

# Chapter 8

## Fathers on Leave Alone in Sweden: Toward More Equal Parenthood?

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### 8.1 Introduction

There is a longstanding political consensus in Sweden favouring equality between men and women. This is defined as men and women having the same opportunities, rights and responsibilities in all important areas of social life, including employment and parenting (Government Offices of Sweden 2009). One important political reform designed to support this goal is fathers' right to paid parental leave (Lundqvist 2011). Sweden was the first country to offer fathers paid leave and subsequent reforms such as non-transferable months were designed to encourage fathers to take a larger share of leave (Duvander and Johansson 2012). The expected long-term effects of shared leave include equalizing the distribution of paid and unpaid work and improving women's labour market opportunities (Riksdag Propositions 1993/1994 and 2000/2001).

This chapter's goal is to explore the meaning parental leave has for men who take a substantial amount of leave "home alone." Since in Sweden parental leave is considered an important policy instrument for gender equality, we pay particular attention to the extent to which the long leaves of the fathers interviewed seemed to promote the development of egalitarian parenting practices and the dual-earner/dual-carer model.

Three stages of fathers' leave experience are examined:

- (1) fathers' decision-making about leave length and timing, including motivations and factors impacting leave-taking;

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- (2) fathers' experiences on leave, including relationships with children, participation in childcare, housework and paid work;
- (3) fathers' perceptions of leave consequences, including paid work, identities as caregivers and relationships with partners.

## 8.2 Parental Leave Development

Sweden is distinctive in terms of its long commitment to equal parenthood and programs like parental leave designed to meet that goal (Duvander and Ferrarini 2013). In 1974, Parliament replaced maternity leave benefits with a parental leave program allowing fathers time off with pay after childbirth. The new program consisted of 6 months job-protected leave to share between parents as they saw fit. Leave was compensated at 90% up to a high income ceiling, which almost no parent reached.

Swedish fathers' right to leave has been uncontested and strengthened since then. A Liberal-Conservative government first reserved 1 month of non-transferable leave for fathers in 1995; this was extended to 2 months in 2002 by a Social Democratic government. Both reforms were effective in increasing men's leave use (Duvander and Johansson 2012).

An important incentive to use leave is compensation at a generous level. The benefit length has increased to 16 months; 13 months at 78% of previous income and 3 months at a low flat rate. Each parent has 2 non-transferable months paid at the higher level and is entitled to half of the remaining leave (but can transfer it to the other). Over time more parents have reached the income ceiling; in 2010, one-fifth of men and less than one tenth of women had incomes above the ceiling (Försäkringskassan 2012). However, most employees receive extra compensation through collective agreements (Duvander et al. 2014). Dividing leave equally yields a financial "gender equality bonus," instituted in 2008. However, the bonus has not yet affected leave division (Duvander and Johansson 2012).

Another aspect of leave policy that may impact men's leave use is flexibility. Fathers can take leave full-time, part-time, even an hour a day. Unpaid leave can also be taken during the child's first 18 months, and is commonly used by both parents to lengthen leave. Parental leave can be taken anytime until the child turns 8 years old (for those born by 2013) or, for those born after 2013, until the child turns 12 (although only 96 days can be used after children turn 4). While the law allows leave-taking three times a year, most employers permit more. Since 2012, 1 month's leave (but not the 2 reserved months) can be used simultaneously by parents, facilitating transition from mother care to solo father care.

The parental leave benefit is complemented by a pregnancy benefit, paid leave for sick children, parents' right to reduced work hours and guaranteed, subsidized public preschool for children from age 1 (Duvander et al. 2014).

Today, fathers' leave has become the norm; almost nine of ten take parental leave (Försäkringskassan 2011). Some fathers use leave later in children's lives but since

the introduction of the first reserved month, over three-quarters use leave before children turn 2 (Duvander and Johansson 2012). However, fathers tend to take leave in more blocks than mothers (Duvander 2013). While the length of leave varies greatly, just 11 % of fathers used at least 40 % of benefit days (Försäkringskassan 2011). A common pattern is that the mother is at home the first 13 months and then the father for 3,5 months before the child starts preschool. Some of this leave is typically unpaid (Duvander and Viklund 2014). While it is not common for parents to take leave together, it is possible for one parent to be on leave while the other uses vacation days.

### 8.3 Theoretical Background

In all Nordic countries, but especially in Sweden, fathers' right to parental leave has been regarded as a prerequisite for gender equality in society. Accordingly, fathers have the same rights as mothers to leave and policymakers aim to increase fathers' leave use by various reforms. Perhaps most importantly, cultural norms support fathers' use of leave (Haas and Rostgaard 2011).

Compared to other societies, Sweden stands out as having more gender egalitarian policies (see for example Gornick and Meyers 2008) and the goal of gender equality is taken for granted. Nevertheless, when scrutinized closely, researchers have noted that there are other policy directions present as well, such as a focus on individual choice, which sometimes conflicts with the pursuit of gender equality (Ferrarini and Duvander 2010). The persistence of an uneven division of leave and childcare responsibility, as well as inequality in the labour market (see Försäkringskassan 2013) suggests that a gender perspective is necessary for an analysis of fathers' experiences of leave in Sweden.

The gender perspective assumes that gender is a social construction and an important aspect of social structure, whereby institutionalized social practices categorize people into males and females and establish systems of inequality around those differences (Ridgeway and Correll 2000). A fundamental component of a gendered society is a division of labour, with women regarded as more suited for childcare and men for breadwinning. Mothers' greater childcare responsibility includes more time caring for and supervising children and taking more responsibility for children's welfare – keeping in mind details and planning related to childrearing (Doucet 2009). Men's breadwinning activities have provided them with more economic resources and power in the family (Polatnick 1983).

When gender-egalitarian social policy targets fathers' attitudes and behavior, change in the gender order seems possible. According to Ahlberg et al. (2008: 11), in Sweden “the room for maneuver on the part of individuals has increased concurrently with a reduction in the compulsive power of norms.” While Swedish policy assumes both men and women benefit from reconstruction of the gendered order (Klinth 2013), one can question whether policy challenges men's greater privileges

and power in society (Bekkengen 2002). The focus has been on men's rights and what they may gain by greater childcare involvement, rather than on demanding that they take an equal share of responsibility (Almqvist et al. 2011; Klinth 2013).

Men's experiences of parental leave are closely linked to gender practices and multiple, interrelated levels of social structure are at play. First, the institutional level and policy context set the framework under which men negotiate integration of employment with family life. Secondly, the cultural level, including norms and values concerning fatherhood and gender equality, consciously or unconsciously sets the boundaries for what is possible. Third, negotiations at the workplace level to a large degree determine fathers' participation in family life. Fourth, at the family level fathers and mothers negotiate amount and timing of leave and the domestic division of labour. Lastly, at the individual level, fathers' personal identities as employees and caregivers are socially constructed and impact their leave experiences.

## 8.4 Methods

To find 14 participants, we sent over 100 private messages to Thalberg's contacts on Facebook and about 50 e-mails to her friends and colleagues, asking whether they knew fathers who might be interested in discussing recent parental leave. Flyers were also posted at 15 preschools and child health centers around Stockholm. All but one informant were found through Thalberg's network. No respondents were personal acquaintances; they were all two or three "links" from her; for example, a friend's friend's neighbour. Five interviewed fathers were still on leave, which yielded detail-rich descriptions of fresh experiences.

There was large variation in age, number of children, educational level, type of work, and leave length (see Table 8.1). In some respects, the sample is similar to Swedish fathers in general, for example, regarding age, number of children and educational level. However, these fathers differed from the general population of Swedish fathers due to their concentration in the Stockholm area, where there is more white-collar work and economic advantage than elsewhere. They may be seen as privileged within the Swedish context and thus find it easier to strive for gender equality. This is also a group accustomed to being perceived as successful, which may shape how they describe their experiences and present themselves as caregiving fathers. All lived with their children and partners and had stable labour-market situations, with 5 of 14 employed in the public sector (a higher proportion than in the population at large). Only one was foreign-born (although Sweden is much more culturally diverse), married to a Swedish-born mother. Almost all respondents were white-collar workers, despite efforts to recruit others. Only one was clearly in a blue-collar job (carpenter). This sample of fathers is therefore biased toward the middle class. Perceptions of fatherhood and attitudes toward leave-taking in Sweden vary by class and ethnicity (Almqvist et al. 2011; Klinth 2013; Plantin 2007).

**Table 8.1** Respondents' background and leave use

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**ANDERS** (age 37). Network and information services coordinator in private sector with secondary education. Two children, ages 1 and 4. Partner took 9 months; he was taking leave for 12 months at 75 % time (9 months full-time equivalent). Had been on leave 5 months so far. His share of leave will be 50 % (36 % so far).

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**CARLOS** (age 42, foreign-born). Technical production manager in private sector with a college degree. One child, age 18 months. Partner took 9.5 months. Then he took 1 month at 50 % and an additional 8 months full-time in one block (8.5 months full-time equivalent altogether). His share of leave was 47 %.

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**CHRISTIAN** (age 37). Carpenter in private sector with secondary education. One child, 9 months. Partner was home for 8 months; he had been home full-time for 1.5 months and was scheduled to be home 6.25 more (8 months altogether). He and his partner took simultaneous leave for 1 week. His share will be 50 % (16 % so far).

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**FELIX** (age 32). Construction site manager in private sector with secondary education. Two children, ages 1 and 4. Partner was home for 8 months; he had been home full-time for 1 month and planned 1.5 months more (2.5 months altogether). His share of leave will be 17 % (8 % so far).

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**FILIP** (age 32). District store manager in private sector with secondary education. One child, age 2. After partner took 10 months, he took 2 months leave full-time in two blocks. His share of leave was 17 %.

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**KRISTOFFER** (age 37). Special needs assistant in public sector with secondary education. Two children, ages 3 and 6. Partner was home for 12 months. He took 5.5 months altogether, 4.5 months full-time home alone and 1 month simultaneously with partner. His share of leave was 31 %.

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**MARTIN** (age 37). Public administrative official with a doctorate. Three children, ages 1, 5 and 8. Partner was home 12 months, then he took 1 month simultaneously with partner and then 8 months alone. His share of leave was 43 %.

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**MATS** (age 40). Group leader for emergency services in public sector with a college degree. Two children, ages 2 and 4. After partner was home for 9 months, he was home 6.5 months full-time in one block. His share of leave was 42 %.

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**MATTHIAS** (age 33). Telecommunications advisor in private sector with secondary education. One child, 13 months. Partner was home for 8 months. He had been home full-time for 4 months, and planned to be home 4 months more (8 months altogether). His share of leave will be 50 % (33 % so far)

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**NILS** (age 40). Researcher in the public sector with a doctorate. Two children, ages 3 and 6. After partner was home 9 months, he took 2 months part-time and 5.5 months full-time in one block (6.5 months full-time equivalent altogether). His share of leave was 42 %.

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**NOEL** (age 37). Creative director in a private electrical accessories company with some college courses. One child, 11 months. Partner took 7 months and he took 2 months of leave simultaneously with his partner (who was on sick leave part of the time). He had been on leave alone 50 % time for 2 months and planned an additional 5 months (in two blocks). His share of leave will be 44 % (12 % so far).

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**PATRIK** (age 32). Production manager in private sector with secondary education. Two children, ages 3 and 4. After partner was home 18 months, he took leave full-time in one block for 9 months. His share of leave was 33 %.

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**ROBERT** (age 30). Construction consultant in private sector with a college degree. One child, age 2. After partner was home 9.5 months, he took 8.5 months full-time in one block. His share of leave was 47 %.

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**URBAN** (age 41). Software programmer in public sector with elementary education. Two children, ages 1 and 4. After partner was home 10 months, he took 8 months full-time leave in one block. His share of leave was 44 %.

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Our sample was markedly different from Swedish fathers in general in the amount of leave taken or scheduled. Leave length varied from 2 to 9 months, averaging 6.86, considerably longer than average. However, only three had taken or were scheduled to take half of the leave. Seven had taken or planned to take over 40% and four took one-third or less (see Appendix). All fathers were mainly home alone; however, four had short overlaps with partners.

The interviews were conducted by Thalberg, using a slightly revised version of the interview guide from the *Fathers on Leave alone* study (Chap. 1). Questions focused on leave experiences with the youngest child, although earlier experiences were discussed. We did not add questions about gender equality orientations, to see whether this would be brought up in different contexts. Of 14 interviews, eight took place at participants' workplaces, five at their homes and one at Thalberg's office. The interviews took about an hour and participants received €20 in compensation.

Following Magnusson (2008), we view these interviews as data and discourse. They provided information about fathers' decisions to take parental leave, experiences while on leave and potential impact of leave-taking on domestic work and identities as fathers. In terms of discourse, we learned about the social construction of these men as fathers on parental leave from how they talked about these topics. What they neglected is also important. Since fathers produced their own narratives, we anticipate that accounts would be crafted for an outsider (the interviewer). Consequently, we expected to hear accounts shaped to conform to the Swedish values of gender equality, downplaying experiences or views contradicting equality norms.

Interviews were recorded and transcribed. Thematic analysis was used to identify patterns related to our research topic (Braun and Clarke 2006). First, all authors read transcripts for initial ideas. Then two authors re-read and coded transcripts, noticing topics related to the general purpose of the study and specific research objectives. Next, similar codes were grouped together by basic themes and sub-themes, capturing what seemed to be the most important findings. At several stages, the authors discussed themes and subthemes, as well as how these might be interconnected.

It was sometimes difficult to separate out whether fathers' experiences and outcomes were direct results of being home alone or just from becoming fathers. This is related to the fact that parental leave is today an unquestioned part of the idea of fatherhood in Sweden.

## 8.5 Results

### 8.5.1 *Leave-Taking Decision-Making*

Fathers described it as *taken for granted* that they would take leave. Relatively little discussion between partners had occurred. They used phrases such as "It was obvious." Christian (carpenter, 37) reported: "We didn't talk so much about it really. But

it just felt so natural that we each took half.” Filip (district store manager, 32) said, “Clearly we took for granted that I would be at home.” This result agrees with recent Swedish research (Alsarve and Boye 2012; Nordberg 2007; Roman 2014) and reflects the cultural discourse promoting shared parenting.

*Gender equality* was sometimes taken for granted as a reason why they shared leave, especially when fathers took more leave. Matthias (telecommunication advisor, 33) stated: “It was self-evident for us to share equally. We share everything and that is how we were both brought up, we both come from gender equal families.” Previous studies found that Swedish fathers with more egalitarian attitudes take more leave (Duvander 2014; Haas 1992; Haas et al. 2002),

Some fathers claimed they were *more interested in equal sharing than their partners*. For example, Noel’s (creative director, 37) partner wanted to stay at home for about a year but he thought that would be too long, if he was to share. In the end she stayed home 7 months. Some fathers reported that *partners convinced them to share more leave*. Mats (group leader, 40) said: “She definitely would not have accepted me being home only a short time....Probably I would have been home a shorter time with the children and thought a little more about the economic consequences if ... my partner, hadn’t pushed sharing, saying, “Hey, it is only once in life.” In previous research, mothers’ willingness to share leave increased fathers’ leave (Haas 1992; Haas et al. 2002) but mothers sometimes claim physical recuperation and breastfeeding as reasons for a larger share of leave (Alsarve and Boye 2012; Roman 2014). In this study, the overall impression was that mothers supported fathers’ longer leaves and mothers’ preferences to take longer leave were rarely mentioned. However, it was also not questioned that mothers took the first and major chunk of leave.

*Child-related reasons as a motivation* were commonly mentioned, often as an individual experience not to be missed (found also by Almqvist et al. 2011; Klinth 2013). Felix (construction site manager, 32) reported: “I wanted to be at home with my children...to get to know them when they are small.”

No father reported negative comments from family members about taking leave but *mothers and fathers as role models* were mentioned. Felix said: “My mother raised me alone...so she was obliged to work very hard and it influenced me in taking parental leave and reducing work hours.” Robert (construction consultant, 30) told us his divorced father had taken leave and had been very active in his upbringing: “He was a role model for me.” *Friends* also influenced the decision to take leave. Experiences are exchanged between men in similar situations, in a normative way. Kristoffer (special needs assistant, 37) recounted: “...among my acquaintances ...it is clear that you should take pappa leave. It is politically correct in some way.”

Even if fathers’ leave was taken for granted among respondents, multiple constraints, pressures and negotiations were reported. The major institutional constraint was the *timing of the preschool start*, which affected leave length and division. Robert took an extra month because preschool was not available earlier. Matthias indicated: “We knew he would start daycare when he was about 18 months so we just split the leave in two.”



A frequently mentioned barrier to fathers' leave use is *economics* (Riksförsäkringsverket 2000; 2003). There is a curvilinear relationship between fathers' leave length and income, with medium to medium-high earners taking more leave (Duvander and Viklund 2014; Sundström and Duvander 2002), probably caused by both economic and workplace constraints. Swedish couples also claim to take *economics into account* in negotiating the division of leave (Almqvist 2008; Försäkringskassan 2013; Hobson et al. 2014). Although our respondents indicated economics was a factor, they did not mention that economic constraints played a crucial role. Mats reported preventing economics from being a barrier: "We wanted to be able to be home about the same amount... It is a big economic change, since I earn more." His family moved to cheaper housing when expecting their second child, and one contributing factor to this decision was that they could afford for him to take about half the leave, as he did with their first child.

Prior research has suggested that fathers receiving extra compensation from the employer take longer leave (Hobson et al. 2006). Filip mentioned that the compensation available from his employer was an incentive, while others said this was welcome but not a factor in their decision-making.

Fathers' leave has been limited by *workplace factors*, such as managers' and co-workers' reactions, leave use among colleagues and the workplace's sex ratio (Bygren and Duvander 2006; Elvin-Nowak 2005; Haas et al. 2002; Hobson et al. 2014; Näsman 1997). Yet our sample did not claim the workplace to be a significant barrier. These fathers did not request leave; they *announced their plans* to go on leave.

All five fathers working in the *public sector* described taking leave as no problem; it was common and taken for granted at their workplaces. Previous research has found fathers are more likely to take leave in the public sector; private-sector employers tend to be less supportive of fathers' leave-taking (Amilon 2009; Haas 1992; Haas and Hwang 2009). In this study, *private employers' responses to fathers' leave-taking were mixed*. Fathers in the private sector tended to report that there was also a workplace norm for fathers' leave-taking, but *long leaves were exceptional*.

Fathers in the male-dominated building industry and those working in foreign-owned companies reported the most opposition, particularly from co-workers. Christian said: "There are of course many people in our branch, especially older ones, who think that it is strange that a person should be at home half a year. "What will you do at home?" they ask. There is a little bit of a macho culture among the guys..." Patrik (production manager, 32), who earlier worked in a foreign-owned company, recounted: "They don't understand the concept of parental leave, it is 'Bah! How can that work?'"

Fathers in private-sector professional positions sometimes made concessions. Felix, having taken half the leave with his first child, reported that he postponed leave a month and took much shorter leave for the second child because of work demands. Matthias reported challenges in finding an appropriate time to take leave because of project work. One strategy to adapt to work demands was to take part-time leave for at least part of the period. However, some fathers in the private sector



indicated their workplaces were supportive of long leaves. Anders (coordinator, 37) reported: "...It's not something strange at this workplace. There is never any talk at all if employees want to be at home....We want of course to be the type of workplace which facilitates people taking parental leave."

Fathers reported that *partners' work situations* affected the division and timing of leave. Anders' partner's new job led to his taking leave sooner than planned: "This fall she will work in a new classroom with new children and she wanted to be there from the beginning." The partner's work situation was also used in negotiations with the father's employer. Carlos (technical production manager, 42) argued, "My partner earns twice as much as I earn. ... We lose money every month she is at home and I work. So if I lay it out like that, some colleagues are a little more understanding.... She has an important job, earns a lot of money, okay." Mothers' employment orientation and income have previously been found to increase fathers' leave (Duvander and Viklund 2014; Haas 1992; Sundström and Duvander 2002).

In summary, forces influencing fathers' leave decision-making operate at all levels of social structure.

At the institutional and cultural levels, progressive parental leave policy and the cultural discourse of involved fatherhood seem to have promoted a strong sense of entitlement amongst fathers to substantial parental leave. The entitlement was however not always to half the leave.

At the workplace level, reactions to fathers' leave were mixed. Taking parental leave is highly supported in most workplaces. More vocal opposition came in private companies, especially in traditional male branches, where the gendered "norm of limited caregiving" sometimes prevails (Votinius 2008). Yet fathers who received negative reactions at work still felt a strong sense of leave entitlement and some challenged the status quo by taking long leaves even in the private sector. Nevertheless, fathers sometimes made concessions, taking less leave than desired, postponing leave or taking leave part-time.

At the family level, economic barriers played little role in decision-making. Keeping in mind that our sample had seemingly economically stable situations, one interpretation is that when fathers are strongly motivated to take leave, economic sacrifices can be made. In addition, mothers' career commitment pressured men to take longer leaves. It is often argued that men's leave-taking is a prerequisite for women's improved economic opportunities (e.g., through sharing of childcare), but in line with the idea that gender relations are reciprocal, this study suggests that mothers' improved labour market positions may be a prerequisite for men's longer leaves. Fathers reported little discussion with partners about leave-taking, saying they were "in synch" with each other, sharing the same attitudes and understanding each other's work situation. Absence of discussion may however for other couples lead to fathers taking less leave.

At the individual level, gender equality was mainly an unspoken taken-for-granted goal in the decision-making process. Our sample seems to have incorporated equality norms common in the larger Swedish society into their belief systems. Nevertheless, only one father mentioned awareness of how shared parental leave connected with gender-equality goals in society.

### 8.5.2 *Fathers' Leave Experience*

Fathers' stories predominantly described positive experiences with leave, involving nontraditional caregiving and stepping away from paid employment. Some fathers wished leave hadn't ended so quickly, but most were content with the length.

When asked what was most positive about leave, most mentioned the opportunity to get to *know their children and follow their development*, a finding similar to other studies (Almqvist et al. 2011; Chronholm 2004; Haas 1992; Nordberg 2007). Christian (carpenter, 37) recounted:

The most positive thing I think is connecting in another way with the child.... When you work, then you feel that you come home in the evening and have an hour to try to catch up and hear what has happened during the day and you have perhaps not seen what progress she has made during the day. Right now I am the one who is at home and get to inform my wife with text messages and pictures, 'Look what she has done here,' and I think that is really cool.

Fathers often described leave as a *relaxing, worry-free, simple existence*. Nordberg (2007:320) also found that fathers saw leave as an oasis, "a chance to distance oneself from the norm for the high achieving full-time employed man," similar to earlier findings (Björnberg 1998; Chronholm 2004). In our study, Anders (coordinator, 37) stated:

My experience with both leave opportunities was that it was like a 'bubble'... we managed by ourselves... and only lived in the present." Urban (software programmer, 41) , still on leave, indicated that: "It has been extremely nice to be on leave ...such an unbelievably worry-free existence...the biggest worry I have had is what to make for dinner...It has been a quiet existence...one feels secure.

Several aspects of being home alone emerged as challenging, although these challenges were not present during the whole leave. The majority talked about difficulties withdrawing from work. It was common to *remain involved with work on a voluntary basis*, seemingly due to job commitment. Felix (construction site manager, 32) admitted: "I have a need for control, so I like them having to call me up for me to solve their problems." Carlos (technical production manager, 42), who kept his work phone on said: "It is clear that you need to keep in contact, you cannot just disappear and then come back after 8 months after being completely away."

Some fathers, however, seemed *forced to do some paid work*. Noel (creative director, 37) related: "I worked 32.5 h overtime during the first 3 weeks; there were special circumstances, there was a big annual exhibition...and that is holy [laughs]." Robert (construction consultant, 30) reported pressure to work at the beginning, but stepped away: "We had really set this date long in advance and I stepped down in stages from the job ..... Even if I thought I had arranged things properly, there are still some questions left."

For some, *being away from work was more of a psychological adjustment*. Filip (district store manager, 32) said: "It feels unfamiliar not to work.... to all of a sudden not need to bother about all that. Someone else must take care of it..." Noel admitted: "I have really missed ...being able to sit deeply in concentration and work

on something.” Others mentioned they *deliberately did not keep contact with work* while on leave. When asked by his supervisor if he was willing to come in and keep in touch with email, Urban said no and reported: “I didn’t check job e-mail. I had my work telephone, but I had it turned off.”

Only a few fathers reported *challenges involved in everyday childrearing*. These related to typical issues involving infants, including eating, sleeping, crying, illness and managing activities. Matthias (telecommunication advisor, 33) said: “So he doesn’t sleep and doesn’t eat...Then you get more or less depressed...’What am I doing wrong, did I buy the wrong food, or did I prepare the food wrong, why did he eat when [my partner] was at home but not with me?’” Felix reported that it was hardest when both children were sick simultaneously: “I have a shorter temper and yell more than I ought to.” Kristoffer (special needs assistant, 37) said: “He screamed the whole time, ... when he was happy, ...when he was sad, ...when he was angry. So I walked around with earplugs. And then he was very wild, he crawled around, pulling things down everywhere.” To cope and prevent injury, Kristoffer put his son in a bicycle helmet.

*Few opportunities to socialize* with adults was an issue and some worked hard to maintain social ties. Lack of male social networks was also found by Almqvist et al. (2011) for fathers on leave. Nils (researcher, 40) said: “I felt a little jealous of the mamma groups...for our first child I participated in my partner’s mamma group, so that was really nice....[T]hey were really open and accepting, and they were a lot of fun.... You are perhaps more alone as a pappa than as a mamma. It is still rare to see fathers with strollers in a group.” Some fathers *developed strategies to reduce isolation*. Noel and a close friend (both taking leave part-time) planned ahead to be home the same days. However, another theme was *mixed feelings about socializing*. Anders (coordinator, 37), home on leave part-time: “I feel stressed when I am expected... to always be so social with other parents during parental leave. And I don’t feel the need myself...[But] now that our child has become a little older I think that I perhaps ought to go to open preschool for her sake, just for socializing...” The only father who had contact with a “pappa group” was dissatisfied with the experience. Filip said: “I didn’t feel like we had the same goals. I was more about how to get her to develop in the best way ...and [for others] it was more like, ‘...if he gets bumps on his bottom you should do this’...I am not interested in that.... There was no relationship, it wasn’t developing into anything....”

The fathers in this study were home alone for almost all of their leave while partners worked or studied. All fathers generally *managed childcare alone*. None reported hiring help with childcare. A few reported visiting their parents for a respite. Matthias reported his dad visited “now and then,” mainly to see his grandchild, while Filip rejected his mother’s offer to help.

All fathers *took on the duties of the primary parent* while they were home alone. Christian, now on leave said: “...the one who is at home [on leave] has the primary responsibility the whole time, even when the other is home ....” Past studies have also found that fathers on leave take on both practical and emotional carework, thereby becoming more involved in the father role and competent at domestic work (Almqvist et al. 2011; Chronholm 2004; Elvin-Nowak 2005; Haas 1992; Nordberg

2007). Nevertheless, some fathers indicated that it took *time to get used to childcare duties*. Mats (group leader, 40) said: “I felt really like an underdog in the beginning...Then it changed, I became the one who was at home and says, ‘He does this now’, and the mother says, ‘Oh, he didn’t do that when I was at home.’” Noel reported: “[At first] I couldn’t get him to sleep...And now it isn’t a problem, it took only being home 3 days before I had a whole different approach.”

*Establishing their own routines* was part of becoming the primary parent. Matthias reported: “I got tips and advice [from my partner]...But of course the child changes weekly, so certain advice she gave me didn’t work any longer.... I must of course try to find my own solutions.” Going out of the house with children figured prominently in fathers’ descriptions of what they did while on leave. Noel stated: “I started to get anxious only sitting at home. So I was super careful to plan the days and meet other friends on leave and go out and do errands.”

Even if they were the primary parent during the day, some fathers admitted that *they did not do the full range of childcare tasks* and they *did not always take equal responsibility*. Noel (still on leave part-time) said: “But we have had a certain division, we have always had one, ... that is a little gender-role typical. She takes care of all the children’s clothes and such (laughs).” Kristoffer recounted that even when he was home on leave: “[my partner] has always had a type of overall perspective. She thinks about the future, and sees several steps ahead while I am very much here and now, and everything which is far off is like an invisible cloud which I cannot really handle.” This included appointments, knowing where things are and what to bring when going out. Earlier surveys show that even when fathers have taken long leaves some areas remain predominantly mothers’ tasks, such as responsibility for clothes and contact with preschool (Almqvist and Duvander 2014; Försäkringskassan 2013).

Like childcare, it was taken for granted that as the one at home the *father would do more and take more responsibility for housework* than his partner. Some fathers mentioned that *partners were still involved in household work*, much as the fathers themselves had been when they were working. Urban reported: “When I was on parental leave...I fixed the food and cleaned and such. ...then naturally one helps out when one comes home [from work]. Both my wife and I have done that. But the one who has been home has done a great deal.” Almqvist et al.’s (2011) research, which included a more representative sample of parents, found that some mothers claimed that fathers did not do sufficient housework while on leave and had lower standards, while some fathers claimed they were not always trusted. This was not evident in our interviews.

The fathers who planned to get other things done during leave quickly discovered that *taking care of a small child is full-time*. Patrik (production manager, 32) described this discovery: “I remember that it went extremely fast...much more intensive work than what I had expected...[A]t work you can say, ‘I will figure this out’, and you think about it for 15 min and go get a cup of coffee or something. But that doesn’t work when you have two children [laughs]. It is ... 12 h full focus! And then, poof, and so goes the next day and so went 9 months and it felt like 4 weeks. But it was also extremely fun. I had not one boring moment.”

In summary, our research suggests leave-taking was experienced as fulfilling but also as hard work and sometimes fathers had ambivalent feelings about the period at home.

The caregiving experience and closer contact with their children was expressed as something very positive. The extended period of time alone with children was seen as very important for development of strong bonds with their children. They all saw it as obvious that they were as capable of caregiving tasks as mothers, which aligns with the idea of gender-neutral parenthood underlying Swedish family policy. The division of tasks that remained in some families was not portrayed as based on gender, even if it could be interpreted that way.

Fathers reported little hesitation in taking on challenges of daily childrearing and often recounted learning and adapting to intensive parenting. The most formidable challenge fathers encountered was difficulty disconnecting from work. There was variation in the workplace demands placed on fathers, sometimes related to leave length. Most fathers did some work, often because they felt they should, reflecting a strong work commitment complementing their desire to be primary caregivers. They showed little awareness that their devotion to work might be influenced by traditional workplace expectations for male employees. Some fathers, however, actively resisted organizational efforts to involve them in work while on leave.

At the family level, these men reported little discussion over what they would do while home alone; in most cases it seemed obvious to them and partners that they would take over the full range of activities and responsibilities and that they would also put their own stamp on routines and childcare practices. Few couples also agreed in advance that the parent at home should focus on childcare, not housework. Nevertheless, fathers still recounted some activities as gender-divided between partners. It should be kept in mind that we do not have the mothers' accounts of the division of tasks.

At the individual level, leave was portrayed as enjoyable (if sometimes challenging) – even a comfortable respite from everyday life. However, these fathers' efforts to become primary caregivers were portrayed as personal projects and solitary activities. Some only occasionally interacted with other fathers and isolation during leave was a recurring theme. It is thus noteworthy that even in a context where the cultural discourse presents parenthood as gender-neutral, mothers and fathers on leave are likely to experience different situations.

### ***8.5.3 Impact of Leave***

Interviews explored whether fathers believed that leave had influenced areas of life related to various dimensions of gender equality. Most discussed changes involving employment, domestic labour and relationships with partners. It was not always clear if these consequences were different than those associated with the transition to fatherhood.

Fathers' orientation toward employment seems to have changed and it was commonly expressed that *work was now less important* than actively participating in family life, also reported by Nordberg (2007). Felix (construction site manager, 32) said: "Things have a completely different meaning. The job is now just a necessary evil instead of my life's calling." In one important respect, men's participation in paid employment did not change due to long leaves. All fathers who had completed leaves *returned to full-time work* and those still on leave planned to do so. An earlier study found that men who took at least 2 months of leave worked fewer hours, mainly through reducing earlier overtime (Duvander and Jans 2009).

Despite working full-time afterward, several fathers mentioned making *structural adjustments to help work become more compatible with family life*. Some changes were major. Mats (group leader, 40) gave up a managerial position he was promoted to before his leave, upon realizing how much time the position took. "I remember when I made that decision, I told them no, I intend to concentrate on my children, and it was so heavenly nice when it was said, when they understood that I was serious...." Other job changes were less dramatic, but designed to increase men's flexibility to participate in childcare. Matthias (telecommunications advisor, 33) reported: "I think like this, 'If I travel to that meeting, how will it work out at home?' You have to think like that when you become a parent, you have a responsibility...." Nils (researcher, 40) stated: "I work from home one day a week to be able to pick up and drop off [at preschool] that day." Carlos (technical production manager, 42) leaves work early to pick up his child from preschool, "It doesn't matter if I am sitting in a meeting with a super-important person, no, sorry."

Fathers also reported that they experienced *negative consequences* of leave-taking on their careers. While on leave, Carlos's boss hired another person as technical manager, a position he thought would be his. Robert said he lost clients when on leave and had to build his base back up again. Noel (creative director, 37) said the kind of company he works at changes quickly "... I can't be half-time and at the same time be the creative director...such a person must be present. If you want to have a career perhaps you shouldn't follow my example" (laughs). For some, their changed attitudes meant that *career damage did not matter*. Nils said: "...if I hadn't had children and had I only prioritized my career ...I perhaps would have gotten somewhere else.... Who knows, I feel very good about this, I feel that I grew as a person because I took [leave]."

Another theme from the interviews was that fathers felt that there were positive consequences of their leave-taking for their workplaces. Some claimed leave had made them *more efficient when back at work*. A few mentioned that *leave-taking increased company recruitment*. Patrik (production manager, 32) stated: "It became an opportunity to circulate people and recruit new ones." A few discussed how being on leave *affected their management style, enhancing other men's opportunities to be at home*. Filip (district store manager, 32) reported: "I emphasize [to my employees]... 'Stay home, we will manage, we will survive. We won't go under just because you are at home, this will be super important for you.'"

Fathers' leave-taking may also have had impact on partners' careers. Mothers who completed leave returned to full-time work and those still on leave seemed likely to return to full-time work. It was not clear if this was a cause or consequence of fathers' extended leaves but contrasts sharply with national statistics indicating that part-time work among mothers is common (SCB 2014). Swedish mothers' early return to full-time work increases their contributions to family income and breadwinning and also enhances the chances that couples will share childcare after leave is over (Thomas and Hildingsson 2009).

Fathers' changing relationship to employment appeared to be associated with their growing absorption in the caregiving father role. Parental leave made fathers feel very *close to their children*. Anders (coordinator, 37) stated: "I don't believe that my relationship to my child...would have been like this if I hadn't had the opportunity to be at home so much." Some fathers *connected the close relationship with their ability to be active and caring parents*. Patrik said: "I learned a lot about the children. If I hadn't been on leave I believe I would probably not have understood them at all .... When something goes wrong I understand ... what happened and how to handle it." Other studies have found that fathers taking a more equal share of leave are more likely to report participating in childcare afterwards (Försäkringskassan 2013; Haas and Hwang 2008).

When asked, most fathers mentioned *gender differences in parents' participation in childcare*. Though modest, these differences reflected mothers providing more emotional caregiving and taking more overall responsibility. Martin (public administrative official, 37) thinks he is better than his wife at "being present" with the children, while he is less likely than his wife to be confided in by the children and says his wife feels she needs to run around and do things. Robert said he is out at the sandbox a lot, puts the boy to bed, gets up in the night – "practical things," while his partner takes care of clothes and has more overall responsibility. These gendered activities were also reported for the leave period, but more clearly elaborated upon when describing after leave. The reported gender differences in activities were not presented as a problem or as a limit to fathers' engagement.

Some fathers suggested that they did as much or more housework than their partners. Prior studies found that fathers taking longer leave engaged in more daily housework and took on more responsibility for this than before (Almqvist and Duvander 2014; Chronholm 2004;). Felix stated: "I clean more.... As soon as either of us sees something needs to be washed, we just wash it, but we try to share that as much as possible also. On the weekends, she prepares more meals than I do. But I am the one who picks up and straightens constantly." Others suggested that housework was not shared equally, although they were very involved. Filip reported: "She doesn't trust me so much when it comes to laundry, mostly because I mix different colors together.... Food preparation she is really much better at, I fix food sometimes, but she knows that there are only about five dishes that I know. Then I usually take care of everything else, the vacuuming and such. That I think is fun...."



When asked how leave-taking affected relationships with partners, several fathers said the *common experience brought them closer together*. For most, this was through increased understanding of each other's situation. Patrik explained: "[There is] more understanding about the workload.... She has told me a thousand times before, but you don't really understand it before you have done it yourself...." Other fathers attributed the strengthening of their relationship to partners' becoming *proud of them* for managing the work while on leave or because it freed them up for employment. Carlos said his partner "...told me that she feels extremely happy and lucky to be with me, and proud of me.... [S]he has told others, 'My guy stayed home almost all of last year so I could work.'"

Finally, fathers were asked their opinions on parental leave policy. Earlier surveys have indicated opposition to reforms setting aside non-transferable leave for fathers and at the time of the first non-transferable month the issue was heavily debated (SOU 2005). All fathers in our sample, however, were positive towards earmarking 2 months to fathers. They saw Sweden's policy as luxurious and generous, compared to arrangements elsewhere. Kristoffer (special needs assistant, 37) said: "The length I think is really good....unbelievably generous if one compares with other countries." Fathers also thought that non-transferable leave should probably be extended. Matthias stated "You need more time than 3 months to get into the pappa role." Some fathers mentioned that further earmarking could be difficult economically for some families and they could understand why people want choice. Robert stated: "I think that it is good if people get to choose what they want to do with the time themselves. At the same time, it can be a little push in the back sometimes, if men were obligated to share more of it."

Some fathers expressed mild criticisms of the system. Filip complained about the low income ceiling. Carlos thought the government did not allocate enough resources to resolve disputes with employers over parental leave. Matthias and Noel both thought parents should be able to take more leave simultaneously. This is often argued to be needed during a transition period between the solo care of the two parents. Anders mentioned that it was problematic when a person works for more than one employer during the qualification period. Noel felt that the reporting system was too complicated for people taking leave part-time.

In summary, interviews support the idea that fathers being home has consequences at all levels of social structure, and that these can be related to gender equality. Swedish parental leave policy, offering fathers two non-transferable months, was highly regarded by the interviewed fathers. Although the general population may be hesitant to reserve additional months for fathers, our respondents were in favor. They felt such pressure would encourage fathers to take longer leaves – which based on their experience – is important for men to become active fathers.

These fathers' accounts of being home on leave alone reinforces the Swedish cultural discourse promoting "child-oriented masculinity," whereby "real men" embrace and have no real difficulty becoming capable, caring parents. The respondents seem likely to share their positive experiences, encouraging others to take longer leaves. This may gradually close the gap between the principle and practice of active fatherhood.

At the workplace level, fathers expressed both change and continuity with a traditional male norm. While all fathers returned to full-time employment, some had difficulties getting back into former jobs and claimed to have sacrificed career progression by being home. On the other hand, some fathers successfully challenged norms about the work commitment of loyal male employees, by changing to more family-friendly jobs or reorganizing work hours to facilitate availability for child-care. Some claimed leave-taking had positive outcomes for their workplaces; perhaps men's desire to combine father involvement with jobs they care about may lead to change in workplaces.

At the family level, fathers' reports indicated engagement but not fully realized gender equality or gender-neutral parenthood. Fathers remained active in childcare and housework after leave, although all did not describe sharing all duties equally with mothers. Even when they saw themselves as capable of being primary caregivers, they reported a division of tasks based on gender, without mentioning this as a problem. Fathers reported enhanced closeness with partners from taking leave, but did not mention equality as a goal in these relationships. Gender equality was expressed as an abstract and taken-for-granted goal, not really of concern for their own situation.

Developing closer bonds and reprioritizing values were also commonly discussed consequences of taking leave; paid employment was no longer the most important thing in life. This change in orientation could contribute to the spread of shared caregiving and breadwinning responsibility in Sweden.

## 8.6 Conclusion

Sweden provides a unique context to explore fathers' experiences home alone on parental leave because it is a society that strongly embraces gender equality as a political goal and champions a new norm of masculinity calling for active caregiving. Our interviews with Stockholm fathers in a privileged situation to choose long leaves explored three stages: the decision-making process surrounding leave, experiences on leave and (for those who had completed leave) perceptions of the leave's impact on fathers' employment, caregiving and relations with partners, as well as opinions concerning leave policy. We applied a theoretical framework that regards men's experiences of parental leave as closely linked to gender practices and influenced by multiple, interrelated levels of social structure.

Progressive parental leave policy and the cultural discourse of involved fatherhood seem to have promoted a strong sense of entitlement amongst fathers to substantial parental leave, so that it was taken for granted that they would take long leave. This entitlement was however not always to half the leave, and mixed reactions at the workplace sometimes led fathers to make concessions in terms of leave

use. Within the family, economic barriers to fathers' long leave were not reported and fathers reported little discussion with partners about leave. The desired pre-school start date and mothers' interest in returning to work often influenced fathers' choices.

In line with cultural expectations for fathers, these men emphasized that leave-taking was experienced as personally fulfilling, valuing close contact with their children and finding childcare to be a desirable task. Leave was regarded as a "bubble," a welcome respite from employment. They faced the same challenges mothers have on leave and expressed ambivalent feelings about being at home, such as social isolation. They came to see themselves as capable of caregiving as mothers and as the "primary parent," creating their own routines and practices. However, mothers often appeared to still be involved in some aspects of childrearing suggesting that equal parenting practices were not common. Moreover, fathers did not express concern over inequality in parenting; nor did they remark upon how difficulties separating from work might be related to traditional workplace expectations for male employees.

The experience of leave appeared to make these fathers strong supporters of reforms offering fathers more non-transferable months. They felt this would encourage fathers to take longer leaves which, based on their experience, is important for men to become active fathers. Those men who had completed leave expressed both continuity and change with a traditional male norm for employment. While all returned to full-time work, some had sacrificed career progression, a development they didn't regret because now they prioritized family over work. Some had changed to more family-friendly jobs or reorganized their workday to be more available for childcare. At the family level, fathers' reports indicated close relationships with children and active engagement in childcare but not fully realized gender-neutral parenthood, without considering this as a problem. Fathers reported enhanced closeness with partners, since they felt they understood each other's situation better, but did not mention equality as a goal in these relationships.

The main conclusion from these interviews is that it is possible for fathers in Sweden to feel like, and act like, primary caregivers. Even if traditional expectations and cultural norms for motherhood and fatherhood can be difficult to change, these fathers' experiences suggest that there is a change in the norm of fatherhood where caregiving is becoming more central. Perhaps gender relations are also shifting to be more concerned with sharing tasks, although this seems to be a more inconsistent and incomplete development. The main focus of change seems to revolve around the positive experience of being with the child, something that was expressed as having major consequences for future prioritizing of family over work among the interviewed men.

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