

**STOCKHOLM RESEARCH REPORTS IN
DEMOGRAPHY**

No. 73

**PARENTAL LEAVE IN SWEDEN
- A WORKPLACE ISSUE?**

by

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ISBN 91-7820-068-7

ISSN 0281-8728

December 1992

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Paper presented at 4th Conference of the International
 Symposium on Working Time (ISWT), Gelsenkirchen December 1991

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this paper is to analyse the impact of the options regarding parental leave in Sweden as seen from parents' as well as employers' point of view.

The first part of the paper gives a background to the topic by describing the modern Swedish family. The second part focus to what extent workplace conditions have an impact on the patterns of parental leave, and further what impact parental leave has on the workplace and the worklife conditions of the parents. Results are presented from a project including among other parts, a questionnaire to the parents of 1,000 children born in 1986, and to 258 employers.

Parents use the parental leave rights to a large extent and a majority of them do not see any major problems at their workplace in that connection. Employers see an economic loss and administrative difficulties in dealing with the leaves but nevertheless sometimes offer parents opportunities exceeding the legal rights. These options are not only part of formal agreements but are also included in informal contracts at the workplaces.

Negative experiences concern a minority of parents, but quite a number of fathers mention obstacles to them taking parental leave, the workload seem to be heavy among many parents who reduce their working hours and further quite a number of men and women who have been on parental leave, see a negative impact on one of the following: development of their wages, opportunities for on-site education and opportunities for becoming more qualified at work. Furthermore, for almost half of the women who were transferred or had their tasks changed after parental leave, these changes were for the worse.

Parents who see a negative impact of their leaves on their working conditions rarely turn to their union for assistance, and unions do not in general take part in the decision-making about parental leave. Parental leave, traditionally an issue mostly for women, is mainly dealt with as a private issue, for the employer and the individual parent to negotiate about with the aim of consent and mutual adapting.

Introduction

The Swedish family model has during the last decade attracted attention in other countries due to the unique combination of very high labour force participation amongst women, high fertility rates, extensive public child care and a growing proportion of fathers taking parental leave in order to care for their newborn babies.

This paper will analyse how the options regarding parental leave in Sweden are used and what impact this has on the working conditions of men and women that take advantage of these options, as well as the impact on the conditions of production as seen from the employers' point of view.

The first part of the paper gives a background to the topic by describing the modern Swedish family, including the family formation process, the patterns of employment and working hours, and the distribution of housework between fathers and mothers.

The Swedish family

In 1987 the average age of women at first marriage was 27.7 years. This did not mean, however, that young adults increasingly live alone. Consensual unions are now established at an early age, hence the period of living alone after a young adult has moved away from the parents is, on average, short.

More than 96% of children are born into families consisting of both parents, but two-thirds of the first-born children and almost half of all children are born to parents living in consensual unions. Legislation and social norms in society concerning these matters have kept pace with developments. The law makes almost no distinction between consensual unions with children and marriages, and there is a general acceptance in society of both types of family formation.

It is usual to plan the timing and number of children. Women of childbearing age use contraceptives to a great extent. The childbearing period is nowadays frequently postponed in a woman's life, so that mothers on average are older than in earlier periods. In 1987 mothers were, on average, 26.7 years old when their first child was born. The postponement of

childbearing, together with a long-term trend towards fewer children per woman, explains a decrease in the fertility rate up to 1981. The subsequent increase is partly accounted for by older women now having the children they postponed having when they were younger. All cohorts of women, however, show an increase in fertility. Today Sweden is one of the countries in Europe with the highest fertility rate. In 1990 the rate was 2.15.

The proportion of women giving birth to many children has decreased but there is no increase in the proportion of permanent one-child families. Most Swedish women today have two children. Childbearing is further concentrated in a short period in women's lives, in what Bernhardt has labelled a "speeding-up" strategy. On average, a woman has her second child 2.6 years after the first.

There are incentives in the parental insurance for both postponement of childbearing and concentration in time. The principle of compensation for loss of income gives incentives for postponement of childbearing until the woman has a permanent job with a reasonable income. The closer spacing of children is also related to this. The so-called 30-month rule from 1986 means that if a woman gives birth to another child within 30 months, she is entitled to at least as high parental benefits as during the previous parental leave, even if her income is reduced in the intervening period due to unpaid leave or reduced working hours. This rule is likely to have contributed to the increase in fertility, since second and third births have come earlier.(1)

Childbearing has become more widely distributed in that most women now have children. The proportion of women who at the age of 40 do not have any children has decreased. Obviously very few women have to give up motherhood for economic reasons and few choose not to have children because of their career.

The number of children born to single mothers has decreased but an increasing number of single parents are women. Children of all ages to a growing extent experience separation from one of their parents due to divorce, but still close to 80% of those under 18 live with both their biological parents.

To summarize the development during the 1980s, there are more singles and fewer families in Sweden, a drop in marriage and upswing in cohabitation, a high degree of family formation and a high degree of family dissolution. Families with two children are the most stable. (Arvidsson 1982, Statistics Sweden 1989, Statistics Sweden 1990:1, Hoem 1990, Bernhardt 1991, Sundström 1990b)

Employment patterns of parents

Since the 1960s female employment patterns have changed radically in Sweden. Through part-time work, women's gainful employment rate has increased. Today women constitute just under half the labour force, compared to one third in 1960. The change has been most marked amongst mothers with children of pre-school age, 72% being housewives in 1960 and 86.9% working in 1990. Of the fathers with pre-schoolers, 96.9% participated in the labour force in 1990.

Amongst mothers of school-age children, 48% were housewives in 1960 and 94.4% were working in 1990. Women have increased their labour market participation almost to the level of men's (Winander 1982, Statistics Sweden 1991).

Table 1. Men and women 16-64 in the labour force in 1990, relative numbers (%)

| | Without children(0-16) | | With pre-school-age children(0-6) | | With only school-children(7-16) | |
|-------|------------------------|-------|-----------------------------------|-------|---------------------------------|-------|
| | All | 35-44 | All | 35-44 | All | 35-44 |
| | years old | | years old | | years old | |
| Men | 81.7 | 92.7 | 96.9 | 97.3 | 97.5 | 98.3 |
| Women | 78.2 | 92.9 | 86.9 | 90.6 | 94.4 | 95.5 |

(Labour Force Surveys 1990, Statistics Sweden 1991)

The proportion of men in the labour force is still at the beginning of the 1990s greater than that of women, but the employment of fathers as well as mothers varies according to the age of the children. Women increasingly seldom leave the labour market when they have children. Most women take parental leave in connection with the birth of a child and later return to paid part-time work for some years. The majority of women with young children work part-time (55.4% work less than 35 hours per week) while the majority of employed women and of

fathers with young children work full-time. However, since the beginning of the 1980s the increase in part-time work has stagnated. There has been a decrease in part-time jobs of less than 20 hours a week, and a steady increase in longer part-time working hours and full-time work among women (Sundström 1987).

That women's entry into the labour market took place by means of part-time work meant that their share of total working hours did not increase equally fast, but with respect to both gainful employment rate and working hours women have now approached the male pattern. The actual hours worked by fathers as well as mothers increase with the age of the youngest child. In 1990 the average number of actual working hours per week for parents with pre-school children was 29.5 for mothers and 42.2 for fathers. The tendency is for the mothers to increase their hours and for the fathers to decrease their. Of men with children, those with very young children work the shortest hours and those with teenagers the longest. Furthermore men's absenteeism, like women's, is highest for those with babies less than one year old (Pettersson 1988).

However, very few men work part-time and the proportion has not undergone any major change, although there is a slight increase. Of all employed parents with children under 17, 57% of mothers and 4% of fathers worked part-time in 1987, 62% of mothers with pre-schoolers worked part-time, and 53% of mothers with school-age children. Single fathers work part-time to a higher extent than cohabiting ones, while single mothers work full-time to a higher degree than cohabiting ones (Statistics Sweden 1988, Sundström 1990b).

Working part-time in Sweden is thus mainly a way for women to combine traditional responsibility for the children and home with the shared role as a breadwinner. Bernhardt labels this the "combination strategy" of women (Bernhardt 1991). Part-time work cannot, however, be seen as simply an equality trap for women. Women entered the labour market mainly on part-time, but the increase in part-time jobs was the answer to demand throughout the labour market, not restricted to dead-end jobs with low pay and poor conditions (Sundström 1987). Full social benefits (relative to hours worked) are today granted to

employees working part-time for at least 20 hours per week, and parents may remain in their job and take part-time leave of absence as a legal right until their child is 8 years old. In a recent study of mine 75% of the women who reduced their working hours due to their parenthood had a full-time job from which to take part-time leave (see note 2). I will return to these legal rights below.

An issue of equality between men and women much discussed. is however, that the labour market in Sweden is highly segregated by gender. Women are mostly publicly employed (54.3%) while men mostly work in the private sector (66.5%). Women do mostly service, care and clerical work while men mostly work in the manufacturing industries and in technical occupations. (Statistics Sweden 1989, Gustafsson & Lantz 1985, AKU 1990, Bengtsson et al 1991) This segregation may have an impact on the conditions of parenthood in relation to the workplaces.

Household patterns of working hours

The most common combination of working hours in families with children and two adults today is for the man to work full-time and the woman part-time. The next most frequent arrangement is for both parents to work full-time; this is the most common combination in families with teenagers and is almost twice as frequent as in families with pre-schoolers. Third in frequency comes the pattern involving a housewife with the man as breadwinner and the woman not employed. Other combinations are unusual.

Table 2. Combination of working hours in households by presence and age of the youngest child, 1987, relative numbers (%)

| Age of youngest child | Both full-time 35h/week< | Both 41h/ week< | Woman full-time | Neither is working | Both are working |
|-----------------------|--------------------------|-----------------|-----------------|--------------------|------------------|
| < 3 years | 25 | 1 | 29 | 2 | 76 |
| 4-6 | 28 | 2 | 30 | 1 | 84 |
| 7-11 | 35 | 3 | 37 | 1 | 87 |
| 12-16 | 46 | 4 | 49 | 1 | 90 |
| no child | 42 | 3 | 48 | 8 | 72 |
| All households | 36 | 2 | 42 | 4 | 77 |

(Households with a man and women, married or cohabiting, at least one of them in the 16-64 age-group (Pettersson 1988).

The working hours of parents are seldom entirely overlapping (14%) but on the other hand only 8% do shiftwork i.e. largely separate working hours. Irregular working hours, flexible working hours and part-time work are means used by parents to decrease the overlapping. Parents often choose to fit their working hours together for the children's sake. They want to restrict the children's hours in child-care arrangements outside the family and increase the hours the children spend at home with at least one parent. Irregular patterns of working hours are thus mostly not chosen in order to compensate for shortage of child-care facilities, but do restrict the options regarding public child-care for the hours the parents cannot manage the care themselves (Jacoby & Näsman 1989, Ulveson 1987). In 1990 48% of all pre-school children had access to municipal child care (Barnomsorgsundersökningen 1990).

The jig-saw of working hours as a household pattern increases the fathers' responsibility for the care of the children. That fathers mind their children during some of the mother's working hours has been a family pattern in Sweden since the 1960s, and these hours have increased slowly since then (Boalt 1961, SOU 1965:65, Jacoby & Näsman 1989). In 1984 a study showed that there was a decrease in both men's and women's time spent on child care and housework, and that there was an increase in the time spent gainfully employed, with the increasing age of the youngest child.

Table 3. How men and women spent their hours in 1984 according to presence and age of the youngest child, hours per week

| | No child | Age of youngest child | | | |
|---------------------|----------|-----------------------|------|------|-------|
| | | 0-2 | 3-6 | 7-12 | 13-17 |
| <u>Men</u> | | | | | |
| Paid work | 22.9 | 31.7 | 34.4 | 38.4 | 40.3 |
| Housework | 7.1 | 8.2 | 6.9 | 6.7 | 6.4 |
| Maintenance/repairs | 5.1 | 4.9 | 5.9 | 5.7 | 5.2 |
| Active child care | 0.3 | 8.2 | 5.6 | 1.9 | 0.4 |
| <u>Women</u> | | | | | |
| Paid work | 15.8 | 11.8 | 20.9 | 22.1 | 25.5 |
| Housework | 19.3 | 21.5 | 19.0 | 23.1 | 21.4 |
| Maintenance/repairs | 2.2 | 0.5 | 1.2 | 1.2 | 1.7 |
| Active child care | 0.6 | 13.4 | 10.6 | 4.1 | 0.6 |

(Flood & Klevmarken 1989)

Although there is still a sex-determined division of various types of task in households, and most routine work is still carried out by women, a change seems to have taken place, the principal feature of which being that men play a larger part in activities related to children. The task of taking children to day nurseries etc. and fetching them is divided equally between fathers and mothers; this also shows that a large proportion of fathers do not just "help" at home but assume a responsibility of their own for the care of their children on an everyday basis (Jacoby & Näsman 1989, Haas 1981, Pettersson 1988).

Moen, in her analyses of the conditions of working parents with pre-school children, concludes that the pressure on working mothers from their double burden, decreased from 1968 to 1981 in terms of daily fatigue as well as in terms of psychological strain. This is the result of the increased support for working mothers but may also be due to the increase in housework among men. The daily fatigue increased among men during the same period (Moen 1989). The workload of the mother still seems to be heavier than that of the father but when hers is especially high, his is too.

Table 4. Total workloads of Swedish parents, hours per week

| | Father | Mother |
|-----------------------------|--------|--------|
| Both parents work full-time | 66 | 74 |
| Mother works part-time | 59 | 60 |
| Youngest child under 5 | 65 | 70 |
| Youngest child over 5 | 55 | 61 |

(Sandqvist 1987)

Parental leave

State support in connection with childbirth was initially directed towards mothers alone. In 1974, a radical change was implemented: fathers, too, became entitled to parental leave. Since then, legislation has extended the period of leave and, with a few exceptions, improved the compensation. Moreover, more legal reasons for leave-taking have been introduced, including separate rights for both women and men. The law is combined with a national parental insurance funded by the

government. The law applies to biological parents, step-parents, foster-parents and to the parents of adopted children. The law guarantees parents the right to go back to work after leave of absence, and further that the parents shall not be discriminated against at the workplace because of the leave.

There are central agreements on equality between men and women stressing that the work shall be so arranged that it facilitates for both men and women to combine employment with responsibility for home and children. Some agreements add leave rights to those of the law and also add to the parent's allowance.

In brief, the Child Care Leave Act and the parental insurance provided the following opportunities as of 1991.

Paternity leave

The father is entitled to ten days' parent's allowance within 60 days after the child's birth, and these days may also be used when the mother is on leave. Multiple births entitle the father to additional days. In 1987, 83% of the fathers used an average of nine of these days an increase by a few percentage points since the option was introduced. More than half of all fathers use all ten days, and the proportion rises with lower income. (Riksförsäkringsverket forthcoming, Röcklinger 1987)

Leave in connection with the birth of a child

The Act confers the right to parental leave up to when the child is 18 months old and as a separate right an entitlement to leave when parent's allowance is payable; today, the latter is for a period of 450 days, which the parents may use at any time up to the child's eighth birthday. For 360 benefit days, parent's allowance usually provides a compensation of 90% of loss of earnings, but it never falls below a minimum rate of SEK 60 per day. Fathers' compensation is based on their own income. For another 90 days all parents are entitled to the minimum rate. Adding maximum unpaid and paid leave, one arrives at a possible period of leave per child of 990 days, if taken in the right order i.e. unpaid leave before paid. If both parents are responsible for the child's custody, they are

entitled to at least 90 of these days each, but days can be transferred in writing. Day's leave may also be used before birth, during parental education. Leave may be taken in the form of whole days, half-days or quarter-days.

The proportion of men among those utilizing this type of leave was 3% of all fathers of newborn children in 1974, when parent's insurance was introduced, but has increased since then. In 1989 44% of all couples where both parents were working shared the leave for some period during the first year of the child's life, and the proportion grew the more days of parental leave the family had used. (Riksförsäkringsverket, 1990:16)

On average, fathers are on leave for one and a half months this first year, as compared with the mothers' nearly 10 months on average. Men more often take days of leave on a part-time (Röcklinger 1987, Riksförsäkringsverket 1989:24).

Temporary parent's allowance

When a child or the usual person caring for the child is ill or infectious, or the child has to have a health check-up, temporary parent's allowance is obtainable. This leave covers a maximum of 120 days annually per child until the child is 12 years old, or 16 in specific cases. After seven consecutive days' illness, a medical certificate is required. Leave may be taken in the form of whole days, half-days or quarter-days. This is the form of leave that is divided most equally between fathers and mothers.

Table 5. Men and women and temporary leave days taken 1980-1989, relative numbers (%)

| Year | Parents on leave | | Proportion of days | |
|------|------------------|---------|--------------------|---------|
| | Men % | Women % | Men % | Women % |
| 1980 | 42.8 | 57.2 | 36.6 | 63.4 |
| 1981 | 41.8 | 58.2 | 35.8 | 64.2 |
| 1982 | 40.9 | 59.1 | 34.4 | 65.6 |
| 1983 | 40.7 | 59.3 | 33.7 | 66.3 |
| 1984 | 39.7 | 60.3 | 33.7 | 66.3 |
| 1985 | 40.2 | 59.8 | 33.1 | 66.9 |
| 1986 | 40.6 | 59.4 | 34.4 | 65.6 |
| 1987 | 41.1 | 58.9 | 35.2 | 64.8 |
| 1988 | 41.3 | 58.7 | 34.8 | 65.2 |
| 1989 | 40.9 | 59.1 | 34.5 | 65.5 |

(The lines show between which years rules were changed)
Riksförsäkringsverket 1990:22)

40%

↑
35

The proportion of fathers was at its peak in 1980.

This leave is taken for less than half of the entitled children, but the proportion is increasing. This may be due to the increase in the number of parents gainfully employed and the decrease in municipal child-care services for sick children. Since 1980, the average number of days per child has been stable at just over six days a year. (Riksförsäkringsverket 1990:22)

Contact days

A parent is entitled to parent's allowance two days per year and child for parental education or to visit the child at school or at the day nursery while the child is between four and twelve years old. This leave can be taken in the form of whole days, half-days or quarter-days.

In 1987, 34% of those who utilized contact days were men. In 1986 this form of leave was taken for just under 12% of children, primarily the youngest schoolchildren and in conjunction with the beginning and end of term. One-fifth of the days were taken as half-days. (Riksförsäkringsverket forthcoming, Riksförsäkringsverket 1989:8)

Parent's allowance provides compensation for lost income at 90%, up to a ceiling (SEK 17,400 per month), provided that the parent has been registered at the social insurance office for 180 consecutive days before the leave is taken. The compensation is lower though (down to 80%) during the first 14 days of temporary leave in line with the lower level of sick pay.

The compensation is taxable and qualifies as income for pension purposes. With a few exceptions, parental leave can be taken by only one parent at a time. Entitlement to leave of absence requires the parent to have had the same employer for six consecutive months, or 12 months in the past two years, before leave is taken. The mother, however, always has the right to six weeks of leave.

Both parents are further entitled to reduce their working hours to 75% of a full-time job, in the form of a daily

reduction, up to the child's eighth birthday or the end of the child's first year at school, with the right to return to full-time work after two months' notice. There is no compensation for loss of income connected to this kind of leave, which means that the usage of this leave is not centrally registered. Of the employed fathers in my study, 8% shortened their working hours due to their parenthood and all of them had been on full-time parental leave as well (see note 2).

Some fathers do not use the options regarding parental leave because they can in their ordinary schedule of working hours be at home a lot during daytime. Men doing shift-work have made use of this as an alternative. Other fathers use holidays to be at home with the child on their own. (Röcklinger 1987, Jacoby & Näsman 1989, Jedling 1990) The proportion of children who during their first year of life have their father as the main caretaker for some time may then be higher than the statistics on parental leave show. That on the other hand some fathers use parental leave days for other purposes than to take care of the child, is also known. How frequent these two kinds of phenomena are, is however not known.

There are major differences between men and women in terms of the amount of and kind of parental leave taken. Few men offer examples of role reversal in the sense that they like women take a protracted break from their jobs to care for a newborn child. Nor, to any great extent, do they make the lasting adjustments of gainful employment in terms of working part-time. (Sandqvist 1987)

Parental leave and the workplace

In the remaining part of this paper I will discuss on the one hand to what extent workplace conditions have an impact on these different patterns of parental leave, and on the other hand what impact parental leave has on the workplace and the worklife conditions of the parents. I will mainly use results from a newly finished study of mine including among other parts, a questionnaire to the parents of 1,000 children born in 1986, and to 258 employers. (Näsman & Falkenberg 1989, note 2)

Employment

Most of the parents were employed at the time of the child's birth and were entitled to parental leave. About 20% were self-employed, students, unemployed or home makers and thus not of further interest in our analyses.

Obstacles to taking parental leave

Of the employed parents about 25% of the fathers (148 fathers) answered that they faced obstacles at the workplace to taking parental leave. These fathers were significantly more often than not privately employed, white-collar workers, in possession of managerial responsibilities, working at a workplace with few employees and in possession of a qualification they shared with few if any at the workplace. The reasons they gave for the obstacles they faced were mostly related to a demand for their attendance due to, for instance, their qualifications, a heavy workload, their position or the small number of staff members.

The men who face obstacles to taking leave mostly nevertheless were on leave, but in several cases for a shorter time than planned. A small proportion of fathers abstained from parental leave due to the obstacles (3.5%, 21 fathers). Fathers who were on leave for at least one month were significantly more often employed in the public sector or highly educated than fathers who did not take any leave at all. Fathers who worked at a female-dominated workplace significantly more often took leave than fathers at male-dominated workplaces.

A small number of the employed women also faced obstacles with regard to taking parental leave, and these women gave the same kinds of reasons as the men did (3.8%, 23 women). None of these women abstained from parental leave. That management or colleagues had negative attitudes to parental leave was not frequently mentioned by any parents.

Looking at the 480 couples where both had an employment, there seems to be an influence on the father's leave-taking from the working conditions of the mother. The father tends to take more leave the higher her income is, if she is highly

educated and if she has a competence which she shares with few if any at her workplace. A correlation between shared leave and the woman's education and the qualification of her job is found also in earlier studies (Röcklinger 1987, Sandqvist 1987, Riksförsäkringsverket 1985:4).

During parental leave

The law does not regulate what happens at the workplace when a parent is on leave. According to the fathers the most frequent way to get their job done during their leave was to redistribute the tasks to other employees but another way was to have an internal substitute or simply to let the job wait. The employers asked confirmed that these solutions were common.

Since women are on leave for a longer time the higher frequency of external substitutes in their case seems no more than might be expected. Internal substitutes was the second most frequent way of getting the job of women done.

The employers' view of parental leave on full-time was in general that it did not cause much of a problem. The few exceptions were employers at small companies and also a few employers expressing very traditional sex-role attitudes.

Less than half of the employers asked had experienced any parental leave, part-time or full-time among their staff members, during the last three years, and among those who had it was mostly a minor problem compared to absenteeism for other reasons. Male-dominated enterprises mostly had experience of parental leave among men while female-dominated enterprises had the opposite experience, a result that shows the importance of realising the different perspective on parental leave that one gets when employer is the unit of measurement and not parent.

What some employers did complain about was the problems involved in finding, training, planning for and deriving benefit, rather than trouble, from external substitutes. It was these difficulties that in several cases explained the redistribution of the tasks, with the effect of a heavier workload for the remaining staff members to manage. Several examples illustrate that the lack of a good solution might become a pressure on especially the fathers to abstain from

leave, to reduce the leave or to adapt it to the production. In almost half of the single cases of parental leave described by employers the parent had been involved in planning for the leave (48%, 64 cases. Each employer was asked to describe three of the latest cases). A few employers had asked the parent for help temporarily during the leave.

The difficulty in solving the problem of substitutes was especially mentioned by employers in small companies and by other employers concerning parents who were some kind of specialists or key-persons in the production.

Back to work

Most of the parents who had been on leave returned to the same employment afterwards - almost all men and more than three out of four women (98% of the fathers on leave; 79% of the women).

Of the women who did not return, a majority got employed elsewhere. A few left their employment because it was difficult to combine with parenting, and less than a handful because they wanted to become a home maker.

However, quite a number of men as well as women commented that they would have liked to stay at home longer than the parental leave legislation gives them the right to. Quite a number of the employers said that they were willing, at least in some cases, to let parents continue on leave when the period they had a legal right to was ended. Lack of child care was one reason mentioned for acceptance of requests for extra leave. That parents had to resign due to lack of child care was however according to the employers the most frequent explanation regarding the minority of parents who resigned after parental leave.

On returning, most parents got their former job and their former tasks back. Only one father was transferred to another job and a few faced changes in the tasks they used to do at work. Changes were, as could be expected, more frequent among the mothers. Of the returning mothers 18% were transferred or had their tasks changed. Changes do not necessarily mean worse conditions, but for almost half of these women the changes were

for the worse, as compared with only 6% facing worse conditions of the other returning mothers.

A few employers confirmed that transfers did happen in a few cases, but at some companies transfer was the rule. In most of the cases described by employers, the parent got his/her former job back.

To reduce the working hours

As already mentioned, few fathers reduced their working hours due to their parenthood, and those who did had also been on parental leave full-time. Of the women a majority reduced their working hours some period after returning from full-time leave.

We asked whether these parents had their workload decreased in proportion to the reduction in hours at work. A minority answered that their workload was reduced to the same extent as their working hours. A majority of these fathers and almost half of the mothers answered that they had the same workload as before. In comments some parents described their situation as stressful and without breaks. Though the reorganisation at work in terms of workload is not regulated by law, one can conclude that the time gained by reducing the working hours can lose its value due to loss of energy or overtime. Swedish parents with pre-school children, and especially mothers, suffer from daily fatigue and psychological strain more than other categories in the workforce, and this was one of the reasons for introducing the right to reduced working hours (Moen 1989).

One explanation of these parents' overload of work is given by the fact that some employers, because of the problems concerning substitutes, had as one of the solutions to increase the tempo at work for the parent. More frequent solutions were, however, to redistribute some of the tasks to other employees by increasing their workload or their working hours, or to employ a substitute.

The legal right is for a daily reduction to 75% of a full-time job. Parents as well as employers describe a much more varied picture with reduction to more or less than the 75%, concentrated to whole or half days, according to individual schedules and other patterns of working hours. Most employers

said that they and the parents agreed upon the patterns chosen, and that most parents were satisfied with the working hours they got. Several employers explained that the patterns were chosen since they fitted into the parents' child care arrangement. The conflicts mentioned were all about parents who wanted another reduction than a daily one. "Everybody cannot be off on Fridays."/ "The parent is needed on the job every day."

All employers had accepted proposals for reductions less than 25% of a full-time while most employers accepted a more far-reaching reduction only in some cases. The situation was the same for parents who wanted to reduce their hours even when the youngest child had passed the age limit of 8 years. A couple of employers accepted this for everybody who asked, one employer refused this altogether, while most employers accepted it in some cases.

Summarized impact of parental leave among returners

To sum up the impact of parental leave we asked the parents who had been on parental leave if they saw a negative impact on the development of their wages, opportunities for on-site education and opportunities for becoming more qualified at work. Every fifth of these fathers saw a negative impact on one or more of these factors of their leave-taking on full-time or part-time (20% 27 fathers). Among the mothers the proportion who saw a negative impact on one or more of these factors, was even larger (29% 131 mothers). These women had significantly more often than not shortened their working hours due to their parenthood.

The most fundamental aspect of the Child Care Leave Act is the job security. We asked the parents if they due to their parental leave had been dismissed or requested to apply for another job or to give notice. Six women had been dismissed but no father. Several of these women were, however, substitutes and had due to that less job security. Two men and 14 women had been requested to apply for another job due to the parental leave.

Table 6. Problems related to parental leave among parents of children born in 1986, frequencies and relative numbers (%).

| | Fathers | | Mothers | |
|--|---------|--------|---------|--------|
| | % | number | % | number |
| Employed | 86 | (592) | 81 | (595) |
| Whereof: | | | | |
| Obstacles to taking | 25 | (148) | 4 | (23) |
| Abstained due to this | 4 | (21) | - | - |
| Parental leave 1 month< | 23 | (134) | 99 | - |
| Whereof: | | | | |
| Quit due to parenthood | - | - | 7 | (34) |
| Back to same employer | 98 | (131) | 79 | (456) |
| Whereof: | | | | |
| Worse conditions due to transfer or other tasks | 5 | (6) | 9 | (40) |
| Of all employed: | | | | |
| Reduced working hours | 8 | (46) | 58 | (346) |
| Unable due to the job | 6 | (36) | 3 | (20) |
| Of all back after parental leave on full- or part-time | | | | |
| Dismissed due to leave | - | - | 1 | (6) |
| Requested to apply for a new job due to leave | 1 | (2) | 3 | (14) |
| Negative impact on wages | 11 | (14) | 13 | (57) |
| Neg. impact on development | 13 | (17) | 15 | (67) |
| Neg. impact on education | 4 | (6) | 9 | (43) |
| Negative impact, all three aspects | 20 | (27) | 29 | (131) |

According to Sundström one year of parental leave meant 1.6% less increased earnings among women and 2.3% among men, in a huge Swedish Company, Televerket (Sundström 1990a, see further Hoem et al 1990). The negative impact of parental leave on wages can at least partially be explained by the way they are handled at the yearly negotiations. Though a majority of the employers explained that the parents on leave were included in the negotiations, it happened that they only got the centrally agreed percentages of increase but not much if anything of the part that was locally decided. Some employers renegotiated the parents' wages when they returned while others let them wait until the next yearly negotiation took place.

Concluding remarks

Two of the main concerns of Swedish family policy since the 1930s have been equality between men and women and the

conditions for children. However, up to the 1960s political action was dominated by a family ideal based on complementary roles of equal value rather than equal roles. A woman's rights in marriage were based on her responsibility for looking after the home and children, whereas the man's rights stemmed from his responsibility for supporting the family. In the 1960s, the debate on sex roles gathered impetus, and new ideals emerged. Marriage as an institution was now increasingly equated with other forms of cohabitation. In a process of individuation, men and women are now increasingly placed on an equal footing as citizens, employees, partners and parents.

Parental leave rights are part of this policy. Parents use these rights to a large extent and the majority of them do not see any problems at their workplace in that connection, at least in the rather rough ways we have measured. Employers see the economic loss and the administrative difficulties in dealing with these leaves but nevertheless seem not so seldom to offer parents longer leaves and further alternatives regarding when during day and night to work and for how many hours. The alternatives are not only part of the formal agreements but are also more or less common offers in the informal contracts developing at the workplaces. The employees' part of this kind of contract sometimes includes not to fully demand their legal rights regarding parental leave but rather to adapt any leave taken to the specific needs of production.

Though the positive examples dominate the results from the study, quite a proportion of fathers say that there are obstacles to them taking parental leave, the workload seems to be heavy among many parents who reduce their working hours and further quite a proportion of the men as well as the women who have been on parental leave see a negative impact of that on their working conditions.

That violations of the law in these respects so seldom become cases in the legal process of negotiation between the parties on the labour market, not to mention cases for the labour court, raises the question whether this is another example of the strength of the informal law, overriding as it may the formal one. Parents who see a negative impact of their

leaves on their working conditions do not as a rule turn to their union for assistance, and the unions do not in general take part in the decision-making about parental leave, either on the central or on the local level. The issue of parental leave, traditionally an issue mostly for women, is mainly dealt with as a private issue, for the employer and the individual parent to negotiate about with the aim of consent and mutual adapting. Parenthood has largely been a non-issue on the labour market, and as feminist scholars argue, women's life world and their interests in working life are rarely considered in the making of laws and collective agreements (Stang Dahl 1991, Petersen 1989). Women, especially working mothers and increasingly also fathers, are dependent upon the informal rule-making and the arbitrariness in employers' attitudes towards individual solutions to the problems and conflicts in the work-family interface, and further upon the solidarity among colleagues (Petersen 1989). A frequent answer from employers to questions concerning widened options was that they offered such "in some cases" but not always, and a frequent comment concerning why they did not see parental leave as a problem was that it was a matter of give and take, and that as long as the parents did not demand their full formal rights it all worked well.

The extent to which the collective of workers make parenthood an issue at the workplace and themselves contribute to an informal system of norms where degrees of freedom in action are given for the varying demands of parenting, may depend on the question of male versus female domination in staff and the good will of the managers rather than on differences in the demands of the specific production at the workplace. There are both in our study and in earlier studies differences between the private and the public sector as well as between male- and female-dominated workplaces. Men take parental leave more and see less obstacles at female-dominated workplaces and within the public sector. These issues, which could be summarized under the heading of workplace culture/s, are the focus of interest in my ongoing research project Gender and Workplace Culture in the Work-Family Interface, a Nordic

comparative study of conditions for parenthood in male- versus female-dominated workplaces and in male- versus female-dominated occupations (Bengtsson et al 1991, see note 3).

The parental leave project gathered data from a boom period in Sweden with a shortage of manpower. There are indications of employers dismissing women with young children first, in the ongoing period of recession. By-passing the job security legislation is possible. To the understanding of the results presented here I will thus add the question whether a replication of the parental leave study today would paint another picture than that of the late 1980s. The question could be widened by asking about the impact of the policy-making of the present government and further of the ongoing adaptation to EC conditions. Comparative crossnational studies may illuminate these processes.

Notes

1. This kind of reasoning developed into a legal practice already during the 1970s, was made statutory in 1980 within narrower time limits, 24 months, and finally extended to 30 months in 1986.

2. The study included the following parts: 1. case studies of the employed parents at a bank firm, a metal firm, a hospital, a social service agency and a chain of shops; 2. a questionnaire to the central unions and employers' associations; 3. analyses of all cases coming to the labour court and JÄMO (the ombudsman for equality between men and women) during three years; 4. a questionnaire to a sample of clubs in SIF, the union for white-collar workers in private industry; 5. a questionnaire to blue-collar workers in the food industry; 6. a questionnaire and telephone interviews with, employers; 7. a questionnaire to 1000 parents of children born in 1986.

The last-mentioned part was done twice on two separate samples, of which we here refer to the second one. The frequencies of answers were on most questions very similar between the two samples, which indicates that the results can be generalized to the population of parents of children born 1986. For 76% of the children sampled we have got an answer from at least one parent, a proportion which for Swedish conditions is acceptable.

The employer study concerned a sample of 258 employers stratified according to size of staff, drawn from the employer register at Statistics Sweden. We got answers from 88% of them, 230 employers. 60% of these answered that they had no experience of parental leave among staff members during the last three years. The interviews were conducted with the remaining 92 employers.

The results from the union questionnaire were much poorer. The data gathered are to some extent used for qualitative analyses but the study is not referred to here.

The project was financed by the Work Environment Fund and The Swedish Center for Working Life and conducted by a team situated at the latter. Eva Falkenberg, a labour lawyer, was the project's expert on the legal issues.

3. The project includes studies done in Denmark, Norway, Finland and Sweden by different research teams. The first part is a case study of five workplaces by observations, interviews and content analyses of documents. The workplaces are: a textile factory, an advanced metal-works, a daily newspaper, a middle-sized hospital, a middle-sized police district. The case study is followed by a questionnaire to the parents employed in some of the occupations at these kinds of workplaces: seamstresses, metal workers, journalists, doctors, nurses and assistant nurses, police assistants and, a category found in all the workplaces chosen, clerks. As far as possible the sample from each profession will include male as well as female employees in enough numbers for comparison between the sexes. The Swedish part of the project is led by me and financed by The Work Environment Fund and The Swedish Center for Working Life. The Nordic cooperation is financed by The Nordic Council of Ministers and coordinated by Inge Maerkedahl, The Danish National Institute of Social Research, Copenhagen. The project will be finished in autumn 1993.

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