takes up at least 2 months of this leave, then the family gets a bonus of another 2 months of leave.

There is evidence of increased take-up by fathers, though Germany is still far from achieving gender equality. The current parental leave systems in Québec and Iceland push this aspect the furthest, and are therefore worthy of study.

My questions with regard to a good leave policy:

I am still working with the following questions with regard to this theme:

- Should we drop the idea of maternity leave and paternity leave and just go for parental leave? In the Icelandic model the authorities do not use the words 'maternity' and 'paternity' leave, they just speak about parental leave. Some argue that as long as you have maternity leave – i.e. leave just for women – you will not reach gender equality.
- On the other hand, there are biological, health and welfare reasons to maintain maternity leave. However, I consider that offering 12 months of maternity leave, as happens in the U.K, is far too much, and not possible to justify on health and welfare grounds.
- Another question: should parental leave be divided only into a mother and a father allocation, or should there be a family allocation, for parents to divide as they choose, offering a certain amount of flexibility, as in the current Icelandic model?
- Another policy question: how far can or should we push the individual entitlements for mothers and fathers? Iceland offers 3 months to each – could this be increased to 4, 5 or 6 months of paid leave for fathers only (matched by a similar period for mothers only)?

3.3 Lessons learned from Designing Leave Policies:

- Parental leave is the end result of policy considerations in the following areas:
 - maternal health
 - foetal and infant health
 - fertility policy
 - labour market policies
 - gender equality
 - children's rights
 - family policies
- Children's Rights are never, in my experience, taken into consideration when designing parental leave policies. I have not seen one country where the Children's Commissioner was consulted, or where he/she offered his/her services, when the new parental leave policy was designed. Did the European Commission and the European Parliament consult the Commission's Rights of the Child Unit when considering new Directives on Maternity and Parental Leave?
- The main actors and stakeholders in this area are the people responsible for labour market policies and gender equality. Often this subject falls under the department handling labour affairs and it is the social partners that decide on it. However, as mentioned above, there are so many other actors and stakeholders who should play a role, but whose voices are not heard. They are not even invited to the table.
- It is interesting to see how the mix of actors and stakeholders, who participate in the negotiations, differs from one country to another. It says a lot about the national priorities, values, national interpretations and social constructs of the family and childhood, and so on.
- If you want to understand what it means to be a good mother or father in a country, then look at the parental leave policy that is in place there.
- Because so many policy areas are involved the end result can go in many directions, depending on the stakeholder who has the most influence.
- Most countries are strongly inclined to continue along the path that they had opted for a long time before. The U.K is a good example in this respect. It chose a long period of maternity leave in 1976 and since then it has gone further and further down this path.
- But sometimes there are major shifts in policy, for example Germany, Iceland and Quebec suddenly took another direction. In general, the improvements consisted of redesigning leave to place more emphasis on fathers' use of leave.

What steps need to be taken on the European level?

The EU level has its 'Barcelona Targets', which provide targets for the number of children in early childhood education and care. However, these targets do not cover parental leave. My assessment is that the European Union is drifting with regards to parental leave. I recommend the following steps:

- The first thing that the European Union could do is to develop a set of targets. I would recommend an equivalent of the Barcelona Targets for Parental Leave to be met by 2020. These targets might be: 20% of all parental leave taken in the EU is taken by fathers; and all EU member states to provide 12 months of parental leave, with a minimum of 4 months of 'mother only' and 4 months of 'father only' leave paid at a minimum of two-thirds of previous earnings.
- At the same time Eurostat should collect statistics about the numbers of people taking up parental leave, as happens at the moment with regards to Early Childhood Services.
- The European Union should work on the theme of diversity. How do leave policies work for different individuals and parents, for example ethnic minorities, families with a disabled child, parents who have temporary or other precarious employment? I took part in a leave network seminar on this subject and the conclusion from this was that:
 - Very little is known about the profiles of parents who take up parental leave;
 - It is necessary to start to collect much more detailed data on this subject.
- The European Union should develop a recommendation on parental leave, more detailed than the current directive, thus providing a sense of direction and encouragement to member states. This might be done in the context of a revised version of the 1992 Recommendation on Childcare.
- We should consider parental leave in a broader context and perceive it as a part of an entire life course approach. How can we give people more control over the way they can use their time over their whole life course? You can find this issue – of the use of time – coming up in debates about the future in many areas, such as developing a sustainable economy, renewing democracy, and providing care for the elderly.
- There is far too little border crossing between policy areas. For example, little discussion takes place between policy makers and researchers dealing with children on the one hand and the care for the elderly on the other.
- People and organisations working on the theme of a sustainable economy and the meaning of a flourishing life as a reaction to the broken economic model of neo-liberal capitalism, which can only function as long as there is endless growth, are also considering the issue of time and its use. They realise that everybody is on an economic treadmill: everybody is working longer hours to earn more and to spend more, while their level of consumption increases their carbon footprint and affects their well-being. The treadmill economy is not a good way of achieving a well-balanced life.

In the U.K two important reports have been published recently, which address this theme:

The government's Sustainable Development Commission published a report entitled 'Prosperity without Growth' by Professor Tim Jackson. This report criticizes the current economic model based on endless consumption-fuelled growth, as unsustainable and unfulfilling. It furthermore criticizes economics in general because it does not offer an alternative macro-economic model, one that is not based on the idea of continuous economic growth.

The New Economics Foundation has published two recent reports – 'The Great Transition' and '21 Hours', both of which also question current unsustainable and unfulfilling economic models and examining how working time might be reduced.

The common theme of all these subjects is time – its use, its allocation, and within these the theme of gender equality.

Is Belgium showing us the way?

In Belgium they have developed a unique and innovative life course programme, a key ingredient of which is time credits. In the 2009 International Review of Leave Policies and Related Research, three articles are included on this subject:

- Belgium: 'Articulating work and family, the gendered use of institutional measures' by Bernard Fusulier;
- Belgium: 'Career breaks in Flanders' by Jessie Vandeweyer and Ignace Glorieux;
- Belgium: 'Family-work articulation policies, a life-course approach' by Amandine Masuy;

Belgium has maternity, paternity and parental leave, but on top of this it has a 'Life Course Time Credit' system. This arrangement was introduced in 1985 in order to re-distribute work at a time of high unemployment. Employees could reduce their time at work, and the employer could then, with the money that was freed up, hire unemployed people. The state paid the person who reduced his/her time at work. In 2002 the time credit system was updated and the last condition, i.e. the obligation to hire an unemployed person, was dropped, because there were not enough unemployed people available to be hired.

In Belgium employees can make use of 'time credit' facilities of between one and five years. They can take time off for any reason whatsoever, but if the person takes time off to care for somebody else, then the credit can be extended to 5 years. For people of 50+ the conditions are more generous (they are more flexible and the people receive more generous pay). Jessie Vandeweyer and Ignace Glorieux say the following about this:

'The current policy is intended, on the one hand, to enable a more relaxed career and acknowledges the need for time across a lifespan for activities other than employment'.

What is the role of civil society organisations in this area?

- Civil society organisations could make connections across various interest groups, such as the people working on children's issues, the labour market, children with special needs, people that care for the elderly, and those working in the fields of democracy and sustainability. There should be much more discussion between these various groups – they have common interests and strong alliances between them should be possible. Of course each group should keep the focus on its own field of work.

- Civil society organisations can also come forward with new ideas, which are out of reach of politicians.

Discussion

What about one-parent families?

Your question comes under the heading of diversity. We have seen an interesting change in European politics in this respect. In 1983 when the first draft of the Directive on Parental Leave was published it was proposed that single parent families be given a 'double helping' of parental leave. However, when the Directive was adopted in 1996 this clause had disappeared. At present the entitlements to parental leave are different in each country and this is also true for single parent families. The entitlement can be for the family or there can be an individual entitlement. In the former case the single parent receives the full entitlement, in the latter only the individual part. This aspect of diversity is not addressed in the European Union's policies. The same holds true for the EU member states.

Parental Leave has been considered from the point of view of the parent, and not from that of the child. Can you comment on this?

I agree with your remark, but I would like to add to that if children's rights advocates would have been present at the discussions regarding the design of parental leave it would not be clear what position they would have taken, because within the children's rights movement different perceptions are held. One position is that a child has the right to have its parent as a caregiver until he or she is 3 years old. Another is that the child has the right to a period of being breast fed by his/her mother, a period to develop a safe attachment to a parent, and after this they will benefit from being at nursery school.

Should parents be given coaching in parenting?

This is not a field in which I feel particularly comfortable. I took two years of parental leave and I went with my toddler daughter to a crèche. It was good to meet other people there. In this context I think that it is important to facilitate opportunities for parents with young children to meet one another, where they can share their experiences about the challenges that they are faced with, and be part of a wider community, since it is not easy being alone at home with a toddler.

There are two issues here:

- the resources to be made available;
- the question of democracy.

I worry about parental training because it holds the danger of experts telling parents what to do. It needs to be discussed in the context of democracy and the ambiance should be such that people are facilitated to see things in new ways. Of course, there are many practical things that parents have to learn, either by themselves or by being taught by others. Before,

mothers taught their daughters these things, but today it is different, and both mothers and fathers must make a deliberate effort to pick up this knowledge. In the absence of support from grandparents it would be helpful if other networks would be available to young parents.

A fundamental question here is: How do we understand education? How does education happen and how can it be delivered without regulating people?

Gender issues in the home and in early childhood education and care

At this moment there are two separate discussions going on: on the one hand the discussion about fathers spending more time at home and taking more responsibility there, and, on the other hand, the issue of gender equality in early childhood services, which have within living memory been dominated by women. These two discussions should be connected.

We also see that men now spend more time at home, but the children spend more time outside the home in early childhood services, and here the children interact mostly with women. There needs to be a strategy to make these services more gender balanced. Otherwise we create a feminized childhood for our children. Norway is the only country in the world that has set a target to increase the number of men in the early childhood workforce. That target is 20% of men in 2020. I don't believe in female and male role models for parenting, both men and women parent in many different ways, but I think that it is important to have diversity in early childhood services, in order that men have responsibility for children just as women do.

Closing Thought

We have to ask ourselves the question: what form of capitalism do we want? The work of Tim Jackson, in my opinion, points in the right direction in this respect. The following types of questions should therefore be addressed: how do we look at the work place and gender equality? What is a good life?



A father holding his new born baby

© Cultura / Alamy

BOOKS CITED DURING THE SESSION

Sheila B. Kamerman and Peter Moss (editors) (2009): *'The Politics of Parental Leave Policies, Children, Gender and the Labour Market'*. Bristol: Policy Press.

Sustainable Development Commission (UK) (2009), *'Prosperity without Growth'*. Available at: <http://www.sd-commission.org.uk/pages/redefining-prosperity.html>

The New Economics Foundation (2009): *'The Great Transition'*. Available at: http://www.neweconomics.org/sites/neweconomics.org/files/Great_Transition_0.pdf

The New Economics Foundation (2009): *'21 Hours'*. Available at: <http://www.neweconomics.org/publications/21-hours>

Peter Moss (editor): *'International Review of Leave Policies and Related Research 2009'*. Available at: <http://www.berr.gov.uk/files/file52778.pdf>. Three articles were cited in the session:

- Belgium: *'Articulating work and family, the gendered use of institutional measures'* by Bernard Fusulier;
- Belgium: *'Career breaks in Flanders'* by Jessie Vandeweyer and Ignace Glorieux;
- Belgium: *'Family-work articulation policies, a life-course approach'* by Amandine Masuy.

Professor Peter Moss

of the Thomas Coram Research Unit, Institute of Education, University of London, has been an activist for decades to push for improvements in the Quality of Childhood in the European Union. With colleagues from 25 countries, he has established an international network on leave policies and research. The network is very active with an annual seminar and an annual review of national leave policies, and members collaborate to produce other publications, including a recently published book *'The Politics of Parental Leave Policies'*, edited by Peter Moss and Professor Sheila Kamerman from the U.S.A.