

Father-inclusive family policies: challenges and recommendations

**Professor Margaret O'Brien*,
Centre for Research on the Child and the Family, University of East Anglia, UK**

**United Nations Expert Group Meeting, New York, 1 – 3 June 2011 “Assessing
family policies: Confronting family poverty and social exclusion & Ensuring work-
family balance”**

*** Professor of Child and Family Studies, Centre for Research on the Child and the
Family, School of Social Work and Psychology, Elizabeth Fry Building, University
of East Anglia, Norwich, NR4 7TJ. UK.**

E-mail: m.o-brien@uea.ac.uk

Introduction

Across the world men's roles as fathers are in a state of flux. An increased democratisation of the father's position in the family, through the rise in women's rights and the decline in patriarchal socio-legal structures, has been a dominant trend in many countries during the last century. As Badinter (1981: 325) suggests '*After centuries of the father's authority or absence, it seems that a new concept has come into existence- father love, the exact equivalence of mother love*'. By contrast we have also seen the growth of paternal peripherality with the rise in lone motherhood leading to increasing marginalisation of fathers from family life. Coltrane (2004) has characterized these simultaneous trends of greater involvement and more marginality as the paradox of fatherhood. It seems to me that although the cultural and socio-economic contexts of our regions differ significantly, a common challenge is to how to plan a modern family policy framework which is responsive to the diverse ways contemporary fathers create, shape and negotiate their *parenting* and *partnership* activities within increasingly *insecure economic and emotional settings*.

A pressing reason for including fathers in our deliberations on future family policies is that there is increasing evidence that paternal behaviour (what men 'do' in and around their families) matters for children's well-being (Lamb, 2010). The literature on fathers' impact on children's well-being is now extensive and shows that children are at risk, or benefit, from the life histories both parents bring to their parenting. There is growing awareness that a family policy and support approach which concentrates on mothers or mother-child relationships, to the exclusion of fathers, may miss significant emotional attachments or causes of stress for children and parents and so weaken any potential family policy or programme (O'Brien, 2004).

A further key reason for including fathers in family policy planning is to promote a context for greater gender equality in the workplace and home, particularly for women when they become mothers. Family policies which stress paternal and partner support to mothers affirm joint responsibility for children's well-being, and underpin the principle that mothers should not be expected and may not be able 'to do it all'.

Mothers' labour force participation was widely considered to be one of the most significant social developments of the 20th century (Haas & O'Brien, 2010). Once mothers entered the labour market in record numbers in industrialized societies in the 1960s, the economic, individual and cultural benefits of female economic independence emerged and have been celebrated. But scholarship has highlighted the continuing difficulties faced by employed mothers in managing a job and caring for children: unequal division of labour at home; motherhood wage penalty; work-family conflict (Gornick & Meyers, 2009). In the face of this incomplete or stalled gender revolution (Esping-Anderson, 2009) there is a growing awareness of the need to reconfigure men's "two worlds" of work and family, as well as women's. Fathers' active participation in

family life will likely be one of the most important social developments of the 21st century.

This briefing paper highlights the challenge of developing a framework for a father-inclusive family policy approach, applied to work-family issues with a focus on leave policies.

Fathers and work- family policies in context

In many countries across the world, governments, regional bodies and employers are developing support for working fathers' caring responsibilities. From the late 1990s, in particular, there has been a rapid expansion of both parental leave and flexible working provision targeted at fathers, especially in the Nordic countries which have been global pioneers in work-family policy innovation.

Historically, work-family policies have operated to protect the health of mothers after childbirth and to sustain women's participation in the labour force (Kamerman & Moss, 2009). During the last century as female employment rates began to rise dramatically in many countries, mothers returned to work earlier after childbirth, compared to previous cohorts of women (Gornick & Meyers, 2009). For example, in the U.S. 50% of mothers have returned to employment by the time their child is three months (Hofferth & Curtin, 2006). Across industrialized nations, the economic well-being of families with children is increasingly reliant on maternal as well as paternal employment. As the proportion of dual earner families has grown, with more mothers working full-time, the combined working time of couples with dependent children has increased (Jacobs & Gerson, 2004) leading to a growing acknowledgement of the limitations of work-family policies which concentrate purely on women or mothers (e.g. Lewis, 2006). In turn policy analysts have charted intensified disquiet about 'a care deficit' whereby employees are less available to care for young children and elders in their families and communities (Heyman, 2006). Inevitably fathers have been drawn into the dialogue about work-family policy; at varying speeds in different national contexts and a range of care policies for fathers have emerged, particularly in Europe.

Changing cultural expectations on men to be more actively engaged in the care of children (Doucet, 2006) have served also to draw fathers into work-family reconciliation policy development. In many countries across the world fathers of the twenty-first century are expected to be emotionally involved with children as well as economic contributors to their welfare. Increasingly 'earning as caring' is not enough to validate being a good father; fathering is also about directly caring for and being with children. Although, in general, fathers continue to work longer hours than mothers in the labour market, there is emergent evidence that higher earning European fathers with shorter working hours are able to contribute more care to children (Smith & Williams, 2007). Similarly longitudinal analysis of time use diaries (Bianchi, Robinson & Milkie, 2006) is showing increases in caring for children by fathers in U.S. two-parent households since 1965, promoted they argue, by some reduction in working hours, time alone, personal care and by increases in multi-tasking.

Paternity leave - a statutory entitlement to enable a father to be absent from work for a period of time when a child is born- became visible in the mid-1970s, notably in Sweden, and forms of *parental leave* - a statutory entitlement to be absent from work after initial early maternity and paternity leave developed thereafter. Father-sensitive work-family leave packages have been based on the logic that giving fathers the opportunity to spend more time at home through reduced working hours or leave after childbirth should stimulate paternal involvement in the care and well-being of children. Impact studies of parental leave are in an early stage of development and only recently have started to examine the relevance of fathers and other relationships beyond the mother child dyad during this period. However, the emerging evidence suggests that parental leave has the potential to boost fathers' emotional investment and connection with infants as well as supporting mothers (O'Brien, 2009).

Fathers' Access to Paternity and Parental Leave

An analysis of 173 countries from the Project on Global Working Families team (Heyman, Earle & Hayes, 2007) indicates that fathers have a paid statutory entitlement to paternity leave or paid parental leave in 66 nations across the world. By contrast 169 countries offer paid maternity leave (with Liberia, Papua New Guinea, Swaziland and the U.S. the 4 nations not to offer paid maternity leave). There has been a tendency in countries such as the U.S. and Australia, in contrast to many European countries, to encourage informal and private solutions for the care of infants and children. However, since 1993, American parents (mothers and fathers) working in the public sector or in the private sector with more than 50 employees, are eligible to 12 weeks unpaid leave after childbirth under the federal Family and Medical Leave Act (Kamerman & Waldfogel, 2006). In 2002 California pioneered the first paid family leave law in the U.S., enabling eligible parents to take six weeks postnatal leave at about 55% of salary reimbursement (Grant, Hatchard, & Patel, 2005) and during the last decade several American states have developed At Home Infant care (AHIC) policies (Grant *et al.*, 2005), with state innovation using family leave insurance schemes.

Parental leave – global variations

Parental leave design has become diverse in its design features and varies on four main dimensions: (Moss, 2011).

- (i) whether it is an individual or family entitlement (a non-transferable individual right or a family right that parents can divide between themselves as they choose);
- (ii) length;
- (iii) payment;
- (iv) flexibility.

Several countries have adopted father enhancement schemes through experimentation with a range of policy instruments, based on incentive, penalty and even compulsion.

Part of the policy innovation has involved a form of re-branding where periods of leave time within individual or family entitlements have become reserved for *fathers or father-targeted* (sometimes referred to as a ‘father’s quota’). Through the reconfiguration, fathers’ access to a period of parental leave, previously implicit, within an individual gender neutral entitlement, becomes explicit. The countries includes the well-established father-sensitive regimes embedded in the majority, but not all, of the Nordic countries, and the recently enhanced schemes come from countries as diverse as Germany, Portugal, Spain and Slovenia.

A complex mix of informal unpaid and formal paid entitlements across and within nations makes assessment of the magnitude of paternal leave taking difficult to assess.

Moss’ (2011) most recent audit confirms that where leave is a family entitlement only, fathers’ use is low (i.e. where leave can be shared between parents, fathers take only a small proportion). For example, less than 1 per cent of recipients are fathers in the Czech Republic; and the proportion of fathers taking parental leave is 2 per cent in Finland and Poland, and 3 per cent in Austria. However, where parental leave has both an individual entitlement element *and* is relatively well paid, fathers’ use is higher – though not equal with use by mothers.

When applying a new typology of father-care sensitive leave models in a comparative analysis of 24 developed countries (O’Brien, 2009) I found: that fathers’ use of statutory leave is greatest when high income replacement (50% or more of earnings) is combined with extended duration (more than 14 days). See Table 1.

Main observations

- Fathers’ utilization of both paternity and parental leave is highest under the ‘Extended father-care leave with high income replacement’ model, lowest under the ‘Short/ Minimalist father-care leave with low/ no income replacement’ model and intermediate under the ‘Short father-care leave with high income replacement’ model.
- Fathers’ use of leave is heightened when high income replacement is combined with designated father targeted or reserved schemes. The audit shows that on average over 70 per cent of eligible fathers take some form of leave when these conditions have been in place for some time. Countries with more recent introductions of this model have seen marked increases in utilization by fathers.

Designated father targeted or reserved schemes enhance fathers’ utilization rates. Blocks of time which are labelled ‘daddy days’ or ‘father’s quota’ are attractive to men and their partners. Put another way, discretionary/ optional leave schemes, even with high income replacement, have lower levels of utilization by fathers.

- ‘Gender- neutral’ parental leave schemes which implicitly, rather than explicitly, include fathers do not appear to promote greater father involvement. At this point

in time fathers (and their partners) may need more explicit labelling to legitimise paternal access to the care of infants and children.

- Numerous policy experiments with the timing of father's leave are occurring. Two peaks appear to exist: leave time around the birth of a child and leave time linked to mothers return to employment (later in Nordic countries - 11-15 months but earlier in other European countries).

Diversity and Income issues

- County level eligibility criteria (e.g. length of continuous service) restrict access to parental leave for many fathers and mothers. Significant excluded groups include; those with insecure or unstable labour market histories prior to a child's birth (over-represented by low income and immigrant families). Countries rarely keep child-level data but Danish records shows only 55% of children born in 2002/3 have a mother and father who *both* took leave (Rostgaard, 2007). Population exposure to father leave is higher in countries with a lower threshold of entitlement (e.g. Sweden).
- Lower take-up rates by fathers in less secure and poorly regulated occupations indicate the significance of financial loss as a disincentive.
- A socio-economic profiling of fathers' utilisation of leave indicates: higher rates are generally associated with high income occupations (self and partner), high levels of education (self and partner), and public sector occupations (self and partner).
- In countries where there is no statutory father-care sensitive parental leave taking time away from employment is more difficult for low-income fathers. Nepomnyaschy & Waldfogel's (2007) community study shows that that the likelihood of taking the longer leave of two or more weeks was associated with fathers being U.S.-born, more educated, and in middle or high prestige jobs.
- Countries with high statutory income replacement father-care policies may promote gender equality but reinforce income inequalities, as cash transfers are being made to families which are already well-paid. This risk of greater economic polarisation between '*parental leave rich* and *parental leave poor households*' can be offset by distributive tax policies (e.g. higher tax for wealthier households, a fiscal strategy only acceptable in some countries).

Overall, the evidence highlights the importance of a country's policy framework, particularly financial incentives and father-targeting, in shaping fathers' propensity to take parental leave. In the absence of formal paid job protected leave, poorer and less economically secure fathers may be less able to spend time with their infants and partners in the transition to parenthood. It is possible that, from the earliest period of life, infants

in poor households are experiencing less paternal investment than infants in more affluent households.

General Recommendations for discussion

Family policies need to move away from a dichotomous breadwinner male worker and homemaker female carer model of the family. This historic framework leaves little conceptual space to understand how men care or how national state systems can support or hinder men's engagement in care of children or elders. As Finch (2006: 119) reflects: *'By concentrating on the extent to which states unburden the main carer (i.e. women) to undertake paid work, the extent to which states unburden the main breadwinner (i.e. men) to undertake care is ignored.'*

Most policy energy has been devoted to enhancing maternal employment and less on promoting paternal caring, despite political rhetoric and the significant historic policy achievements for fathers seen over the last decade.

A dual carer / dual earner family policy model should be adopted in order to develop measures to support men and women's caring and earning responsibilities and obligations. *'Father inclusiveness is part of a modern family policy'* (Hewitt, 2004).

National bodies should explore systems to recognise and support caring activities by fathers in families, in particular, consider statutory leave provision for fathers at the time of a child's birth (paternity leave) or later, in the early years of a child's life (parental leave). Policies should be guided by the emerging comparative evidence on design features which promote paternal utilization.

References

- Badinter, E. (1981) *The Myth of Motherhood*. London: Souvenir Press
- Bianchi, S. Robinson, J. P. & Milkie, M. (2006). *Changing Rhythms of American Family Life*. New York: Russell Sage Foundation.
- Coltrane, S. (2004) *The Paradox of Fatherhood: Predicting the Future of Men's Family Involvement. Vision 2003: Contemporary Family Issues*. Minneapolis, MN: National Council on Family Relations.
- Doucet, A. (2006). *Do Men Mother? Fathering, Care and Domestic Responsibility*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press.
- Esping- Anderson, G. (2009) *The Incomplete Revolution: adapting to women's new roles*. Cambridge: Polity press.
- Finch, Naomi 2006. Childcare and Parental Leave. In *Social Policy, Employment and Family Change in Comparative Perspective*, edited by Bradshaw, Jonathan and Hatland, Aksel. Northampton, Massachusetts: Edward Elgar Publishing, Inc.
- Gornick, J. & Meyers, M. (2009) *Gender Equality: Transforming Family Divisions of Labour*. London; Verso Books.
- Grant, Jodi, Hatcher, Taylor and Patel, Nirali 2005. *Expecting Better: A State-by-State Analysis of Parental Leave Programs* [online]. Washington, D.C.: National Partnership for Women and Families. [cited 14th January 2007]. Available from <http://www.nationalpartnership.org/portals/p3/library/PaidLeave/Parental-LeaveReportMay05.pdf>, 48–49.
- Haas, L. & O'Brien, M. (2010) Men, Work & Parenting: new observations on how fathers work and care *Journal of Fathering* November
- Hewitt, Patricia (2004) Keynote Speech to Fathers Direct , Working with Fathers National Conference, London, 5th April 2004. www.dti.gov.uk
- Heymann, Jody, Earle, Alison and Hayes, Jeffrey (2007). *The Work, Family, and Equity Index: Where Does the United States Stand Globally?* [online]. Boston: Project on Global Working Families. [cited 29th April 2008]. Available from <http://www.hsph.harvard.edu/globalworkingfamilies/images/report.pdf>.
- Heyman, J. (2006) *Forgotten Families: Ending the Growing Crisis Confronting Children and Working* Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Hofferth, S. L. & Curtin, C. (2006) Parental Leave Statutes and Maternal Return to Work After Childbirth in the United States *Work and Occupations* 33: 73-105.

Kamerman S. and Waldfogel, J. (2006). The U.S. Report. Moss, P. & O'Brien, M. (eds.) *International Review of Leave Policies and Related Research*. London: Department of Trade and Industry, Employment Relations Research Series No. 57.

Kamermann, Sheila & Moss, Peter (eds) (2009) *The Politics of Leave*. Policy Press

Lamb, M. E. (Ed.) (2010) *The Role of the Father in Child Development*. (5th Ed). Hoboken, NJ: John Wiley & Sons.

Moss, P. (2011, in press) (eds.) *International Review of Leave Policies and Related Research*. London: BERR Employment Relations Research Series

O'Brien, M (2009) 'Fathers, Parental Leave Policies and Infant Quality of Life: International Perspectives and Policy Impact' *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*. Vol. 624: 190-213. [Original article]

O'Brien, M. (2004) *Fathers and Family Support Services: Promoting Involvement and Evaluating Impact* (London: NFPI)

Nepomnyaschy, Lenna and Waldfogel, Jane 2007. Paternity Leave and Fathers Involvement with their Young Children: Evidence from the American ECLS-B. *Community, Work & Family* 10 (4):427-454.

Rostgaard, Tine 2006. The Denmark Report. In Moss, Peter & O'Brien, Margaret (eds.) *International Review of Leave Policies and Related Research*. London: Department of Trade and Industry, Employment Relations Research Series No. 57.

Smith, A. J. and Williams, D. (2007) "Father Friendly Legislation And Paternal Time Across Western Europe" *Journal of Comparative Policy Analysis* 9 (2) (175-192).

Table 1
Statutory Father-care Sensitive Leave Models by Selected Countries*

<p>I. Extended father-care leave with high income replacement Finland, Germany, Iceland, Norway, Portugal, Quebec, Slovenia, Spain, Sweden.</p> <p>II. Short father-care leave with high income replacement: Belgium, Canada, Denmark, France, Greece, Hungary, Netherlands.</p> <p>III. Short/ Minimalist father-care leave with low/ no income replacement Australia, Austria, Czech Republic, Estonia, Ireland, Italy, Poland, UK.</p> <p>IV. No Statutory father-care sensitive parental leave: USA</p>

*Adapted from sources: Moss, Peter (2007) 'Policies to increase fathers' use of leave', Network presentation, Budapest; Moss, Peter and Wall, Karin (eds.) 2007. *International Review of Leave Policies and Related Research*. Employment Relations Research Series no. 80. London: Department for Business Enterprise and Regulatory Reform (BERR) www.berr.gov.uk/publications ; Moss, Peter and O'Brien, Margaret (eds.) 2006. *International Review of Leave Policies and related Research*. Employment Relations Research Series no. 57 London: Department of Trade and Industry (DtI) www.berr.gov.uk/publications