

FATHERS ON PARENTAL LEAVE



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A Joint Report
based on qualitative research with
fathers on leave, employers and decision makers
in Lithuania, Iceland, Denmark and Malta



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1. INTRODUCTION

Currently researchers of gender studies and family sociologists are paying considerable attention to the study of masculinities. Fatherhood in particular is a phenomenon that gives rise to a wide range of theoretical and empirical research. The improvement of women's situation in society is inevitably related to the exposure and celebration of women's experience and also to the social visibility of their problems and ways of empowering themselves in the public sphere. These changes have had profound influence on the transformation of the meanings of hegemonic masculinity and the reproduction of power relations between the sexes.

The empirical studies on masculinity point to the fact that, in contemporary societies, the role of men within the family sphere – particularly with regard to childcare – is becoming a more and more significant

part of the masculine identity. Across the “Old Europe”, an increasing number of men are exercising their right to parental leave¹. They are also actively participating in childcare thereby acknowledging their partner's right to pursue personal career ambitions. Research indicates that these changes pave the way for a win/win situation. Men's participation in family life strengthens their relationships with their partners, creates a closer emotional bond with the child and opens up new possibilities for women to contribute to the general social and economic welfare.²

1.1 Analyzing fatherhood and masculinity

In this context fatherhood and masculinity are analysed as dynamic phenomena in an ongoing process of development. The formulation of fatherhood

¹ In this Joint Report the term parental leave will be used to comprise the concept of maternity and paternity leave. It is our hope that this minor detail will contribute to an understanding of parental leave as a joint project with equally shared obligations and privilege.

² In a report on the European labour market participation (1999–2000), the European Commission emphasized the fact that equal opportunities for men and women are an economic necessity and that the gross national product of the European Union countries has been increasing by one fifth yearly (2,3%) because of the increasing women's participation in labour market (Burneikienė et al. 2002).

and masculinity practices is to a large extent determined by social traditions, values and norms. Consequently fatherhood and masculinity are viewed as something that is formed and transformed by a variety of social institutions and discourses including, the government, the legal system, medicine and public health, the mass media and the educational system. Institutions and discourses reflect deeply engrained values, influence public policy and affect the lives of many men. By analysing the empirical data collected in Denmark, Iceland, Lithuania and Malta, this project sets out to grasp the complexity of practising a masculine identity³ while at the same time engaging in parental leave.

Childcare is traditionally viewed as a gendered occupation in the sense that women are expected to take on the overall responsibility. Hence, the hegemonic ideology of fatherhood reflects the ‘traditional’ concept of the breadwinner that defines a good father as a good provider. A good provider has a distinct role within the family and may not engage in activities associated with childcare or motherhood.

1.2 About the project

This Joint Report is part of the larger project “*Modern Men in Enlarged Europe: Developing Innovative Gender Equality Strategies*” largely financed by the European Commission⁴.

This report is a fusion of four National Summary Reports⁵. Besides summarizing the findings of each report, this Joint Report is dedicated to presenting the results from a broader perspective.

The main objective of the project is to develop and sustain innovative gender equality strategies in relation to parental leave. This is understood in terms of creating sustainable change in gender identities by encouraging men in general to embrace new and modern gender roles as well as by overcoming gender stereotypes. By using parental leave as a means to challenge hegemonic gender identities, the way is being paved for new images of men as caregivers to come into being.

Four scopes of action

The main objective has been reached by crystallizing the approach of the research into four scopes of action.

1. Understanding the motivating factors that encourage men to take parental leave.
2. Understanding the obstacles that men encounter in relation to parental leave.
3. Understanding the strategies that are used when dealing with parental leave.
4. Understanding how employers in Denmark, Iceland, Malta and decision makers in Lithuania deal with men who want to take parental leave.

³ It has been acknowledged by many gender scholars (Connell etc) that hegemonic masculinity hinges on heterosexuality, economic autonomy, being able to provide for one’s family, being rational and keeping one’s emotions in check. Hegemonic masculinity emphasise values such as courage, aggression, autonomy, mastery, technological skill, adventure, and toughness in mind and body. On the other hand, emotions such as nurturing, receptivity, empathy, and compassion are experienced as inconsistent with the power of masculinity and are ascribed to femininity.

⁴ The project was also financed by the Government of the Republic of Lithuania.

⁵ For all the National Reports, go to www.dadcomehome.org

The structure of the project

The report is introduced by describing the methodology used in the project. Following this, an outline of the legislations on parental leave in the partner countries is given. This is followed by some statistical information on some of the ways in which parental leave is shared between the mother and the father in the four countries. Hereafter a report from each country is presented giving the main findings from each of the four National Reports. The report closes with a summary of the national results and with recommendations for the different target groups i.e. fathers, employers and politicians.

1.3 Research methodology

The research of fathers, employers and decision-makers orbits around a combination of quantitative and qualitative method.

Interviews with fathers on parental leave

In each country 15 fathers (who are/have been on parental leave) have been interviewed⁶. The main objective has been to study how the fathers undertake the role of caregivers (strategies) while at the same time maintaining a sense of a coherent masculinity. As a rule the interviews were conducted in the fathers' homes. In some cases the child was present and this proved to contribute positively to the dynamic of the interview. It was clear that the child facilitated the father being more "present" and involved in the inter-

view. The interviews adopted a qualitative approach and each lasted around an hour. Information concerning the social-demographic situation of the fathers and their labour participation was collected via a questionnaire. Some of the fathers were still on parental leave at the time of the interview. The rest had been on leave a few years prior to the interview.

Survey of employers with experiences of male employees on parental leave

22 employers (10 in Iceland, 8 in Denmark and 4 in Malta) who had experience with employees taking parental leave were interviewed using a questionnaire (which included open ended questions) concerning their experiences with, and attitudes towards, parental leave. They were also asked to discuss what they perceived to have gained or lost as a result of their decision to take parental leave.

In Iceland, 4 employers from the public sector and 6 employers from the private sector were interviewed. The company sizes ranged from medium to large. 6 male of the employers were male while 4 were female⁷. In Denmark 3 employers from the public sector and 5 employers from the private sector were interviewed. All the employers came from medium to large companies and operated primarily within the service sector. In Malta, 4 employers, 2 male and 2 female, all from the public sector, were interviewed. The employers came from the education, health and aviation sectors of the public service. The number of employees ranged from a mere 48 in the aviation sector to about 7,000 in the education sector.

⁶ In Malta, however, the practice of men taking parental leave is so rare, that the researchers only managed to find 10 men who had been on leave within the last five years.

⁷ It should be pointed out that from a general point of view Icelandic men will take paternity leave for at least 3 months because it is simply accepted in Icelandic society.

Survey of politicians and state officers

The sample survey carried out amongst politicians and state officers investigating their attitudes towards men's participation in family life and childcare, the legal regulation of paternity/maternity leave and the means for improvement of the judicial basis in this area in Lithuania was done by mail between March and April 2005. Out of 141 members of the Lithuanian Parliament, 45 participated in the survey (32%). Out of 51 representative of the ministries, 29 completed the questionnaire (57%) and 3 out of 4 representatives of a social policy group participated expressing the opinion of the Chancellery of the Lithuanian President.

The largest part of the men included in the sample (31) represented the Parliament of Lithuania while the remaining 8 represented the ministries. Most women in the sample (20) worked in the ministries, 13 were members of Parliament and 3 were experts at the Chancellery of the President of the Republic of Lithuania. The sample of respondents is directly involved in social policy and equal opportunities policy, decision making and monitoring of the National Program on Equal Opportunities for Women and Men for 2003–2004 in Lithuania⁸. A total of 77 respondents returned completed questionnaires (the response rate was 39%).

1.4 Legal regulation of parental leave in the countries

The different country legislations carry different protective measures against dismissal during parental leave. There are considerable differences in the legislation on parental leave across the different countries.

The difference between the total amount of days granted to the mother and the father respectively differs in each country, as does the economic factor; i.e. whether the parent is granted leave with full, partial or no economic compensation. There are also differences in the length of leave granted and in how much leave is reserved for the mother and for the father and how much may be shared between the parents.

Below is a short overview of the various national parental leave legislations and the use of parental leave in each country. (This is not comprehensive and not all details of the laws are included.) The Icelandic legislation is discussed more extensively than the rest as Icelandic legislation is currently considered best practice. Most of the countries have different legal regulations for parental leave: pregnancy leave and maternity leave may be availed of by the mother, parental leave may be availed of by the father and parental or childcare leave may be availed of by both parents. In this report we do not differentiate between the various types of leave and refer to them using the generic term, 'parental leave'.

Denmark

The legislation on parental leave in Denmark was last amended in 2002. The legislation grants the mother 4 weeks parental leave prior and 14 weeks following the birth of the child. The father is granted 2 weeks parental leave following the birth of the child. Both parents have the right to 32 weeks of parental leave, but only the reserved periods (4+14 for the mother and 2 for the father) and 1×32 weeks are paid. This makes a total of 52 weeks paid parental leave.

⁸ For full text of the Program, go to: <http://www3.lrs.lt/cgi-bin/preps2?Condition1=212270&Condition2=>

The Danish legislation grants people who are entitled to sickness pay (i.e. all wage earners) a parental leave pay that equals daily allowances during leave (3.267 DKK per week or approximately €1.913 per month). However, pay during leave is not only regulated by the legislation. Most employed people in Denmark work under the regulations of an agreement between union and employers' organisation. Almost all agreements grant full pay during the periods that are reserved for one of the parents, and a growing number – for example, within the public sector – also grants full pay for a further 10 weeks. A very small number of private companies even grants 100% pay during the whole period (up to 52 weeks).

Iceland

The Icelandic law, which was unanimously adopted by the Icelandic legislative assembly in 2000 grants a total of 9 months leave. These nine months are split up in three parts: 3 months to be availed of by the mother, 3 months to be availed of by the father and 3 months for either of the parents' use. The months assigned to each parent are non-transferable with the only exception being when one of the parents dies before having made full use of their non-transferable three months. The flexibility of the leave regulations allows the parents to take leave separately or together, to divide it into distinct periods or even use it on a part-time schedule in cooperation with their employer. The leave must be used before the child reaches the age of 18 months. While on parental leave, the parents receive compensation which amounts to 80% of their salary. This payment comes from a Parental Leave Fund, which is financed by a part of the insurance levy that all employers pay as part of the wages.

Lithuania

In the laws of the Republic of Lithuania regulating paternity/maternity leave, the term 'parental leave' does not exist. Instead maternity/paternity benefit and childcare leave are used. The Labour Code of the Republic of Lithuania provides for childcare leave which can be used, depending on a family decision, by the mother (or foster mother), the father (or foster father), the grandmother, grandfather or other relatives that take care of the child until he/she reaches the age of three. The Lithuanian legislation on Sickness and Maternity Social Insurance grants the mother between 126 and 140 calendar days before and after the birth on 100 % salary compensation. After this period, any of the abovementioned family members is granted a maternity/paternity benefit until the child reaches the first year of age. As from March 1, 2004, parental benefit amounts to 70 % of the caretaker's salary.

Malta

The Maltese parental leave legislation allows for 14 weeks of leave for the mother (of which 4 weeks are to be availed of before the birth and 6 are to be availed of after.) During the first 13 weeks the mother is granted full wage compensation while the 14th week is unpaid. Apart from the maternity leave, each parent is entitled to 3 months of unpaid leave to be taken before the child is 8 years old. The employer and employee are to decide whether the leave should be taken full time or on some kind of part time schedule. The employer may postpone the granting of parental leave for reasons related to the smooth running of work operations.

1.5 Use of parental leave in the countries

Fig. 1: Percentage of fathers using their right to parental leave

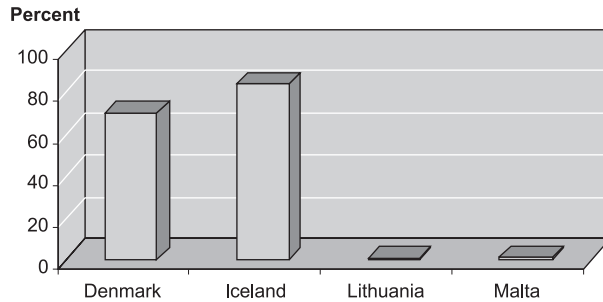
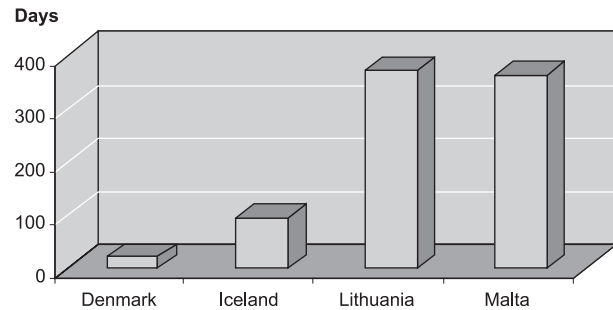


Fig. 2: Average length of leave for fathers taking leave



Malta

The uptake of parental leave by Maltese fathers is extremely low. From a study carried out in 2003⁹ by the Department of Women in Society, it is clear that even

within the public sector, where family-friendly measures are more readily available to workers, it is still overwhelmingly women who make use of these measures. In fact, only 1.6% of workers who availed themselves of parental leave between 1997 and 2001 were fathers.

Table 1. USE OF PARENTAL LEAVE AMONG THE INTERVIEWED MALTESE FATHERS

Age	Level of Education	Gross Annual Income*	Parental Leave Period	Children
41	Tertiary	8,000 – 9,999 LM	28 weeks	3
42	Tertiary	8,000 – 9,999 LM	30 weeks	1
46	Tertiary	10,000 – 13,999 LM	2 years 5 months	2
44	Tertiary	8,000 – 9,999 LM	1 year 24 weeks	2
38	Vocational	3,001 – 5,999 LM	20 weeks	2
35	Tertiary	6,000 – 7,999 LM	1 year	3
35	Tertiary	3,001 – 5,999 LM	3 year	2
33	Tertiary	6,000 – 7,999 LM	1 year	2
46	Tertiary	3,001 – 5,999 LM	2 years	2
34	Tertiary	6,000 – 7,999 LM	1 year	2

* One Maltese Lira equals 2.34 €. Thus 5,000 LM = 11,700 €

⁹ Department of Women in Society. 2003. *The career progression of women and men: equal opportunities – The impact of parental leave, career break and responsibility leave in the Maltese public service*. Malta: Ministry of Social Policy.

Denmark

When looking into the statistics on the use of parental leave in Denmark it becomes clear, that something must be hindering the fathers from exercising their legal rights¹⁰. As pointed out in the section above, the present legislation on parental leave does make it possible for fathers to go on leave for up to 34 weeks. This is considerably more than the approximately three weeks that the average Danish father make use of. Depending on how the parental leave period is calculated, Danish fathers currently make use of 2.7 and 3.5 weeks of parental leave. As Danish women on average take 40 weeks parental leave, Danish men were only accountable for approximately 7% of all the parental leave taken in Denmark in 2004. In families with a child born in 2003 where at least one parent took parental leave, 71% of the fathers and 92% of the mothers availed themselves of parental leave¹¹.

Lithuania

According to the data of the State Social Insurance Fund of the Republic of Lithuania (Sodra) from the first quarter of 2005, 98.8 % of women and 1.2 % of men received maternity/paternity benefits, or, in other words, availed themselves of parental leave. In previous years the percentage of fathers on parental leave was even lower (see Table 2). In 2003 the average length of fathers' parental leave in Lithuania was 354.5 days (approx. 50 weeks) and the average of mothers' maternity leave – was 411 days (59 weeks).

The national representative survey held in 2004 in Lithuania shows that half of Lithuanian women and men believe that it is not good that the father looks after a new born child for a year or two and mother works. Table 3 below gives the profile and parental leave period for each of the fathers included in the Lithuanian study.

Table 2. THE GENDER DISTRIBUTION OF MATERNITY/PATERNITY BENEFITS IN LITHUANIA (2000–2005)

Year	Men		Women	
	N	%	N	%
2000	457	1.16	39051	98.84
2001	465	1.3	34887	98.7
2002	377	1.17	31731	98.83
2003	344	1.08	31320	98.92
2004	400	1.2	32837	98.8
2005	376	1.36	27337	98.64

¹⁰ The legal rights regarding parental leave in Denmark are secured through the union and/or the employers' association.

¹¹ For example students officially do not get parental leave, in stead mothers get an extra 12 months and an extra 6 months of Educational Grant from the government (Statens Uddannelsesstøtte, SU).

Table 3. USE OF PARENTAL LEAVE AMONG THE INTERVIEWED LITHUANIAN FATHERS

Age	Level of Education	Position	Parental Leave Period	Children
30	Tertiary	Financier	59 weeks	2
28	Secondary	Machinist	24 weeks	2
29	Tertiary	Engineer-mechanic	36 weeks	1
30	Vocational	Manager	52 weeks	3
35	Vocational	Driver	46 weeks	2
34	Tertiary	Lecturer	28 weeks	2
30	Tertiary	Manager	32 weeks	2
38	Tertiary	Manager	26 weeks	3
24	Tertiary	Medical doctor	52 weeks	1
26	Secondary	Driver	32 weeks	1
33	Vocational	Electrician	26 weeks	3
25	Tertiary incomplete	Student	30 weeks	1
23	Vocational	Woodworker	52 weeks	1
34	Secondary	Machine operator	52 weeks	3
29	Vocational	Welder	52 weeks	2

The average length of parental leave among the interviewed Lithuanian fathers is 40 weeks.

Iceland

Generally speaking the reform has been a huge success in Iceland. The political consensus has been complete and opinion polls show that Icelanders generally sup-

port it. The only major surprise has been how easily and willingly Icelandic men have adapted to the changed circumstances. In fact, the high take-up was one of the main reasons why a ceiling had to be introduced and the insurance levy (or pay roll tax) raised. So many more men were availing themselves of parental leave than had been expected that the Parental Leave Fund was rapidly being depleted. With the changes in the law the fund is now sustainable.

Table 4. USE OF THE PARENTAL LEAVE IN ICELAND¹²

	2001	2002	2003
Applications from fathers ¹³	82,4%	83,6%	86,6%
Average number of days used by fathers ¹⁴	39	68	97
Number of fathers using more than their basic right ¹⁵	484 or 14,5%	472 or 13,9%	584 or 16,1%
Number of fathers using less than their basic right	161 or 5,1%	342 or 10,1%	516 or 14,2%

¹² The reform was introduced in steps so that fathers got one month in 2001, two in 2002 and three in 2003. As it can be seen the average number of days that men use closely follow their share.

¹³ I.e. applications from men as percentage of applications from women.

¹⁴ Only those who have been on the labour market.

¹⁵ I.e. the percentage of men using more than their basic right, one month in 2001, two months in 2002 and three months in 2003.

Table 4 continued

	2001	2002	2003
Percentage of fathers taking all of the leave in one package ¹⁶	45,2%	21,2%	13,7%
Percentage of fathers dividing up the leave	54,8%	78,8%	86,3%
Mothers' wages as percentage of fathers' wages	58,2%	60,4%	62,5%

Table 5. USE OF THE MATERNITY LEAVE IN ICELAND

	2001	2002	2003
Average number of days used by mothers ¹⁷	186	187	183
Number of mothers using more than their basic right ¹⁸	3.819 or 94,2%	3.798 or 93,4%	3.811 or 90,9%
Number of mothers using less than their basic right	36 or 0,9%	31 or 0,8%	42 or 1,0%
Percentage of mothers taking all of the leave in one package	71,0%	63,8%	45,7%
Percentage of mothers dividing up the leave	29,0%	36,2%	54,3%

Around 84% of fathers use their right in whole or in part. The average number of days taken is 94 while the average number of days taken by mothers is 182. Around 16% of the fathers at least a part of the three months that can be divide between the parents while around 90% of the mothers do so. About 18% of the fathers do not make use of all the time allotted to them but only about 1% of the mothers do the same. More and more of the parents share the leave entitlement in one way or another (83% of the fathers and 42% of the mothers in 2003) but unfortunately we still do not have information on *how* it is being shared. While the first implication of the take-up of parental leave by fathers is that more fathers are now involved in the care of their infants than were before, it was also hoped that this phenomenon would contribute to enhancing the position of women in the labour market. The idea was that when employers could expect men as well as women to take leave for family reasons, women would no longer experience discrimination on these grounds. Even though it is

too early to say anything definite about the success here we do have indications that the labour market position of men and women is becoming more similar. The following two examples illustrate this:

One of the largest trade unions in Iceland recently stated that there had been an increase in the number of men complaining about (illegal) dismissal due to parental leave. Although the union did say that there were still more women who complained about this type of dismissal, this phenomenon obviously means that now parents *in general* are liable to become victims of this form of discrimination. It should be noted though that this is not a major problem. It has been reported in only few workplaces and usually, when the union points out that the dismissal is illegal, it is withdrawn.

As a second example, male-dominated workplaces have had to reconsider some aspects of their working environment. The most publicized case was that of

¹⁶ The leave can either be taken all in one package or divided in different ways.

¹⁷ Only those who have been on the labour market.

¹⁸ Three months.

the fire brigade in Reykjavik. In the first months of 2001 – the first year that the law was in effect – the fire brigade faced the situation that so many men were expecting babies (and intending to avail themselves of parental leave) that new men would have to be brought in. This was something that this male-dominated work environment had never experienced and consequently had not made provisions for in its budgeting exercises. The brigade was forced to ask the commune for more funds to meet this situation. Female-dominated workplaces have, of course, always, per necessity, made provisions for this in their budgets but now all workplaces must do the same.

Much still needs to be studied regarding this new phenomenon although something has been done and much more is underway. One EU-funded study compared the situations in Iceland, Norway, Germany and Spain. It was called Custom, Culture and Caring. It can be found on the Internet, http://caring.jafnretti.is/docs/CCC_FinalReport.pdf. The interested reader should be aware, however, that the figures regarding the use of parental leave in Iceland are different to those published here. The reason is that parents have an 18-month window in which to avail themselves of their right to parental leave and figures continued to change right up to the end of that period.

2. DENMARK

2.1 Fathers' attitudes and experiences

The interviewed fathers

The interviewed fathers were either on leave when the interview took place or had just recently gone back to full-time paid employment. The age distribution of the fathers ranged from 27 to 46 years of age hereby making the average up to 37.

According to Statistics Denmark¹⁹ this makes these fathers approximately three years older than the average age of a father to a newborn child. Compared to the Danish population, the informants all represent a group of well educated people working in a variety of fields: engineering, medicine, teaching at a university, playwriting, acting and programming. Other fathers interviewed are working as janitor, postman, two as pedagogues, and one is a student. The fathers that were interviewed all made use of more than the average 2.7 weeks²⁰. Their parental leave periods varied from 8 weeks to one year, and most of them

were still on parental leave at the time of the interview. A few of them had only recently started working again. On average, the children were 7 months old when the fathers went on leave.

Barriers to be addressed

Lack of information on rights: One thing that proved difficult for most of the fathers was getting a clear understanding of their parental leave rights. The fathers drew attention to problems concerning legislation as well as specific local agreements between employer and union. The rules were said to be hard to understand and sometimes even unclear. This made dealing with parental leave more difficult. Most significant was the group of fathers who had not given parental leave much thought before the coming of the child. They were surprised to find they couldn't make out what their rights and possibilities actually were. Not only were the fathers bewildered, the employers were in the dark too. One

¹⁹ Statistics Denmark is the leading provider and disseminator of statistics on social and economic trends in society.

²⁰ It should be pointed out that the Danish Statistics make use of two different ways of measuring the average leave period for men.

father had to call his union and the municipality in order to convince the employer that he had a right to 12 weeks parental leave with full pay.

Economy: No matter how the problem with parental leave is tackled, the issue of money seems to have been of major importance to almost all the interviewed fathers. Some mentioned that they had had to cut down on the family's consumption and many expressed the wish to be given full wage compensation for the duration of the parental leave period. For the fathers there seemed to be a strong correlation between the length of the paid leave and the length of the leave actually availed of. All the fathers availed themselves at least the full paid leave period (which varied among the fathers). For some this was the only parental leave period which was possible for them to enjoy.

Career: While balancing career and parental leave there seems to be much at stake. The workplace culture and the stage at which the individual is in terms of personal career, seem to be of outmost importance. Most of the fathers interviewed showed remarkable understanding for men who were not taking parental leave. This was especially marked in relation to career considerations. All the fathers interviewed appeared to be less concerned with their career. Nevertheless it is important to keep in mind that the material describes only fathers who *had* decided to take more than the average leave period. This, by definition, excludes fathers who might be concerned about their career and who may, as a consequence, take very little or even no parental leave at all. Thus no fathers said that they expected to be laid off, or in other ways degraded, when returning to work after their leave period. On the

other hand one informant chose to quit his job because of how disappointed he was with the way in which his employer handled his request for parental leave.

When asked whether they considered themselves family or career oriented, only a third of the fathers interviewed said that they considered themselves family oriented. Most of the fathers considered themselves as both family and career oriented while just a few said that they saw themselves being career oriented.

The mother had the first right to leave: None of the fathers said that they had disagreed with their partner on the issue of how to share the parental leave period between the two of them. This aspect was talked about as something which did not cause any conflict at all. However, when describing their own and their partners leave, a large part of the men used words which suggested that the mothers had in some way had first choice on how many weeks she would take. The fathers, it appeared, had often had no option other than to take whatever was left of the leave period.

Masculinity

From the analysis it becomes clear that masculinity and parental leave constitute a complex 'meaning-making' system in which fatherhood is the main centre of rotation. However, fatherhood tends to stand out as something that can be conducted in many different ways. Inevitably the categories – 'good' and 'bad' fatherhood are brought into question. In the following summary, all the different aspects that are tied to the 'good father' phenomenon will be outlined.

Being a good father means:

- Taking responsibility for the child.
- Getting to know the baby as a person and showing respect for the baby's personality.
- None of the fathers interviewed said that they were using their own father as a role model. Rather they had to "invent" the content of a good father themselves.
- The importance of making the child feel safe was frequently underlined.
- The fathers didn't seem to consider the roles of a good father and a good mother to be very different. Asked directly, one father stated that he had been told that fathers were good at more uncivilized play activities like throwing the child up in the air.
- Also, the notion of being present – both physically and mentally – and not only in terms of the so called "quality time" – were also very important. This notion seems to be charged an equal sharing of responsibility for caring for, and raising, the child. To the fathers there seems to be an overwhelming arsenal of positive connotations linked to the concept of 'being there' – some of which signalling an understanding of prestige.
- Finally attention, closeness, calmness and love were important good father's qualities as expressed by the interviewed fathers.

Parental leave and masculinity: The interview material shows that masculinity plays an integral role in the way parental leave is handled by the fathers. Most of the fathers expressed themselves in a discourse that is supportive of gender equality. Taking parental leave therefore constitutes a statement to the outside world that this family in particular, is to be understood as a forum of mutual understanding and equality.

During the focus group interview, there were clear indications that the 'discourse on gender equality' was used to support a mutual understanding of a logical coherence between masculinity and parental leave. The fathers agreed that taking care of one's child is a very masculine task and should not be considered a woman's job. The fathers also came to an understanding that the care taking of children demands a certain amount of expertise on human nature and to an equally important degree, the courage to undertake full responsibility for a small child.

In the individual interviews some similar findings were discovered. Here the discourse on gender equality was used to constitute a masculinity that was even more closely related to parental leave. The fathers made it very clear how much they enjoyed strolling with the pram and thereby signalling to their surroundings that they were on leave and that they were proud of it.

What did the fathers say they learnt as a result of their experience?

In general the fathers reported that their parental leave experience had enhanced their ability to take care of their newborn child. When asked about their views on the correlation between parental leave and paid employment, the general response of the fathers indicated that they had not given this issue much thought. Nevertheless, the fathers came up with some considerations on this issue. The following points are divided into two categories. The first three illustrate the most common answers regarding the issue of parental leave and paid labour. The last two points illustrate answers that deal with considerations on personal development and family integration.

Planning, efficiency and overview: The fathers reported that parental leave had increased their understanding of planning and made them more efficient with regards to how to getting things done.

Emotional competence: The fathers made it quite clear that ‘emotional competence’ increases as a result of being with a child that does not yet have command of language. As a consequence, communication has to be established through other channels. The process of learning to “read” another human being and understand his or hers needs was described as something firmly connected to the “soft” skills. The fathers described their new abilities as soft skills and indicated that they could be used in other contexts such as their workplace.

Tolerance and empathy: The ability to show patience and tolerance, combined with an increased capacity for empathy also characterised many of the fathers’ statements. It was strongly underlined that the different skills arose from specific parental leave experience where many situations had forced them to accept the fact that a baby’s behaviour is not predictable and to a large extent will set the agenda regarding the nature of interaction.

Personal growth and enrichment: The fathers also related parental leave to personal growth and general life enrichment. Almost all the fathers reported that the parental leave period made them feel that their relationship with the child had grown stronger. The daily interaction with the child seemed to have a profound effect on the fathers’ view of the child. Most conspicuous was the fathers’ descriptions of the crucial moment of ‘recognizing’ the child – thereby putting the child in perspective. This epoch-making point where the child turned into an individual was

vividly explicated. In all the description of this moment, it is clear that the moment of recognition is directly related to the amount of time spent with the child. It is also clear that, in the eye of the fathers, this moment of transformation served as a constant source of patience and empathy in periods when they were under pressure. As a “side effect” the fathers reported that this new way of viewing the child also made them view their own life, relationship with their partner, and their working life, from another point of view. Generally this was presented as having gained a more family-oriented focus.

Understanding childcare and domestic work: Finally the fathers described their parental leave period as something that had provided them with great insight and increased their competence in providing adequate childcare and dealing with domestic work. As evident as this point may seem, there should be no doubt that the fathers’ described their experiences as journeys towards a greater serenity. Not surprisingly, parental leave is a good way for men to acquire a thorough understanding of childcare and domestic work. Furthermore the leave period has great impact on the fathers’ way of viewing the different tasks. It was clear that the fathers held great admiration for their partners’ ability to cope with domestic tasks and with caring for the child. In particular the fathers stressed that they could hardly see themselves being the ones to take most of the parental leave period, as this would make them go “slightly mad”. So what is the main point regarding this issue? It is absolutely paramount that the fathers get a chance to understand the concept of child caring and domestic work. It ensures a joint understanding of family life and in most cases it constitutes a stronger foundation for communication and for the solving of problems.

2.2 Employers' attitudes and experiences

The interviewed employers

In accordance with the project description, ten employers were interviewed. The main objective was to interview employers that had had as much experience with fathers' applying for/taking parental leave as possible. It did not prove difficult to make contact with employers. In general they held middle management positions managing an average of 30 employees. Two out of three employers worked within the private sector and nearly half of them had taken parental leave for a shorter or longer period. Only two out of the ten employers were women. The number of male employees taking leave within the last three years ranged from zero to five.

Generally the employers treated us very positive and were very helpful showing a great interest in the project. It soon became clear that finding and planning interviews with this specific group of employers was much harder than we had envisaged. The employers tended to stress the point that they did not have that much experience with men applying for/taking parental leave thereby implying that they were afraid of not living up to our expectations. Statements of this kind can be interpreted in many ways, however, we got the impression that some of the employers were trying to avoid the interview for some reason. This impression further corroborated by the fact that they often asked why we weren't holding the interviews with the fathers instead.

The employers view on parental leave

The most typical phrase used by the employers when discussing the issue of parental leave was: "*absolutely*

no problem". It soon became very clear to us that a lot of energy was being invested in pointing out that parental leave is a legal right for women as well as for men and that these conditions are being respected. Furthermore the employers emphasised that parental leave did not affect the individual's chance of pursuing career goals and that the company/organisation knew how to deal with any obstacles that could arise. The fear of not appearing "politically correct" became even more evident when discussing whether there was any significant difference in their attitude when a man, rather than a woman, applied for parental leave.

In spite of the fact that only a very small number of fathers take parental leave for more than the average 2.7 weeks the employers all said that the gender issue was a matter of pure formality. And yet, in the same breath, the employers reported that some men did express some very strong insecurity regarding their employment status and future career prospects when the issue of parental leave was discussed. According to the employers the most common fear is that of being left behind – of losing their hold on interesting and important projects. Also the employees expressed a fear that the workplace would have undergone so many changes that they would not be able come to terms with the new conditions upon their return. One employer stated that the act of giving notice of, or applying for, leave was a major barrier in itself for many men.

The interview material also reveals a problem regarding the actual planning of the leave period. Generally the employers reported that they didn't interfere in the planning of the leave. Nevertheless, they did point out that parental leave didn't always fit into the general planning of the organisation. One employer said half-jokingly:

“Well I think it would be ideal if they all took the 10 weeks in July and August when we are on holiday anyway. But it’s not like that. I haven’t tried to influence any of them”.

Is parental leave just a practical implication?

In most cases parental leave was discussed using straightforward words like: “giving notice”, “planning”, “solution”, “execution”. The general picture was, to a great extent, charged with considerations on the position that the employee occupies within the organisation. The employers seemed to be keen to point out that it makes a huge difference whether the employee was in a specialist position or was a lower-level employee. As a rule the specialists were more difficult to replace. That said, one employer described the problem of replacement from a different perspective. Parental leave, he argued should be seen as a welcome opportunity to reconsider the company’s ability to share knowledge across of internal demarcations. Apart from this isolated point of view, the employers generally dealt with the issue in one of two ways. If possible the tasks were divided amongst the other colleagues. Should this solution not be viable (e.g. in the case where the father is a specialist) the tasks will be put on hold until the employee returns from parental leave.

Parental leave in an organisational perspective

The material presents an interesting point with regards to the potential benefits of a progressive parental leave policy. Knowledge-based organisations in

particular reported positive experiences with fathers on parental leave. However, as mentioned in the section above, one private company was an exception. The employer pointed out to us that the popularity of an active policy on parental leave had forced the organisation to take a critical look at logistical procedures, communication channels etc. The organisation had gained important information regarding the ability to share knowledge across persons and groups. This point illustrates that parental leave can be dealt with in a positive and proactive perspective thereby providing valuable knowledge about the organisation and can also indirectly be used to improve or alter internal structures and logistics within organisations. Also, the information can be used to optimise and strengthen the organisation’s ability to compete in a post-modern economy.

Is parental leave considered a right or a privilege?

In the public sector, as well as in companies which have an active policy granting men between 10 and 32 weeks of parental leave on full pay and communicate information about this to their employees, parental leave is considered as much a right as private companies with only two weeks of full pay consider this an employee right.

Although some months’ paid parental leave in some parts of the labour market is a right secured either by agreement between the union and employers’ organisation or by the company management, in some organisations it is still considered a privilege or a even a gift from the company which implicitly demands payment in the form of gratitude or increased loyalty towards the organisation.

How parental leave contributes to the organisations

When the employers were asked how parental leave could contribute to the organisation the most predominant view was that parental leave gives the employee a more positive view of the world and of himself. Specifically, they pointed out an increased self esteem and the fathers' satisfaction with taking responsibility for the family by managing everything from changing nappies to doing all kinds of domestic chores. This also gives the men a much better

understanding of domestic life and house chores and gives the man the possibility to figure out how best to balance work and family.

Therefore, acquired skills are not the main reason why parental leave is a positive thing for the organisation. Rather it's a more personal thing. The fathers get the time they need to sort things out on the home front, which, in turn, makes them return to work with a more positive attitude. As one employer says: "It's very positive – both for the employee, I think, but certainly so for the company".

3. ICELAND

3.1 The Icelandic society

Iceland is a republic in Europe with a population of nearly 300,000. For most of the 20th century the main economic activity was within the primary sector, farming and fishing. In the latter part of the last century heavy industry was introduced and Iceland has followed the road taken by other western societies with a major expansion of the service sector and high technology. Prosperity is good and the living standards are high. In part this is due to high male and female participation in the labour market, low unemployment and long working hours.

In 2003 the labour market participation of Icelandic men was 86.0% – a somewhat lower percentage than that which prevailed for most of the 20th century. That same year the labour market participation of women was 78.4%. Women's participation began to rise in the sixties – particularly among married women – and has continued to rise to this day. This does not mean that men and women are similarly involved in the labour market as far more women than men work part time. Nonetheless, that figure has been declining somewhat. The working hours of

men remain longer than for women. In 2004 Icelandic men worked on average 47.1 hours a week and women 35.9 hours per week. Women have been increasing their hours and in the last decade we have seen a reduction in the number of working hours by men who have reduced their working hours by 4.2 hours from 1991.

The presence of mothers in the labour market, and an increase in their working hours, has also meant that more children are spending more time in kindergartens. Over 90% of Icelandic children between the ages of 2 and 5 are in kindergartens and over 80% of them spend 7 or more hours there each day. The number of one-year-old children in kindergarten is steadily rising and was up to 27% in 2004.

Obviously these changes have created a very different situation for parents today to the one that was present a few decades ago. We have definitely left the housewife-and-breadwinner model and are steadily moving in the direction of two breadwinners in the nuclear family so that both men and women have a full-time career and increasingly share the joys and burdens of family life and child rearing.

Background to the changes

Although Iceland is one of the Nordic countries and shares many societal traits with these countries, a number of things have been different here. Politically, the other Nordic countries have had a social democratic party as their largest party and the party in government for most of the 20th century. In Iceland, on the other hand, the largest party has been a centre-right party named the Independence party. The social democratic party has been rather small. Among other things, this has meant that the Icelandic welfare system has developed in a somewhat different manner to the Scandinavian model and in some aspects has more in common with the United Kingdom and Australia. This has, for example, meant that social benefits in Iceland have usually not calculated relative to a salary but have been given at a flat rate. This applies, for example, to unemployment benefits and, until recently, to maternity leave benefits. In a similar way, general support for families was somewhat less available in Iceland than it was in other Nordic countries.

One of the aspects in which Iceland lagged behind regarding support for families was with regards to maternity and parental leave. Prior to 2000 the leave period granted was shorter in Iceland than it was in

the other Nordic countries, economic compensation much lower and the employee was not granted any flexibility in connection with the leave period. Coupled with this was the fact that the system was rather complicated. There were vastly different rules for those working in the private sector to those applicable to people working in the public service, and in some aspects they were discriminatory to fathers. Last but not least it became increasingly obvious that the only way forward regarding gender equality was to increase the participation of men (fathers) in the home and to make it “equally risky” for employers to hire men as it was to hire women, i.e. challenge the given that mothers more than fathers would (have to) prioritise family life over working life. In the last decade of the 20th century this issue increasingly came up for public debate and a number of attempts were made to change the system without success except for some minor improvements. This lack of success was, in part, due to the fact that unions and employers’ organizations could not agree on a general policy. In the end the centre-right government then in power decided to take the matter into its own hands and appointed a committee of civil servants with instructions to draw up a bill for new laws on maternity and parental leave. This resulted in a radically different system adopted in 2000.

3.2 Fathers’ attitudes and experiences

Table 6. THE INTERVIEWED ICELANDIC FATHERS

Age	Education	Occupation	Length of leave
34	Computer programmer	White collar – management	3 months
32	Doctor	White collar – management	75% leave for 4 months
32	Philosophy (M.A.)	White collar – management	3 months
39	Student exam	Skilled worker	3 months

Table 6 continued

Age	Education	Occupation	Length of leave
38	Computer programmer	White collar – management	3 months
43	Literature (B.A.)	Media worker	3 months
32	Computer programmer	White collar worker	3 months
39	Computer programmer	White collar – management	6 months
24	Student exam	University student	6 months
40	Student exam	White collar – management	3 months
40	B.A.	Skilled worker	3 months
27	Student exam	University student	3 months
27	Cand. Econ	White collar worker	3 months

All the Icelandic fathers held their leave within a year from their child's birth.

The question of the age of the children is hardly relevant since they are all under one year old. Men generally take some weeks off right after the birth and the rest of their parental leave later. In some cases they will take parental leave together with the mother and sometimes after she has returned to work. There is also a tendency to use summer holidays to extend the leave period so that the child is older by the time it is entrusted to the care of third parties. All the men interviewed were either on leave during the time of the study or had just returned to full-time paid employment.

The main impression gathered from the interviews with the fathers was that the period is characterised by cooperation between the parents. They try to make arrangements around the leave period which allows them to share the joys and burdens of caring for their child and this is also what characterises the ordinary day during this time. If the child does not sleep well during the night then that is a problem to be solved by both parents. One of the fathers explained:

“Yes, we’ll we take turns during the night because the boy takes both breast and bottle. In this way I

can take care of him when he wakes up during the night and if I have taken care of him in the night then his mother will do so when he wakes up -, around seven or eight or whatever. That way I can sleep a bit longer.”

Another father was no longer living with the mother and the child was in her custody but he was still on full parental leave and took care of the child except for the nights when the girl used to stay with her mother:

“I always have her during the day, The length of time differs but I’ll always have her from 7:30am except on the weekends. Sometimes I will pick her up and sometimes her mother brings her. We only live three minutes walk apart. ... I live in the next street. The rule is that I wake up around 7:30, go to her, her mother goes to school and I... Yesterday she was sick, my daughter, so I just stayed at their home and you know, fed her and did this and that until her mother came from school at six o’clock.”

In itself, it does not come as a surprise that the fathers interviewed for this study describe their leave

experience in very positive terms. That is something that earlier studies in Iceland have shown and is similar to findings from the other Nordic countries. The Icelandic fathers say that their leave period with the child was a wonderful period, which has given them new perspectives on life in general.

“I think it has been great. To my mind this mainly has to do with, in the first place wanting to be with the child as much as possible. And then I also think that it is a question of being allowed to take on responsibility... I think it is very important once the child was born that everybody realized that I do not intend to be a father who runs away from his... And I also find it relaxing to really be with the child – compared to much of what I have been doing in life.”

“What has it taught me? Well, I’m not sure. Of course, becoming a father has taught me a lot... I mean from an existential point of view, about life and existence and it is good for you to have something that totally commands and focuses your attention and is dominating instead of you being the centre of your own universe... which we men are so often accused of being. Not to mention how fulfilling it is to care for another person unconditionally. It is complicated.”

The fathers also say that, generally speaking, their employers reacted positively to their application for parental leave. The general attitude among employers was simply that fathers’ right to parental leave is a social fact that every company has to take into account and work around. Female dominated workplaces have always had to cope with this. Now every workplace, female-dominated, male-dominated or mixed, has to cope with it.

And last but not least the fathers say that their involvement has clearly established that the parents are

on a more equal footing regarding the child. Almost all the fathers mentioned something to this effect and their use of parental leave appeared to be a key factor in this area. When asked if his partner had had any difficulties handing him the main responsibility for child and domestic labour one of the fathers replied:

“No, that’s just it, you see. I think that because we are very much in this together, all of it, you see, and as a matter of fact that is how it has always been. And that is just so. That is why this time has been so. That’s why it is so important because when you can be there on the spot and you can learn these things together, then you are on equal footing. Even though my partner, of course, has certain responsibilities which I cannot share, you know, breastfeeding, I can of course do everything else. And I have done it during the time that we were together. After that she could go out and leave me with the child and know that I will take care of everything, you know. Therefore I think that ... we have been equal in this.”

But it is still obvious from the interviews that the mother is the gatekeeper in many ways. For example the parental leave is mainly planned by her or at least determined according to her preference. It appears to be highly unlikely that a father would protest if the mother stated that she intended to use the sharable months – even if he might have had other plans. Generally though, the issue simply does not come up for discussion. One of the fathers was asked if it had always been clear that he would use his parental leave entitlement:

“Yes. Yes. It was never an issue. It was only a question of what the mother would do, how she wanted to go about it. She just decided. She thought that it would be practical to be on leave for eight months, especially as it happened, the six months were at the beginning of

summer, which is a slump period in her work you know and really not that interesting to go back to. So she decided to take her summer holiday and then a period without pay, and go back after the summer.”

Finally, the fathers have generally had positive reactions from their immediate surroundings. No one regarded the taking of parental leave as something “unmanly” or tried to make fun of a father taking care of his child.

“We don’t seem to have any attitude problem here – that people look down on men on parental leave, I think it is quite the opposite. Now you are regarded as weird if you don’t use the parental leave.”

Some of the older generation were surprised and many appeared envious that this was not a possibility when they were having their children. Still the perception lingers that perhaps a man is not really as good at taking care of a child as a woman is. The fathers regard such attitudes as insulting and reject them. One was asked what had been most difficult during the parental leave:

“I think that the relationship with the child and everything that has to do with the child has been nothing but fun and fulfilling and I just don’t see anything there as having been difficult. I don’t know if anything was difficult. I think that if anything was difficult then it is perhaps dealing with a certain attitude towards men with children. It is as if they are looking after the child -, as if they are au pairs or something... You know, questions like “How do you cope when the mother is not there?” You know, as if this has to be, you know, either a major burden for me or that I probably have something more important to do and am therefore making a huge sacrifice to be with the child. You realize that some questions are born of an underlying attitude, or on the other hand the perception that this must be difficult for me because I must be less capable than the mother in relation to the child you know, handling it and so on. And then it’s just “Can you change diapers?” and something like that. Old-fashioned views, you know. This is very rare... but if I have to mention something then this is it.”

3.3 Employers’ attitudes and experiences

Table 7. PRESENTATION OF ICELANDIC EMPLOYERS

Public/Private	Gender	Age	Number of male employees taking leave
Public	Male	49	Most
Public	Male	57	Most
Private	Male	37	
Private	Female	40	
Private	Female	30	Most
Private	Male	49	Most
Public	Male	54	
Private	Female	35	
Private	Female	39	Some
Public	Male		

We have a rather good mix of private and public and male and female participation in parental leave. But it really does not seem to matter much. The fact that men will take parental leave for at least 3 months is simply accepted in Icelandic society.

The employers that were interviewed presented similar views. Obviously the organisation has to face some problems when employees take leave but that is never something that cannot be overcome. A certain degree of flexibility also ensures that several possible solutions are available. One female Director of Human Resources – with a firm employing around 630 people – was asked what she did when approached by a prospective father with a request for parental leave:

“Well of course we just discussed it: How do you intend to take your leave? For what length of time? Some want to stay away for a whole year. And we have accepted that. Then we just hire someone temporarily to take their place. People get their old job back when they return... if there are special wishes then we try to meet them. It is easier if it is a job that is done in the evening. It is more difficult with daytime jobs. It is difficult to find people for the daytime jobs and if someone wanted to be on leave one week and work the next and so on, then it would be difficult for me to solve that. But of course everything is possible.”

Another stated:

“Our general policy is to accept what the prospective father suggests regarding his parental leave. It will take very strong reasons for the father’s supervisor to try to influence how the leave is taken. I can only recall one case where an agreement was reached which was a bit different to what the employee had

originally suggested. That was because he was taking over a new position and... but it was done in complete harmony and agreement.”

It is also obvious from the interviews with employers as well as fathers that parents use the leave period very differently. However it appears that the customary pattern is for both parents to take leave for between one to three weeks following the birth. Then the father returns to work while the mother stays on leave for a few months and the shareable months and when that time is over she goes back to work and the father enters the home to make use of what is left of his time. One of the employers interviewed described the general use of parental leave thus:

“... there is always, in the beginning, some time together, but for those with women on the labour market, then I think it is more common that those fathers use the parental leave after six months – to lengthen the couple’s period at home with the child.”

But as can be seen from the statistical table above there are a number of fathers who do make use of some of the sharable time. One of the employers mentioned this when he was asked about the importance of fathers taking care of their children:

“I think it matters very much. And I also think that it matters a great deal for women’s careers as well. It no longer matters so much whether you hire a woman or a man for the job. Both take parental leave. And you really do not know which of them is going to take a longer period. I know of many examples where the woman took three months and the man took six.”

When the employers were asked if they thought parental leave contributed anything positive to the firm

the answers were hesitant. It should be kept in mind that it is a relatively new situation and all the possible effects may not be evident yet. One Director of Human Resources in a male-dominated firm contributed this:

“On the other hand I think that this is going to change a certain culture within firms. I mean regarding children or, how should I put it, people’s opinions or how the management views parents who need a certain flexibility in their work today. More so nowadays than often before. And people have to be at home with sick children and so on – fathers as much as mothers. And this has been changing. I imagine that many superiors, especially the older

ones, have a hard time coming to terms with this change.”

The employers are all in agreement that parental leave is of major importance for gender equality. One said:

“... I imagine that it means that they will be closer to child in a way. And that is a step towards gender equality. When both are active on the labour market, then this form of discrimination is eliminated. I mean it has sometimes been claimed that employers do not hire women because they take maternity leave. Well, that is equal now, you can’t hire men either. They will take parental leave.”

4. LITHUANIA

4.1 Introduction

In Lithuania only just over 1 percent of men use their right to parental leave. Therefore, it is likely that the benefits of male participation in childcare have not yet been fully realized and that the ability of men to be good caretakers is still to be proven in this country. Without rejecting the basic concept of gender difference, we should not evaluate the quality of male care using the standards of female care. Male care is particular since it acquires a specific form and expression and is no less valuable to the lives of children and other family members. If we accept male and female care without prejudices and complexes, male care may gradually transform the norms of hegemonic masculinity and open new spaces for masculine self-expression.

Lithuanian politicians and state employers make up another target group for the research. The objectives of their survey were: to investigate their opinion about a more active participation of men in family life, to analyse their attitudes towards the legal regulation of paternity/maternity leave and the improvement of the judicial basis of these leave entitlements

and to gather information about the experience of other countries in this sphere.

4.2 Fathers' attitudes and experiences

Socio-demographic characteristics of interviewed fathers

15 fathers who have used their right to parental leave participated in the research. The average age of the interviewed fathers was 30 years. The youngest informant was 23 years old, the oldest, 38 years old. More than half of the informants indicated that they had: an unfinished high school education (2), high school education (4) or special high school education (3). The remaining 6 had a tertiary level of education. All the fathers were married. The average age of their partners was 29 years (the youngest was 20, the oldest, 38 years old).

The educational background of their partners was similar to that of the informants. Almost half of the women had a tertiary level of education (7), four had a high school educational level and another four

had a special high school educational level. The spectrum of the informants' professional occupations was very broad: an electrical technician, a driver, an assembler of ship electricity, a technologist of environment protection, an economist, an organizer of youth events, a university lecturer, a philologist, a doctor, a woodworker, an engineer-mechanic, a machinist, a carpenter and a welder-metalworker.

All the men who participated in this survey indicated that they have been raising children who were biologically theirs and their spouse's (5 couples had one child, 5 couples had two, and another 5 couples had three children). Apart from their own children, one couple had been raising one foster child whose biological mother was the informant's spouse. The average age of the youngest child was 12 months. There were 8 boys and 6 girls (one informant did not indicate what his child's sex was.). All the fathers took parental leave to care for their youngest child (only one father took parental leave twice, i.e. he had also taken care of his older child for 3 months). In all cases, the men took parental leave after the their spouses' maternity leave was over. The latter, on average, lasted 6 months. The average duration of the informants' parental leave was 9 months. (the minimum duration was 6 months while the maximum was 15 months). The duration mentioned most frequently was 12 months (in 5 cases).

The relationship with the child / Being a good father

What is a good father in Lithuania? Which norms of fatherhood are acceptable and unacceptable in the country? Only in very few cases did the interviewed fathers have a clear idea of how a good father could

be defined. In most of the responses, closeness, care and contact with the children were emphasized as the most important features of a good father. Although in most cases the fathers did not query their relationship with their children, friendship and constant communication with children were seen to be very agreeable:

"To play with a child... To teach her various games... Well...to be busy with a child. It is not like, for example, buying something for her and thinking you've done your duty as a good father. It's not like buying her chocolate and giving it to her...No." (Rimas)

"Well, I think that the most important thing is to save some time for your child. You must find time for him. It isn't right to come home tired and say to your child 'Go away!' No. You must spend time with him." (Titas)

When talking about their communication with their children, some fathers emphasized patience as being the characteristic of a good father. Others thought that, from the child's point of view, the better father was the lenient one. Still others argued that a good father was one who provided for his family and fed and took care of his children in every possible way. Thus, besides constant contact and communication with the children, the fathers also mentioned the role of breadwinner in their responses. In most interviews, the ideas of a participating and nurturing father and a breadwinner were inseparably related.

A good father actively participates in family life, shares responsibilities and helps his partner with the housework. However, discussing a good father, the informants concentrated more on children – taking

good care of them, playing with them etc. – and less on housework. Food preparation, doing the laundry and any form of cleaning closely related to the child appeared to be secondary to them.

For some fathers, parental leave presented a kind of respite from their professional careers but for most it was a very difficult work. The latter emphasized that looking after a child was much harder than keeping a job because of immense responsibility the latter entailed.

Did the informants think of themselves as good fathers? Most did while a few argued that they saw themselves as being neither good nor bad. When asked about how parental leave fits in with being a good father, half the informants said that parental leave could help men to become good fathers; while the other half stated that parental leave was merely a natural expression of being a good father.

Masculinity

What norms of masculinity dominate in Lithuanian society? According to the 2002 representative survey “The Crisis of Male Roles in Lithuania”, the main features of a “normal” or “genuine” man emphasized by both men and women were (in order of importance):

- the ability to earn money for his family (72% of informants);
- the capability to do male housework: like home-improvement and technical jobs (67% of informants);
- being responsible for the care and upbringing of his children (67%);
- taking care of his female partner (66%).

This survey demonstrates that both Lithuanian women and men consider the breadwinning role as the most important feature of a “genuine” man.

The identity of men as fathers is closely connected to their male identities and the social politics of fatherhood is inseparable from the politics of masculinity. What changes men and their masculinity experience when they temporarily leave paid employment and assume child-caring responsibilities within the home? How does the concept of care conform to masculine ideals? Do men consider parental leave a threat to their masculinity?

For most fathers, parental leave did not present any threat to their masculinity because, according to them, it was neither masculine nor feminine:

“Well, I don’t think that it is a woman’s job or that there is any difference at all. A man can do many things but he simply doesn’t want to do them.” (Titas)

„Spending a day with your child and activities related to its care are similar to a job in a firm because you have to plan everything in order to act and perform well. [Child care] is the same. It is only the work environment and results which are different but it does not harm a father’s masculinity.“ (Paulius)

Some informants thought that parental leave did not have any impact on their masculinity at all. As the interviews demonstrated, all fathers did not doubt their masculine identity in spite of the sceptical and sometimes negative responses of others in their environment.

According to the fathers, men can express their masculinity by taking care of children. However,

analysing the men's answers in this regard we encounter a paradox: although the informants did not think of childcare as an exclusively female activity, some of them did compare fatherhood to being a mother and gendered childcare as feminine:

„A father on parental leave feels the same responsibilities a mother feels. It doesn't change anything. It's just a formality. You feel like a mother anyway and you have to spend a lot of time with your child and to do a lot for it. A good father should be as much like a mother as possible, and he should be as responsible and attentive and feel the same obligation to the child as a mother.“ (Paulius)

Most informants argued that women could take better care of children as it is an inborn quality in them. On the other hand, men could learn to do it. It is obvious that the fathers interviewed live in a culture that traditionally associates childcare with women and in which traditional images of motherhood are idealized.

Asked whether they conform to the image of a traditional man, most fathers said that they did not or did so to a very small degree:

„... I don't conform. When I was working, I didn't notice that there were a lot of men in our village, that didn't have time for children. A friend of my wife has a two-year old child with her husband. There is only a day's difference in age between our child and theirs. But I didn't notice how little her husband would play with his child. He's only interested in work, work, work...“ (Rimas)

In most cases, the complex problem of masculinity was rather poorly articulated. But the strongest tension related to their masculinity – that is, the tension

between being a breadwinner and a nurturer – emerged in most interviews.

Decision to take parental leave

According to most interviewed fathers, one of the factors which had the most bearing on their decision to take parental leave was financial considerations. The interviews demonstrate that financial considerations are particularly significant in Lithuania where a part of population receives an unofficial salary (“salary in an envelope”). Therefore those who earn less officially do not have powerful incentives to take parental leave.

Three informants gave different reasons for their decision. One informant said that he took parental leave for the personal experience of taking care of a child full time. Another took parental leave because he was at a critical stage in his university studies while a third informant took parental leave because he needed to care for his child who was born with a handicap.

Although, in most cases, the financial factor was what influenced the men's decision most, it could be argued that another reason for their opting to take parental leave was their caring attitude towards their partners. Several men said that, when taking the decision to take parental leave, they had considered their partners' needs and wishes. In many cases, they simply wanted their partners to have time for a well-deserved rest.

Reactions from the environment

Reactions from the environment were sought from four categories: 1) employers; 2) the State Social Insurance Fund Board of the Republic of Lithuania (Sodra); 3) colleagues; and 4) relatives and strangers.

More than half of the informants did not encounter any problems from their employer's side. Most employers did not resist the men's decision to take parental leave. Only very few employers were unhappy and would have liked to stop the men from leaving their jobs. However, they did not have a choice.

According to the informants, in spite of the fact that their colleagues were surprised by their decision, positive reactions among them prevailed. The reasons for this were first of all, that the fathers were thought of rather highly at their workplace; and, secondly, the majority of the workforce was made up of women. Some fathers mentioned that at first colleagues and co-workers would ridicule them and call them „mothers”:

„Well, at first it was so funny to them.... They would make fun of me at first. I would go in to work at some points – I had some matters to settle – and my co-workers would ask me: “How is our young mommy doing?” But after that they got used to it. They calmed down somehow...” (Juras)

Well, what can I say? At work my co-workers laughed. They said: “He left to take some maternity leave.” They laughed in a friendly way and that was it. Now, for instance, when I go to work, they'll try to mock me and say: “How is your maternity leave?” But I can see that they actually envy me...” (Titas)

It was at the State Social Insurance Fund Board of the Republic of Lithuania (Sodra) that the fathers encountered most problems. Although the 2002 Labour Code of the Republic of Lithuania provides both mothers and fathers with the right to parental leave, officers of the Sodra were completely uninformed and ignorant of this law:

„When I was, for instance, at the Sodra, I had to take care of my documents at Šiauliai Sodra, [I could see] the female officers look at me with big round eyes. They would say: “What? What parental leave are you talking about? This is the first time we're hearing of this!” I was sent to a different floor in which the Head of the office was located.” (Rimas)

Officers' negative attitude towards fathers was prevalent.

It is important to emphasize that most relatives and even strangers approved of the fathers' decision to take parental leave. Their initial astonishment has eventually been replaced by respect for these fathers.

Relationship to partners

Did parental leave change men's relationship to their wives and partners?

Most fathers stated that their relationships did not change at all. According to several fathers, their relationship is stronger because now they have shared a common problem – childcare. Only one informant indicated that parental leave was a real test on his relationship with his wife.

Analysing the fathers' responses it is possible to notice that the sharing of housework tasks affects, at least partially, the men's relationships to their partners and their fathering experiences on parental leave in general. Is housework necessarily included into the fathers' conceptions of parental leave and child-caring activities? Do they share housework equally with their partners?

In this regard, the conducted interviews presented some very contradictory views. Although the housework was not seen to enhance masculinity by informants, some did share housework chores with their partners. However, most men stuck to the traditional attitude towards housework. They tended to do some household jobs but ascribed most responsibilities to their partners.

4.3 Politicians' and state officers' attitudes

Nowadays gender equality in the 2003–2004 Lithuanian National Program on Equal Opportunities for Women and Men is based declaratively on the principle of equal rights, responsibilities and possibilities for both genders in any life sphere. In this program, the state offers concrete measures for the reconciliation of women and men's family and work responsibilities and for the achievement of gender equality in childcare. However, different obstacles impede the transformation of institutional and gender relations. According to the experts of gender policy²¹, this program is fragmentary and lacks a consistent strategy, stable financing and inter-institutional cooperation; officials that curate this program are rather incompetent and insensitive to gender problems and to the social-structural reasons of gender inequality.

After reviewing the programmatic principles of the political parties that in May 2005 composed the ruling majority of the Lithuanian Parliament, it can be noted that these principles emphasize a constitutional human right to equal opportunities but do not offer

any concrete measures to achieve them. The issues of paternity/maternity in these programs are discussed not in the context of equal opportunities for genders but in the context of family security and social welfare. Therefore these programs suggest raising paternity/maternity benefits, promoting a higher birth rate and supporting families by reducing the burden of taxation according to a number of dependents in a family. They also encourage to raise benefits for childcare and to guarantee social services for families at their place of residence by using flexible work forms for parents. These provisions have also been integrated into the 2004–2008 Program of the Lithuanian Government, which guarantees social support for the families raising children and promises to raise maternity (paternity) benefits paid until the child reaches the age of one. Concrete measures in the sphere of equal opportunities policy are not explicated here.

The sample survey of politicians and state officers was conducted in order to measure their attitudes towards gender roles in a family and the role of the state in securing equal opportunities in the private sphere. The majority in the sample agrees with the idea that men should not only support their families financially but also take care of children since the latter strengthens the family and reduces negative social phenomena. The data of this survey demonstrate that the primary role of women in childcare is no longer considered a natural thing. More than half of the Parliament members agreed that the state was responsible for the implementation of gender equality in family and society. The Parliament members are inclined to believe twice as much as the representa-

²¹ This data is taken from the 2004 survey "The EU Enlargement and its Impact on Women in Lithuania." The survey was conducted by the Center for Social Research at Vytautas Magnus University.

tives of the ministries that the greater participation of men incorporated into laws could push the Lithuanian society closer to a real gender equality. Hence, more than 2/3 of the politicians approve of a proposal to legalize the greater participation of men in childcare in Lithuania. If we compare these data with the 2000 survey of the politicians²², we could notice that politicians' attitudes towards the role of men in childcare have gradually become more liberal. The more positive attitudes of the current members of the Parliament may have been influenced by the integration processes of the European Union, the higher representation of women in the Parliament and gradually changing traditional gender norms.

The informants in the sample view the current legal basis of childcare favourably despite the commitment of the ruling parties to raise benefits and the repeated discussions in society about the need to increase them.

In the course of this research, it was attempted to learn how the politicians view men's reluctance to use their right to parental leave. The most frequently cited reasons include professional risks, an insufficient financial compensation and the traditional "natural" gender order. Women tended to think more frequently than men that the men's choice was influenced by their reluctance to leave labour market and public life and their aversion towards household tasks.

The measures offered by the informants to increase the number of men taking parental leave were more

often related to the reforms of labour market and the raise of paternity benefits than to the assumptions of positive discrimination (for instance, validation of individual right to parental leave). Almost half of the informants indicated that it is necessary to legally regulate the creation of a family-friendly work environment, increase the employers' obligations to support fathers on parental leave and raise maternity/paternity benefits. The dissemination of information about parental leave was also emphasized. The survey conducted in 2004 in the countries of the "old" European Union²³ revealed similar conditions in which, according to the population, men would use their right to parental leave more frequently. These conditions include bigger financial compensations (38%), better work and career guarantees during parental leave and after them (30%), better information (27%), more favourable reactions of employers and colleagues (23%), and a possibility to share this leave with a mother or take parental leave only for a part of the day (18 %). Essentially the main conditions are related to the amount of a financial compensation and career guarantees.

Informants in the sample were also asked to evaluate a non-transferable parental leave, i.e. the „Icelandic“ model of parental leave and a possibility to adapt it in Lithuania. 34 % of the informants approved of the implementation of such law in Lithuania; 40 % doubted whether such law would encourage men to take a non-transferable parental leave. Some members of the Parliament evaluated such law ambiguously because, according to them, some very concrete provisions of such law would influence their opinion. For

²² In 2003, the Men's Crisis and Information Center conducted a survey of politicians about the possibilities to reform the legal basis of paternity leave.

²³ http://europa.eu.int/comm/employment_social/news/2004/sep/parental_leave_en.htm

instance, they would support the law if the duration of paternity/maternity leave was extended from one year to two or even three years and if the compensated amount was increased to 90–100% of a salary. In spite of the doubts of the Parliament members, almost half of them would not initiate this type of law in Lithuania; but if other Parliament members showed their initiative, they would support it.

The informants' doubts seem unfounded if we keep in mind the high numbers of men taking parental leave in the countries in which parental leave is non-transferable or partially non-transferable. Studies of the legal basis of parental leave and the analysis of its influence and recommendations in other countries of the European Union could facilitate the Lithuanian politicians' decision.

5. MALTA

5.1 Fathers' attitudes and experiences

Reasons for taking parental leave

The main motivations for taking parental leave were to spend time with the child and to be more involved in his/her upbringing. Interestingly, while all the fathers interviewed said that they took parental leave to spend time with their child, this motivation was generally accompanied by a second reason which was generally one of two:

- To care for the child while his higher-paid partner/spouse worked at a full-time schedule, and/or;
- To spend some time away from the work environment and take advantage of a career break.

There were other reasons mentioned by some of the fathers interviewed, although these were present to a lesser degree. These were: a) to be able to raise the child personally – rather than having him/her raised by available third parties such as, grandparents, and b) to study on a full time basis for the duration of the parental leave period.

The decision of taking parental leave

In most cases informants took the decision with their spouses. The main sources of information were: the media, in-house circulars and colleagues.

Reactions from family, friends and colleagues

Most informants said that they were met with generally positive, albeit not overly enthusiastic reactions. In all, the span of reactions seemed to go from mild but non-judgemental surprise to verbally expressed disdain. There was some element of surprise from some parties – in some cases very markedly so – but in most cases the decision was easily accepted. There were also some cases of negative reactions. These stemmed mainly from a) the informants' parents who were concerned about the informant jeopardising his job, b) colleagues who resented having to do his share of the work, and c) older friends and colleagues who regarded his decision as weird and “not something a man should do.”

Reactions from superiors varied from a rather negative insistence that they be given a replacement be-

fore approving the parental leave application to trying to persuade the informant to opt for a reduced hours working schedule. In a couple of cases the informant had to insist that their application be approved and also accept that they would be transferred to a new department on re-entry should that be necessary.

Experience of parental leave

Parental leave was generally viewed as a special period during which informants had time to enjoy their children and home. Around half the informants felt very relaxed and found parental leave to be not at all stressful when compared to their jobs. The other half, however, said that they had very busy, even hectic, days – even more so than when at work.

The best things about parental leave are that it:

- Gives you time to appreciate the family and other things in life besides work;
- Gives you direct experience of children and is a learning experience in child-rearing;
- Allows for time off work and to enjoy a less hectic pace of life;
- Allows the spouse to re-enter the job market/devote more time to her work.

The worst things about parental leave are that it:

- Involves a considerable financial setback which requires one to alter one's lifestyle;
- Exposes one to some negative/judgemental attitudes from acquaintances and colleagues;
- Involves spending a lot of time alone and losing contact with adults;
- Can have a negative effect on career prospects; such as setting you back in terms of promotions;
- Is a lot of work!

The biggest challenges of being on parental leave are:

- Creating your own routine and adjusting to a more flexible daily schedule;
- Adjusting to a different lifestyle dictated, to a great extent, by the limited household income.

Suggestions for improvement of parental leave terms

The most frequently mentioned suggestion for improvement was that the family be given some financial support. Other suggestions made were to:

- Give parental leave takers guidelines on how to replace the work routine and spend time in the home more efficiently;
- Increase the maximum age of the child when parental leave can be availed of;
- Allow a “reduced hours” clause for when children are older;
- Allow the parental leave period to count as time in service safeguarding the employee's seniority and promotion prospects;
- Modify legislation so that the leave option can be broken down into a number of periods and used with more than one child.

The optimum duration of the parental leave period was said to be between two and four years. Three informants said that there should be no limit on the duration of the parental leave period. Parents should be allowed to go on parental leave for as long as they can afford it.

Comparison to paid employment

Most of the informants interviewed said that they found the experience of parental leave to be very different to that of paid employment.

The two main advantages of parental leave vis-à-vis paid employment were: having more time to spend with the children and an opportunity to learn about the home.

Parental leave was said to be more relaxing because one's schedule was more flexible.

A few informants said that the major negative aspect of parental leave vis-à-vis paid employment was that one felt isolated from the social activities and adult company.

Relationship with partner

All the informants said that their decision benefited the relationship with their partner. This was said to be mainly due to the extra time that they had available to spend together. Some informants also said that having one partner taking care of the child on a full-time basis made life less hectic for both parents and that therefore the relationship improved because both partners were less stressed and tired during their time together.

The increase in quality time improved both the quality of communication and mutual understanding between the couple.

All informants said that their partner/spouse had supported their decision and with hindsight felt that it had been a good one.

Relationship with the child

All the informants said that their relationship with the child improved because of the time spent to-

gether. This was less marked in informants who had taken parental leave when the child was very young – under 2 years of age. Informants said that the parental leave period had strengthened the bond with the child. This was mainly due to improved communication and to the fact that they had time to get to know and understand each other. Communication with the child had improved following the parental leave period. Some informants emphasised the fact that non-verbal communication especially had improved and that they could understand their child via a look or a gesture.

Interestingly, many informants compared their relationship to the one their partner had. The relationship of the child to the mother was seen as a kind of benchmark of a good parent-child relationship. In some cases, the mother was still seen to have a better relationship with the child than the informant.

Although almost all informants had taken parental leave a number of years prior to the time of the study, a number said that the positive effects of the time spent together were still felt through what they considered to be a very healthy and positive relationship with their child.

Being a good father

Definitions of a good father included one or more of the following factors:

- Being responsible for the child – both financially and emotionally;
- Actively instilling values, a sense of discipline and desirable qualities in the child;
- Investing time in the child;
- Being both a friend and a supportive parent.

There was, however, some difference in emphasis across the participants. Some fathers insisted that the most important defining feature of a good father was the ability to instil a sense of discipline and actively guiding the child's choices while others described how their understanding of parenting and caring encompassed mutual respect and friendship beyond the simple discipline-focused approach. 'Being a good father' was said to be very involving – a very time consuming task requiring a lot of effort and understanding.

On being asked, around half the informants said they felt they were good fathers to their children whilst the other half said they *tried* to be.

The feeling of being a good father made informants feel more complete. It was described as a fantastic feeling – one giving a great boost of fulfilment and satisfaction.

Self-Image and others' perceptions of self

The informants' self-perceptions had improved following their experience. Some said they felt more complete, were proud of themselves and more confident that they could manage any situation following this experience. Most of the informants said that parental leave had helped them become better fathers.

Parental leave was said to have both positive and negative effects on others' perceptions of the informants. Friends and relatives had generally appreciated, in some cases admired, what they had done. Acquaintances and colleagues were more likely to judge their decision negatively.

Perceptions of masculinity and the traditional man

All informants but one said that childcare was equally the responsibility of both parents.

Some said that times had changed and that traditional attitudes must be challenged. However, childcare was still deemed to be primarily a woman's job if:

- The father is the sole breadwinner;
- The father is more involved in his job/career than the mother;
- The child is physiologically dependant on the mother; such as during the initial "breast-feeding period".

A number of informants said that a "traditional man" would not consider going on parental leave and would not be very involved in either the running of the home or caring for the children. Most informants did not consider themselves traditional men. As some explained, they are not the type of men who work all day and return home in the evening expecting to be waited on by their wives.

5.2 Employers' attitudes and experiences

It is important to note that all employers in this study were from the Public Sector.

Awareness of public service parental leave policy

All informants said that their department complied with Public Service regulations on parental leave. In-

formants were generally not very aware of parental leave terms and regulations. Only one informant was able to describe the service regulations on parental leave in any detail.

How parental leave impacts the organisation

All informants said that having an employee on parental leave was very disruptive. This was particularly so when the employee was in a senior position or headed a working team. Whatever the employee's position, however, informants felt that parental leave always interfered with the smooth running of their department.

In a couple of cases the informants said they had tried to persuade the employee to opt for reduced hours rather than taking parental leave. However some informants, who pointed out the following disadvantages, did not see reduced hours as an ideal solution:

- The need to negotiate working duties around the employee's family commitments;
- Handover frequency;
- The fact that these employees generally miss out on the first (planning) part of the day;
- Negative reactions and resistance from other members of staff.

How parental leave impacts the employee and employers' attitudes

Informants had positive comments to make on how the experience of parental leave affected the employee. Both mothers and fathers who availed themselves of this option were seen to mature as a result of the experience.

A negative aspect of parental leave – relevant to both men and women – was that it generally occurred at a time when the employee was reaching a peak in his/her career development and this could affect their career path and personal development at work.

It was a common belief that parental leave is often used to make a career change. Most informants implied or explicitly stated this. They felt that it was not uncommon that the department lose some of its best trained and most experienced employees through this leave option. Informants also felt that parental leave can be abused of and that this fact was very de-motivating for other employees.

Overall, parental leave was said to be a fundamentally praiseworthy option by all informants and very motivating for the employees who do avail themselves of it.

Extent of personal experience with parental leave applications

Informants had very limited experience with male employees on parental leave. Informants had handled between one and four applications for parental leave from male employees to date.

When asked to describe their reactions they all said that they had initially been surprised. They had then discussed the options with the informant in lesser or greater detail. In a couple of cases they had tried to persuade the employee to opt for reduced hours, while in a couple of other cases they had insisted that they be given a replacement before the parental leave period commenced.

None of the informants had ever availed themselves of parental leave. Only one informant said that he would not consider the option if he were to have a child at this time. The reason given was that his spouse does not work and therefore there is no need for him to be with the child on a full-time basis.

Attitudes towards parental leave & gender equality

All informants agreed with the concept of equal rights and responsibilities for both sexes. Some informants however, expressed reservations – specifically with reference to the issue of childcare where they said that the mother in some respects was still better suited to caring for the child.

6. CONCLUSIONS

6.1 Recommendations

In this last chapter the analytical implications of each country's findings will be presented as a line of recommendations for fathers, employers and society in general. The recommendations should be thought of as guidelines that have the potential to promote change with regards to the main issues of this project.

Denmark

In Denmark parental leave – especially paternity leave is experiencing a high level of interest. The public media is covering a range of different stories about, and interviews with, fathers on leave. From the unions' side we are experiencing a strong will to discuss and research issues of gender, parental leave and ways of reconciling work and family life and within the academic field we are witnessing intense discussions and many new publications on gender equality, fatherhood and parental leave. Finally the large Danish organisations seem to conceive, handle and promote 'diversity management' internally and externally with a much stronger focus on gender equality and parental leave. We welcome all these

positive changes but at the same time we stress the point that changes give rise to issues which need to be addressed. On the basis of our research we will lay out some important recommendations for the upcoming debate on parental leave.

- As it was pointed out earlier, the Danish findings indicate that economic considerations during the leave period seem to be absolutely paramount. In many parts of the Danish labour market (primarily the private sector) there seems to be a move towards improving the fathers parental leave conditions. Primarily the improvements orbit around the question of wage compensation during the leave period. Some organisations like TDC grant the fathers 10 weeks with full wage compensations whereas an organisation like Novo Nordisk pays for 12 weeks. The policies of these different organisations have proven to be very powerful tools as they can report a very high number of fathers choosing parental leave. However, during our research we have also come across some indications that the employers more or less tend to associate parental leave with giving the employee a "gift" or at least doing something extra for them. It is fully understandable that the

organisations have an interest in “investing” in their employees with a progressive and family friendly parental leave policy but we strongly oppose to the idea that the loyalty of the employees should be rooted in a relationship where the employee gets the feeling that he is receiving such special treatment and is therefore duty bound to perform extraordinarily when he returns from the leave period. Viewing parental leave as a “gift” proves problematic because the gift concept always entails an expectation of being returned at some point. It is therefore important to keep insisting that parental leave is a human right. We find it absolutely vital that the conditions under which the leave is arranged are as clear as possible. Our research has shown that the fathers have a tendency to be troubled with concerns about their career. Leaving their duties at work seems to be tied up with a lot of fear that it will somehow affect their career in negative direction. Also we have found reason to believe that a clear arrangement with the organisation facilitates the fathers’ ability to getting familiar with taking care of his child and doing domestic tasks. Our recommendation to organisations that provide full wage compensation for men on parental leave is therefore that the employers should be very explicit about the expectations that are awaiting them when they return. The optimal way of handling this issue would be to have individual talks with the employee – ensuring that both parties are clear on agreements and expectations.

- During our research we have realized that the Danish parental leave legislation has some serious inadequacies. Not only have we come across examples where fathers were completely confused

about their rights, we have also seen several indications that the parental leave policy does not provide sufficient encouragement for fathers to go on parental leave. As already mentioned the economic issue plays an integral part in this issue and we therefore strongly recommend, that the politicians change the Danish parental leave legislation taking the Icelandic model as a guideline.

- In general we recommend that the current debate on parental leave is sustained and carried on by all social partners. If the Danish parental leave legislation is going to be changed, we need a constant focus on this issue. Another reason for keeping the discussion in the public eye is that there seem to be a strong general need for debating all the aspects surrounding it. Parenthood, masculinity, gender equality and the reconciliation between work and family life are all issues that in different ways are connected to parental leave. Finally, the argument for keeping a constant pressure on the debate finds its legitimacy in the fact that the knowledge we have based on a group of men who have taken more than the average 2.7 weeks of parental leave is relatively limited. The ongoing debate is a great help for further investigations. If we are to make progress in our task of encouraging men to taking responsibility for child care and domestic chores, we need to know more about this heterogeneous group of men that we define by their fatherhood. As mentioned earlier we have put much effort into interviewing fathers with different socioeconomic background, age, ethnicity etc. These interviews have proven that much research still has to be conducted if we are going to gain a deeper and a more subtle understanding of the complexity that seems to stick to parental leave.

Iceland

If these recommendations are to indicate the best conditions for encouraging more fathers to take parental leave, then the following is crucial:

- Individual non-assignable rights for the father. All experience shows that sharable time becomes the woman's time.
- Economic compensation related to salary and probably no less than 75–80% of salary.
- Flexibility – the possibility to combine work and parental leave.
- Job security guarantee.

As one can note, this is something that is to be found in the Icelandic law. The main deficiency here is that the leave is too short. It should be extended to 12 months with a 4-4-4 division with a stipulated condition that it has to be used within 24 months. This measure, together with a guaranteed space in pre-school from when the child is 18 months old, would practically eliminate the need for either parent to leave the labour market and would guarantee the child parental care in the first instance, and parental and pre-school care in the second.

Lithuania

- To achieve gender equality, institutions working in the sphere of equal gender opportunities should actively solve women's problems in the public sphere and encourage men to get involved in family life.
- In the 2003–2004 National Program on Equal Opportunities for Women and Men in Lithuania, the state offers concrete measures for

the reconciliation of work and family for both men and women and for gender equality in a family. The real transformation of gender roles and social institutions, however, is still insignificant. The problem reconciling work and family is one of the priorities in the current gender policy of the European Union. But in Lithuania the importance of this problem has not yet been fully realized. Therefore it is necessary to introduce it more widely into the public discourse via scholarly studies, educational and information means in order to reach the widest public possible: politicians, state officers, employers, social security institutions, NGOs, and men and women.

- The economic aspect of fatherhood is important for the welfare of families and children as is evident amongst the majority of the interviewed fathers. In order to increase the economic benefits of parental leave, it is necessary not only to introduce financial compensation to fathers on parental leave but also to encourage a family-friendly work environment and employer sensitivity to men's involvement in family life and childcare. It is also necessary to guarantee that fathers on parental leave would suffer minimal material and professional damages.
- To perfect the legal basis of parental leave in Lithuania using the experience of the Northern countries and the Directive of the Council of the European Union ratified on June 3, 1996, on the General Agreement on Parental Leave. This Directive states that with the aim of encouraging equal opportunities for men and women, the right to parental leave should be granted without the right to transfer it to another person. The

laws of the Republic of Lithuania should legalize a more flexible model of parental leave combining both the individual and family choice of parental leave (similar to the "Icelandic" model). As the experience of the Northern countries demonstrates, currently the majority of men use their individual right to parental leave, and employers have to accept it. The model of a well-paid and flexible parental leave period can become a real challenge to the traditional perception of nurturing. It can also gradually erase the boundary dividing the public and private spheres.

- To implement by law a more flexible administrative order of parental leave according to which parents can exchange parental leave and choose partial or full leave more easily. To achieve this objective, it is necessary to conduct a comprehensive comparative analysis of the legal framework of parental leave in the Northern countries and present it to politicians, state officers and society in general.
- The majority of men indicated that attempting to formalize their parental leave they had elicited very negative reactions from the officers at the State Social Insurance Fund Board of the Republic of Lithuania (Sodra) because of their lack of information, legal ignorance and stereotypical attitudes towards gender roles. For this reason, it is necessary to disseminate information to all departments of the State Social Insurance Fund Board of the Republic of Lithuania about relevant laws and parental leave as the right of women and men. A positive attitude amongst Sodra officers towards fathers choosing parental leave should also be encouraged.
- Without acknowledging the perception of any threat to their masculinity, the interviewed fathers defined childcare as a primarily female activity and emphasized the "inborn" connection of the child to their mother. It is necessary to question this traditional aspect of childcare and nurturing and advocate a model of nurturing father in Lithuania through mass media and the Ministry of Social Security and Labour. This can be done via educational programs and campaigns in mass media and work places aimed at encouraging more men to take parental leave.
- Educating and informing men about their rights, it is necessary to emphasize the positive aspects of nurturing and to minimize a possible negative impact of parental leave on fathers' careers.
- Policy frameworks shape the choices men make as fathers and foster certain kinds of identities and interests. Public discourse creates hegemonic ideologies around fatherhood, which can enable or constrain fathers. Therefore the dissemination of the discourse of nurturing fatherhood can provide fathers with discursive resources to make claims upon their employers, colleagues and relatives. To transform the notion of fatherhood in Lithuania, it is necessary to concentrate on the benefits of nurturing fathers for children, fathers themselves and gender equality. The emphasis on male nurture is important in changing gender relations and men's attitude towards women and their role in society.
- To encourage Lithuanian NGOs to pay more attention to men and masculinity problems, to conduct social, educational and information campaigns and to influence public policy decisions.

- Attempting to secure the support of the Lithuanian society including the politicians for a more active involvement of men in childcare, it is necessary to analyse, publicize and discuss the advantage of parental leave for the whole society. As the experience of Northern countries demonstrates, a more active participation of men in childcare increases birth rate, reduces negative social phenomena and unemployment and helps men and women reconcile their professional and family responsibilities.

Malta

The main concern Malta has at the present moment regarding parental leave, is to increase the uptake of parental leave among fathers both within the Public and Private sector. From our research and general observations, the following recommendations could lead to a positive move toward greater involvement by fathers in their children's lives:

- Presently in Malta, parental leave is unpaid. Should this leave be given some form of remuneration, which need not necessarily be at 100% of pay, we believe that more fathers will seize the opportunity and take up parental leave to care for their children. Caring for one's children is a responsibility and we believe this should be compensated. This incentive could boost the dismal parental leave uptake in Malta by men.
- While one year parental leave per parent is present in the public Sector, this is greatly reduced to 3 months per parent in the private

Sector. We believe that it would be beneficial to reduce the gap between the two sectors, particularly by increasing the leave entitlement for those working in the private sector.

- Many fathers suggested that the duration of their parental leave be increased as this would be of benefit to them as well as to their children.
- In order to ensure that fathers make use of parental leave, it would be desirable to introduce a father's quota, wherein a certain number of weeks/months are allocated and reserved exclusively for the father's use (e.g. the Icelandic model). Should the father refuse to make use of the prescribed quota, the couple will then forfeit their right to use that part of the parental leave allocated to the father, thus creating a greater incentive for fathers to use parental leave.
- The law within the private sector gives much of the prerogative for awarding parental leave to the employer. The employer has the right to refuse or postpone requests for parental leave due to organisational problems, such as work-load, company size and other reasons. We believe that the law should primarily protect the right of those wishing to make use of parental leave and therefore we recommend that the law be amended to give fathers and mothers more rights as to when and how to take parental leave. We are aware that such leave may create a burden on the employer, particularly for SMEs. Therefore, we believe that the State should carry some of the weight in financing part of the expenditure to those on parental leave.

- The main recommendation that we make through this report is to increase the public awareness of parental leave. Firstly, it is necessary to make the public aware that there exists a legal right for parents to take time off work to care for their children. Secondly, awareness and discussion of the topic must be actively promoted within society at large. Through debate and discussion, traditional gender roles carried out by men and women should be questioned and renegotiated in order to

ensure that both fathers and mothers can actively participate in the family and in the social sphere.

Through all these recommendations we hope that fathers will find a new sense of pride in their role as financial providers but also as carers. We want to put forward an image of a father who is there for his partner and children as a holistic mature person able to both provide financial and emotional security to his family.

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