Men’s childcare: a comparative study of fathers’ parental leave use in Sweden and Finland

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Multiple countries, especially in the Nordic regime, promote gender equal use of parental leave through quotas and paternal leave. The motives to promote fathers’ participation in care are many. The most eminent may be gender equality per se. The role of the father has undergone a drastic change from mainly being bread-winning to include increasing amount of child care in many western countries. The common perception is that the change has emerged partly independently from, but also in connection to policy changes. However, it is important to note that not all fathers have been affected. Parental leaves are most equally divided among the highly educated (see e.g. Eydal & Rostgaard 2015). The support of paternal care can also be motivated through outcomes for the child and the couple. Studies have shown that fathers’ participation in child care is financially beneficial for women’s careers. There are also positive outcomes on child cognitive development, the relationship between parents and continued fertility (see Allen & Daly 2007 for a review). We aim to study fathers’ parental leave use in Finland and Sweden, two countries within the Nordic regime with distinct differences in their parental leave systems.

The study sets out to answer to the following research questions: What factors influence fathers’ use of parental leave in the two countries? Is the use similarly affected by factors like socio-economic status and work sector? Does any of the leave system facilitate long leaves among subgroups of fathers or is it the same groups of fathers who use long leaves in both countries?

A large body of research has paid attention to the determinants of fathers’ leave use in different contexts. To summarize, the decision on leave use is affected by complex interactions of both parents’ individual and work place factors in the national contexts. Typical factors includes the economic restrictions of the family, pressures from work place, awareness about the leaves, gender attitudes
among the parents and the existing leave policy (e.g. Sundström & Duvander 2002; Salmi & Lammi-Taskula 2015).

Swedish and Finnish family benefit systems can both be portrayed as belonging to the Nordic family benefit models (see e.g. Duvander & Lammi-Taskula 2011). They are featured with relatively long periods of leave and quotas dedicated for each parent. We concentrate on two types of parental policies targeted to fathers: 1) The “daddy days” which are used typically right after the birth while the mother is also at home and 2) the individual leave which can be allocated for father (father quota) or used by either of the parents (shared leave). Both Finnish and Swedish systems incorporate these types of leaves, but the legislations have changed over time. As depicted in Graph 1, the lengths of spells differ greatly between the countries. In Sweden the mother and father have quotas of the same length. The first quota month was introduced already in 1995, the second in 2002 and third now in 2016. In Finland the mother’s quota is longer than the father’s quota. The father’s quota was introduced eight years later than in Sweden and was then still conditioned on that the father used also the part of the parental leave that can be shared. Fathers got access to the two weeks “bonus days” only if he used the last two weeks of the parental leave (green-red block in graph 1). This condition was abolished in 2013 which can be interpreted as the introduction of a real quota in Finland. However, our analysis concentrates on the period when conditional quota was in force and a few years before (first births during 1999-2009).

One indication of “maternalism” of the Finnish system is that the Finnish paternal leave concentrates on “daddy days”, e.g. the leave simultaneously with mother. Since 1993 the maximum spell of daddy days has been three weeks. In Sweden, daddy days are a minor benefit compared to parental leave, and it is targeted to employed (and unemployed) fathers. The spell is also shorter than the Finnish spell, that is, two weeks. In Sweden these days are to be used during the child’s first two months while in Finland they can be used more freely during the mother’s parental leave (approximately the first eight months) and after 2013 whenever the child is younger than two years. Parental leave in total is approximately 5 months longer in Sweden. What is not visible in graph 1 is the flexibility of Swedish parental leave system. Parents in Sweden can use the benefit part-time or postpone the use until the child turns 8 years old (12 years since 2012). The possibilities to utilize the flexibility depend greatly on the employment status and economic restrictions of the parent (Duvander & Viklund 2014).
Graph 1a-b. The development of parental leave quota legislation in Sweden and Finland 1991-2016.

One point that affects the fathers’ use of parental leave in Finland is the popular use of home care allowance after the parental leave (Salmi & Lammi-Taskula 2015). If the mother intends to use home care allowance, the father may be discouraged to use his short quota in-between. This was the primary reason why in 2007 fathers were granted the possibility to postpone the use of quota (and further in 2013). Almost 90 percent of families (mostly mothers) use the home care allowance in Finland to extend the home care spell at least for a short while. Sweden had its own home care allowance during 2008-2015. However, the take-up rates remained a fraction of Finland’s (2 % in 2013) and the provision of the allowance was decided on municipal level.

The eligibility to paternal benefits differs between Sweden and Finland. In Sweden the entitlement is tied to the custody of the child which, in case of separation, remains typically with both parents. In Finland, the entitlement is tied to the marriage or cohabitation with the mother. Cohabitant partners without legal custody are entitled to use the paternal benefits in Finland but not in Sweden.

From both countries we use detailed longitudinal register microdata for first births between 1999 and 2009. These data include sociodemographic variables where parents and children are linked. They also include data on income and parental benefits on an annual basis. We use linear probability models to estimate the propensity to use parental leave among fathers in the two countries. We build on ongoing work on fathers parental leave use in both countries, and in earlier studies we focus on immigrants (Tervola 2015, Mussino and Duvander 2016). We distinguish between different types of leave, daddy
days and individual parental leave. We will also estimate the length of individual leaves which vary significantly by country as depicted in graph 2. We will compare the trends in Finland and Sweden and connect this to the policy development in the two countries.

**Graph 2. The average number of parental benefit days taken up by fathers for their first child.**

![Graph 2](image)

Note: The number is the sum of daddy days, father quota and the shared parental benefit days. For Finland it is the exact number of days per child. For Sweden it is the sum of parental benefit days during the birth year and two consecutive years.

**References**


